

Federica Pompejano  
“Të bëjmë fshatin si qytet!”.  
**The urbanization of the countryside in socialist Albania**

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the communist party came into power in Albania where most of the society consisted of the peasantry. In line with the Soviet model, the new society that the regime aimed to build was constituted of two social groups creating the working mass: workers and peasants. To pursue the ideal of a new socialist society, efforts in bridging the distances and differences between the urban and rural contexts were conceived as a priority and went on in parallel with the land collectivization process, agricultural mechanization, industrialization, and electrification of the whole country. Under the party maxim “Let’s make the village a city!” the urbanization of the countryside was a declared and tangible project toward a modern socialist rural life. Through the examination of archival documents and literature preserved in the main Albanian State archives, this paper underlines which were the new urban planning approaches and settlements’ schemes in rural areas and the main architectural elements composing the new Albanian socialist village.

Keywords

Socialist urban planning — 20<sup>th</sup> century rurality — Socialist Albania

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After the Second World War, Albania developed a harsh dictatorship converging in the socialist ideology. The country, until then considered the most backward in Europe, with a traditionally agrarian society (Kopsidis and Ivanov 2018, p. 36; Brochert 1975, p. 177), started a rapid modernisation process that led to the industrialisation of the major cities and the urbanisation of the countryside. From the very beginning of the dictatorship, this development was sustained, by foreign help from the East European countries and the Soviet Union. The new Albanian society inspired by the Soviet model had space for two main social groups: workers and peasants, that together with the *intelligjencia*, formed the working mass of socialist Albania (Czekalski 2013, p. 82).

In August 1945, the Agrarian Reform Act introduced the principle according to which «the land belongs to the person who cultivates it» and allowed the confiscation of all large properties including these belonging to religious communities. The confiscated land was divided among the peasant families, that until then, owned no or little land. Meant as the first step towards the new socialist life, the Agrarian Reform Act was the very first social-economic scheme implemented by the regime. The implementation had also a political and cultural impact on the peasant population. The impact of political coercion was exemplified in the subjecting of the mass to socialist ideology, underlining its close and direct “democratic relationship” with the state (AQSH 1950, pp. 2-5). Cultural impact was reflected in the opening of schools and public services, and in the great campaign against illiteracy. The collectivization process went alongside the establishment of cooperatives and state farms and was slow (Czekalski 2013, p. 72), ending only in the late 1960s.

At the same time, the regime laid further emphasis on bringing more land under cultivation by reclaiming swamps and marshlands (Brochert 1975, p. 181). The main swamps in the Albanian plains, such as those in the Myzeqe Plain and Korça plains, were reclaimed and transformed into arable land and provided with a rational system of water sources for irrigation. By carefully looking at the territory, it is possible to observe the extension of the vast water network composed of pre-existing main rivers, waterways, and lakes, to which the regime added new water basins, canals, and reservoirs. Following the reclamation of marshy and saline lands, many works of arrangement, embankment, or deviation of water courses were realized by the technicians aimed at implementing the irrigated surfaces. Furthermore, from North to South, the hills and halfway mountainous profiles were shaped in terraces that transformed into bands of arable and cultivated land, mountain pastures became into cultivated fields.

In 1967, 730 villages were provided with electricity (Instituti i Studimeve Marksiste-Leniniste 1974, p. 408) corresponding to 29% of the rural villages of the country. The directives of the Plenum of the Central Committee of Albanian Labour Party, held in December 1967, anticipated the achievement of providing electricity supply in all rural areas by November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1971; a Party's priority was already expected to be achieved in 1985<sup>1</sup> [Fig. 1].

In this context, rural landscape, urban planning, and architecture were placed at the service of industrialization and urbanization implemented through development aid from the Soviet Union until 1961, and there after from China until 1978 (Mëhilli 2017, 98).

Furthermore, in Socialist Albania issues of urban planning and architecture were related to demographics forecast – in view of the prospective developments of industry and agriculture, cities, and villages – yet conditioned by the economization of the productive and arable lands and fast-paced process of reducing materials and construction costs.



**Fig. 1**  
Cover of the periodical *Bujqësia Socialiste* celebrating the 30<sup>th</sup> years of Albanian Labour Party and the announcement of the imminent ending of the electrification supply campaign in the country expected in 1971 (*Bujqësia Socialiste*, 1, 1968, cover).

