

Spring 2023

Da Ste Zhivi I Zdravi: May You Be Alive and Well An Exploration into Play, Ruination, and Preservation

Levana Elena Rashba
Bard College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2023



Part of the [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), and the [Other Architecture Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Rashba, Levana Elena, "Da Ste Zhivi I Zdravi: May You Be Alive and Well An Exploration into Play, Ruination, and Preservation" (2023). *Senior Projects Spring 2023*. 299.

https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2023/299

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Spring 2023 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

Da Ste Zhivi I Zdravi : May You Be Alive and Well
An Architectural Exploration into Play, Ruination, and Preservation

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
Levana Elena Rashba

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2023

For

Mama, Baba, Hristofoncho, Lela Tzetzta, i vsichki ostanali ot semeistvo.

Mnogo vi obicham!

Acknowledgements

Mama, you always say, “don’t thank your mother!”, but how could I not- without you there would be no project. You are the smartest, bravest woman I know, and you have deeply influenced my passion for art, design, and culture. Thank you for always encouraging me and giving me the space to be myself, for teaching me Bulgarian and translating for me when the language barrier gets too tough. I can’t thank you enough- words don’t do it justice. I love you, Mama!

Thank you, Tatko, for your labor of love in thoughtfully taking the nails out of the wooden panels and carefully taping them together, without ever having me have to ask. Thank you for always being there for me, calling to make sure I’m okay, for listening to me, and helping me through my problems. I love you!

Blagodarya, Lela Tzetzta, za tvoyata lubov, blagodarya ti za pomoshta i za vsichki istorii koito ti mi raskaza. Bez teb ne bih imala tozi proekt. Ti si tzentarata na proekta, ti si dushata, ti si iskustvoto! Много те обичам.

благодаря ви, бабо и дядо, че ме отгледахте. Вие сте причината аз да обичам калофер и моята българска култура. обичам Ви с цялото си сърце и душа. нямам търпение да ви видя отново!

Rhayne, Isa, Lily, and Micha†- thank you for being a source of light, laughter, and inspiration, and giving me a reason to look forward to coming home! Thank you for rewatching all of Game of Thrones for me and being the best of friends and roommates.

Finlay, thank you for always being supportive and patient with me, even when I make an impulsive decision to trek to Brooklyn and pick up old wood scraps! Thank you for helping me carry them through the city and so much more, I couldn’t have done it without you by my side and I am so grateful.

Thank you to my car, Tulie TwoSubie, for carrying all my wood, cinder blocks, and metal scraps and miscellaneous art materials without breaking on me, despite having your catalytic converter stolen.

Thank you to the TSA agents who didn’t stop my suitcase full of rusty scrap metal.

Thank you, Olga Touloumi, and the Bard Architecture department for inspiring and pushing me to pursue architecture. I would not be here had I not taken *Situating Modernisms* which rocked my world! I am so grateful I was able to find an area of study that felt true to myself. Thank you to Ivonne Santoyo-Orozco, Ross Adams, and Michael Cohen for being wonderful and uplifting professors.

Thank you, Betsy Clifton, for guiding me with my model and giving me the space to incorporate my senior project in the model-making course. I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to learn how to cast, along with other fabrication skills that I will continue to grow and refine moving forward in my career. Your thoughtful critiques and method of teaching have inspired me to be a better designer!

Thank you, Thena Tak, for guiding me through this thesis for the past nine months. Without your time, care, patience, and wisdom, I would not have been able to produce a project I am confident in. I have learned so much from you about what it means to be a thoughtful designer and architect, and your insight and approach has allowed me to see the multitude of possibilities that an architectural education can take on- from graphic novels to film installations and beyond. Thank you for understanding where I am coming from and what I was working towards, I could not have asked for a better mentor and professor.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Part1: Method.....	6
Part2: The <i>Banya</i>	9
Part 3: Memory	13
Part 4: The Panels.....	15
Bibliography.....	30

Introduction

My thesis explores unconventional architectural representation and themes through the lens of memory and play. I am drawn to the everyday, less heroic moments of architecture and to the celebration of lived life. I use the thematic structure of play throughout my project as a way to approach a site and rethink its space, history, and meaning. The surface is the site with which I am operating, inspired by motifs of weathering, pastiche, palimpsest, and collage to illustrate fractured memory and layered histories. These approaches manifest in a memory map informed by two walks I took this February with my mom and baba in Kalofer, Bulgaria, after five years of not being able to see my family. It ruminates on personal memories of play as well as familial histories of place to recontextualize ruination, its meaning, and its potential.

„Тогава в Калофер беше хубаво и тогава вие сте измазали къщата. Много хора по това време измазаха къщите си.

Back then, Kalofer was beautiful, and that's when your parents stuccoed the house. Many people at that time were stucco-ing their houses.

И сега, когато го погледнете, как да не боли? Всичко ме боли!

And now when you look at it, how can't it hurt? Everything hurts!

Ботевски Калофер беше толкова чист, красив и хубав, с цветя и хора! Толкова много хора, които бяха невероятно чисти, невероятно събрани... имаше кметство, улиците бяха чисти, а сега нямаме нищо, нямаме лекарски кабинети, училища – нямаме нищо.

Botevski Kalofer was so clean, beautiful, and nice, with flowers and people! So many people who were incredibly clean, incredibly put together...there was a town hall, the streets were clean, and now we don't have anything, we don't have doctors offices, schools—we don't have anything.

И да знаете, че тук е било остров на Българщината, на просветата, тук, където бащата на Ботев и Иван Вазов са възпитавали светилата на българското Възраждане.

And to know that here, this was the island of Bulgarian-hood, of enlightenment, *here* where Botev's father and Ivan Vasov were educating the luminaries of the Bulgarian Renaissance.

