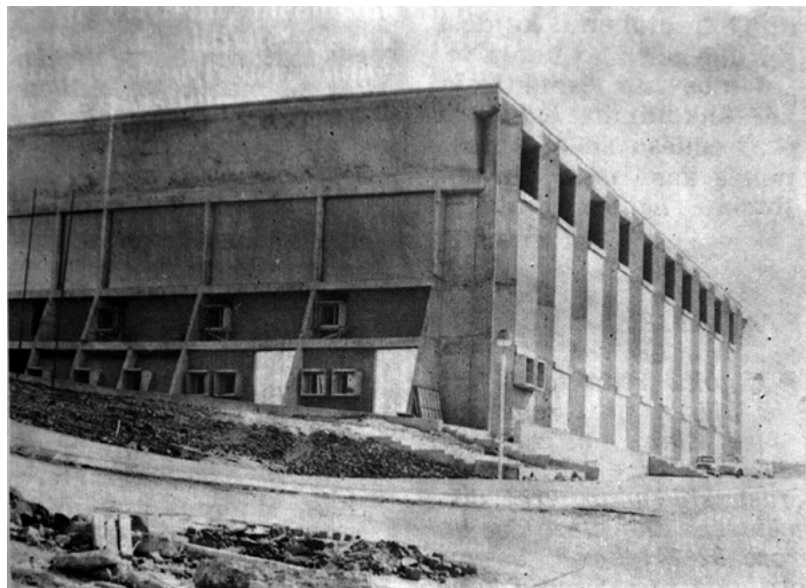


WE DIG REPETITION

Bardhi Haliti



May 25 Sports Hall, Prishtina in 1975 nearing completion



Vllaznim Bislimi, first-year economics student and handball player for Vjosa (Shtimje) in front of May 25 Sports Hall, Prishtina, 1982

I

The images in this book gathered from newspapers, document sports activities that took place in seven sports halls in Kosovo from 1976 to 2018. They trace the almost untraceable—it's impossible to find what is missing from a lost archive. What we do find are sharp, small, obsessive details. Newspapers preserve moments grabbed from fluid minutes: bodies jumping, clashing, pushing, pulling at each other, striving to win while crowds cheer, roar, sweat, protest. Sporting contests are defined by movement, by outmaneuvering opponents, by finding space or sticking together—bodies always in motion. And yet, they take place in ways and in spaces that seem to stay the same, or loop, or repeat themselves. In 1974, Kosovar architect Miroslav Čočanović, an in-house architect at the major industrial construction enterprise Ramiz Sadiku in Prishtina that employed over six thousand workers, was commissioned to design a sports hall for the seven cities of Kosovo. The Prishtina hall was finished in 1976, followed by six exact replicas in 1979 in Prizren, Gjakova, Mitrovica, Peja, Ferizaj, and Gjilan to coincide with the most important international event to take place in the sports halls to date: the Women's Junior World Handball Championship.

The perfect modernist response to the Kosovar youth's growing interest in sports, the halls were factory-like in their efficiency, standardizing recreation. Just like business, it came down to the numbers. There are winners and losers but the score always resets.

Are you level? How's your trim?
Do you rotate, eddy, or spin?
Are you game? What's your trick?
Do you vibrate, bounce, or tick?
What's your cut? Are you correct?
Do you detour, bend, or stretch?

II

Upon its inauguration in 1976, the heyday of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the first Prishtina hall was named May 25 after Youth Day and Tito's official birthday. Every 25th of May, a Yugoslavia-wide relay race ended in Yugoslav People's Army stadium in Belgrade with the batons handed over to Tito and later his successors, in the presence of enormous crowds dressed alike and performing choreographed dances. As naming is important, the other cities quickly followed suit: Prizren and Gjakova named theirs after two partisan heroes killed during the Second World War, respectively, "Sezai Surroi" and "Shani Nushi"; Mitrovica opted for "Minatori" (Miner) in tribute to the Trepça miners, mining being the city's most cherished enterprise and accounting for two thirds of Kosovo's gross domestic product before the '90s wars—handball, basketball, volleyball, and boxing teams competed under