### The establishment of agricultural cooperatives and state-farms in the new post-war rurality

Since the collectivization process began alongside the implementation of the incessant propaganda to produce the new modern society conditioned a socialist architectural, construction, and planning code that led to the impellent urbanization phenomena significantly reflected in the rural landscape. During the implementation of the new socialist rurality, Albania adopted two types of rural economies: the *Ndërmarrja Bujqësore Shtetërore* (NBSH), i.e., the agricultural and livestock state-enterprise or state-farm and the *Koperativa Bujqësore* and *Koperativa Blegtorale* (KB), i.e., the agricultural and livestock cooperative<sup>2</sup>. These economic models reflected in two main types of rural settlements: the new socialist agricultural centres built from scratch in reclaimed or most suitable land, and cooperative settlements encompassing existing villages as well as new agricultural centres (Faja, Sukaj and Shehu 1990, p. 4). Most cooperatives started on a village basis, but later several settlements were combined to form bigger units. As Brochert (1975, p. 185) reported, the number of agricultural state farms increased from 13 in 1947 to 32 in 1968, whilst the number of agricultural cooperatives, , decreased from 1208 in 1967 to 643 in 1970 (Geço 1973, p. 37). This was due to the impellent need to transform one of the two social forms of property, namely, the cooperative property, into state property by transforming the major cooperatives into state-farms.

The collectivisation of the land and the mechanisation of the agricultural sector also led to the rapid urbanisation of the countryside. The latter covered a long span of time and was conceived as a complex process strictly linked to and coordinated with the socialist political ideology, the industrialisation processes, the strengthening of the socialist output relationships, the intensification of agricultural output, the country's electrification campaign, the implementation of urban masterplans and the socio-cultural propaganda of the regime. The socialist intent of reducing the differences between the urban and rural areas converged into an effort for creating new socio-spatial settlements for the new society in the making<sup>3</sup> [Fig. 2].

Therefore, the development of new rural settlements was a pivotal element in the rural landscape transformation. The minor settlements were to gravitate on major ones and major ones were to be connected the main cities, trying to materialise the communist system of economic, production, and socio-cultural relationships that had to determine the functional structure of the environment (Gutnov et alii 1968, p. 27). Hence, the countryside urbanization process manifested itself in the specific schemes and designs that the regime aspired to implement. The establishment of agricultural cooperatives and state-farms economies and the mechanization of agricultural production necessarily led to the re-organization of the Albanian village. In this sense, of particular interest are the agricultural settlements based on socialist rural planning principles with the intent to create and strengthen the cooperation between the working class and peasants, by narrowing the differences between towns and villages. As Londo (2022, p. 26) pointed out «The identification of the spatial changes following the principle of narrowing the difference between the city and the village [...] can be classified according to a hierarchical system going from the macro-regional to the micro-local scale». At the territorial level, the changing of rural “space” was reflected in the development of masterplans with the intention of ruling and organizing the new post-war rurality and its relationship with a socialist urbanity at different scales. Nevertheless, as also Mëhilli noticed (2017, p. 160), the intricate central planning and the inexperience of professionals and technicians preceded and postponed urban planning evolution.

### **The overall configuration of the socialist Albanian village**

From the analysis of the archival documents preserved at the Central State Archive (AQSH) and Central Technical Constructions Archive (AQTN) in Tirana, it has been possible to retrace the excursus of the urban planning legislative framework identifying the main functional zones and architectural elements characterizing the masterplan of the Albanian socialist village.

The functional zoning of the new socialist village was composed of the residential zone (*zona e banimit*) and the economic zone (*zona ekonomike*) that were arranged to form a grouped settlement. Schemes varied in relation to topography but also according to the distance from national roads that, pivotal in deciding the future urban development of the rural village. The architectural elements forming the residential zone were the individual and collective residential buildings and the common public spaces between them, the streets and squares, the parks and sports fields, the *centre of the village*, and the socio-cultural and administrative buildings. The economic zone could be composed of different architectural elements depending on the economic and productive vocation: i. e., livestock, ag-



Fshatra të reja, njerëz të rinj.

New villages, new people.