Тук е моята душа. Тук е хубаво. Всичко е тук за мен. Няма значение колко запустял е градът. Всяка една от тези тухли е минала през ръцете ми. Градът се събра на поточни линии. Построихме тези къщи от нулата. Тухла по тухла ги изпичахме тук и с калта ги изсипвахме във формите и ги оставяхме под слънцето, като ги обръщахме от време на време.

Here is my soul. *Here* it is nice. Everything is *here* for me. Doesn't matter how desolate the town is. Every one of these bricks has passed through my hands. The town gathered in assembly lines. We built these houses from scratch. Brick by brick, we used to fire them here, and with the mud we'd pour them into the molds and lay them under the sun, turning them over every now and then.

Нашето поколение е много дълбоко свързано с нашите къщи. Много дълбоко обвързани... В първите години след падането на комунизма, първите години на демокрацията, трябваше да заминем за Америка, защото нямахме заплата 6 месеца. Синът ми каза да дойда в Америка, защото нямаше средства за оцеляване. Съпругът ми винаги беше ангажиран със синдикатите и стачките, но изведнъж това нямаше значение, ние всъщност гладувахме и трябваше да напуснем. И тогава Антон каза „да продадем къщата“.

Our generation is very deeply connected with our houses. Very deeply tied...In the early years after the breakdown of communism, the early years of democracy, we had to leave for America because we had no salary for 6 months. My son told me to come to America, because there were no means to survive. My husband was always involved with the union and strikes but it suddenly didn't matter, we were basically starving and so we had to leave. And then Anton said 'let's sell the house.'

Как можете да обясните на младите хора това вътрешно изгарящо чувство за вашата страна? Как можете да комуникирате гордостта и болката? Много млади хора не споделят тази принадлежност към тази страна, те са толкова отчуждени. Поколенческата верига е непоправимо прекъсната.

How can you explain to young people this burning feeling inside about your country? How can you communicate the pride and the pain? Many young people don't share this belonging to this country, they are so removed. The generational chain is irreparably broken.

Комунизмът разкъса семействата, както и пост-комунизмът. Хората трябваше да напуснат. Съпрузи и съпруги бяха разделени, търсейки работа в различни области. Те ще отидат в чужбина по работа и ще оставят децата да живеят при бабите и дядовците си и ще им изпращат пари, а децата ще ги харчат за нокти и инжекции в устните и ще ги прахосват.“

Communism tore families apart, and so did post-communism. People had to leave. Husbands and wives were separated looking for jobs in different areas. They'll go abroad for work and leave the kids to live with their grandparents and send them money, and the kids will spend it on nails and lip injections and waste it.”

- Lela Tzetzta

“One of the many reasons why we must turn to the ‘little’ instead of focusing solely on scaling up is that we are noticing how we are – ourselves – ‘little’. I do not mean that in terms of size; I mean that in terms of porosity: we are not self-contained, predetermined, independent creatures situated in the environment... To be fully ‘human’, we must come to terms with the ‘nonhuman’; we must come to acknowledge the inescapable materiality we once tried to disconnect from when we fashioned the creed of the disembodied soul/self.

Magic is noticing how sensuous the world is – so sensuous (perhaps coquettish!) that our usual cause-effect trajectories and givens cannot adequately account for its aliveness... We fail to notice its response-ability – it’s agential vibrancy, its ability to disrupt our familiar notions of scale and import, and its power to repartition the sensible.

What if we gave room for the genius of grief to mature – instead of truncating its logic with hammer blows of contrived positivity? An activism of grief, of touching, of sighing, of grandmothers telling stories, and of singing pollination songs with bees?”

Báyo Akómoláfé, *A Plea for Magic*

Architecture as an academic and technical discipline is typically associated with its formality. When designing, students are taught to emphasize the importance of calculated precision, permanence, and function. This formality also manifests socially in rituals like reviews and exhibitions, where architects meet to discuss theory and engage in productive critique surrounding the work. These are some typically held associations when you say ‘I’m studying architecture’. Of course, there is a time and place for rigorous architecture—after all, the formality of standard practice allows for things like consistency, efficiency, and the basis for common language and communication. When beginning this thesis journey, I was daunted by the pressure I put on myself to abide by these formalities, to make something academic, “smart” and

monumental—literally, for a while my Senior Project was entirely and aimlessly about monuments. I had this quest for ‘bigness’, to end my collegiate days with something that said, “I am an adult, send me out into the world, I’m ready.”

Writer Báýò Akómoláfé points out this universal quest for bigness as being one of the most consequential markers of our everyday relationships. He argues in *A Plea for Magic* that “this means that we are more and more at odds with ‘little’ things: with trees, with rivers, with stones, with seashells, with bees and mountains. With spirits. With children.” I take his plea for magic and for a return to ‘little’ things as a return to my inner child. Instead of declaring “I am an adult, send me out into the world,” my quest has become a plea to say that it is OK to be vulnerable, to grieve, to heal, and to preserve that part of myself. This is the attitude I took forward with my thesis.

Part 1: Method

In my project, I have defined a memory map as a counter-mapping method that allows for a representation of a history which is deeply personal and reflective of a larger socio-cultural context. This map pushes, pulls, and permeates a site which has been flattened by settler-colonial mapping practices, such as Google Maps, which shows a fixed view of place. While it is possible in Google Maps to follow the literal path I walked, it is not chronological and it predicates itself on a kind of distance and removal of a place. The memory maps I have explored however, privilege time and embodiment: or in other words, lived life. It speaks to a surface that collects memory. I play with the canvas by cutting and carving into it, collaging drawings and images onto it, and filling it with materials to create a tactile catalog of each site where experience and memory is integral to the ‘mapping’ of the place. The wooden boards are presented among cinder blocks and bricks to incite an interactive, dynamic, and playful experience of reading them. In addition to this, these elemental units of construction help foreground the temporality of the place - buildings, landscapes, people, and moments that are in constant flux of layering and weaving with one another. Like a forest, things are built, rebuilt, revised, and reimagined.