Celebrating Tito's birthday at May 25 Sports Hall, Prishtina, 1976
Dancers and politicians performing the "Brotherhood and Unity" dance

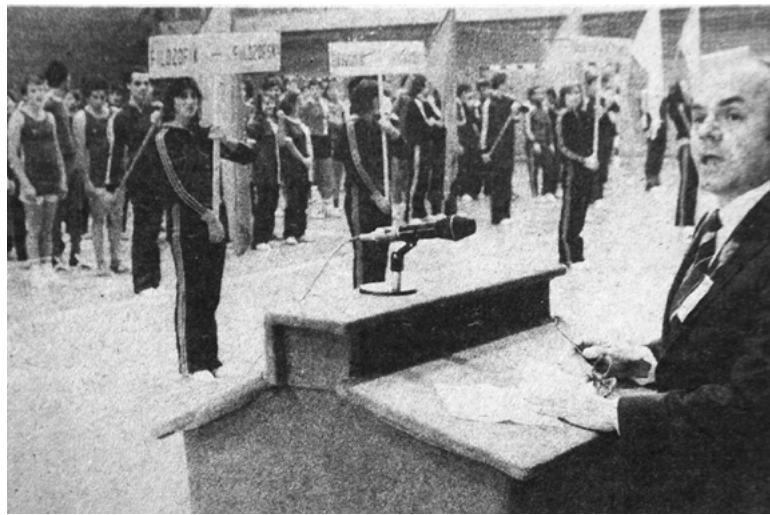
Trepça too; Ferizaj's was named "Youth" in reaction to socialism's obsession with it; Peja took the name "Karagaç" after the park and the area of the city that it was built in; and Gjilan named the hall after itself.

Are you loyal? Are you proud?
Is your silence painful or loud?
Where's your grip? Do you slide?
Recover, charge, and hide
What's your quote? Do you vote?
Do you turn, or does your coat?
Are you spare? Have you a part?
Is there a finish, a middle, or start?

III

In 1987 the Slovenian art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) won the competition to design the annual May 25 relay race poster—with a copy of the Nazi propaganda poster *The Awakening* by Richard Klein, a favored artist of the Third Reich. NSK cleverly replaced the Nazi symbols with socialist ones as a critique of Tito's persona. The ingenious gesture initially went undetected by the state, allowing the design to be printed in millions of newspapers. On discovery of its Nazi template, the state was humiliated. The enormous scandal amid growing ethnic tensions, also saw the relay tradition stop the following year, with a closing ceremony accompanied by Ravel's *Boléro*.

May 25 was so much a part of the Yugoslav state system that upon the state's collapse, this name given to the Prishtina hall became suspect. After the end of the Kosovo War in 1999, it was renamed October 1 to commemorate the student protests in Prishtina on that day in 1997 against the Serbian government's occupation of university buildings. A march took the place of the relay race, and students the place of a more politically active youth. Later still, the Ferizaj hall was renamed Bill Clinton in commemoration of his November 1999 speech. The United States president spoke of the hope of Kosovar youth, addressing the children who had come to greet him in the sports hall. With two basketball hoops in the background, a cheering crowd waving American flags and chanting "Clinton, Clinton", it had the feel of a sports event. After all, Clinton was an avid sports fan and no stranger to basketball, often referring to his own time playing church league basketball in Arkansas. The city of Ferizaj would not only name its main recreation center after Clinton, but also give up a large swath of land as a site for one of the biggest US military bases in the world, Camp Bondsteel. Gjilan's hall at this time took on the name "Bashkim Selishta—Petriti", after a Kosovo Liberation Army soldier killed during the Kosovo war in 1999, erecting a statue of him in front of the building. The others kept their original names because they were not a threat to the new political ideology.