**Fig. 2**

View of a new socialist rural village and a scene from socialist rural life. The text in between says "New villages, new people" (in 40 vjet Shqipëri socialiste, 1984, p. 92).

ricultural or industrial, of the cooperative or state-farm. Usually, although not adjacent, the economic zone was placed in proximity to the residential zone to facilitate workers commuting. [Fig. 3]

Since the 1950s the path towards the *standardization of architecture* also concerned rural housing. The method borrowed by the Soviet Union consisted in the designing and developing standard types that could be applied in different contexts on a large scale<sup>4</sup>. *Typification (tipizimi)* or *standardization (standardizimi)* was considered the principal method of socialist architecture and urban planning<sup>5</sup>. In Albania, however, it had to deal with research and debate around the *national character of architecture (karakter i kombëtar i arkitekturës)* that tried to avoid monotony by delving into and emphasising the historical characteristics of local traditional architecture<sup>6</sup>. As in other socialist countries, also in Albania studies no rural housing types varied and produced a repertoire of workable solutions that, throughout the dictatorship, evolved from one-storey single-family houses and simple two-storey townhouses to four up to five-storey collective housing. The latter typology was most likely to be found in peri-urban areas and new industrial cities. Since the late 1970s and following the directives of the Decree of the Presidium of the People's Assembly (DPPA) no. 5747/1978 to increase the construction index and therefore the population density in the countryside, without compromising productive agricultural



**Fig. 3**

From left to right, example of rural housing in Rëmbec, Kërçë district (row 1); ruins of the Museum of the Village and the House of Culture in Rëmbec (row 2); agricultural and livestock breeding buildings in the former economic production zone of Rëmbec (Pompejano F., 2021, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

land, the housing to be built in the villages of the agricultural cooperatives had to be minimum two-storeys high and possibly grouped in two-storey townhouses' general plans. In the major villages of the agricultural state-farms instead, they had to preferably be built as collective housing (*banesa kolektive*) up to three or four-storey high. Typification was also applied to other architectural elements such as the elementary schools and kindergarten, the administrative, municipal, and health services buildings and the state retail shops so-called *Magazina Popullore (MAPO)*, the cultural buildings such were the House of Culture (*Shtepi Kulture or Vatra Kulture*) and the Museum of the Village (*Muzeu i Fshatit*).

In the urban texture and architectural portfolio of the new Albanian socialist rural village, the *qendra e fshatit*, namely, the centre of the village, played a key role as a socio-cultural and propaganda space. Conceived as an architectural ensemble formed by the main square and central streets around which to build the socio-cultural, administrative, and commercial buildings, the *qendra e fshatit* was the space envisaged for the daily de-

velopment of the new social and cultural rural life. Therefore, it was considered the most important urban unit in the masterplan, around which to arrange and structure residential development and expansion.

Finally, also in the economic zone, design types (*projekt-tip*) were developed for the construction of warehouses for the collection and storage of agricultural products, deposits for the recovery of agricultural machinery, mechanical workshops, and stables for intensive livestock breeding.

### **Towards the urban planning for a socialist rurality**

The advancement of socialist production needed, also in the agricultural sector, the creation of new and increasingly massive territorial-agricultural-industrial complexes, bounding to regroup the working mass at selected geographical points. In the countryside, the new rural economies had to find a correspondent functional structure; the forthcoming socialist architects and urban planners had to be considered the «organizers of [the] social process in time and space» (Gutnov et al 1968, p. 7).

On August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1947, a Commission for the study for the masterplans of the new rural villages, composed mainly of representatives of the various sectors of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and of representatives from the Ministry of Public Works, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Central Committee of Cooperatives, met to discuss some issues relating to the design and characteristics of the new rural settlements (AQSH 1947, 4). The Commission agreed that the most suitable areas to settle the new villages were the plain or the gentle hilly slopes with a surface able to ensure to each family a plot of land of about 800-1500 m<sup>2</sup> and the possibility of a future expansion of the settlement. The design phase of the masterplans was initially appointed to the new-born *Ndërmarrja Studime, Projekte, Kolaudime*<sup>7</sup> under the supervision of the Ministry of Public Works and in close collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the representatives of other Ministries. For each new village, the number of resident families, and the types and number of buildings had to be provided in the masterplan. The Commission addressed every aspect of the issue, appointing each Ministry with different tasks. For instance, the task of designing the most suitable rural housing types in relation to the agricultural production vocation and directives of the settlement was charged to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. Hence, while the Ministry of Health had to decide where, among the new settlements, to build small medical clinics, the Ministry of Education had to plan where to establish schools and of which level, considering on the number of families foreseen by the masterplan, as well as the study and design of socio-cultural buildings, such as small cinema, reading rooms, sports fields, and squares.

