

# Drawings

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**ERSELA KRIPA IS DRAWING ON  
HER OWN CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES  
TO TEACH YOUNG ARCHITECTS  
HOW TO BUILD AROUND BORDERS.**

BY LUCY GREENBERG  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JUSTIN REX

# “You’re being foolish,”

the old man spat, his footsteps pounding as he paced across the wood floor. “You think too highly of yourself for someone with such low status.”

Despite his anger, his 12-year-old cousin, Ersela Kripa, stood her ground. Her extended Muslim family was trying to force her older sister into an arranged marriage — it was a fate Ersela knew would likely await her one day, too, and she wanted none of it.

“No,” she declared. “I’m going to become an architect.”

Ersela was as good as her word, but her path was far from easy. Over the next decade, she would flee her home country of Albania, live as a political refugee, and ultimately appeal to the U.S. government for asylum before finally achieving her goal.

## The Pain of Being an Outsider

Born in 1978 under a communist dictatorship in Albania, Ersela had no friends as a child. Her parents were outspoken challengers of communism, so her family was politically persecuted and pushed to the outskirts of society.

“It was the most brutal dictatorship in Eastern Europe,” Ersela says. “My father was imprisoned at age 15 for writing anti-dictatorship poetry. When he got out, he met and married my mother.”

Her parents continuously fought for a better Albania and instilled the same fighting spirit in their children, which made them outsiders as well. That feeling of exclusion lingers even in her earliest memories.

“I told one of my kindergarten classmates that our family didn’t watch Albanian television because my parents said it was used to brainwash us,” she says. “Well, word got back to the classmate’s father who was a government leader, and the situation was reported.”

Ersela’s teacher told the other kindergarteners that their classmate was an enemy of the state, and should be treated as such. The teacher had the children take turns spitting on 5-year-old Ersela.

Ersela learned that day that the Albanian educational system would not be her ticket to a better life. It, in fact, was designed to do the opposite.

“If your family were members of the previous government, you were not allowed to attend college,” she recalls. “You could graduate high school but then had to work a trade job. It was their way of keeping anyone who thought differently out of positions of power.”

But the conditioning started well before that.

“I remember studying so hard, yet never making anything better than a C,” Ersela recalls. “I would compare the answers I gave on exams with my classmates’ answers. We marked the same things, but they got As.”

The classmates with high scores, predictably, belonged to families who were friendly to the regime.

With no hope of attending college, Ersela’s future seemed narrow: her only culturally acceptable option was to work a government-assigned job until someone offered to marry her, and when they did, she would accept.

Fortunately, her parents didn’t subscribe to the idea of an arranged marriage the way her extended family did. Her father, who worked in construction engineering, let Ersela study his design blueprints at night when he got home from work. And her mother never stopped encouraging her.

“My mother always vowed I would go to college,” Ersela says with a grin.

But as a child, she laughed at the notion. Her mother’s hopes for her children seemed as likely as Cinderella’s fairy godmother materializing from the sky.

“There was no way out,” she explains, her eyes drifting away. “My fate was decided before I was born. Being part of my family meant being an outsider.”

## Uprising

When Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha died in 1985, things got worse before they got better. It was an intense and dangerous time in Eastern Europe.

Ersela recalls sitting in the living room of her house listening to the radio as communist regimes fell in Romania and Bulgaria. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the people of Albania saw a light at the end of the tunnel—an energy began to rise.

By 1990, the momentum of surrounding countries coupled with Hoxha’s ineffective successor created a chance for Albania’s communist regime to finally be overthrown. University students began protesting in the capital city of Tirana, and things quickly turned violent. The whole country fell into chaos as civilians clashed with communist police.

Due to the lawlessness, there also was a rise in human crises throughout the country. Teenage girls were being trafficked out of Albania into surrounding countries and sold into prostitution.

Families trying to escape with their children often took boats or rafts across the Mediterranean Sea to Italy.

“Many attempts were unsuccessful,” Ersela says. “I still remember pictures of capsized boats and bodies washing onto shore.”

With the rise of violence, Ersela’s parents became worried for her safety. While the 12-year-old was more than happy to stay and help, her parents decided it best to send her away. Ersela’s 24-year-old brother Artan was tasked with getting her out of the country.

Her parents didn’t want them to travel by boat; the chances of drowning were too high. Rather, they planned for Artan to take his sister to Greece by way of Albania’s southern border.

“I pleaded with my parents not to make me leave,” Ersela says, desperation still in her voice. “I was a young girl; I didn’t want to leave my family. But so many girls in our town were disappearing. My parents were not going to let that happen to me.”

