

Anibar / Kinema Jusuf Gërvalla, Peja, Kosovo

FULL REPORT

The place

Twenty years after the war, when Serb forces chased hundreds of thousands of Albanian citizens out of the country and looted, burned and destroyed cities and villages, it is astonishing to walk around Peja. It doesn't have the cosmopolitan bustle of Prishtina or the medieval beauty of Prizren, but this Kosovar town of 90.000 inhabitants in the west of the country, comfortably spread out at the foot of the majestic Albanian Alps, has recovered much of its provincial charm. In 1999, after the war, some 80% of the buildings were damaged. Today, the scars are hardly visible. The city centre, with its squares, bazar and shops has been transformed into a mainly pedestrian zone. Walking across the Lumbardhi i Pejës river, that snakes through the city, you will pass by a neatly re-designed small park, the traditionally lifeless municipal theatre and there it is, the facade of Kinema Jusuf Gërvalla: the cinema, built in the forties, that served the moviegoers of Peja for decades. After the war, it never really came back to life. Right now, Anibar, a young and energetic team of local animation film addicts, are working hard to return the cinema to the city.

The modest facade deceives: inside, this cinema (Kino, as the locals call it) is much larger, and architecturally more interesting, than you might have guessed. The main hall, with 170 seats, has all the hallmarks of a movie theatre.

But there is work to be done: the ceiling leaked until recent repair works, the stage needs a real make-over, the lighting is incomplete, there is no digital equipment (although the 35 mm projector in the movie appears to have survived), the screen and the sound system are out of date, and the heating system, which needs expensive diesel for every screening, barely warms up the place during the winter months.

Around the main hall, the building counts enough other spaces that could potentially host the ambitions of Anibar, to turn this into a multifunctional arts centre and meeting space. The Anibar team has moved into the two offices spaces on the first floor. Last year, they organised three workshops that produced a design for transforming the building. Between the streetside entrance and the main hall, the annex could be enlarged to fit smaller screenings, presentations, workshops and discussions. To the left, there is a corridor with a small bar and the toilets. And behind the movie hall, there are two floors with five smaller studio or office spaces. The Anibar Animation Academy, that started five months ago, is based here. It offers

young people a platform to address social issues by creating their stories from scratch. (And in April, Anibar opened its second academy in Prishtina.)

This August, the Anibar International Animation Festival, the first of its kind in Kosovo and the largest annual cultural event in Peja, hosted its ninth edition. Films were shown in all different categories of animation from across the world. Over the past years, the main themes had a social urgency: global warming, migration, reclaiming the city etc. This year's theme was 50:50. 'In the wake of the numerous scandals worldwide, which have highlighted the pervasive problem of sexism, sexual harassment and gender inequality. Anibar International Animation Festival in the 9th edition will deal with the issue of gender inequality and empowerment of women in animation.' The aim, supported by many signatures during the festival: a 50/50 representation by 2025 of women in the animation field.

During the festival week, Anibar screened 300 works across six locations in the city, four of them built for the occasion in the open air (including the popular Lake Cinema, where people could float on the water in the city park and watch the big screen), with a total of 1200 seats. It presented us with a simple fact: animation film is an art form that shows us the world in its most honest, elegant, imaginative and confronting way. And every night was closed by one of the immensely popular concerts on the basketball court in the park, with local and international music acts.

Through the reputation of the festival, Anibar has gained the responsibility for reviving the local cinema all year long. Last year, they signed a memorandum with the municipality, allowing them to use Kino Jusuf Gërvalla free of rent, for a period of 15 years. The building is theirs, but so is the responsibility to raise the necessary funds, program daily screenings and other cultural and social activities, and set up the necessary organisation.

The idea

'Anibar commits itself to breaking the civic apathy through cultural activism.' Their motto shows that Anibar's ambitions reach beyond the annual animation festival and beyond restoring the city cinema. Their generation has grown up in a society of shaky economy, troubled politics and few serious job opportunities. The Anibar team believes it can make a difference. Through the art of cinematography, especially animation, through restoring public spaces like this cinema and through providing a platform for issues like sustainability, equality and human rights.