Ten years later in 1956, the urban planning of the new villages was still critical: the only drafted masterplans were these of a few *Stacionet e Makinave dhe Traktoreve* (SMT), the Machine and Tractors Stations and the masterplan of the villages of Orman-Pojan and Nishavec in the Maliq Plain (AQSH 1956, p. 32). A report submitted in 1956 by Josif Pashko, the Minister of Construction at that time shows the backwardness of urban planning works in rural and urban areas, due to the lack of trained specialists and a stable and efficient organizational and management structure of planning bodies during the first decade of the regime (AQSH 1956, pp. 34-35).

To overcome the situation, Pashko suggested the establishment of a dedicated urban planning department at the Ministry of Construction, and «[...] to benefit from the experience of socialist countries, especially from countries like ours, [there is the need] to send engineers and architects [to get scientific-technical expertise]. [...] [and] to extend the stay of the Bulgarian architects working at the Urban Planning Sector of the Ndërmarrja 'Projekti'» (AQSH 1956, p. 38). He also attached to this report a very first draft of a Decision of the Council of Ministers (DCM) addressing the problems highlighted around the drafting of the masterplan of cities and of industrial and agricultural settlements.

Therefore, in the aftermath of this debate, two legislative acts were issued. The DCM no. 2974, October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1959, *On the drafting, approval, and implementation of cities and residential centres' masterplans* and the complementary Regulation *On the planned construction of cities and residential centres* was issued to regulate the urbanized areas. In the introduction written by Pashko, the Regulation was declared to be «based on our experience of constructions in cities and residential settlements of our country» with reference to «foreign literature» (AQSHa 1961, p. 8). It was approved with DCM no. 282, August 16<sup>th</sup>, 1961, and sealed by the first Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers, engineer Spiro Koleka<sup>8</sup>. The first attempts to regulate the construction of buildings in rural areas were firstly reflected in the Decree of the Presidium of the People's Assembly no. 3303, July 24<sup>th</sup>, 1961, *On saving the land fund in construction and other works* that tried to reduce the misuse of arable land ruling the construction works in the countryside. Until then, construction works came before urban planning, which did not exist.

A few months later, in October 1961, the Ministry of Agriculture in collaboration with the Ministry of Construction issued a brochure titled *Urban Planning of Agricultural Centres (Projektim Urbanistik i Qendrave Bujqësore)*. This brochure provided overall guidance for the selection of the most suitable locations for the establishment of agricultural cooperatives' residential and production zones, with information, materials, and normative data for the drafting of the regulatory masterplans. These guidelines were meant to inform the agronomists, zootechnicians, building technicians, and directors and administrators of agricultural cooperatives (AQSHb 1961a, p. 64/1) and were developed upon the directives of the 4<sup>th</sup> ALP's Congress, during which Enver Hoxha demanded: «to pay attention to the future development of the villages, which should not only consist in agricultural-economic centres, but also important residential, cultural and educational settlements, to truly represent the new socialist village» (AQSHb 1961, p. 64/3).

This brochure was the first practical and official attempt to regulate urban planning and construction works in the countryside. It described the climate of the country and the geological composition of lowland rural areas; the conditions and aspects to be considered for the location of the residential and production areas; the circumstances allowing the relocation of existing villages and the consequent displacement of population.

The urban planning scheme was supposed to vary with respect to the survey, with the suggestion to adopt a square urban grid in plain areas and an arrangement along the contour lines in the case of hilly terrain. [Fig. 4]

The residential zone had to be located at a higher altitude than the production zone and was divided into administrative, socio-cultural, and housing areas. The organization of the village had to consider the local conditions,

paying attention to pre-existing buildings, especially those of historical value (AQSHb 1961, p. 64/14). However, within the residential zone of the new socialist rural village, the smallest and most important spatial unit was the individual plot or parcel (*ngastër individuale*) belonging to each cooperative member (AQSHb 1961, p. 64/16). The individual plot was composed of the courtyard in front of the house (*oborri para shtëpisë*), the house plot (*trualli e shtëpisë*), and the vegetable garden (*kopështi*) (Fig. 5). It had to be rectangular in shape and cover maximum area of 300 m<sup>2</sup> including the surface intended for construction of the house; the latter had to be placed transversely along the longitudinal axis of the parcel, at 3-5 m from the street and 4 to 6 m from the adjacent houses.

