



Reimagining Kukës' Underground City: Community Perspectives

Jacob Ellington, Aliaa Hussein, Audrey Johnson, Ariel Schechter



WPI

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Abstract

Thirty meters beneath the northern city of Kukës lies an extensive network of abandoned Cold War-era tunnels. Kukës, the poorest city in Albania, grapples with high rates of youth migration fueled by economic adversity. In collaboration with community stakeholders, this project explored perspectives of the tunnels, ethical considerations for redevelopment, and ideas around potential reuse. Our team developed a website that explores the history of the tunnels, documents residents' ideas for redevelopment, and includes an interactive map where users can view the tunnels. Our research revealed strong community support for the tunnels' reuse, as well as the need to professionally assess the scope of the network so that the municipality can begin progress on the network's redevelopment.



View of Kukës' Gjallica mountain

Acknowledgements

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Faleminderit shumë to...

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Introduction



Aerial view of Old Kukës (Courtesy of A. Shehu)



After the fall of the communist regime in 1991, Albania was left with a landscape filled with remnants of their past, notably over 700,000 concrete bunkers spread throughout the country. In its northeast corner, the city of Kukës sits above an interconnected tunnel network of underground bunkers built during the regime as a failsafe against an invasion that never came. After the regime, the tunnels fell into disuse and disrepair as they were stripped of their furnishings and naturally degraded over time.

Currently, Kukës—the poorest city in Albania—is experiencing high migration rates among youth due to a lack of economic opportunity in the region (Politiko). Local community members and British consulate officials have expressed interest in the tunnels and their potential to improve economic conditions and potentially lower emigration rates. Our project gathered perspectives of residents and other involved stakeholders on their knowledge about the tunnels, ideas for the repurposing of the tunnels, current progress, and how its' potential economic impact on Kukës.

In this report we discuss the history of Kukës, including the underground tunnels, the ethical and social implication of their redevelopment, existing examples of reuse, and memorialization and remembrance of historical sites. Through our research, interviews, and analysis, we discovered a multiplicity of perspectives about the reuse of the tunnels that highlight the potential opportunities and challenges that come with it.

History of the Communist Regime in Albania

Between the end of World War II and the early 1990's, Albania was governed by Enver Hoxha, first secretary of the communist Party and de facto dictator (Eaton & Roshi, 2014). Hoxha pushed communist Albania away from outside influences such as capitalism, music, art, and fashion. (Eaton & Roshi, 2014). After the death of Joseph Stalin, his relationship with the larger community of communist countries declined and in 1961, tensions boiled over and Hoxha broke with Khrushchev, allying Albania with China and breaking the Warsaw Pact (Payne, 2014). The regime maintained a state of paranoia that gripped not only its citizens, but also the governing bodies responsible for central services and infrastructure (Woodcock, 2016). During the 1970s, Hoxha pursued various military defense projects out of fear of an invasion from outside forces - most notably, Projekti Bunkerizimit, or “bunkerization” projects in which tens of thousands of concrete bunkers were built throughout the country (Payne, 2014). The project aimed to provide a bunker for every Albanian and culminated in the construction of over 700,00 bunkers, which amounted to one for every four Albanians (Payne, 2014).



Image 1: Bunkers at the Border of Albania (Source: D. Jarvis, CC-BY)

The Three Cities of Kukës

The history of Kukës is often recounted as a story of three cities (Woodcock, 2016). The original Kukës, as displayed in Image 2, was an ancient city that traced its roots back over a thousand years (Woodcock, 2016). In 1969, plans were made by the regime to flood the old city of Kukës and turn it into a reservoir that would be used to power a hydroelectric power station (Onuzi, personal communication, 2023). In 1976, the regime built dams on the White and Black Drin rivers to create Lake Fierza and the Fierza hydroelectric power plant (Woodcock, 2016). The new city, Kukës e Ri – or simply, “New Kukës” – was built on an adjacent plateau over a thousand feet above the lake, as seen in Image 3. Residents of Kukës moved their belongings to their newly allocated government houses at New Kukës and watched as the water slowly flooded the ancient city (Woodcock, 2016). The third city – also referred to as the underground city – was a part of Projekti Bunkerizimit and is a massive network of underground bunkers and tunnels, built under New Kukës.

Under strict, secretive orders from the regime, Feti Gjici – the chief planner for the town of Kukës – designed a replica of the city 30 meters underground, locking the tunnels’ plans in his desk drawer before leaving work each day to ensure that no one saw them (Walker, 2020). The underground city fit thirty thousand people and included residential bunkers as well as space for a hospital, bakery, courtroom, army center, police station, pharmacy, printing presses, and radio station (Walker, 2020; Gjici, 2019)



Image 2: Old Kukës (Source: A. Shehu)



Image 3: New Kukës (Source: UNDP, CC-BY)



Image 4: Underground tunnel in Kukës

The hospital design included three hundred beds and a maternity ward with eighty beds, each of which connected directly to the existing above-ground hospital (Walker , 2020). Residential bunkers were designed to include one room per family, and to be connected to the non-residential sections of the tunnels (UK Ministry of Defense, 2023). The grinding mill and bakery were estimated to support fifteen thousand people for a year; the hospital, hygiene directorate, press and pharmacy were designed the same way (UK Ministry of Defense, 2023). The idea was to sustain the entire population underground for up to six months in the event of an attack (Walker, 2020).

Required military preparation drills were carried out occasionally to practice what to do in case of an attack (A. Ismailaj, personal communication 2023). There were sirens on all the main buildings of the city that would sound at five or six o'clock in the morning on the day of the drill. There was an entrance in roughly one of every three buildings, and everyone had to move outside quickly and in an orderly fashion towards the bunker entrance nearest to them (A. Ismailaj, personal communication, 2023). Although the plans detailing where the tunnels led were not publicly available, Kukës residents slowly learned about the size of the network through curiosity and word of mouth (A. Ismailaj, personal communication, 2023).

Once the regime collapsed, the city no longer used the tunnels and they fell into disrepair. People stripped the bunkers of everything that could be taken— all the furniture (with the exception of the unmovable concrete tables), utilities, and even the copper wire from the tunnels' electrical network was stolen (A. Shehu, personal communication, 2023).



Image 5: Andrit Shehu scans a collapsed section of the underground city

Some homes use the bunkers on their property for personal storage (F. Bajraktari, personal communication, 2023). Many residents have fond memories of using the tunnels as a shortcut to get to the shore of Lake Fierza, a tradition shared by both older residents and teenagers (F. Bajraktari, personal communication 2023; A. Ismailaj, personal communication 2023). Youngsters sometimes explored the tunnels in their free time and shared with others what they had seen (Ismailaj, personal communication, 2023). At the height of the Kosovo War in 1999 – when the residents of Kukës took in over 300,000 ethnic Albanian refugees (Carr, 2012) – the city's bunkers housed refugees, and bunkers in the neighboring villages were also used as shelter against Serbian shells (B. Onuzi, personal communication 2023; Pike, 2013).

Kukës has experienced significant transformation over the course of its history. Nowadays, Kukës struggles with multiple socio-economic challenges---poverty, lack of jobs or other economic opportunities, inadequate medical care--- causing residents to emigrate to other cities in Albania or to move abroad to pursue employment and educational opportunities (Politiko, 2022). Kukës experiences especially high migration rates among youth. Between 2011 and 2019, 32.1% of households in Kukës have had either some or all members emigrate from Albania to the UK or EU-member countries while 39% of households have had some or all members migrate to another part of Albania (Gëdeshi & King, 2021).



Image 6: Deteriorated section of the underground barracks

In 2022, 12,301 Albanians attempted to enter the United Kingdom illegally compared to the previous year where about eight hundred Albanian crossed the channel (House of Commons, 2023). The significant amount of internal migration and emigration highlights the underlying socio-economic problems of the region and could potentially further limit the economic and social development of Kukës (Gëdeshi & King, 2021).

Ethical and Social Implications of Reuse

While questions on how to repurpose Kukës' underground tunnels to support economic development are important, there also remain ethical considerations regarding repurpose and reuse given that these are sites of memory.

In the aftermath of Albania's Communist era, the psychological ramifications of the regime proved to be profound, leaving a lasting imprint on the nation's relationship with its material heritage from that period (Pike, 2013). The various bunkers constructed “provide an opportunity to grasp the meaning of a traumatic period of recent history which deeply scarred not only the landscape and the economy, but also the psyche of anyone in the country over forty, and which many Albanians still prefer not to discuss [the communist regime] directly” (Pike, 2013, p. 60). The memory of the Kukës underground city is inextricably linked with that of the regime that built it and the fear of invasion that spurred its creation. According to Patrizia Violi of the University of Bologna, “The most relevant feature of trauma sites resides in their indexical character: these places maintain a real spatial contiguity with the trauma itself [...] and the demonstration of such a continuity is an essential part of their inherent and constructed meaning” (Violi, 2012, p. 39).