Opening of Student Games, 1979
May 25 Sports Hall, Prishtina
Photo: Bedri Skenderi, Rilindja newspaper



Opening of Student Games, 1979
May 25 Sports Hall, Prishtina
Photo: Unknown, Bota e Re newspaper



Opening of Student Games, 1979
May 25 Sports Hall, Prishtina
Photo: Unknown, Bota e Re newspaper

How's it with you? What's your form?
Your outline, shape, or form
How's your price? What do you cost?
Your value, profit, or loss
How's your skull? Does it fit?
Is your mind free, empty, or split?

IV

The images in this book provide a history of a world beyond the sport. Kosovo's extended autonomy in 1974 within Yugoslavia saw an increase in urban planning and architectural freedom of the cities, which saw sports halls come into existence. This gave Kosovars a chance to train and compete on equal terms nationally and internationally. The new architecture echoed an ideology of "Brotherhood and Unity" of Yugoslav people and aimed at attaining the goal of freedom and autonomy. The shift away from ethnic particularities enabled by modernism resulted in the use of new, untraditional forms and materials while spurring economic growth. Original buildings were erected, signaling a shift West.

Through numerous competitions, the new architectural realm provided an educational context for young architects such as Čočanović. The indoor hall was perfect for boxing, the sport quickly becoming a strength in Kosovo and throughout Yugoslavia. Elbows down, hands up. Head behind the gloves, chin down. Swarmer, slugger, counterpuncher. The straight punch, the uppercut. The aggression of boxing, however, could not then be seen as a harbinger of things to come. The training was not done on any ethnic basis; people with different languages mixed, teams with the same names competed and shared experiences in common. Standardization was in full effect. Only after 1989, when access to the halls was closed to Kosovar Albanians were they co-opted by ethnic politics. With the revocation of Kosovo autonomy by Slobodan Milošević in 1989, sports halls ceased to exist for the Kosovo Albanians, forcing them to practice and play their games in elementary school gyms or in open fields. Ten years of systematic repression during the '90s leading to a vicious ethnic war, saw the sports infrastructure completely collapse.

Are you off? Are you on?
Arriving, staying, gone
Do you flow? What's your line?
Do you separate, mix, or combine?
What's your output? How's your growth?
Was your statement sworn under oath?



Women's Junior World Handball Championship, 1979
National Yugoslav Team. Sezai Surroi Sports Hall, Prizren
Photo: Unknown, Rilindja newspaper



Women's Junior World Handball Championship, 1979
Yugoslavia's players (right) greet the Austrian team before the game
Gjilan Sports Hall. Photo: Unknown, Rilindja newspaper

V

In the 1990s, there was a kind of separation between expectation and experience. While expectation remained largely modernist, the assumptions no longer matched people's experience. The terms modernism had imposed—principally autonomy—no longer applied. The lack of autonomy was now at odds with modernism's insistence that it materialize the goal of freedom. Kosovars observed the world in continuous change, from economic policy to political positioning. Questions arising from repression, seclusion, and immigration began to change what defined Kosovar culture and identity. Modernism's position on society needed to be interrogated—not just for the sake of it but because its assumptions bore no relationship to the lack of political and cultural engagement of Kosovars. The architectural modernism that once anchored the idea of progress and unity was now used as an instrument for ethnic division and interrogation.

On March 24, 1999 NATO launches airstrikes against Yugoslavia lasting 78 days before the Milosević government withdraws its military from Kosovo. In the first week of the NATO bombing, the Serbian police kick Kosovar Albanian families out of their homes in the city of Peja, gathering them in the city square into a large crowd before leading them to Karagaç sports hall, where they would spend a night before finally being forced out of their city to the neighboring Montenegro. The real intentions of gathering big crowds inside the sports hall remains unclear even today. Some speculate that the Serbian military's intention was to use the civilians as a deterrent against the NATO planes striking the nearby military base. The military base was shortly bombed but the sports hall remained intact, although most of the city of Peja was set ablaze by Serbian military and paramilitary groups in a systematically planned operation, sanctioned by the state, with the intent to carry out ethnic cleansing.