The seemingly humble architecture I documented has been frequently overlooked, especially by the institutional forces that have contrived such circumstances. Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007, and despite EU funding it remains the poorest country in the coalition. Internally, the government is still corrupt, making it hard for this funding to adequately reach and affect communities; funding that would otherwise be invested in infrastructure and public services- especially in rural areas. Therefore, the sites that I’ve chosen – often once civic public

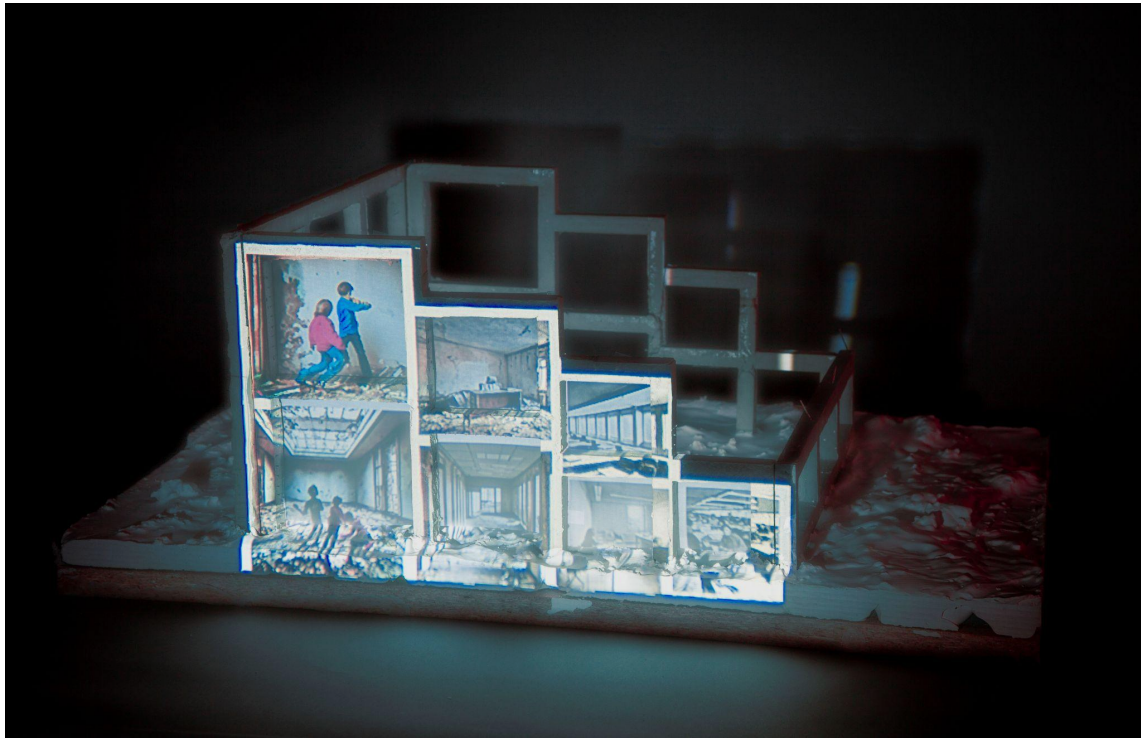
centers or homes built in the communist era that are abandoned and in states of disrepair— have not been reinvested in. The ruination of Bulgarian architecture is evidence of the lingering and knotty effects of communism on the current socio-economic landscape. This and many other global factors have resulted in the sleepy blight of rural Bulgarian villages; the old generations remain and pass on, while the young generations move away in search of better opportunities. My grandparents and my mom are perfect examples of this phenomenon. After the fall of communism in 1989, my mom moved to Vienna, Austria for university and a job, working illegally in a fur store. It was there that she met my dad one night on a train, and they fell in love. She moved to America, while the rest of my family stayed in Bulgaria. Therefore, while the abandoned factory, office building, bath house, clinic, church, and many more are all testament to Kalofer as a dying town, my aim is to refocus the experience of said ruination through a child, who, with a blissfully ignorant viewpoint, sees potentials for play; resuscitating and reclaiming a dying space.

Ruination naturally fascinates most people. As buildings get weathered by use, and later by neglect, they seem to take on new personas, wisdoms, and whispers that speak to a long gone era. As a representational method, my attention to materiality begs the viewer to get personal with the marks of time at a small scale to rethink a ruin. To come close to the drawings is to pay attention to time and even go back in time yourself—perhaps to when you were a child, as I did while making this project.

The wood I work on is bruised, stained, and sometimes rotten, implying its own layered history. These marks could allude to a previous user's attitude against preciousness, but despite

being discarded, they are not without value. I collected these boards to allude to the nature of Bulgarian facades, which I view as unintentional collages created in the maintenance and construction of buildings; a composite of various weathered ad hoc materials that are sourced depending on what is readily available and cheap. Similar collages are also made when buildings decay and reveal their inner workings. Falling stucco, exposed brick, mortar, stones, clay, and so on. Embedded into the boards are sample replications of these materials, which further includes detritus like vines, dust, and litter, that together culminate in a tactile profile of each building. The viewer is meant to interact with these samples with the curious intensity of a child. These ubiquitous moments are found in communities all over the world, but in my personal Bulgarian context, these sites made for exciting playgrounds.