Historical memory is “a system of representations about the past that exists in the minds of most members of society,” which is influenced by “the actual experience of participants and witnesses of past events and official history, memorials, media, literature, and so forth,” (Nikiforov, 2017). Historical memory is used in various sites of memory around the world, one of which is the House of Terror in Hungary, a communist related memory museum located in a building that was used as the center of the communist secret police services (Réti, 2017). The House of Terror is said “to commemorate the collective traumatic experience,” through the “presence of victim identifications,” invoking a sense of collective memory (Réti, 2017). Another example is the DU Amache Project, which mentions that “heritage items not only reclaim historical memory, they enable new memories, ones related to an engaged, intercultural public sphere,” (Clark & Amati, 2019). In this context, ‘heritage items’ includes physical sites.

According to Dr. Dacia Viejo-Rose of the University of Cambridge, “It is only through social interaction —whether at familial, national or ‘world’ level— that heritage fully comes into its own. It is in the process of concretizing and communicating that values, protagonists, plots, and narratives are appended to heritage.” (Viejo-Rose, 2015, p. 4) Cultural heritage is not the kilometers of concrete tunnels thirty meters underneath Kukës, rather it is the social context regarding the site as performed by locals and foreigners alike. The heritage that the underground city represents is not immutable. “... heritage is not lost and found, stolen and reclaimed. It is a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past.” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1995, p. 370).

Viewing cultural heritage as a living, breathing facet of culture rather than as an artifact of the past allows for a more holistic and active approach to its development, and helps insure greater community inclusion (Violi, 2012). This approach, viewing cultural heritage as a continual process, allows the presentation and discourse surrounding the site to influence a better future. “The urgency lies in the questions that this form of remembrance provokes in relation to duties towards victims, the responsibilities that come with witnessing suffering, and the potential of memorial practices to drive changes in society that will make it less violent.” (Viejo-Rose, 2015, p. 6) A potential memorial must reflect its duty to those affected, not only in terms of respectful treatment and framing, but also in terms of a responsibility to educate future generations.

Community Involvement

During the planning state of reuse of a heritage site, it is important to include a variety of stakeholders to avoid potential conflicts. In an analysis of the implementation and success of five underground-built heritage sites abroad, researchers found that “leadership, dialogue, and power sharing between the local/regional authorities and communities,” are key components of successful sites (Smaniotto Costa et al., 2021, p. 13). The DU Amache Project “[included] a wide variety of individuals in the actual fieldwork at both the site and the associated museum” (Clark and Amati, 2019), which was described as an element of the project’s success. These examples highlight the value of the possible variety of perspectives from different stakeholders when considering the reuse of the underground city. Constructive authenticity refers to a “site’s connection to the local community in terms of presenting the idea of local culture,” (Kovačić et al., p. 16, 2023). The involvement of the local community is necessary to ensure the connection between the site and community is accurately depicted.

Existing Examples of Reuse

Reimagining the purpose of bunkers can involve preserving their original essence for an authentic experience, yet it also opens up opportunities for creating new memories and life. Worldwide, examples exist of former cold-war bunkers repurposed as varied as museums to datacenters (Kinnear, 2020; Ederyd, 2014). One study explored various approaches to reuse in two Scottish nuclear bunkers. The bunker at Barnton Quarry, underwent a community-driven restoration to its cold-war state to serve as a historical landmark. In contrast, the bunker at Gairloch was structurally modified to become a museum not only about itself but also about the surrounding town, allowing the bunker to serve as an attraction for the region (Kinnear, 2020). Even practical reuse has been preceded in Scotland; the bunkers at Cultybraggan have been converted to a “contemporary data centre, [sic] providing internet access to the surrounding community,” (Kinnear, p. 12, 2020). Further examples of data center conversion exist in the USA and Sweden; notably, the Swedish internet service provider, Bahnhof, redeveloped the 1,100 square meters of the Pionen bunkers under Stockholm for this purpose. (Ederyd, 2014).



Image 7: Barnton Quarry Bunker (Source: G. Pow, CC-BY)



Image 8: Gairloch Bunker Museum (Source: G. Yuill, CC-BY)



Image 9: Pionen Bunkers (Source: A. Chen , CC-BY)

Albania has already begun this process of re-imagining, most notably through the conversion of two bunkers in Tirana to museums, Bunk'Art 1 and Bunk'Art 2. Bunk'Art 1 was originally created as a nuclear-protected tunnel system built to protect the regime's elite including the dictator, Enver Hoxha (Kovačić et al, 2023). Bunk'Art 2 was likewise a secret government bunker built in Tirana, however it served as a facility for the Sigurimi secret police rather than as a simple shelter. Both have since been converted to historical museums, preserving their history as well as educating and engaging the public, (Vokshi et al., 2019). These museums, through using the original structures and modifying them as little as reasonable to allow visitor access, strike a balance between authentic preservation and accommodating the education of the public (Vokshi et al., 2019). In contrast, Gjirokastërs' Cold War Tunnel Museum displays a bunker in its original state, providing visitors an authentic interpretation of what the emergency shelter would have looked like during the regime.



*Image 10: Tunnel in Bunk'Art 1
(Source: EWL Images, CC-BY)*



Image 11: Gjirokastërs' Cold War Tunnel



Image 12: Exhibit in Bunk'Art 2

Summary

A multiplicity of meanings are contained in heritage sites and this remains the case in the underground city and the people of Kukës. Engaging in empathetic listening allows for a variety of perspectives, experiences, and stories to be heard and anchored spatially to the bunkers. The intersection of documented personal testimony and detailed spatial mapping can be used to convey and understand the relationship between the underground city and citizens of Kukës as community stakeholders discuss how to properly engage with this heritage.

Methods



Overview

The goal of this project was to present comprehensive information on Kukës' underground city and its potential reuse, integrating local perspectives, historical data, and schematic details in an interactive website that will inform stakeholders. We conducted interviews with Kukës residents, government officials, and tour operators to understand how much knowledge individuals had about the underground city, their memories and experiences with the tunnels, and the sentiment surrounding ideas for potential redevelopment. The team used findings from these interviews to supplement existing sources in our background chapter and incorporated them into an interactive website. The findings are integrated within our updated digital maps of underground tunnels, created from scans of engineering drawings and enhanced using information collected through explorations and testimony of individuals involved with the creation and maintenance of the tunnels.

Image 13: Exploring the underground city



Interviews with Kukës Residents

Our team interviewed residents of Kukës, government officials, and tour operators to understand their perspectives on, knowledge of, and experiences with the underground tunnels. We used convenience sampling to identify potential respondents, approaching individuals in public areas in Kukës with a translator present. Our sponsor and key informants helped with identifying other individuals to interview, including government officials, those who helped to build the tunnels, those currently working with the tunnels, and tour operators. We spoke to Albanians with varying perspectives on Kukës' tunnel network to develop a better understanding of how the public might feel about their redevelopment.



Image 14: Interview with Andrit Shehu



Image 15: Interview with Afrim Cenaj

For each interview we obtained the interviewee's consent for recording the conversation including the interviewee and the translator if applicable. Recordings typically consisted of a single camera video, framing only the interviewee, with onboard audio in addition to a lapel microphone on the interviewee, but this setup was modified at the subject's request. The team separated each interview recording into individual recordings per question, with additional editing to enhance audio and video quality where necessary. English questions and responses were transcribed by the OpenAI Whisper large machine learning model, with pertinent sections reviewed manually for accuracy. Further information regarding this process and its implications is available in

Appendix E. The responses given in Albanian were sent as audio files to our co-researchers to translate into English. Afterwards, we discussed our impressions of the interview as a group and sent the transcript to the subject for review.

After reviewing the subject's approved transcript, we focused our analysis on insight related to knowledge and experiences with the underground tunnels as well as perspectives and ideas related to repurposing them. We used coding to organize the insights into thematic categories and drew connections between these categories (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). We also formed any emergent questions that were asked in later interviews.

Create a publicly accessible visualization of the tunnel network's topography

While the original maps of the tunnels exist in Kukës' archives, they are not publicly available nor updated; the archives only have the original schematics from the tunnel's design in 1976. In collaboration with the municipality of Kukës, our team analyzed existing schematics from the urban planning archives and took updated digital scans. During a meeting with the British Consulate officials, we received a report containing digital scans of plans and schematics of the underground tunnels. These resources were used to develop an easily accessible digital format for showcasing the underground tunnel network, translated in both English and Albanian. The accessibility of the map will allow the public to develop a clear understanding of the underground network and its relation to the city of Kukës.

Our team used document editing software, the updated scans, and bunker entrance coordinates provided to us by the British Embassy to create new two-dimensional models of the network. They are simplified – the exact specifications, furnishings, and engineers involved, for instance, will be irrelevant for our project's purposes – and presented in a format that can be easily read by users without a technical background. Our coresearchers assisted in adding simplified labels to each section of the map and translated them so that they may be read by both English and Albanian speakers.