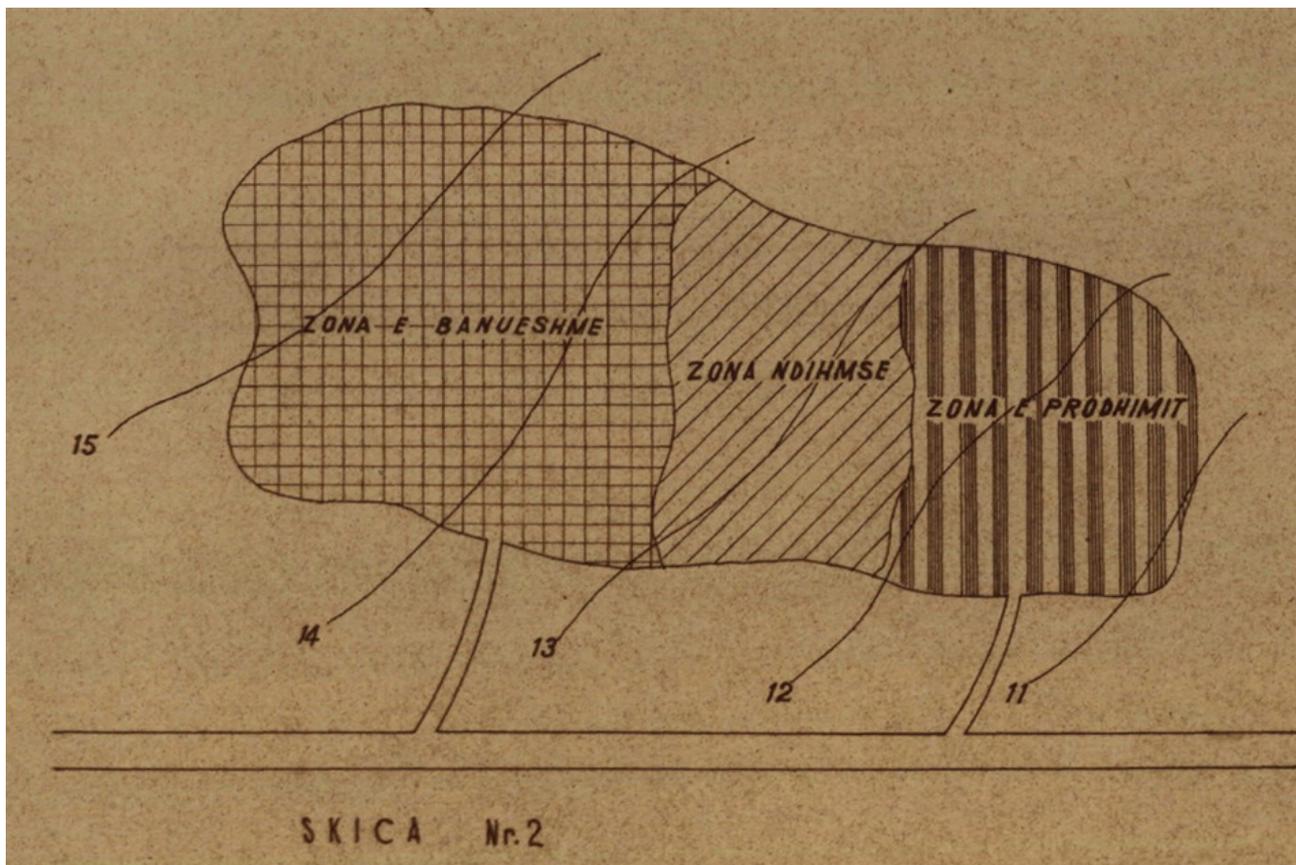
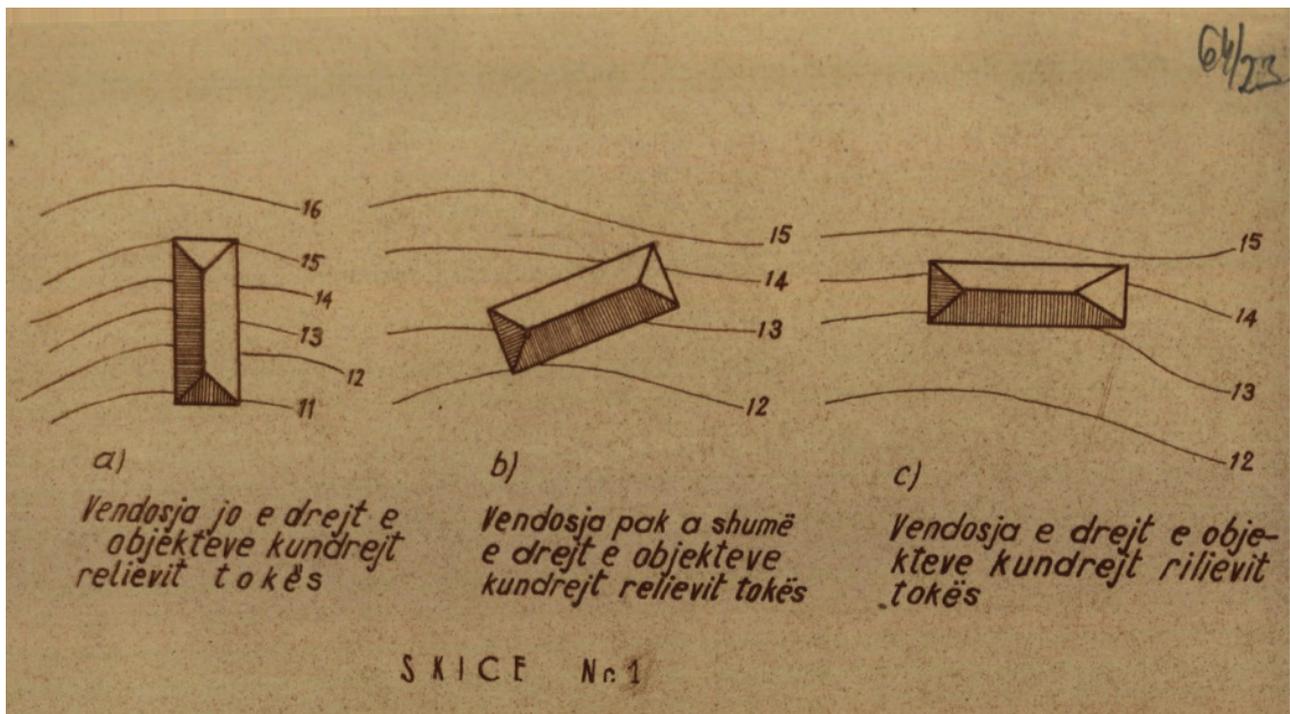
The production zone, including also the auxiliary intermediate zone, was placed in a favourable position with respect to road connections and land cultivated with forage, paying attention to protect the buildings from wind exposure. It comprised all buildings and services intended for intensive farming, the conservation and storage of agricultural products, and related services aimed at maximizing the mechanization of the work processes.