Their vision of the renovated Kino is a place where yes, a regular film program will be presented, including animation, arthouse and movies for children. But there will be more. The academy will educate young people in all aspects of filmmaking – sound, editing, camera, directing, writing, acting etc: visitors will not be here just to view and consume, but also to learn the skills to tell their own story, to develop their own criteria and critical thinking. Other spaces in the building will be refashioned to host social events, public talks and critical presentations. Including the bar, the Kino will become Peja's place to be, especially for its younger generation.

The Kino should become an example of new cultural activism. It aims to have an influence on society in the fields of cultural policy, education and public space. The Anibar strategical plan for 2017-2020 mentions ambitious goals. To integrate a higher cultural budget into municipal policy, based on the contribution that an active cultural life makes to the local economy. To include the methodology of learning activism through art into the curriculum of schools and universities across Kosovo. And to inspire other community groups to revitalise abandoned public spaces and buildings, just like Anibar is aiming to do with Kino Jusuf Gërvalla.

The legal situation

All of these ambitions are being set into motion while the legal status of the Kino is still insecure. In 2016, the municipality of Peja opened a call for initiatives to revitalise the city cinema. Anibar, who had been using the cinema as one of its venues during its festival, was chosen as the most qualified party. In December 2016, Anibar signed an agreement with the municipality for the next 15 years, until 2032. It was offered the use of the building without rent, based on the obligation to add value and revitalise the space (and the immediate neighborhood) by raising the funds to digitalise the cinema and renovate the building.

At that moment, the Kosovar Privatization Agency stepped in. Claiming ownership (as it does with public buildings across the country), it wanted to put the building up for sale – which could very well lead to the demolition of the cinema. Anibar launched a public campaign, collected 6.000 signatures and fenced off the sale for now. Since then, the situation is frozen. The municipality and the KPA both claim ownership. Today, Anibar is involved in a national campaign – along with like-minded initiatives such as Termokiss in Prishtina – to introduce a new law that would allow national and local authorities to lease their property to NGOs instead of letting them be sold off and privatised. But in August, days before the festival, Anibar received a letter from the KPA requesting to agree immediately that the property was theirs. The KPA regards the memorandum with the Peja municipality as 'illegal'. Vullnet Sanaja, Anibar's managing director, was able to postpone any action until after the festival, with the help of his well-known lawyer. But the situation still threatens the whole endeavor.

During our scoping visit, in March, we met with mayor Gazmend Muhaxheri, a veteran of Albanian civil resistance during Yugoslav times and known to be a rare, non-corrupt official. Last year, he was elected for a second term as mayor, on behalf of the liberal-conservative LDK, with a large majority of the votes. He is a man of modest demeanor but obvious moral authority. He sees the potential of the young Anibar team, shares its commitment to improving public space in the city, and is determined not to give up the cinema to the Kosovar Privatization Agency. But he has, as yet, not publicly acted against its recent ultimatum.

All the more relevant was *Hacking Urban Spaces*, the series of documentaries on urban development and public space, that were shown in three cities, thanks to a partnership between Anibar, Termokiss (Prishtina) and Dokufest (Prizren). The final

screening, in June, was followed by a public debate between the four mayors involved – a highly anticipated moment to raise these questions of property, funding and management. The debate showed a renewed sense of responsibility among the mayors, but the property issue was not solved.

With our involvement, other steps were taken to strengthen the position of Anibar and similar initiatives. On behalf of TEH, we wrote a letter to the mayor, proposing some supportive measures. Irena launched the new TEH Balkan network, which will include the TEH Balkan startups in the near future. This network will focus on mapping, capacity building, community building, knowledge exchange and audience development in the region. And together with Teodor Celakoski, the well-known cultural activist from Zagreb, and Dokufest / Lumbardhi Cinema in Prizren, she and Vullnet Sanaja delivered an application for *EU Call: Support to CSO Partnerships and Networks*, which would power a regional network; the application has been approved for entering the second round.

The activities

Next to organising the annual festival, which is what they are good at and which they enjoy, the Anibar team is starting to introduce the Kino as a centre for occasional film screenings and other community activities. The film screenings, in this phase, are mostly made possible by embassies and other international agencies, who provide the funding for special programs such as French cinema, Austrian cinema and urban development documentaries. Under these circumstances, and with a movie hall that relies on external funding for events (including equipment and heating), the Anibar signature is still very much in the making. Gradually, Anibar will have to transform itself from an organisation running an annual festival to one running a daily cultural centre.