Create a published website to showcase the history and potential of the underground city

We created a website to display the history of Kukës and the underground city, an interactive map of Kukës highlighting the general locations and shape of the tunnels, photos and videos from inside the tunnels, and quotes, transcripts, and videos from our interviews. Our choices for the technologies we used were based on prioritizing maintainability for this website and its data after our project ended.

To achieve this, we created two separate components – a front end and a back end – which allowed us to separate the data storage and the website itself. This was helpful in allowing our sponsor to interact with the two components separately, either updating the data or changing the look of the website, as they wish.

For the back end, we used a back-end-as-a-service (BaaS) tool developed by Google called Firebase. This industry-standard tool has a few key resources that will be especially useful for the goals of this website: Firebase uses regular Google accounts which allowed us to create an account for our sponsor to easily hand off ownership; Firebase Hosting also allowed us to publish the website on the internet for free; Firebase Cloud Storage allowed us to store photos and videos of the tunnels as well as text data like transcriptions of our interviews on secure servers.. Having this back end allowed for flexibility in the future for the creation of an app or other related websites that can all share the same data and ownership through one Firebase account.

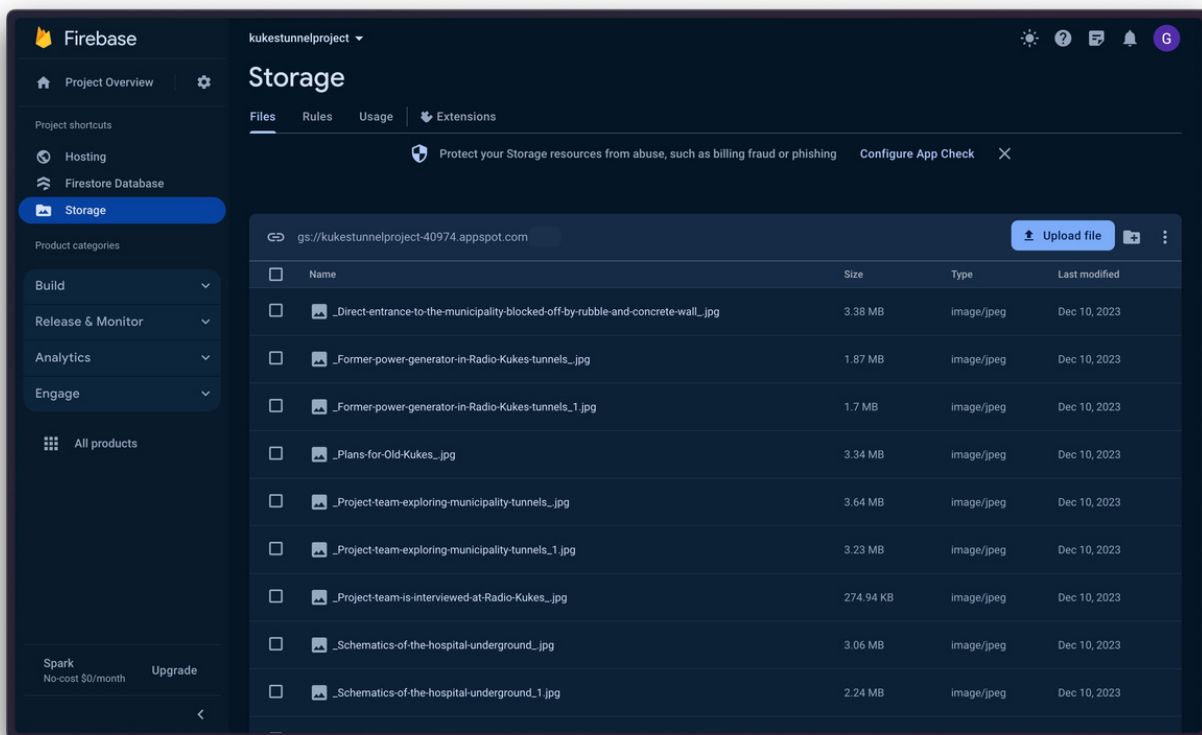
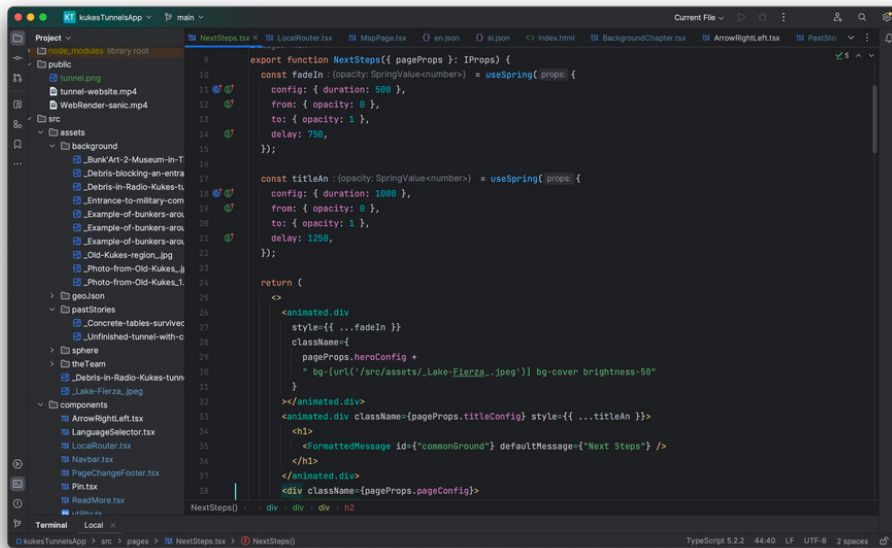


Image 16: Firebase storage bucket with our image gallery

For the front end we used React.js, another industry-standard tool. React is a JavaScript web framework which allowed us to create an interactive user interface that displays our data in an engaging format for the user. We used this to structure our website, create pages, organize videos, photos and text, and create forms to allow end users to deliver new data or feedback directly to our sponsor. We created a language toggle, which allows users to switch between English and Albanian allowing the website to be useful for as many target users as possible.



```

export function NextSteps({ pageProps }: IProps) {
  const fadeIn = (opacity: SpringValue<number>) = useSpring({ props: {
    config: { duration: 500 },
    from: { opacity: 0 },
    to: { opacity: 1 },
    delay: 700,
  }});

  const titleAn = (opacity: SpringValue<number>) = useSpring({ props: {
    config: { duration: 1000 },
    from: { opacity: 0 },
    to: { opacity: 1 },
    delay: 1250,
  }});

  return (
    <>
      <animated.div
        style={{ ...fadeIn }}
        className={
          pageProps.heroConfig +
          " bg-[url(/src/assets/Lake-Eitoxa.jpeg)] bg-cover brightness-50"
        }
      ></animated.div>
      <animated.div className={pageProps.titleConfig} style={{ ...titleAn }}>
        <h1>
          <FormattedMessage id={"commonGround"} defaultMessage={"Next Steps"} />
        </h1>
      </animated.div>
      <div className={pageProps.pageConfig}>
    </>
  );
}

```

Image 17: React.js source code for our website

As a part of the front end, we created an interactive map experience where users can hover over specific sections to display information such as historical stories from our interviews, images of the interior, or links to direct them to additional information on our website. We created this by taking 360° photographs of the tunnels' interior using a Google Pixel 7 Pro, and we took combined photo and LiDAR scans using the Polycam application on an iPhone 12 Pro.



Image 18: Interactive map featured on our website

The combination of front-end and back-end components allowed us to create a website that is accessible and engaging to users as well as easily maintainable for our sponsor.