Part 2: The *Banya*



Play is naturally tactile, and the variety of textures offered in ruined spaces make for an interesting and unpredictable landscape. Kinetically, a ruinous site will react to the impact of play in unexpected and even scary ways, from rubble falling to walls creaking. Playing in risky environments like these with my friends was extremely engaging.

Have you ever visited, say, your elementary school and thought, *wow! this place is so much smaller than I remember it?* This shift in perspective is an aspect I wanted to foreground in my methods of counter-mapping as it privileges a form of memory that is typically overlooked. To do this, I manipulated a concrete cast model of one of the buildings my friends and I used to play in through scale. A cavernous skeleton of its former self, the abandoned office building was massive, and its framework provided the perfect landscape for us to let our imagination run wild. The fact that it is a resonance of a neglected post-Soviet community was not known to us then as I understand it now. Coming back to the site in February ruined the wonder I felt as a child. Becoming an adult afforded me a gut-wrenching perspective of the structure and country before me, and I wanted to remember the lightness of my childhood in this space as a way to preserve the site's alternate significance within a collective history.

In his essay *Experimental Preservation: Challenging What We Keep and Why*, Jorge Ortero-Pailos critiques the antiquated bureaucratic systems in place for designating which sites are worthy of preservation. Experimental preservationists, moreover, choose objects that go against the established canon: objects that might be considered ugly and unworthy, or objects that have long been excluded or ignored from conventional collective histories. Ortero-Pailos writes that choosing such objects “raises the question of whether the old intellectual frames will

be fit to analyze [them].” Nobody in Kalofer would think that this ruin is worthy of preservation, but rather that it is a scar, a painful reminder of the past that blends in with every other ruin. It is not special. However, I have chosen to include this site as a focal point of the memory map because of what it meant for me. In the line of experimental preservation I have furthermore questioned whether traditional architectural representation will be fit to convey the shifts in perspective and sensitive emotional content that I am moving through. My model therefore includes multiple scales in one, breaking away from architectural convention.

Read from left to right, the model’s scale gets larger as a way to read its progression through time. Usually when things decay they get smaller, but in this case, decay makes things bigger since the model is intended to privilege the perspective of a child. At the smallest scale, the model embodies the original program of the building as an office space used by working adults. This is when the building was “alive,” but that history is unknown to a child. The middle scale embodies the building’s transition from in-use to abandonment, in which the program is liminal. The artifacts of use are still evident: desks, chairs, papers, distinguishable rooms, and so on, but the fate of the building is still unclear. The largest scale embodies how a child reads the space now destined for desertion. The artifacts have been scavenged, the rooms have become completely disintegrated, and now, the bottom of the food chain, God's littlest creatures—*children*—enter. The model’s final scale is exaggerated not only because of the child’s physical orientation in space, but because of the potential which space embodies for them. What is important to the child in their moment of play is not the reality of how things once were,

but the ability to inhabit their own world in an unclaimed space. In the moment of play, fun is disproportionate to reality—it is an act of reclamation.

In this way, this building becomes a preserved object of my own fantastical and disoriented memories. Projecting AI generated images onto the model further illustrates the distance I feel to my memories, as well as the way in which I projected new memories onto the site when I revisited it years later. AI proved to be an ideal tool because it is impossible for it to create or understand the intimacy of the stories I am telling, and thus creates “imperfect” images. Instead, it is a speculation that produces documentation through a kind of rote pastiche without contextual criticality: the archive of data it is trained on lacks an understanding of Bulgarian landscapes. In many cases the data it pulls from is a collection of open source material posted on the internet, though it could also come from elsewhere. Regardless, I view the AI as a sort of collective unconscious, pulling from a world that, in this case, is largely visually undocumented. For example, the AI understands the American landscape far better than it does the Bulgarian because the proportion of visual data associated with America is far greater. Nevertheless, by prompting the AI with inputs such as: ‘1970s Soviet factory’, ‘kids playing in abandoned factory’, ‘Bulgarian village mountains’, ‘Bulgarian village kids playing’; and so forth, the AI creates a composite from the collective unconsciousness and fabricates historical moments that I could not have depicted. The gaps in the AI’s knowledge creates an image that, while historically inaccurate, evokes the same sort of disorientation and uncanniness as looking back on one’s own foggy memories. In this sense, I have deployed the use of AI, not for historically accurate visuals, but instead, to elicit a particular ethos and atmosphere of a place.

Part 3: Memory

Where I had no memory I asked my mom and Baba to recount their own. They shared memories and dreams. We laughed a bit, but mostly cried: a stifled, silent, choking cry, trying to hide it because we are only together for a week. We don't know when we'll see each other next, so we try to maintain a sense of joy and levity with one another. There is no room, no time, for grief.

So they trudged on and told me stories of the way life used to be before my time. We ran into my Baba's neighbors and acquaintances who consistently greeted us with open arms, shocked at how much I've grown, but still treating me with the same adoration as they did when I was a little girl. They shared the latest news of their family affairs, which often entailed remembering those who died and which kids, grandkids, and cousins had moved away to start new lives. And then we would part ways, wishing the customary blessing "Da ste zhivi i ztravi!", loosely translated as "may you be alive and well!", but with *more*, an essence of soul that isn't able to be translated.