So, with nothing but the clothes on their backs, Ersela and Artan fled south.



## The Crossing

The siblings took a bus from their hometown of Vlorë to the city of Gjirokaster, 28 miles from the border.

“Buses wouldn’t go any closer than that,” Ersela recalls. “They didn’t want to get involved.”

Not only did Greece not want anything to do with the political unrest in Albania, but it was determined to turn away Muslims seeking asylum. According to Ersela, some Greeks said the Muslims would bring the devil to their land. If questioned, the siblings would say they were Orthodox Christians.

The journey from Gjirokaster to the border crossing at Kakavia took them through valley roads surrounded by the Gjerë mountains. They hitched rides in the back of pick-up trucks and then walked toward the crossing where Artan’s friend had arranged to meet them.

“I remember feeling very exposed and vulnerable,” Ersela says.

Late summer in Southern Albania is extremely hot, a dry heat that seems to emanate from the rocky terrain. The only good thing Ersela recalls from those few days is the smell.

“Chai grows in that region, so the air smelled like tea,” she notes.

It was a pleasant reprieve for her fatigued senses.

When the siblings finally got to the border, they hid in the forest. There were encampments scattered throughout the forest where refugees were hiding from both the Albanian and Greek authorities. They hid in the woods for a few days, waiting for the right time to make a run for it.

The days felt like months.

“I felt really unprotected,” Ersela says. “Basic necessities like water or a bathroom weren’t available. By the end of the second day, I got frantic. I recall thinking I was going to die there.”

As she sat lamenting her situation that night, a rainstorm blew in.

“Artan came up and said it was time to go,” Ersela recalls. And while Artan’s voice was quiet, his pace was quick. A friend of his was going to meet them with a cab at the border, and the arranged pick-up time was quickly approaching. Artan told Ersela to keep up and then took off in a sprint.

On the previous page, Ersela Kripa poses in front of the U.S.-Mexico border wall. As a faculty member in the Huckabee College of Architecture, she is teaching students how to build around borders.

“I remember it getting dark and running as fast as I could through the trees,” Ersela remembers.

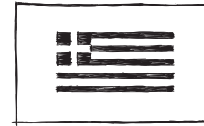
As night set in, she kept running, her lungs on fire; branches snapping back against her. Finally, the siblings made it to the border and slid into a taxi guarded by Artan’s friend. Usually, the border police would be making their way up this stretch, but the rainstorm had turned into a flashflood, keeping the police from their usual routine. The siblings stayed low in the back seat of the taxi and eventually made it to the Greek city of Patras, where they planned to start their new life.

“Artan’s friend took us to an old hotel that refugees were using for shelter,” Ersela says. “It wasn’t nice, but it was better than the forest.”

The siblings shared a hotel room with four other people since they could not afford their own. The hotel’s bathroom was shared by 60 people. Any time Ersela needed to shower, her brother would guard the door.

Still vulnerable, but safe for the time being, Ersela resolved to put her past behind her. If she was going to survive here, it was time to become somebody new.

At right, Ersela shows photos from her childhood, taken in Albania.



Almost four years passed, and slowly, Ersela built a life in Greece. She had friends, school, steady work and even enrolled in piano lessons. The 15-year-old was finally experiencing a relatively normal adolescence.

“One day toward the end of my ninth-grade year, I had gone to school as usual and got home in the afternoon,” Ersela recalls. “Artan wasn’t there, but I didn’t think anything of it since he usually worked late.”

As the afternoon sky dimmed, there was a knock on the door.

Ersela immediately sensed something was wrong.

She opened the door to find two police officers.

“They had picked up Artan earlier that day,” Ersela says, slowly crossing her arms. “They asked to see his papers, and he told them he didn’t keep his papers on him while working. He said the papers were at home, so they detained him and got his address.”

The officers asked Ersela to gather her brother’s papers.

“I was terrified,” she recalls. “I grabbed whatever I could find, including his birth certificate.”

When the police read the certificate, they saw her brother’s Muslim name on it. The police allowed her to visit Artan while he was detained, but they both knew it was over. Soon, he was deported to Albania, leaving Ersela alone in Patras.

“I was determined to stay,” she says. “My parents said they’d come and bring me home, but I resisted the idea. I wanted to stay. I had friends, a job, and a whole life in Greece.”