The identity of what Anibar aims to be presenting here in the years to come, guided by the motto 'Anibar commits itself to breaking the civic apathy through cultural activism', has already been laid out in the Strategy 2017-2020. Next to the daily screenings of animation films, art house movies, documentaries and movies for children, Anibar's objectives will be accomplished through three inter-connected programs: Civic Education, Culture for Development and Film Production.

Civic Education is the methodology Anibar has developed as an incentive for active citizenship. It is an informal, alternative form of education, that starts with animation workshops for children, teenagers and students. They will learn everything necessary to express themselves on social topics such as human rights, corruption, environment, family violence and tolerance. The animation work they produce will be screened at schools and elsewhere, accompanied by open discussions and public campaigns. Film Clubs, with screenings and discussions, will be held regularly at the Kino.

Culture for Development is the campaign, through leading by example, to have arts and culture recognised as an essential element in the development policies of the municipality. By organising the yearly festival, running the Kino as a cultural centre on a daily basis and showing how to revitalise an abandoned public building,

Anibar will prove how a dedicated, independent cultural NGO can be instrumental in breaking the social and economical apathy that is paralysing too many cities in Kosovo.

Film Production of animated films has always been Anibar's natural flipside to the annual screening of animation work from across the world. By educating local talent, Anibar is able to promote Kosovar animation work, both in its own program and at other international film festivals. It has the personal knowledge and the technological equipment to run its academies, in Peja and Prishtina, and workshops across the country. Such workshops in partnership with the cultural scene have been held in Prishtina, Tirana, Prizren, Gjakova and Gračanica, with partners such as Termokiss, Lumbardhi, Frabaac, GAIA Kosovo etc. All the skills necessary to produce animation work – graphic design, 3D, use of software, stop motion technique, directing, scenography, screenwriting, team management and project management – are part of the package. It is all about offering young people the platform to express their concerns and ideas.

In the meantime, proving how it will always regard its own development as a driving force behind the development of Peja and its citizens, Anibar has taken the initiative to found RrOK Peja, an informal network of local cultural organisations. They will develop and coordinate cultural activities, make an economic impact by attracting tourists to Peja's cultural events, improve the quality of their work, influence local cultural policy, promote cultural heritage and encourage active citizenship.

The organisation

It is astonishing to see how young the members of the Anibar team are. They were teenagers when they founded the festival in 2010. Today, the festival organisation, its international network, the number of visitors, the logistics of the (outdoor) venues, its funding applications, its strategy documents and business plans, the work that has been done in the Kino on a very tight budget, the founding of the animation academy – it is all highly impressive. And yet the team – including managing director Vullnet Sanaja, artistic director Petrit Gora and project coordinator Arba Hatashi – has an average age of 25.

Now, they are facing their biggest challenge yet. Next to organising the annual festival (with a handful of paid colleagues and a growing circle of volunteers) they will have to transform the Kino into a daily cultural centre. Even apart from the legal uncertainty, the tight budgets and the general apathy in society, this will ask everything they have.

Right now, the team consists of six paid people (general director, artistic director, academy coordinator, administration, communications and project coordinator), two Peace Corps volunteers and two interns. Half of these people are new: Anibar has managed to create the necessary funding through the ticket sales and merchandising of the festival.

(Anibar estimates that in the near future, they would need 8 people to run the Kino. Paying them an average monthly salary for the Kosovar civil society sector, this would take some €40.000 per year.)

This current team is mainly preoccupied with organising the festival and the management of the two animation academies. Vullnet Sanaja and Kristina Zimaj are writing funding applications almost full-time, but these are rewarded mostly for the festival, not for the Kino. As long as there isn't enough funding, there are no people who can dedicate themselves fully to the transformation of the Kino. But in the meantime, the priorities to realize this transformation are piling up. To name the most urgent ones:

- the digitalisation of the cinema
- the renovation of the building, including the spaces around the main hall
- the agreements with distributors etc necessary to program regular film screenings
- mobilising other individuals and initiatives in Peja to come and organise their activities: the building of a community
- the creation of own programs
- the management of the animation academies

This raises some existential questions. Is Anibar actually dedicated to 'provide the citizens of Peja and Western Kosovo with a long-awaited, hometown movie theatre,' as they say in the Business Plan which won them the tender in 2016? How does this relate to the Anibar motto of 'breaking the civic apathy through cultural activism,' by focusing on social, political and urban issues? And does the team actually want to realise all its ambitions through running a cinema-turned-cultural-centre, or would they be most happy with just the festival and the animation academies?