Coming back home to her mom and dad (my Baba and Dyado¹), my mom was a little girl again. It was strange to see and recognize... It meant *I* was no longer a little girl. Seeing my mom's grief and fear of losing Kalofer completely was the most painful part of this realization. I didn't know how to comfort her. Instead, we spent a lot of time as a family looking through my grandparents' old photographs, the warped paper heavy in my hands. I decided to record our voices as a way to remember our time together, because when I go back to America my time in Bulgaria feels like a dream; I feel so removed. Bringing these recordings of my Baba and Dyado

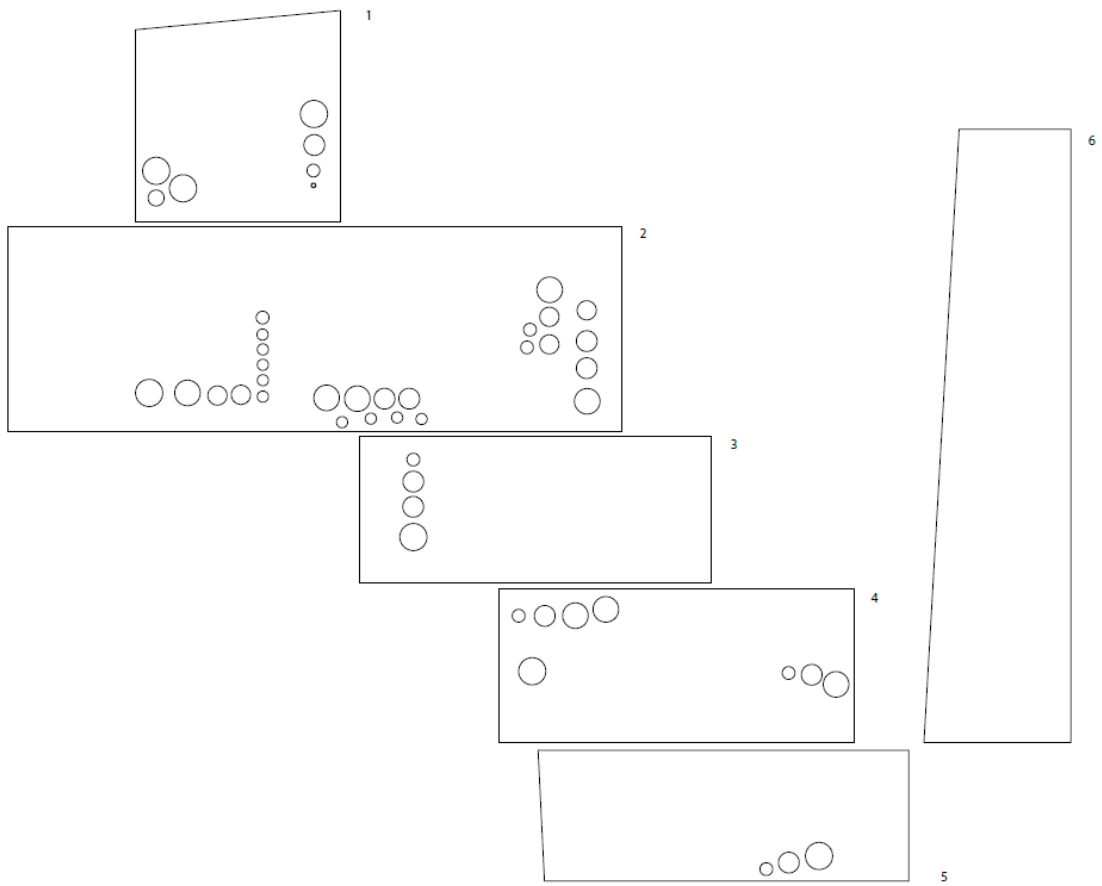
¹ Grandma and Grandpa

into the exhibition space not only encapsulates another dimension of memory, but a very intimate view of two people that allows me to feel that physical closeness to them again. For me, these recordings are mementos of my grandparents and a way for me to remember them when I am no longer with them, or when they are no longer with us. Moving through the space, you may hear Baba reading anecdotes from her diary from when I was a toddler messing up Bulgarian words; *Dyado* remembering faces of girlfriends long ago and asking for his special desert spoon; or my cousin talking about the first time she saw a city.

The architecture that I catalog is not made by architects, but rather, made of memory, community, and lost time. What you see is a map of coming back to place, and celebrating its past and present by moving through a fabrication of memories of my childhood spent in Kalofer. In reckoning with growing up removed from this space, I grasp onto this part of my heritage not only for myself, but mostly for my mom and my Bulgarian family. It is not meant to be formal or precise. It is meant to be fluid, unsure of itself, and incomplete, while also being reaffirming and meaningful. It starts to articulate a kind of architecture that is entangled with lived life.

With this, the sites I catalog prompt wonder in irregularity and an investigation into the bureaucratic demise of spaces. The memory map resists what it means to live architecturally according to the academic Western tradition, in the same way it resists being fraught with the consequences of communism and late stage capitalism. And while the map will always be informed by those conditions, it views them differently. By interrogating and re-scaling spaces originally meant for adults, or spaces now meant for nobody, *play* allows the landscape to be reframed by a childhood philosophy that keeps memory alive. Play, therein, is an activism of grief.

Part 4: The Panels



Panel 1:



Early one morning, my mom and I decided to take a walk in the neighborhood at the edge of town closest to the mountains. We quietly followed the *Tunjda* river upstream, until she pointed out an empty plot of land where a beautiful school house once stood. With no kids and no money, she explained, it was knocked down a long time ago and the grass had grown thick over it, masking any signs of the building. In front of it was the bridge where the priest throws the cross into the crowd of men dancing *horo*² in the icy river on *Yordanov Den*³. I thought about the music, the singing, the fanfare, the people, and the cold. Kalofer is never more crowded than on *Yordanov Den*.