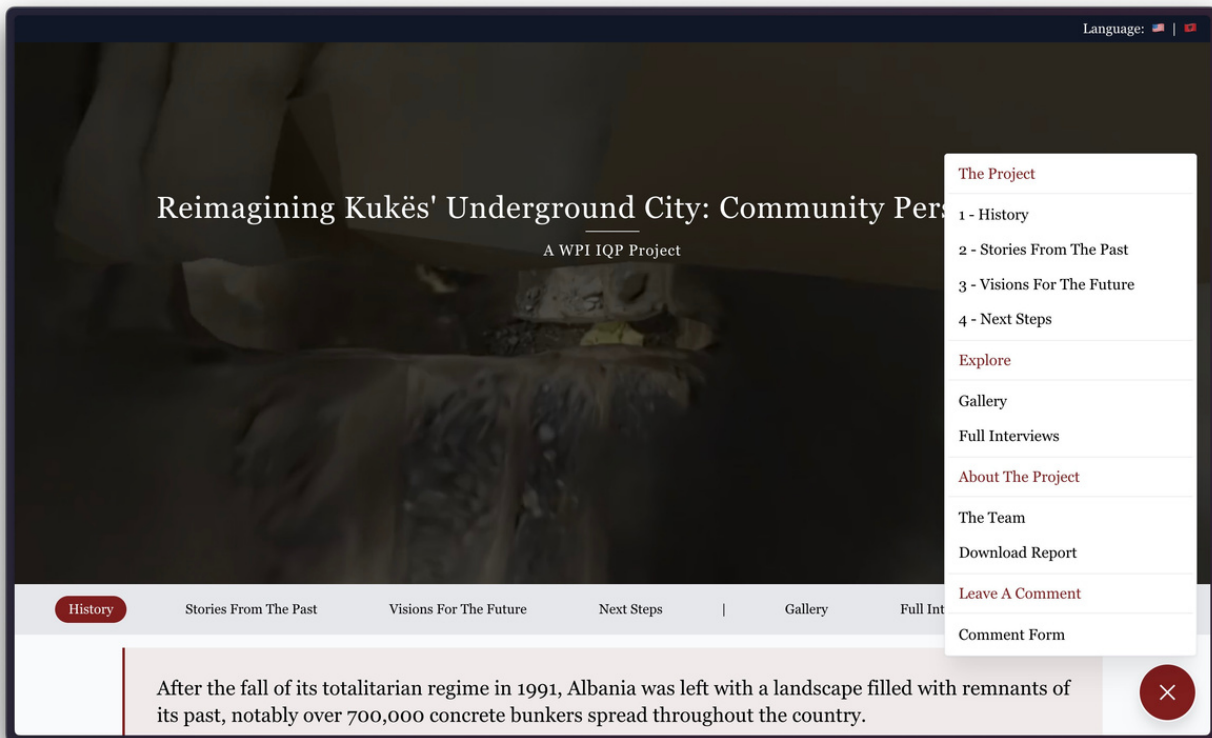


Image 19: Website homepage

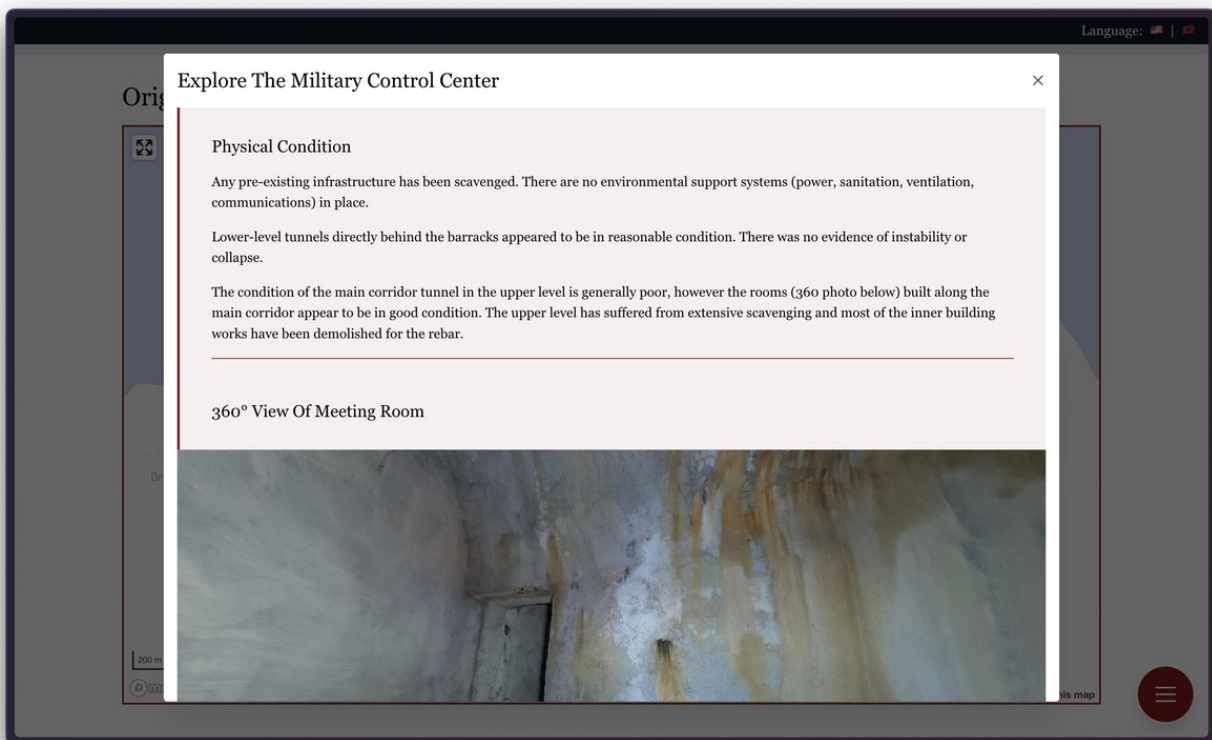


Image 20: Detail page showing notes on physical condition and 360 photos of the barracks

Findings



Stories of the Past

Personal stories of those who had direct experiences with the underground tunnels allowed us to see how perceived external threats were ever-present in the lives of Kukës residents under the regime. People remained in a state of fear and preparedness for an attack that never came. After the collapse of the communist system in the 1990s, the underground city became a safe haven for many, a counter-cultural refuge for some, and a bitter memory for others.

During the Regime

Interviews with older Kukës residents allowed us to see the level of secrecy during the construction of the tunnels. Bukurosh Onuzi, national project coordinator at UNDP and a resident of Kukës, spoke of seeing a map of the underground tunnels that was marked “very secret,” by the leaders of the communist regime that was not allowed to be seen by others, (B. Onuzi, personal communication, 2023). The map and its restriction of being seen by others displays a level of secrecy during the tunnels’ construction.

Flamur Bajraktari was a mobilized soldier under the regime from 1985 onward. To Mr. Bajraktari, the underground city represented a point of pride, with its sturdy construction and construction by his community, as well as being a part of a necessary defensive network against an aggressive neighbor in the form of former Yugoslavia. He described his experience with the bunkers, “during the time off we used to explore the bunkers of the army. We used to explore the bunkers because we used to train there,” (F. Bajraktari, personal communication, 2023). Additionally, he discussed the design of the bunkers, particularly their strength, which were “fortified from airstrikes and land strikes...the thickness of the bunker was unimaginable,” (F. Bajraktari, personal communication, 2023). Mr. Bajraktari showed evident pride in the underground city, its construction, and his time with it. “[...] But still the nostalgia is there. I’m not saying for that system to return, but I feel the nostalgia because our fathers worked hard for that money.” (F. Bajraktari, personal communication, 2023). In this excerpt, Mr. Bajraktari is referencing the significant amount the state would pay workers, such as his father, for the construction of bunkers. He is proud of the underground city and his service within it, despite his negative view of the communist system overall. (F. Bajraktari, personal communication, 2023).



Image 21: Interview clip with Flamur Bajraktari, featured on our website

Alida Ismailaj, a staff member of Radio Kukësi, had a different memory of the role of the underground city in life under the regime. She grew up in New Kukës and only really had an awareness of the underground city in the context of regular drills. As she recalled,

“You were not allowed to enter the tunnels. It was more allowed near the end of the '80s. [...] We were curious about why they were built because the Albanian society back then was indoctrinated with the dogma of the dictatorship. ‘Only we are being attacked’ ‘Only we have enemies.’ But, as we Imaged out, this enemy was imaginary. And as we also Imaged out, Kukës shares a border with Kosovo. [...] It was planned that we would protect ourselves also from enemies that were former allies ... from former Yugoslavia under the rule of Tito because there was a falling out with Tito. But the building of the tunnels was not planned just to protect from Tito, but it was built to protect us from the Capitalist, revolutionist enemy. That is how it was called during the dictatorship: the revolutionist enemy,”

(A. Ismailaj, personal communication, 2023).