After 1999, sports halls were frequently used for events like concerts and political rallies, and as sites for voting stations and college graduations among other things. Although there were no distinguishing characteristics, the sports halls gradually took on different forms. Change accelerated after socialism with economic reform. The building facades and interiors were painted, sometimes in kitsch colors reminiscent of the Kosovar flag, or EU flag on which it is based. Prishtina's hall acquired a new roof, and with EU funds Mitrovica's was completely transformed. Gjakova's facade was painted yellow and gray. Sheds and kiosks annexed the structures as people tried to compensate for industrial and agricultural decline in Kosovo. The clean, socialist modern lines of the original were distorted in the new forms, the halls soon to be fully privatized and subject to market law. Socialist modernism began to be viewed in new ways at this time, associated with repression and a difficult past, so that people held its architecture in disregard. These buildings not only bring to the fore a failure of the past in confronting nationalism, but the failures of the present. Their gloomy decay speaks also of the current contamination of the country by nepotism and corruption; the total lack of architectural understanding abets the deformed, tacky, and continuous alterations of the sports halls.



Students marching in Prishtina on October 1, 1997 calling for the release of seized University buildings. Photos: Ridvan Silvova, Bujku newspaper

Are you hollow? Do you ring?
Keep, save, sent, or pray?
What's your cost? Where will it end?
Do you parry, fate, or pretend?

VI

Seven years of research across Kosovar newspapers published between 1974 and 2018 has gone into this image collection, from the opening of the first hall May 25 onward. The images have been cropped, zoomed in on, and paired together by similarity. The choreography is not meant to render them jewels or treasures, but rather to help find their meaning beyond their meaning within the now unfashionable halls.

The ball is passed from one player to another. Player misses the shot, creating an opportunity for a rebound. Elbow, flop, free throw. The point guard, the center, the shooting guard. Handballer dives and throws the ball. Player receives possession, storms through the ranks of the visitors and shoots. Defensive transitions into offensive and back again. A battle is won, while another one is lost. Gymnast balances on the beam. Volleyballer blocks a shot. Judoka does a triangle choke. Teams drop out of the league and get back again. Referees deny victory. Fans enter the court and attack the referee. Handshake. Speed, footwork, jab, hook, clinching, punching, uppercuts. Crowds gather in the streets. Man holds an image of a chess-board, while another one holds a handwritten sign asking for support from athletes all over the world: *in the name of laborious and hardworking trainings, in the name of strong will for participation in the international sporting activities, in the name of reciprocal recognition and establishing of friendship between athletes of different nations...* Dribbling, passing, shooting. Ball misses the basket. Player jumps over the rim and dunks. Fans repeatedly throw objects on the court. Crowds are prohibited in order to prevent incidents. The role of the crowd changes over time. Initially hardly visible in the images, they later emerge praising the efforts of their socialist comrades and heroes. The blankness of the 1990s is not only a sign of the lack of access to sports but of the dangers to the Serbian authorities of large gatherings.

The sports halls started to be used as gathering spots for Kosovo Albanians in an attempt to mobilize the masses, specifically in the '90s. Activists would get together in the yard of May 25 sports hall in Prishtina and discuss politics. This was basically linked to the overall concept of 'the occupation of public space' by Kosovar Albanians, as they didn't have any other viable means of resistance. Serbian police eventually understood these tactics and started closing down every space that could potentially be turned into a gathering spot. Throughout the 1990s, crowds become more present than ever before: campaigning and protesting with banners, flags, and national insignia. Crowds of people everywhere, blending together signaling a sense of danger and something bigger unravelling.



Sportsmen and women marching in Prishtina against police violence, for the release of seized sports buildings, and recognition by international sports federations. May 30, 1998. Photo: Ridvan Sivova, Bujku newspaper

In the 1991 BBC documentary *Don DeLillo: The Word, The Image, and The Gun* American novelist Don DeLillo in describing crowds states that "There is a primal terror in crowds, a sense of all control gone, all distinctions gone. Crowds speak a half language, a language of rogue and repetition, chanted slogans, a single chanted name over and over. ... Crowds are terrifying but maybe beautiful in a way as well. We desire at times to lose ourselves in the crowd, dress identically, be carried along, burn away all the pain and anxiety of self and the struggle to be who we are. ... Images have something to do with crowds. An image is a crowd in a way, a sneer of impressions. Images tend to draw people together, create mass identity."