We then approached a pile of logs and an overturned, rusty car on the riverbank. On the other side of the river, an area of land had been deforested. This was off-putting, and upon closer inspection we saw a makeshift tent propped up on the site. I took a photo of it. My mom and I wondered what was going on, and in the midst of our theorizing an old man called out from behind the fence of his garden. “Good day!” he said, in a way that he knew we were not from

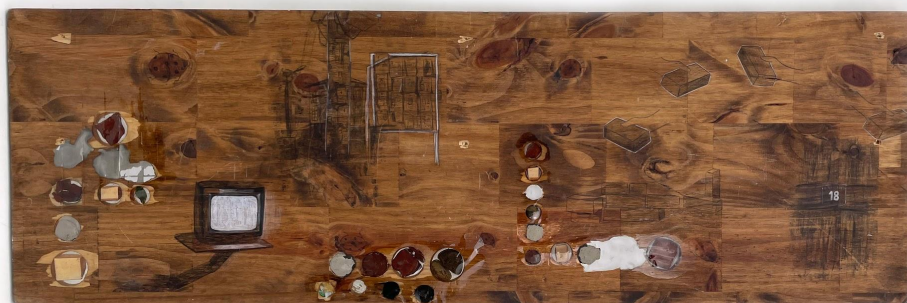
² Traditional folk dance

³ Eastern Orthodox Epiphany

here. My mom smiled and walked over to greet him, and after some small talk, she asked him what had happened here. The man explained that the *tzigani*⁴ had (allegedly) stolen all the trees, and left the logs right next to his car. They had marked them to be sold, but nobody had bought any, and the wood had now been sitting there for some time. I asked why the tent was there, and if anyone was living in it. He told us that recently several children had begun constructing the tent as a playhouse. Now *this* was unusual. I was struck by the skill displayed in the tent and adjacent bridge, which had both been ingeniously constructed with found materials: thick sticks, various tarps and textiles, rope, wooden boards, and cinder blocks. This was impressive, but what I was most moved by was how those children viewed this barren land, a ruined space. While the violence of the stumps (in their environmental degradation and socio-economic/racial implications) was stunning to me as an outsider, the children viewed this depleted landscape as the perfect place to build an oasis. Through play, they were able to give it new meaning.

⁴ Bulgarian equivalent of gypsy, a colloquial slur for Romani people

Panel 2:



“Back then Kalofer was beautiful, and that’s when you guys stuccoed the house. Many people at that time were stucco-ing their houses.

And now when you look at it, how can’t it hurt? Everything hurts!

Botevski Kalofer was so clean, beautiful, and nice, with flowers and people! So many people who were incredibly clean, incredibly put together...there was a town hall, the streets were clean, and now we don’t have anything, we don’t have doctors offices, schools—we don’t have anything.

Here is my soul. Everything is here for me. Doesn't matter how desolate the town is. Every one of these bricks has passed through my hands. The town gathered in assembly lines. We built these houses from scratch. Brick by brick, we used to fire them here, and with the mud we'd pour them into the molds and lay them under the sun, turning them over every now and then."

- Lela Tzetzta

I used to get homesick being in Kalofer, but now I am homesick for Kalofer. There was one summer (I must have been around 11 years old) that I could not stop crying. All day I just wanted to go home, and at night I couldn't sleep. To console myself at night I watched various dubbed programs on the small TV, the grainy screen illuminating the bed where my brother and I slept, and neighborhood dogs barking long into the night. Finally, when the birds started chirping in the cobalt sky, I was lulled to sleep.

Baba and Dyado's house is at the end of the street corner before a massive stone staircase. I was always enamored with the scale of the many steps (now sloped inward at the center by the years of foot traffic and covered in moss, lichen, and litter). Conquering the staircase felt like climbing a mountain, and along it are three houses with entrances facing the steps. The houses are abandoned- at least to my knowledge- but I remember how I would peek through the vines on the fence at our neighbor. A *slivi*⁵ tree grew in his yard, and its tall branches carried over to our fence. My brother and I blindly threw the *slivi* at his dog, but all we could manage to see was his tin roof riddled with all the rotting *slivi* we had failed to aim correctly.

⁵ Sour Plum

The bottom of the staircase leads to the main street parallel to the river, and on the other side is the church. Communism emphasized a secular society, so my grandparent's generation isn't *that* religious- but nevertheless the church has remained a sacred and respected site in the community because it also serves as a reminder of a religious cultural identity before communism. In February my mom, baba, and I visited the church before heading to the graveyard adjacent to it. We sat by the gravestones of my great-grandparents and I watched my mom and baba grieve their memory. I asked baba what they were like. She plucked the weeds as she explained, and I watched her small aged hands. I looked at my mom's hands too, and realized they were the same. I looked down on my own and found a ladybug to hold. We left.

Later on our walk my mom and I encountered the first bath house, built in the 19th century in Byzantine style out of stone and red tile. It had already been deserted when my mom was a kid. I decided to explore it, although I didn't make it far. Inside the cold, damp stone structure it was clear that squatters or teenagers occupied the space, as they have for a long time. A pile of indistinguishable fabric and beer cans looked like a blanket covering a sleeping monster. I left, tripping over a bone on the way out.

Behind the bath house the *Tunja* river flowed loudly, and standing by its edge I surveyed the hill beyond. I spotted my favorite house, which I jokingly refer to as the Bulgarian equivalent of a McMansion as it sticks out like a sore thumb. Its attributes are similar to the McMansion typology; namely in the many arches of dissimilar proportion and shape along what seems to be a veranda, as well as the varied roof line. Despite motifs of luxury it is constructed from the same everyday materials: brick, mortar, wood, concrete, and tin.