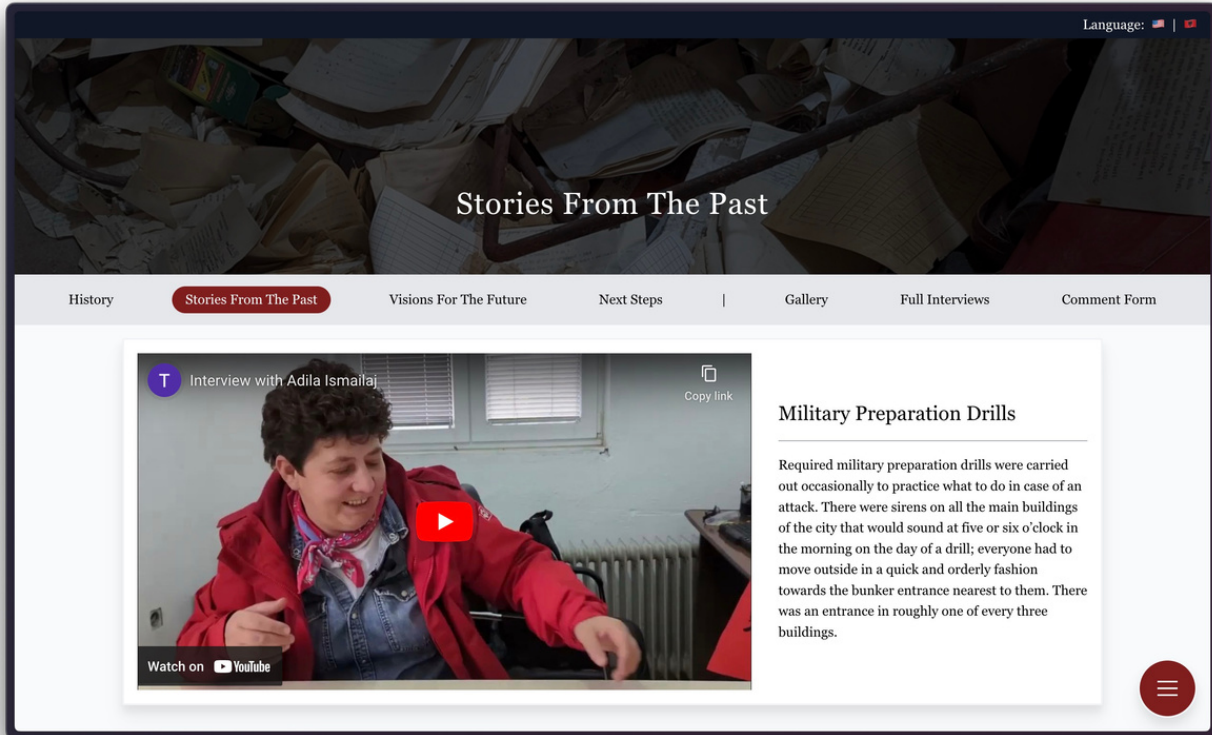


Image 22: Interview clip with Alida Ismailaj, featured on our website

Ms. Ismailaj dismissed most of the fears surrounding the necessity of the underground city as imaginary, incited by the dogma of the dictatorship. She recounted her experience of an invasion drill as a child. “We were notified that an alarm would ring out on Sunday, and we would do the imaginary preparations for war [...] It was planned by the military and high school seniors, they would dress up as soldiers. [...] The first time that I entered the tunnel it was very well lit, very clean, and fully furnished like a proper house.” (A. Ismailaj, personal communication, 2023). These childhood recollections show a civilian perspective of the underground city in the ‘80s, where little was known about the bunkers other than their mere existence. The drills and expectation of war were merely a fact of life, even part of high school to organize them. These interviews also provided critical information and context that was previously unavailable. For example, our background research prior to our fieldwork suggested that the underground city was never completed or used. While it is true that some sections were never finished, these personal accounts clearly show that large sections of the underground city were finished, furnished, and used actively both for civilian and military activities. The personal accounts also helped illuminate the varying perspectives surrounding the perception of threat with some believing that the regime was creating a false sense of danger and others feeling a real threat of invasion. These first-hand accounts helped us provide a more accurate account of history and, from a practical standpoint, inform restoration efforts as to the original state of the site.

After the Regime

After the fall of the regime, the tunnels fell into a state of disrepair even as some were used for varying purposes. Some residents discussed the deterioration of the tunnels, mainly due to theft. Alida Ismailaj stated that, “By [1991] lots of things had been stolen. Lots of furnishings were gone. Things were taken...either stolen discreetly or using violence, but the bottom line is that the place was empty, not like the tunnels used to be in my memory,” (A. Ismailaj, personal communication, 2023). When asked what was taken from the tunnels, she elaborated, “mostly copper wires, the installations...there are only concrete tables left,” (A. Ismailaj, personal communication, 2023). Another resident, Flamur Bajraktari, discussed how residents would, “just destroy [the bunker on their property] and get the iron to sell... for 20 or 30 lek,” (F. Bajraktari, personal communication, 2023). One resident also recalled that “in 1997, everything was being destroyed, all the military bases of our country.” Though his house was close to this tunnel area, he would “not allow this part to be abused,” (A. Cenaj, personal communication, 2023).



Image 23: Barricaded entrance to tunnels

Despite significant portions of the tunnels falling into disrepair, other parts continued to serve different purposes. After the fall of the regime, tunnels became a space for exploration, Ms. Ismailaj recalled exploring the tunnels with a group of friends,

“We were very curious about where these tunnels lead. We knew in an informal way but it's not like we were taught at school. We would be informed by kids from adjacent neighborhoods, that X tunnel sends you from Y location, for example neighborhood one, all the way to the lake or ours, in neighborhood 2, would go all the way to the lake. It would also go all the way to neighborhood one. They were like veins, and we would inform each other, out of curiosity, where they would lead. And one time, I remember, we were a group of friends ...from neighborhood two, where the Kovajt [unsure] area is today, so from neighborhood 2, we went all the way up to, we went by the court. It was called the committee back then. And from there we went down to the lake, where today lies the valley of the Drin. But by 1991 the tunnels were without lights, so we used our lighters to explore.”

(A. Ismailaj, personal communication, 2023)

Another memory that Ms. Ismailaj describes is the tunnel being used as a “hangout spot,” where her friends formed a music band.

“Back then we would sing Albanian and Kosovo rock music and also three other songs ‘Let it Be’ by The Beatles, ‘Satisfaction’ by The Rolling Stones and ‘Break on Through’ by The Doors. We would sing these at the tunnel because it was a decent hangout place, but when I think of it, it was ironic against the system to sing rock music at the tunnel entrance because it was forbidden. It coincidentally served as a way to show our contempt toward the system. This is a small memory that I just thought of but then I reflected on the coincidence of us singing those songs at the tunnel. Actually, this memory today gave me the idea to gather the music band and sing in the tunnels and bunkers,”

(A. Ismailaj, personal communication, 2023).

During the Kosovo War in 1999, the underground tunnels sheltered Albanian ethnic refugees (CITE from background chapter). Bukurosh Onuzi, -- the National Project coordinator at the UNDP -- mentioned, “we cleaned [the underground tunnels], ... to prepare for...the Kosovo crisis,” (B. Onuzi, personal communication, 2023).

Some residents also “preserved [the bunker on their property] and did reconstructions for their own entertainment,” (F. Bajraktari, personal communication, 2023). For example, a portion of the underground city in Kukës is currently used for tourism by Afrim and Renis Cenaj, tour guides for the tunnels. Afrim Cenaj discussed his inspiration for using the tunnels as a touristic site,

“After the Tirana tunnel turned into a museum, Bunk’Art, why not make our tunnel a museum?”

(A. Cenaj, personal communication, 2023).

The memories of looting and exploration of the tunnels from directly after the fall of the regime to its current uses including tours indicates a transformation of the site. The tunnels evolved from its association of perceived external threats to new life whether it is curiosity when exploring the tunnels, defiance through looting or playing rock music, or education and opportunity through tours. This evolution conveys a continuity of collective memory which allows for the potential repurposing of the physical site and its meaning to the community.

Local Insights

In our interviews with members of the Kukës community, we found that sentiments towards the redevelopment and re-use of the underground city can be categorized into two major categories. The first, and more common perspective expressed by Kukës residents is that the underground city is an asset that can and should be used to further the economic, cultural, and educational development of Kukës. While proposed specific implementations range considerably, the general concept of redevelopment for alternative, non-military use has seen support from members of the Municipal government, citizens, and even representatives of the United Kingdom.

Perspectives on Reuse

Alida Ismailaj, a longtime Kukës resident and podcast host at Radio Kukës, has a dream for the tunnels underneath Radio Kukës,

“I have thought and expressed the idea here at Radio Kukësi to make the underground area as a museum for the radio...We still have some old equipment and [the museum] can be separated in sectors,”

(A. Ismailaj, personal communication, 2023)

Having studied cultural anthropology in Germany, Alida's vision for a Radio Kukës Museum is intricate and well thought through. She is currently in charge of maintaining the Radio's extensive collection of archived tapes, newsreel and songs and sees much potential for interactive and engaging exhibits using the tools at her disposal. She envisions creating exhibits using a combination of the historical resources in the archives and modern testimony, "You would have to go to the archives [to] figure out what exactly we have [to] work with, while entwining them with testimonies of people that are still alive today," (A. Ismailaj, personal communication, 2023).