As much as she tried to find a way to support herself, her money was in a bank account only Artan could access. The plucky 15-year-old went to Artan’s boss and asked for his check directly so she could pay for her piano lessons. The boss, incredulous, told Ersela she should be packing, not worrying about piano lessons.

Things were still bad in Albania, and Ersela’s hometown was still a dangerous place. The family she worked for knew this and scrambled to see if they could legally adopt her.

“It was so sweet they considered doing that for me,” Ersela says, “but it was a really long process and just wouldn’t have worked.”

She still remembers the day her mother came with a truck.

“I was devastated,” she says. “I was going back to a place where I felt less than human.”

### Civil War

Ersela was only back in Albania for a few months before she spiraled into a depressive state. She quickly fell behind in school and struggled socially.

“Being allowed somewhere is not the same thing as being accepted,” she explains.

On top of the social tension, Ersela faced major educational gaps. Albania taught a different style of mathematics and literature than she had learned in Greece. After a few months, Ersela became suicidal.

“I was so angry,” she says. “I just kept thinking, ‘This is not my life; my life is back in Greece.’”

While her parents tried to offer support, Ersela’s discontentment only grew. After two years, her world turned upside down once again. In 1996, the country went through another crisis, as a widespread financial scam stole huge sums of money — some \$1.2 billion in total—from Albanian families. Mass panic erupted overnight, and the country fell into civil war.

“The violence and fallout were worse than before,” Ersela recalls.

Desperate to get their daughter out of harm’s way, her parents sent 17-year-old Ersela to the U.S. that fall as a foreign exchange student for her

senior year of high school. She boarded a flight for one year abroad — but it would be more than five years before she returned.

### An Outsider Again

Ersela found herself in the home of an American couple, Chuck and Cheryl, who lived in a New Jersey suburb with their two young sons. Ersela was once again in a country where she didn’t speak the language.

“That initial transition was really difficult,” she recalls. “I didn’t speak any English. I would point to things around the house and Cheryl would tell me what they were called.” A quick learner, Ersela caught on and excelled

in her studies. Socialization was another matter, though.

“I very much felt like an outsider, again,” Ersela notes. “I was the girl in the cheap clothes, and I didn’t fit in.”

While her exchange hosts were incredibly supportive and welcoming, she longed to see her family and know they were safe. But by spring, it became obvious that was not going to happen. Things had become even worse in Albania and the country was now recovering from the Kosovo Genocide. Her parents made clear that she could not come home. Together with her host family, her parents decided she would apply for political asylum to stay

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At left, in this photo from her teenage years in Greece, Ersela poses with a group of friends.

in the U.S. and pursue a college education.

“The problem was, I had to get an attorney and I didn’t have the money, nor did my family,” Ersela notes.

But Chuck and Cheryl along with some of their neighbors were committed to helping her. They raised the money and hired an attorney to represent Ersela in her asylum appeal.

“They were incredible like that,” she recalls with a smile. Ultimately, her application was accepted.

### ‘I’m Going to be an Architect’

Her place secured, it was time to turn her attention to her dreams, and she had dreamt of being an architect since she was a girl poring over her father’s blueprints.

“I remember looking at certain objects as a child and not knowing what they were,” Ersela says. “For example, one day I saw a quarter-circle near a door on one of my father’s blueprints and asked him what it was.”

“That’s the door swinging,” her father replied. “It shows time passing.”

“I was hooked,” Ersela explains. “You can’t really see time; yet here, my father had drawn something that represented it. I wanted to draw invisible things, too.”

And at age 18, she was finally able to.

Ersela started community college and took introductory architecture courses. After two years, she transferred to the New Jersey Institute of Technology and completed her bachelor’s degree in architecture. After graduating, Ersela spent the next three years living and working in Newark. She longed to go to graduate school but felt reality would not lend itself to her ambitions.

“My mother came for a visit around that time,” Ersela recalls. “She knew I dreamed of attending Columbia University. I was driving her around New York City and drove her past the school to see it.”

“Why don’t you apply and see what happens?” her mother asked.

“I just can’t imagine myself going there,” Ersela told her.

“Why not?”

“It’s not for people like me, mom.”

Ersela felt she’d already accomplished more than she should. After all, she had defied the odds just by getting an undergraduate degree. But her mother’s question lingered in her mind. After her mother flew home to Albania, Ersela mulled over the hesitations in her mind.

“I had to fight the belief that nice things weren’t meant for me,” Ersela explains. “I had to decide I could have an identity beyond the one forced on me.”

Ersela decided her mother was right; she had nothing to lose by applying.