Panel 3:



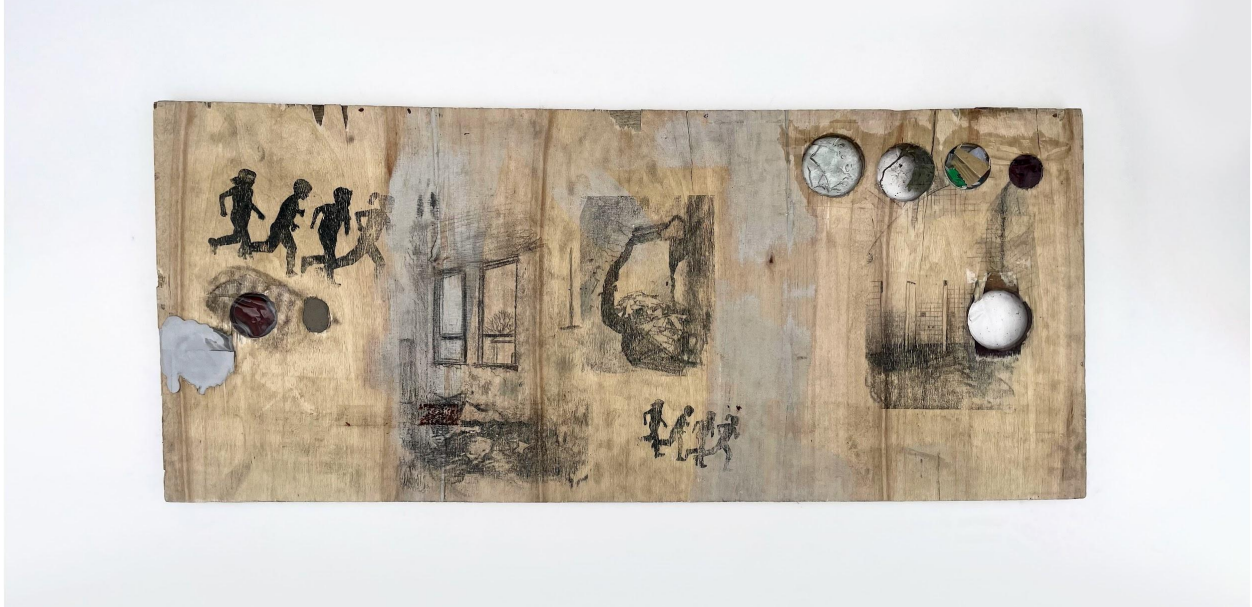
A few feet away from the first bath house stands the abandoned toothpaste factory that, according to my mom, filled the village air with notes of mint and licorice. On the other hand, my great-aunt *Lela Tzetz*a remembers the scent of roses, back when it was a rose oil processing facility. According to her, the river used to be so clean and perfumed with rose oil that people would wash their clothes in it, and on hot summer days people would bathe in it... Quite the

utopian picture. Now, she laments, the river is so polluted with fertilizer and cow manure that it is unusable.

Meanwhile, I remember encountering the factory as an obstacle for tag. The weeds and grass had grown so tall compared to our childish bodies that it provided the perfect camouflage. I would hide by the wall of the factory, now deteriorating. Quietly hiding face to face with it, I would get lost in the collage of stones, mud, and bricks that composed it, tracing my fingers along the surface and imagining little cities full of little people in the cracks.

Panel 4:





Next to the factory and along the river path are a few properties which at this point are mostly used for storage; rusty metal scraps, some old cars, piles of wood, a toy bike, and a variety of other indistinguishable materials. The walls that line these properties are deteriorating with piles of debris collecting at their sides. As the vibrancy of the paint gives way to sun bleaching and dirt, I think about how beautifully tragic these walls are, and my mom starts to weep.

She's not talking to me, but to her boyfriend on facetime. We've never been good at talking about our feelings: looking at each other is almost like looking in a mirror – too familiar, too raw, too vulnerable. But at this moment, at these ruins, I want nothing more than to be able to say how we feel, for her to cry to *me* and not to him because *he couldn't possibly understand*, not the way that I can. But I don't blame her. So I keep walking until I get to the second bath house, the *banya*, a true relic of communist Kalofer and my favorite site to play in as a kid.

Evidence of this play is found around its perimeter, with sunflower seed bags, candy wrappers, and beer cans littered everywhere. It is a tantalizing, echoey space that begs for

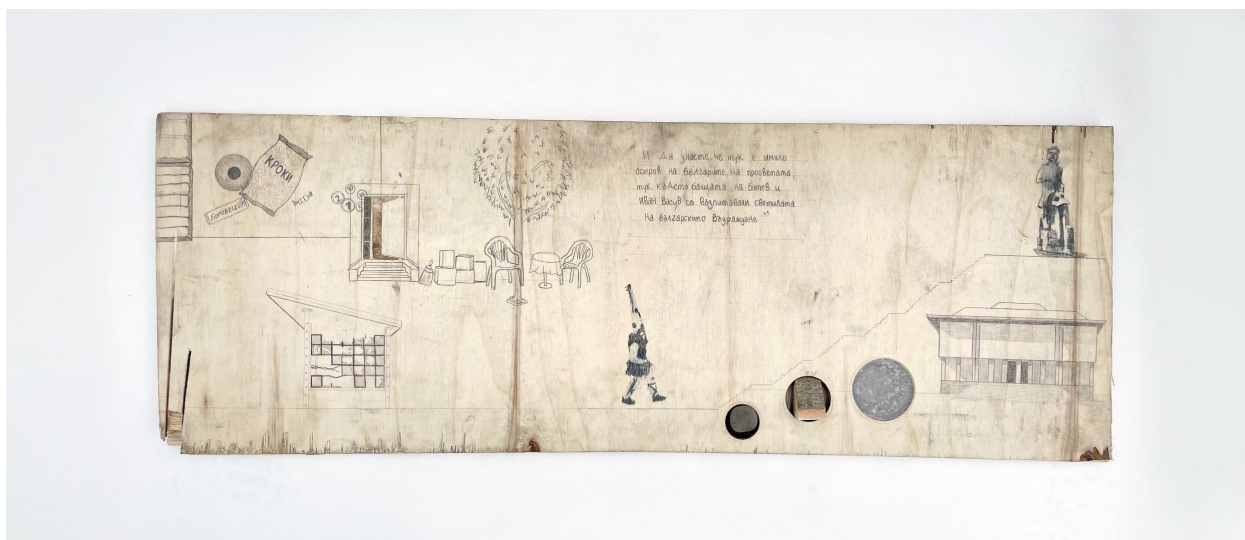
mischievous, and it was the focal meeting point for my friends and I. Sat on the nearby electrical generator with the *banya* as a backdrop, I played spin the bottle for the first time... I don't know the kids I once played with anymore.