This brochure is important to reconstruct the general urban planning legislative excursus in relation to socialist rural planning in Albania. These guidelines attempted to incorporate the socialist ideology and planning applied to the peculiar Albanian context, in a period when urban planning was an “uncertain ground” either as practice or in theory. Moreover, this document set the beginning of a series of future orders, decrees, and regulations that were to constitute the legislative references for the study of urban planning evolution in Socialist Albania and that culminated in 1978 with the approval of the Decree of the Presidium of the People’s Assembly (DPPA) no. 5747 *For the drafting, approval, and implementation of masterplans of cities and villages* and the respective Regulation *For the drafting and the implementation of masterplans of cities and villages*, approved by the DCM no. 47, July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1978 (AQSH 1978a, p. 70, AQSH 1978b, p. 102).

The end of the 1970s also coincided with the split from the bilateral relation with China and with the consequent harsh self-isolation of the country. The introductory text of the decree clearly mirrored this historic moment:

[...] the design and construction of cities and villages with a socialist content and a national physiognomy, against any influence of bourgeois and revisionist ideology, for the concentration and grouping of buildings, saving as much as possible the agricultural land, and especially the arable land, for [providing] the solution to current urban planning problems and [giving] perspectives on the basis of scientific studies [...] (AQSH 1978a, p. 63).