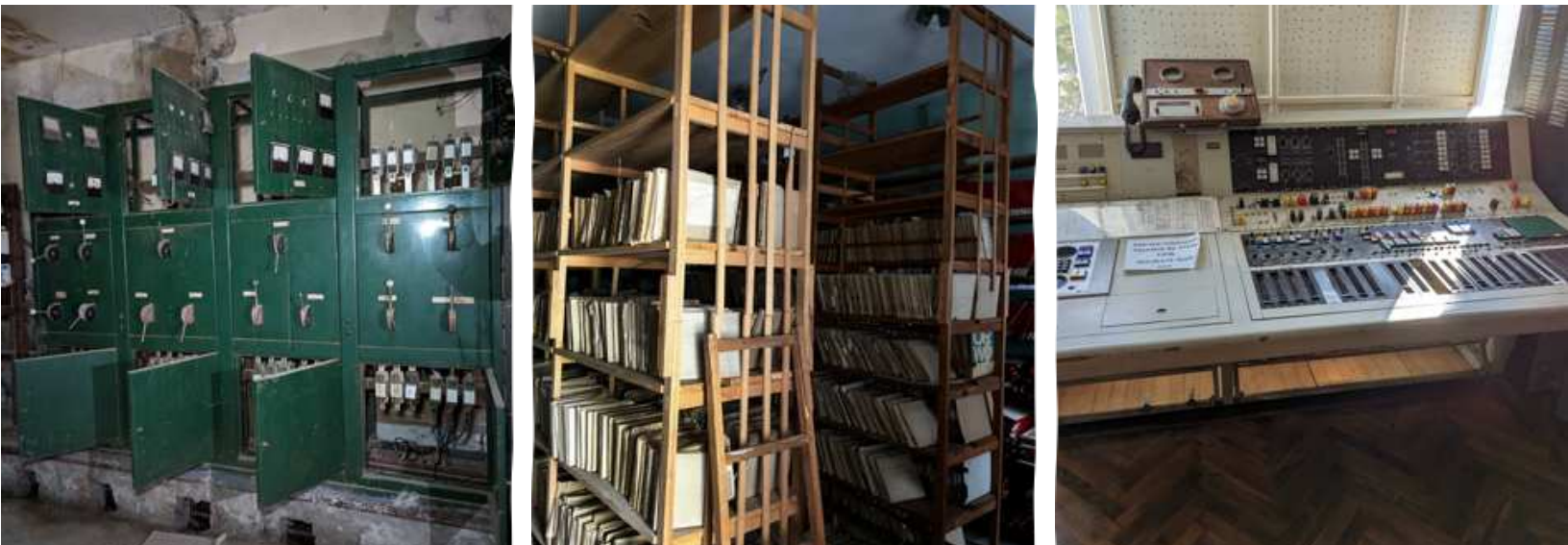


Image 24: Radio Kukësi Museum elements

When asked why this museum concept is important, Alida felt most strongly about the importance of connecting with the youth of Kukës, "...to show the future generations the function that Radio Kukësi used to have, because you have enough youngsters in Kukës right now that don't know of the importance," (A. Ismailaj, personal communication, 2023). Having grown up around easy-to-access information through smartphones and computers, Alida believes that the younger generations should know and appreciate the historical importance of radio, and specifically, the importance of Radio Kukësi in the history of Kukës. Alida's goal to educate the youth of Kukës is not unique; other interviewees who lived through the regime and the Kosovo war see a need to educate the youth about the history of Kukës and we heard various concepts for different museums in the tunnels to accomplish that goal. Although Alida is very passionate about the Radio Kukës Museum concept, she acknowledged that as of now, it is just a dream and much work lays ahead in realizing her vision, "I hope it becomes a goal. It's too utopian...it's a very long process that needs to be studied in length beforehand," (A. Ismailaj, personal communication, 2023).

Bukurosh Onuzi dreams of creating an experience that simulates the drills during the communist regime and includes a museum in a portion of the underground tunnels (B. Onuzi, personal communication, 2023). He mentioned the “memory museum,” can act as a reminder by telling “people to remember, to not forget. This is very important for us,” (B. Onuzi, personal communication, 2023). In Mr. Onuzi’s re-imagining of the tunnels a siren rings, signaling for tourists to follow a path from the tunnels near the Kukës municipality to the Barracks section where the museum would be located (B. Onuzi, personal communication, 2023). The museum itself would include different rooms dedicated to different topics such as the communist regime, border security, Kosovo crisis, ethnography, besa (an Albanian cultural honor code), architecture and environment (B. Onuzi, personal communication, 2023). Mr. Onuzi felt the museum would serve an educational purpose as



Image 25: Kosovar Refugee Camp in Kukës¹

“the young generation doesn't know how it was, the communism system [sic],” as well as foreigners (B. Onuzi, personal communication, 2023). He also mentioned that this museum could potentially allow foreigners to spend money for accommodations, dining, etc. (B. Onuzi, personal communication, 2023). This idea for reuse of the tunnels is mainly for a touristic purpose which could be economically beneficial for Kukës.

The economic benefits of touristic reuse should not be overlooked; Kukës has been struggling with retaining its youth population due to lack of opportunity and all the interviewees shared a common sentiment that any reuse project should help aid this issue. Of course, the economic opportunity is not the only, or even primary reason for the desire for a museum in the underground city. All our respondents voiced a concern about preserving the history and heritage that the underground city represents, especially among the younger generations who have no memory or experience with the regime that constructed it. The educational and preservative value of a museum cannot be discounted from a discussion of the value of museum re-use. Onuzi also highlighted more practical potential uses of the tunnels for the residents including, “agriculture, mushroom cultivation, for gas, for heating,” (B. Onuzi, personal communication, 2023). His overall vision included a multiplicity of uses for different purposes, however he indicated the need to establish a foundation and restore the tunnels, “first thing, to have... light inside of tunnels because they had light, but it destroyed after 1990, to be clean, to have pavement [sic],” (B. Onuzi, personal communication, 2023).



Image 26: Andrit Shehu and the unfinished, deteriorating section of the tunnel network

Mr. Andrit Shehu, an architect and, until recently, the chief urbanist of the Kukës municipality, had a more focused plan for the tunnels. We interviewed Mr. Andrit in an unfinished section of the tunnels that was originally connected to the municipality. While Mr. Andrit voiced support for the notion of re-use of the tunnels in a museum or commercial capacity, his main concern is the integrity of the tunnels. Looting, three decades of neglect, and the fact that some sections were never completed has led to degradation that threatens not only redevelopment efforts, but the city itself. In his words, “[the underground city] must be invested in so that it does not bring misfortune for the upper part, so that there is no collapse,” (A. Shehu, personal communication, 2023). He insisted that, regardless of the future use of the tunnels, investment and action must be taken to analyze and remediate the condition of the Underground city to prevent its collapse from damaging the city above. He showed us the results of partial cave-ins surrounding the area in which we conducted the interview.

While several of our respondents support redevelopment projects, some residents are interested in preserving sections of the tunnels. Flamur Bajraktari – now, a tailor working near the municipality – sees their preservation at least partially as a matter of respect towards the past generations that worked on the tunnels. He noted that keeping at least a portion of the tunnel network intact is “necessary because...natural disasters happen, human mistakes also happen...The only thing it needs is a few cables, the lighting, air conditioning and a few other things,” (F. Bajraktari, personal communication, 2023).



Image 27: Discarded equipment in the bunkers

Rifat Demalija also preferred that a majority of tunnels be preserved for shelter. While neither of these respondents were opposed to some level of redevelopment, they stressed the importance of retaining a portion of the tunnels for sheltering and security purposes. Rifat noted that while “defense is the major priority, ... a small spot can be used by tourists,” (R. Demalija, personal communication, 2023). He was not alone in this sentiment – many interviewees raised fears of continued aggression and instability in the Balkans and cited current military conflicts as reasons to keep the underground city in a ready condition for use as bunkers. Rifat admitted that Kukës is extremely close to the Kosovo border, and memories of the Kosovo war are still fresh in the minds of older residents.

Mr. Afrim Cenaj, a local Kukës resident who operates tours in the barracks section of the bunkers offered a direct rebuttal to this type of sentiment in his conversation with us. “Someone says that [the tunnels] should not be revealed, but these are no longer secrets. From the moment we joined NATO, there are no more state secrets [...]. When NATO and all know our history, why not let our children know the history of their ancestors?!” (A. Cenaj, personal communication, 2023). He believes that the underground city’s utility for military and civil protection has been made largely obsolete by Albania’s NATO membership and is outstripped by its potential for other uses. Mr. Cenaj repeatedly emphasized that his work and interest in the underground city is rooted in a concern for his children; to protect them not from bombs but from economic hardship.

“[I want] to turn it into a source of employment for our children, to turn it into a museum, play camps, bars, restaurants [...] Hopefully, this will be a good thing for the city. [Hopefully] every citizen will see something good in one way or another: selling something traditional, increased the demand for hotels and cafes. [...] Thus, the young generations should not have my fate, to end up in the streets of other countries but to have opportunities [for success] in their own country”

(A. Cenaj, personal communication, 2023).



Image 28: Interview with Afrim Cenaj



Image 29: Interview with Afrim Cenaj in the tunnels

This powerful testimony highlights the economic issues and fears in Kukës, and the belief that the underground city may be a (at least partial) solution. Mr. Cenaj’s current touring operation to support his family demonstrates the viability of tourism in the region even with no re-development or refurbishing of the tunnels. This is a positive indication for the potential for tourism in the region, demonstrating tourist interest. We contend that a relatively small investment in the accessibility of the underground city could allow more people like Mr. Cenaj to support their families while staying in their home of Kukës. When asked if he was concerned about increased competition brought on by further development of the underground city, he said he welcomed it and did not want to lay claim to tours of the underground city.