Dusk had arrived, and my mother's crying caught my attention again. This time she was sobbing. I saw her as a little girl- not in a bad way, not to say that she is immature, but to say that when she comes home she is brought to that version of herself, this ghost of her past, as I think happens to many of us. Thus, in her crying I saw her desperate fear. I understood. "*Look at this! Do you see? There is nothing here anymore, nothing here for me! Everyone is dying. I'm scared of my parents dying. What will be left here when they die?*" I wanted to hug her, but I don't know if I did. Instead I begged her to get off the phone so we could experience this together.

I asked if she wanted to walk through it with me and explain what it was like. We huddled together, stepping on glass shards, weeds, rocks, and broken tile as we made our way through the halls. We crept around walls, their paint viciously peeling off, peeking through doors half open into rooms filled with more evidence of squatters or mischievous teens. She pointed out the ticket room, offices, showers, changing rooms, saunas and toilets, and painted a lively picture of a community space that was vital at a time when most people only had outhouses for toilets and buckets of water for showers.

We left and crossed the bridge to the other side of the river, getting a look at the *banya* from the back. Beyond the windows it was black, and the facade was clearly wrinkled, weathered and decaying with time.

Panel 5:



“And to know that here, this was the island of Bulgarian-hood, of enlightenment, *here* where Botev’s father and Ivan Vasov were educating the luminaries of the Bulgarian Renaissance.”

- Lela Tzetzta

We continued in the darkness to the town square, passing *Kaka Nina*'s convenience store. I remember walking in the hot, dry sun with my brother to get candy and *kroki* (my favorite puffed corn snack that often came with toys inside). Summer meant coming to *Kaka Nina*'s every single day, coins jingling in my pocket. She had been running that store since she was the age I am now, and I learned that *Kaka Nina* recently retired and closed the store. Where was I going to get my candy now? We had to rely on a LIDL chain supermarket a couple miles outside of town, its imposing industrial stance a symbol of Bulgaria's modernizing efforts.

The town center was quiet in the stillness of night. Earlier that day, the *Kukeri*⁶ festival took place and it was packed with people. Adults and children alike dressed in their costumes, and danced in the square for about 40 minutes, the sound of cowbells jingling in unison sending me into a trance. "There used to be many more," Baba said to me. We were standing on the steps of the town hall, a beautiful mid-century modern, brutalist building with stone carvings of revolutionaries on the facade.

⁶ A pagan folk ritual in which people dress up in elaborate costumes (often emulating animals and adorned with beads and cowbells), and dance to ward off evil spirits.

Panel 6:



“How can you explain to young people this burning feeling inside about your country? How can you communicate the pride and the pain? Many young people don’t share this belonging to this country, they are so removed. The generational chain is irreparably broken.”

- Lela Tzetzta

We moved onward, into the night, to the side of town I'm less familiar with. We passed an apartment building which looks quite small and run down now, but used to be luxury. "If you lived in these apartments, you were considered rich!" my mom said. "But they are so ugly," she continued. The apartments were situated next to a narrow part of the *Tunja*, built in the heyday of communism. Apartments like this displaced many households throughout the country, including that of my Baba's childhood house. My great-grandparents used to live on this site, and my baba would play in the *Tunja* in her backyard as a kid.

We passed an abandoned villa, its arches speaking to the wealth of the mercenary who once lived there (very different from the Bulgarian "mcmansion"). A stone plaque of his face is now heavily weathered, obfuscating his name. We continued along the dark streets, passing by houses illuminated only by sparse glowing windows or the passing glare of headlights on loud cars, the only signs of life in the otherwise quiet town. My mother pointed out the house at the bottom of a hill, its windows without glass providing a glimpse into the hollow dark interior.

It was here that we came to a stop on the road. My mother explained how this house used to belong to her elementary school teacher, a lovely woman who has long since passed. In the moonlight she told me of her dream a few days prior, how she was here in front of her teacher's house, how she was a little girl. She was standing in the middle of the road, and from over the hill a car came speeding at her, headlights blazing, with no sign of stopping. "But I didn't move," she said. "I let it drive toward me, and when it finally hit me, I saw light." The moment she finished her sentence, the street lights turned on. We were both startled by that unbelievable moment, one that almost makes you want to believe in god. With teary eyes we laughed in astonishment- it was as if Kalofer had heard our conversation, and was giving us a sign that it

was all going to be okay. At that moment I think we really *saw* each other- mother and daughter- and without speaking much we said everything we wanted to through a deep hug, before we continued on to Lela's house.

Bibliography

Akómoláfé, Báyo. "A Plea For Magic." *Bayoakomolafe.net*, 7 Aug. 2016, <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/a-plea-for-magic>. Accessed 2 May 2023.

Ortero-Pailos, Jorge, et al. "Experimental Preservation: Challenging What We Keep and Why." Lars Muller Publisher, 18 Dec. 2019.