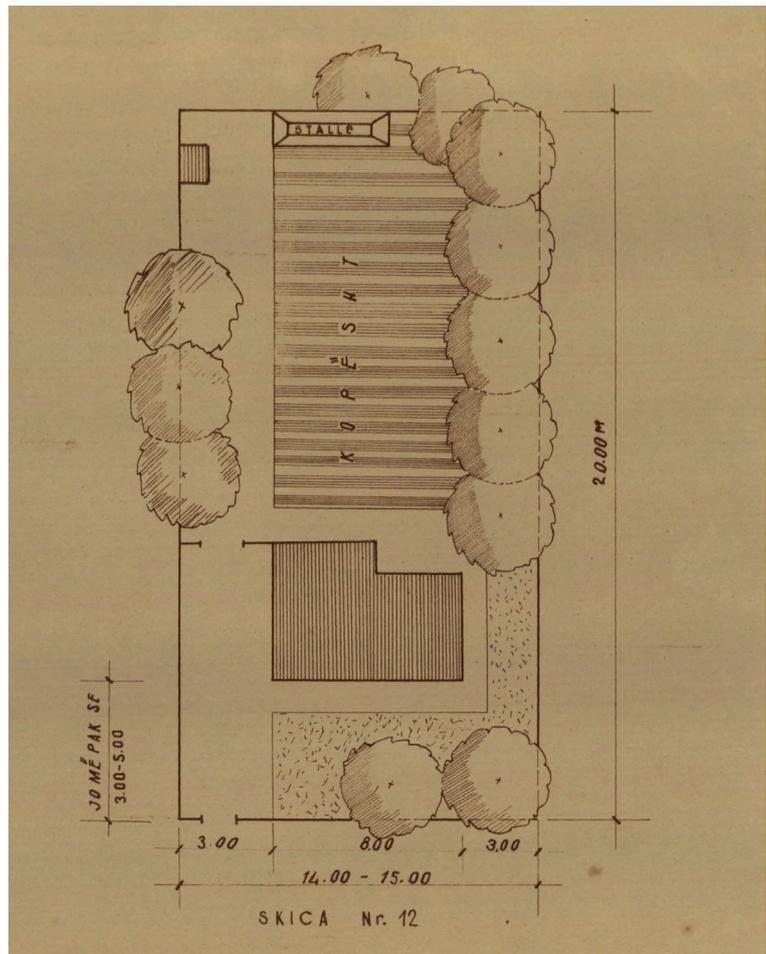
This decree was the first since the beginning of the dictatorship to clarify where the urban planning responsibility laid at central and local government levels, overcoming a long period of professional uncertainty caused by the inexperience of professionals and authorities, during which Albanian socialist urban planning was in a confusing situation. However, despite the above declaration of intent concerning the regime’s priority, the dictatorship mostly considered architecture and urban planning in rural contexts, secondary to industrial plans. Generally, in socialist Albania there was a lack of a real professional and theoretical debate publicly addressed outside of ideological propaganda. Despite in the second half of the 1970s the debate around the role of urban planning and architecture started to gain interest, it remained subordinated to production and economic purposes in relation to the impellent need to industrialize the country.