There has also been a demonstrated interest in Kukës’ bunker network by the British Embassy. As the focus of their *Perspektiva Të Reva* (New Perspectives) project – which offers aid to identifying local opportunities for growth and development in hopes of improving sociocultural and economic issues. The influx of illegal immigrants to the UK from the Kukës region has also spurred interest in the potential for tunnel redevelopment to provide economic opportunities and improved living conditions in Kukës. The Embassy sent a team to evaluate the condition of the tunnels, with a special interest in their potential use for military training or a historical landmark.

The tension between the perceived continued need for military protection and the perceived economic and educational benefits is persistent throughout our findings. From a cultural heritage perspective, the literature suggests that accessibility and engagement of visitors is a critical aspect of preserving heritage. From this perspective, the desire to preserve and respect the work of the bunkers' builders would be better met by an open museum element rather than restoration to military use and control. However, it is also critical from an ethical and engagement perspective to make sure all community members feel heard and seriously consider the safety and historical concerns raised around redevelopment.

Although our interviews have revealed significant variation in viewpoints and desired outcomes, a path forward may still exist in the form of mixed use. Unlike other, smaller examples like Bunk'Art 2, the entire 7.5km of the underground city does not have to be devoted to just one purpose. With a design capacity of just under twice the current Kukës population, the underground city can still offer protection in the case of an emergency and be re-used simultaneously.

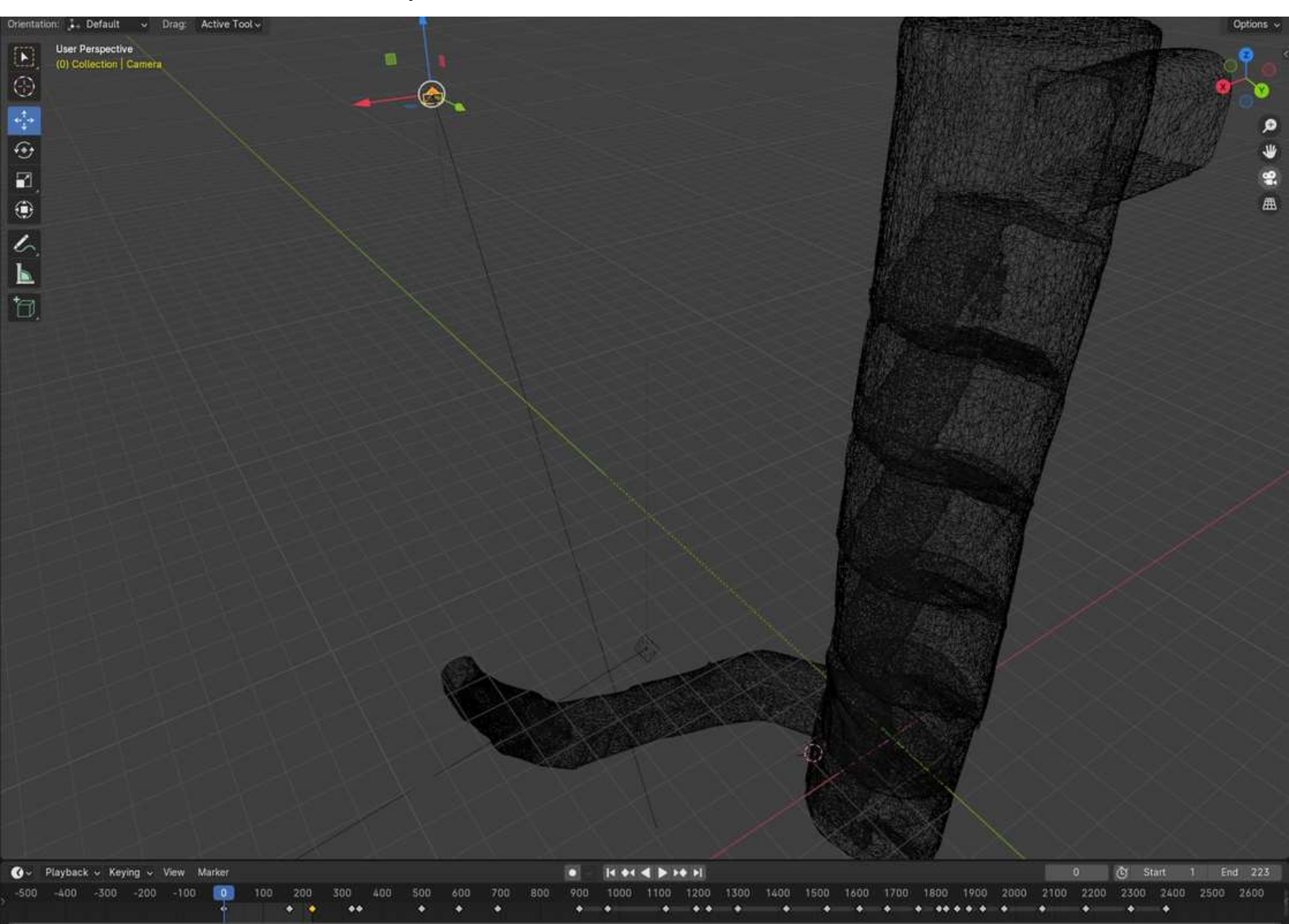


Image 30: Wireframe of LiDAR data of tunnel stairs

Recommendations





Based on our research, we have compiled a list of actionable steps that further bunker-related efforts for preservation and potential re-use.



DEVELOP A COMPLETE MAP AND ASSESSMENT OF THE STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY OF THE UNDERGROUND CITY

With the help of Andrit Shehu and the Kukës municipality, our team gained access to view the original schematics of the tunnels, which were difficult to read as they are undated and written in Albanian with code names for each room. The schematics include details about individual sections – such as the hospital and bunker wings – but because they do not include coordinates, locations, or details about their relation to other wings, their connection to each other, and indeed the location of some sections altogether, is not completely known.

Andrit Shehu and the representatives of the British Army including Lt. Colonel Wight-Boycott, believe a detailed map and assessment of the structural state of the underground city is of utmost importance. A complete map will enable the identification of structurally unsound sections, provide a more precise schematic for restoration projects, and give the Municipality of Kukës the documentation needed to claim ownership. Additionally, a publicly available map of the tunnels will allow citizens, stakeholders, and visitors alike to realize the scale and importance of the underground city. This will hopefully help in gaining more interest and support for future efforts.

In our conversations with both Andrit Shehu and Lt. Col. Wight-Boycott, it became apparent that the ownership and responsibility over the underground city is unclear and likely to stay that way for the near future. The bunker network was built under the Albanian Ministry of Defense. However, after the fall of the regime, no party claimed responsibility. Further complicating matters is the secrecy surrounding the construction of the bunkers, with limited surviving documentation and details. Officials of the Kukës municipality have expressed interest in redevelopment efforts, but the municipality has no legal claim to the tunnels beneath it. A complete map of the tunnels will allow the municipality to assert ownership of the tunnels. It is our understanding that, at the time of writing, the Royal Engineers plan to mount a larger exploration and mapping effort of the underground city in spring of 2024.



Image 31: British engineer surveying the tunnels



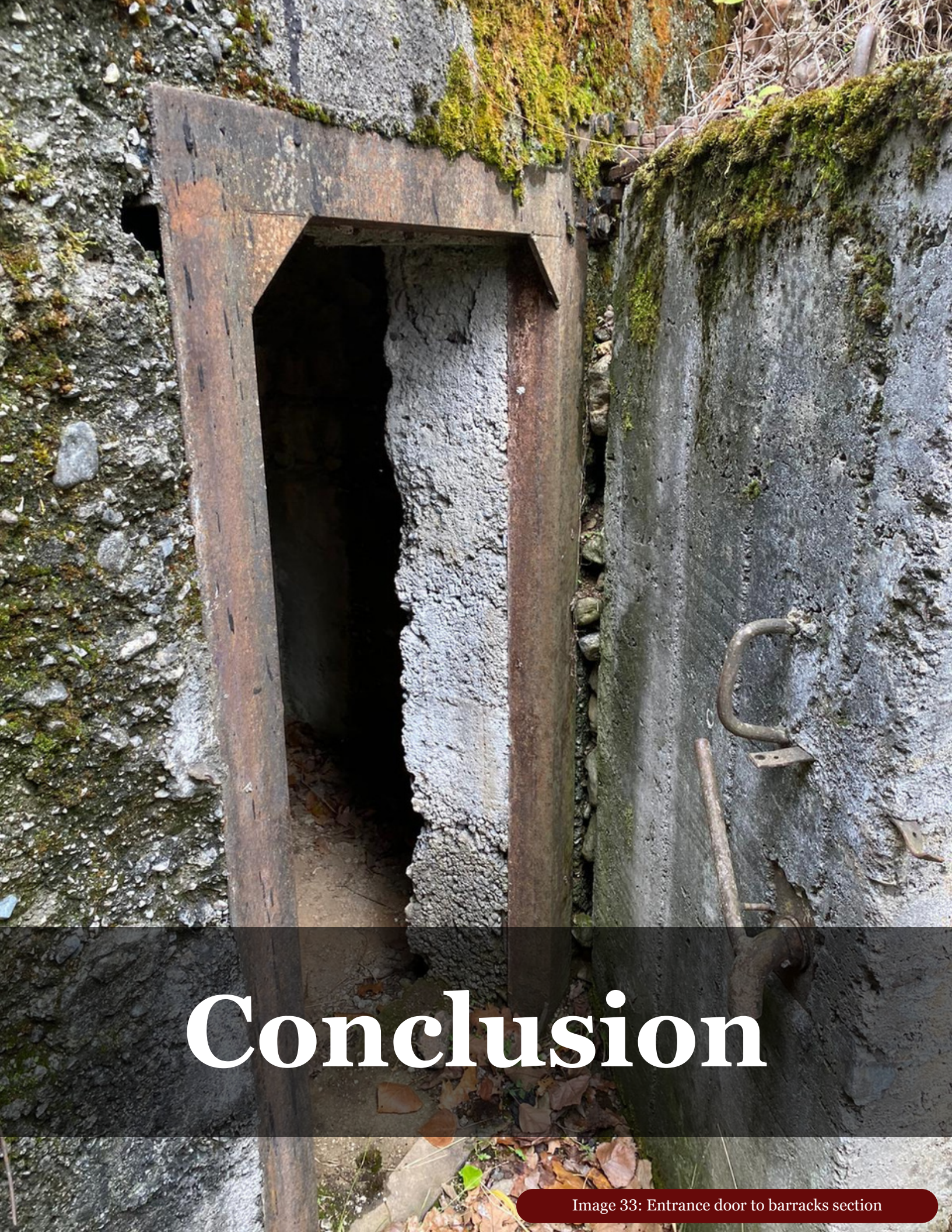
Image 32: British engineer taking LiDAR scans