And as it happened, she had so much to gain. Columbia not only accepted her — the university gave her a scholarship to study advanced architectural design.

### A Larger Agenda

While studying at Columbia, Ersela met Stephen Mueller, a fellow architecture student.

The two immediately hit it off, professionally and personally.

“Stephen and I both struggled with imposter syndrome,” Ersela says, “which is one of the reasons we gravitated toward each other.”

Both had gotten undergraduate degrees from state schools and felt out of place and underprepared for Columbia. That said, they developed their own way of catching up. They spent hours visiting exhibits around New York City. If there was an architecture exhibition or presentation, they were there. While Stephen’s upbringing in the Midwest was not comparable to Ersela’s refugee experience, neither of them felt ready for the cultural deluge of New York City.

“We made up for it by reading every book and watching every film we could,” Ersela says. “We were both outsiders in cheap clothes and Converse, fighting to belong, and that’s what brought us together.”

They have been life partners—and business partners — ever since.

“We were both fascinated by the question, ‘How does architecture build nations?’” Ersela explains. “We were engaged in this larger conversation around architecture beyond a project-to-project narrative.”

Naturally, Ersela looked to her home country of Albania to answer this question. By that time, the mayor of Albania’s capital city had

commissioned artists to paint old communist buildings to stimulate the city’s economy and tourism.

“We thought this was a perfect example,” Ersela noted, “so we applied for funding to research the phenomenon.”

Columbia granted them the funds, and Ersela and Stephen spent the following year in Albania measuring the impact of art on infrastructure. “It was an incredible experience to take Stephen home with me,” Ersela recalls. “It was odd going back and seeing how much had changed, but it was a good change. And I think he could finally believe all the stories he had heard.”

At the end of their time in Albania, they published their first book, “Nation Building Aesthetics” which includes interviews with Albanian residents and outlines the resourcefulness of the low-investment intervention. Upon graduating from Columbia in 2006, Ersela and Stephen logged time with architectural firms in New York. Once they attained their licenses, however, they were itching for a new experience.

“The firm life just wasn’t for us,” Ersela says. “We were preoccupied with a larger agenda.”

With no savings or plans, they quit their jobs to chart their own path. They started applying for funding that would allow them time to plan their next project. They eventually received a MacDowell fellowship and spent two months in the woods of New Hampshire writing what would become their manifesto.

The couple had no desire to build structures for the sake of building or even making money. They saw architecture as a tool to solve some of the world’s biggest problems.

“We studied the works of theorists like Mike Davis and Bill Easterly during that time,” Ersela remembers. “We didn’t want to recreate the wheel; we wanted to build off the work of humanitarian aid and reframe it for architecture.”

It boiled down to one idea: “We want to restore dignity to people through architecture, urbanism and advocacy.”

That became the cornerstone of AGENCY, the couple’s architectural design and research practice.



### Back to the Border

After a few years of international projects and research, the couple took faculty jobs at Washington University in St. Louis. Some of the classes they taught included traveling to sites around the country. On one particular trip, their route went through the far western tip of Texas.

“I’ll always remember the night we drove into El Paso,” Ersela says. “We came over this hill and all of a sudden you could see all of El Paso and Ciudad Juarez lit up, sprawling across the valley.”

El Paso immediately reminded Ersela of home, both in the resourcefulness of the people and, especially, the looming presence of the border.

As they were looking at relevant stops in El Paso, they stumbled upon Texas Tech’s Huckabee College of Architecture campus.

“We had no idea there was an architecture school in El Paso, let alone one right on the border,” Ersela recalls. “Stephen and I kept looking at each other like, ‘How could we not have known about this?’”

Fascinated, they reached out to then-director Robert Gonzalez to set up a visit. Upon touring the school, they asked if any faculty were working on border issues. “No, they’re not,” he replied, “but I’d like someone to be. Are you interested?”

The school was looking to hire a tenure-track position. Surprised, Ersela and Stephen said they’d give it some thought, but for now they had to get back on the road.

The couple finished their trip and returned to St. Louis, but try as they might, they couldn’t get El Paso out of their minds.

“We couldn’t stop talking about it,” Ersela remembers.

“We were just so intrigued by an architecture school on a border and all the possibilities that would come with that. It felt true to the kind of work we wanted to do.”

The catch was that Texas Tech was only hiring one position.

“We decided to both apply and basically said, ‘Let the best man win,’” Ersela laughs.

As it turned out, the best woman won. Ersela was offered the position, but she said there was no way she could move without Stephen. Not only her life partner, he also was her business partner — they were a package deal.