Later on as the games get more heated and rivalries grow, crowds of fans damage parts of the halls' interiors and rival teams' buses, making enemies of the police. The last images mostly foreground the crowd, as Kosovo gains admission into sports federations as an independent country allowing it to compete internationally. Among the most noticeable changes across the images is seen in the jerseys, which accumulate signs and symbols: first numbers, then names, then corporate logos as the funding model switches from state to private and uniforms become another commodifiable space on which to advertise the benefits of the free market.

What's your gift?
 What's your curse?
 Is it fatal charm or worse?
 What's your promise?
 What's your pledge?
 Do you dive in or cling to the edge?
 What's your plan?
 Do you watch your back?
 Do you draw fire, retreat, or attack?

VII

Having read hundreds of newspaper articles to better understand the halls' context and the rapid development of Prishtina, I came across one from socialist times that made me pause. The worker in socialist Yugoslavia was considered the most precious part of society. Yet the kind of workers to be found in Kosovo or the southern republics were different from that in Zagreb or Ljubljana. They were exploited, which was perhaps the case everywhere else, but it was especially harsh for those from rural areas without any connections to the ruling elite. They were the lowest in the social hierarchy. In a 1977 edition of *Zëri i Rinisë* (Voice of Youth), a weekly newspaper, I found a short article titled "A November Present". It was devoted to the newly built sport and recreation center "Boro and Ramizi" (now known



American President Clinton speaking to the citizens of Ferizaj, Kosovo on November 23, 1999 at Youth Sports Hall
Courtesy William J. Clinton Presidential Library

only as Palace of Youth and Sport) and profiles a construction worker by the name of Hasan Sopi. He worked long days into the evening, during the holidays, and while “the whole city was sleeping”. Sopi walked 15 kilometers every day to come to work on the construction site in Prishtina from his village Mramor. His dedication and that of his friends was praised in words, yet he seemed to be no less exploited than a precarious immigrant worker in Western Europe today.

Perhaps one of the most troublesome conceptual grounds on which these halls were built is modernism. While there is nothing particularly extravagant or profligate about the building’s design, its reproducibility, clean lines, and emphasis on public shared space aligns it with housing projects and other spaces designated for collective expression. Formally, sport was not divided by race or religion in Yugoslavia, nor was it based on certain traditions only common to some of the Yugoslav republics. Rather, it was a product of a competitive modernism and halls themselves were evidence of the modern ambitions of each city that hosted one. It was, in a way, these buildings that made these places cities at all. The traces of collective endeavor and enjoyment might seem archaic; modernism’s conformity and willingness to follow protocols established by powerful forces even appears colonial or cosmopolitan—unquestioning in its embrace of repetition. Yet there remains a certain quizzical appeal to sameness, planning, and simply having the confidence in one solution over all others. Now, all that is lost as the buildings face complete reconstruction or possible demolition, in favor of neoliberal city mayors and privatized real-estate investment opportunities.

We’re milling through the grinder,
grinding through the mill
If this is not an exercise,
could it be a drill?

The lyrics in the text are borrowed from *The Drill*, an album by English band Wire consisting of a collection of recordings, all based on the song “Drill” (*Snakedrill*, 12" EP, Mute Records Ltd., 1986) exploring “DUGGA”, monophonic monorhythmic repetition, Mute Records Ltd., 1991.



Democratic League of Kosovo rally, 2000
May 25 Sports Hall, Prishtina. Still from A Normal Life,
2003. Directed by Chai Vasarhelyi and Hugo Berkeley



Democratic Party of Kosovo rally, 2000
May 25 Sports Hall, Prishtina
Associated Press Archive



Head of the United Nations Interim
Administration Mission in Kosovo, Bernard
Kouchner, at the Democratic Party of Kosovo
rally, 2000, May 25 Sports Hall, Prishtina
Associated Press Archive