CONDUCT KEY REPAIRS ON THE TUNNELS

A detailed map will allow engineers to identify the sections most in need of structural repair and remediation and address those repairs. As stated by Mr. Andrit, this remediation is critical not only to any restoration or re-use projects but also to the safety of the city of Kukës itself. After ensuring a baseline structural integrity, work can proceed to restore electrical, water, and air handling systems that were destroyed and looted following the fall of the regime. These basic elements of restoration will be necessary for any future use case discussed in this paper.

FURTHER INVESTIGATE COMMUNITY AND EXPERT PERSPECTIVES

Plans for development or re-use should only proceed following wider collection of community sentiments and consensus among key stakeholders such as the municipality, the Albanian Ministry of Defense, potential funders, residents and community members, and engineering experts. This report discusses a variety of valuable perspectives, but these represent only a few experts and members of the Kukës community. Understanding the ethical concerns surrounding reuse of sites of memory such as community involvement, authentic preservation of the site and emotional impact on the community is vital before executing any of the ideas brought forth in this report. As interest grows around current ideas or as new visions arise, the members of the community of Kukës should be given a voice in the planning and execution of any projects.



Conclusion



A key goal of our project was to amplify the voices of the Kukës community regarding perspectives on reuse of the underground city. To help accomplish this, we created a website that features video clips from our interviews as well as the data that we collected. By increasing the accessibility of information and community perspectives about the underground city, our hope is that a larger discussion begins about preserving its history and how it should be reused.



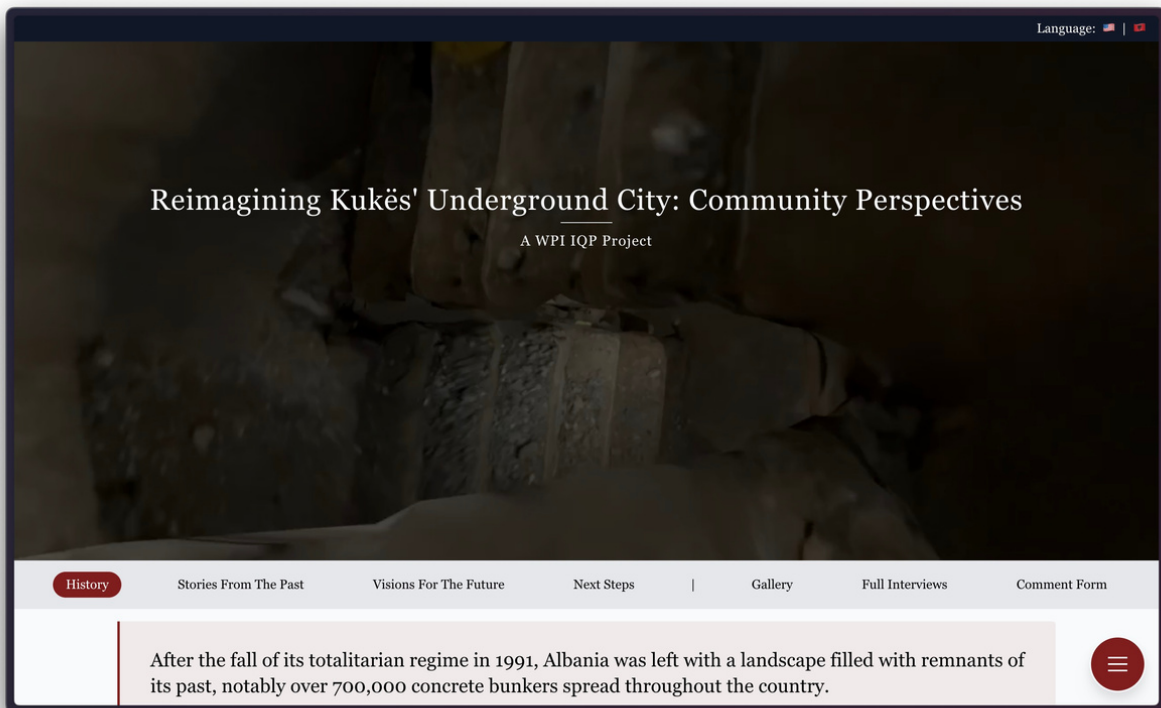


Image 34: Our website



Image 35: Screenshot of digital map deliverable

Our team has combined the information and scans provided by the British Ministry of Defence and the original schematics with our knowledge about the bunkers to create an interactive map. Although our knowledge of the true size and scale of the network is incomplete, this map provides the best representation that can be made at this time and can help inform the public about what lies beneath Kukës.

Physical Condition

Any pre-existing infrastructure has been scavenged. There are no environmental support systems (power, sanitation, ventilation, communications) in place.

Lower-level tunnels directly behind the barracks appeared to be in reasonable condition. There was no evidence of instability or collapse.

The condition of the main corridor tunnel in the upper level is generally poor, however the rooms (360 photo below) built along the main corridor appear to be in good condition. The upper level has suffered from extensive scavenging and most of the inner building works have been demolished for the rebar.

360° View Of Meeting Room



Image 36: Screenshot of barracks detail page including 360° photographs

Included in the map are three interactive 360° photographs of the bunkers. When viewing the interactive map on the website, users can click on these sections and interact with the 360° photographs, panning the “camera” as if they were viewing the tunnels in person. They can also zoom in/out, full-screen, or allow a default viewing animation to play. Examples of the map as well as flattened versions of the images are shown in Images 35-37.



Image 37: Spherical photo of small barracks room



Image 38: Spherical photo of large barracks room



Image 39: Spherical photo of municipality tunnel section

Key Takeaways

Through our work on this project, our team came to appreciate the complexity of the history and potential future of the underground city. Our research yielded a few key takeaways: the need for mapping to establish ownership and understand the full extent of the tunnel network, the necessity of restoration efforts to ensure safety in the underground as well as the above ground city, and the need to amplify community voices to ensure any restoration project will accurately represent the wishes of Kukës residents.

Project Limitations

Although the perspectives we collected on re-use are diverse and valuable, they are limited. A larger investigation that gathers more perspectives of the community and experts needs to be conducted to establish a consensus before undertaking a re-use project.

In interviewing locals in Kukës, we discovered that many residents were unwilling to speak with us because either they were uncomfortable being on camera or felt that they did not have any knowledge to contribute to the project. Over time, cultural memory may influence individuals' recollections of their experiences, potentially introducing subtle discrepancies in the information provided by interviewees (Aydeyer, 2022). Because of this, it is possible that we are missing pieces and failing to represent some of the general public's understanding or knowledge about the tunnel network.

It is also worth noting that nearly all of our interviews took place in Albanian. While our team always had a translator present, it is possible that some information was lost or misrepresented in our translations. There were occasional phrases or idioms that our translators were unable to interpret smoothly into English. Translator bias is also possible; although we trust our translators to remain as objective as possible, they may unintentionally inject their own interpretations or biases into the translation efforts.

Our interactive map is up to date with the current available information; however, it should be noted that the bunker system in its entirety is not yet comprehensively mapped. The British Embassy is planning to return to Kukës for further scanning. Our map does not include photographs of every section, nor does it include details about the rooms or their structural integrity.

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