**Fig. 4**

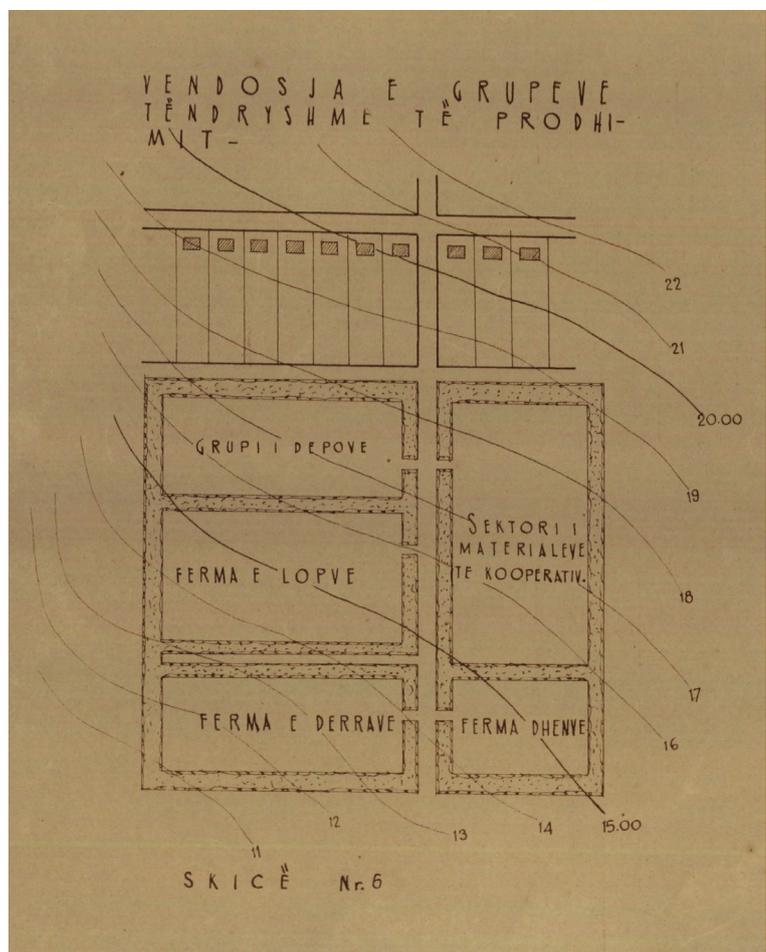
The arrangement of the rural buildings (Skica nr.1) and of the zones composing the new Albanian socialist rural settlement (Skica nr.2) according to the relief as for the 1961's brochure "Projektim Urbanistik i Qendrave Bujqësore" (AQSHb 1961, p. 64/23).

**Fig. 5**

The residential individual plot or parcel (ngastër individuale) according to the 1961's brochure "Projektim Urbanistik i Qendrave Bujqësore" (AQSHb 1961, p. 64/29).

**Fig. 6**

The arrangement of the service, breeding and production buildings composing the production zone of the new Albanian socialist rural settlement according to the 1961's brochure "Projektim Urbanistik i Qendrave Bujqësore" (AQSHb 1961, p. 64/26).



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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The date November 10, 1971, corresponded with the celebrations for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Albanian Labour Party (ALP).

<sup>2</sup> The first agricultural cooperative was established on November 11, 1946, in Krutje, near Lushnjë, in the Myzeqe Plain, Central Albania (Skarço 1987, p.27).

<sup>3</sup> The motto “*Të bëjmë fshatin si qytet!*”, *Let’s make the village as a city!*, was very common among the ALP propaganda to promote the urbanization of the rural areas.

<sup>4</sup> The terminology is borrowed and translated by Soviet literature. Hence, in the Albanian documents one can read *tipizimi* (typification) and *projekt-tip* (type-design).

<sup>5</sup> It must also be emphasised that, alongside the increasing evolution of the disintegration of political and economic relations with the other states of the Soviet Bloc and China, since the late 1970s the process of *simplification of projects* (*thjeshtimi i projekteve*) was introduced along the typification with the aim to save more raw building materials and reduce production and construction costs.

<sup>6</sup> See Pompejano (2021)

<sup>7</sup> With the creation of the *Ndërmarrja Projekti* in 1947, this governing body, supervised by the Ministry of Public Works, was suppressed. In turn, the *Ndërmarrja Projekti* was then suppressed and replaced in 1965 by the *Institutit Shtetëror të Projekttimeve (ISP)*, i.e., the State Institute of Design. The latter was finally substituted in 1973 by the *Instituti i Studimeve dhe i Projekttimeve të Urbanistikës dhe Arkitekturës (ISPUA)*, i.e., the Institute for the Study and Design of Urban Planning and Architecture. Articulated in eight sectors, ISPUA was under the direction of the Ministry of Construction. At the local level, the *Zyrat e Urbanistikës dhe Projektimit (ZUP)*, the Urban Planning and Design Offices, located in the twenty-six districts, assisted the ISPUA with the implementation of technical and methodological tasks.

<sup>8</sup> The Decision of the Council of Ministers (DCM) 2974, October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1959, *On the drafting, approval, and implementation*.

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