So far, the team is tackling all the questions and priorities at once, with admirable energy, sophistication and collectivity. This is yielding results: the Kino is opening its doors 2 to 3 times a week, three new team members have recently been hired, funding possibilities for the renovation and digitalisation are presenting themselves. All of this is bringing the whole organisation closer to the day that Kino Jusuf Gërvalla will really be re-opened to the citizens of Peja. But then? What will the organisation have to look like then, and what steps need to be taken to get there?

After our visit, Chris and Vullnet engaged in an ongoing conversation, through Skype and mail, on the model for the future organisation. Chris emphasised that, in his opinion, the focus should be on the Kino as cultural centre. This should be the basis for everything else: festival, academies, civic action, cultural activism, urban space etc. Then, he posed some preliminary questions to begin with:

- Will the festival become a separate entity, with a separate legal body and team, or will it become an integral part of the Kino team's work, a focus point within the ongoing range of activities?
- Project-based fundraising is often tied to social aims (civic engagement clubs, the academy as a program for reconciliation and migration stories, the festival as a platform for human rights issues), while the daily Kino will have a screening program that presents movies of all kinds, more often than not unconnected to those social aims. How do you see this balance?

- Can the Kino in the future produce financial benefits through ticket sales, bar income and merchandising that supports the wages for the team, like the festival does? Or in other words, can this income provide the financial basis for the core team and the daily expenses & maintenance, while project funding makes it possible to add more activities with a social aim: the cultural activism?
- Can you maintain a horizontal decision-making process, or does this need a more conventional, vertical organisation?

This conversation is ongoing right now. Vullnet, working on all levels of the organisation, encounters good news and bad news every day, from funding opportunities to legal obstacles, which is always of influence on the process Anibar is going through. But whatever happens, the team's energy and dedication seem endless. During his visit to the Anibar festival in August, Chris was deeply impressed by the quality of the program, the real commitment to the 50/50 theme, the hospitality to animation artists and producers from around the world, the care that was taken for the outdoor venues and the clear interest among the mostly young audience.

The financial situation

Currently, Anibar runs on the income from the annual festival, including fundraising, ticket sales and merchandising. The municipality contributes €10.000 annually to the festival, on a total budget for culture of €300.000. The memorandum for the Kino, even as it is contested by the KPA, makes clear that the municipality will not subsidise the renovation and managing costs of the cinema.

But currently, Anibar is pushing the city to act as a twinning partner for a possible contribution of €50.000 to the renovation costs through UNDP. This will be available if Anibar comes up with €20.000 from its side, either through the city or possibly through a crowdfunding campaign with Kosovoldeas.

In total, Anibar has estimated that the full renovation of the building, according to the architectural plans which Anibar inherited when they moved in, would cost some €200.000. Further support for the renovation could come from the IPA budget line which provides pre-access European funding. Kosovo is currently eligible for IPA. Here too, the municipality should support the application. (As it has been done recently at Kino Lumbardhi in Prizren).

The digitalisation, which would cost another €90.000, could be funded through the Creative Europe program – will Kosovo be eligible for its Media program next year?

There are also smaller but important improvements within reach. Currently, heating the main hall costs €150 for every screening: €100 diesel and €50 electricity. The diesel has to be requested from the municipality every time, and when they don't provide the diesel, it has to be purchased from private selling points. This seems highly inefficient and expensive. For now, the municipality could provide the necessary diesel for a year all at once, for approximately €6.000. And once a new heating system has been installed, with woodchips instead of diesel, this practice

would become unnecessary altogether. (And Anibar can build up return on investment through external renting of the cinema outside of regular screening times.)

Anibar already has the business model in place for once the Kino has been transformed into a daily, multifunctional cultural centre. It expects 40.000 visitors a year, who will pay according to category of film: €4 for new 3D releases ranging to €1 for school children in groups.

To expect the centre to be fully self-sustainable in a few years would be unrealistic. But it seems reasonable to anticipate the daily screenings and staff to be paid through regular income from ticket sales, merchandise and bar. For all the other, less commercial activities, external fundraising will remain necessary. In the end, a healthy balance of for-profit and non-profit activities should certainly be achievable for Anibar in its revitalised Kino.