Texas Tech hired them both.

After arriving in El Paso, Ersela and Stephen threw themselves into rewriting syllabi to revolve around the context of the U.S.-Mexico border. It seemed natural that students use the context surrounding them to apply what they were learning in the classroom.

“There is so much complexity to this space,” Ersela notes. All in all, it made the space perfect for architectural research; a fact Ersela and Stephen felt could be a good pull to the school.

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They started gathering data to inform their efforts, and eventually pitched then-dean of the college, Jim Williamson, on an idea for a research center on the border. Williamson quickly agreed, and the Project for Operative Spatial Technologies, an officially recognized Huckabee College of Architecture research center, was born.

**The Power of Being an Outsider**

“When I think back to crossing the border with my brother all those years ago, it’s bizarre because I felt less than human,” Ersela recalls. “Now I am in this privileged space and have much more agency than I did then. I think I have to take those personal experiences and let them guide my voice at the tables I sit at now.”

According to Ersela, if she doesn’t allow her past experiences to inform her decisions, then there’s not much point in practicing architecture.

“I remember what it’s like to flee your home to avoid being sold into sex slavery,” she says, her hands raking through her hair. “I now have an opportunity to instill dignity in others, and I

can do that through architecture. It’s a dignity I wish I had felt all those years ago.”

One such opportunity is a border consortium she and Stephen launched, supported by both the U.S. and Mexico. As delegates came together from both sides, Ersela and Stephen proposed using the data their research center was collecting as part of an open database both countries could access.

Using this data, Ersela and Stephen have started researching the ultraviolet damage and sun exposure that plague people crossing the border.

“There is an inequality of access to shade and water out here,” she explains. “While we, of course, want those resources for those who live here, all humans should have access to those basic necessities.” She emphasizes that people are dying at the border due to dehydration and exposure.

“I have a memory I can recall to empathize with these people,” Ersela says. “It allows me to imagine myself in their shoes. Not everyone has that, and



it might not be easy to viscerally feel what migrants feel, but it doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try.

“Think about your home,” she says. “Think about your family and your customs, the things you enjoy about your culture. Would you just up and leave all of that in the middle of the night? No, people don’t do that. I would not have left my home if I didn’t have to escape. People are pushed to these extremes for a reason.”

Ersela and Stephen are advocating for shade structures, water and showers at borders around the world. AGENCY recently began working with Amnesty International in harnessing the power of architecture to diminish human rights abuses in immigration detention facilities. They believe making the immigration process less humane will not decrease immigration — only make it harder on the people who pursue it. Instead, governments should be looking for other solutions.

One way the couple is helping is by creating shade structures that can be installed in the region. The structures would offer shelter and other necessities while migrants wait to go through the immigration process. El Paso and Ciudad Juarez get 333 days of sunlight each year and it’s not enough just to have overhead protection. Much like snow, sand acts as a UV reflector and can cause severe damage. With that in mind, the architects are designing an arched structure that blocks UV rays not just from overhead, but from other angles as well.

“When people are pushed to these extremes and are facing the hardest moments of their lives, they need to feel they’re human,” she stresses. “That means designing a process that doesn’t strip them of their dignity.”

**More Voices at The Table**

Ersela has accomplished what she set out to do at 12 years old.

Rather than agreeing to an arranged marriage, she realized her dream of becoming an architect — and she’s had more opportunities than she could have ever dreamed of as a young girl. More so, she has dreamed the invisible and drawn it — then, she brought it to life.

“I credit taking control of my life to education,” she says, “and the best decision I’ve ever made was going into education myself.”

Through education, people become aware of their rights and resources as well as understanding their larger context, she says. According to Ersela, it’s one of the most empowering experiences a person can have. Now, at Texas Tech, she guides other young architects along the same path.

Ersela says while many of her students are from El Paso, others come from Ciudad Juarez and many of them come from a background similar to hers. One of her students is designing architectural infrastructure to reduce violence in her hometown in Mexico. She was driven to address the root issues of systemic poverty after experiencing its harsh realities herself.

“These are the people who need voices at the table,” Ersela says. Many global problems remain unsolved because those making the decisions are too far removed from the consequences, she adds. “But when you’re directly impacted by an issue, you have a unique ability to fix it.”

“I am only one voice, but if I can extend agency to my students, and they extend it to others, and so on, perhaps we’ll no longer have outsiders. Just humans.” 📌

At left, Ersela works on her architectural designs at the El Paso campus. Through her work, she is glad to now help others in the same situation she found herself all those years ago.

