

The Gjirokastra Experience

The Art Loop. An urban path to foster the connection between a territory and its cultural identity.

Keywords / Cultural heritage, Urban museum, Identity, Art loop, Existing built asset

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Abstract

The city of Gjirokastra is experiencing severe depopulation (Rembeci 2016). This phenomenon is a result of both economic and social factors, and it reflects a widespread trend in all rural areas of Albania, but it assumes relevant dimensions in Gjirokastra. Medium and long-term strategies that trigger "value chains" are needed to counteract this phenomenon by intervening on critical issues on both the economic and social level, in order to slow down or reverse the demographic drop. Art and local culture can become drivers for social and productive revitalization, providing development opportunities in a territory whose economy can rely again on the manufacturing industry. The old town of Gjirokastra has been included in the UNESCO (Unesco 2020) list of protected sites since 2005. Its territory hosts significant historical and archaeological evidence from the Byzantine to the Ottoman Empire. Important architectural testimonies are preserved from the latter in the oldest part of the city. The buildings realized between the 1920s and the 1940s by famous Italian architects for the city's most affluent merchant families are of particular historical interest. Private mansions, hotels, banks and utility buildings were built by bringing into this area the construction technologies and the architecture style in use in Italy at the time (Bilushi 2008). The urban fabric is characterized by an extraordinary variety of composition, due to both the historical stratification and the organic distribution resulting from the topography. The urban development has led to the emergence of three distinct loci or souls over the centuries. The old town, located close to the ridge, is characterized by a dense and organic fabric. The new city, located at the foot of the ridge, has a modern fabric, and the industrial area developed along the primary road network and the river. These represent three distinct phases, which contribute to the identity of the place and people. The maintenance and preservation of this identity must be the primary driver to develop an intervention strategy. Each part brings a specific social and cultural background that can enrich the city as a whole. The aim of this research is to reconnect the three loci of the city by intervening on the existing urban tissue. The abandonment of the historical city is evinced by historical buildings which are functionally and structurally compromised, or partially collapsed, and cannot be restored but only rebuilt. At the same time, the new city deals with a socio-functional abandonment, in which large 20th-century buildings have lost their function insofar as the needs of an evolving population have changed. Finally, due to global economic changes the industrial facilities are abandoned. These facilities are too modern to be catalogued as industrial archaeology, and too old to be re-functionalized with modern standards. From these assumptions comes the idea of a strategy that foresees the reuse of different types of buildings that share a functional identity crisis (Torresi 2006). The aim of this strategy is to promote the reuse and renovation of the urban fabric, without rebuilding actions, operating through targeted interventions that can act as punctual actuators: single buildings which can work as drivers of economic and social interest (top-down) and trigger collaborative activities (bottom-up). The methodology used in this research is based on the analysis of the development plans already carried out by the municipality and on the trends in tourism development. I am starting from the assumption of using local culture as a tourism driver (Pattueli 2013), and by preserving and promoting it as an added value. The methodology used foresees the simulation on the existing case studies of

non-reconstructive approaches, which guarantee the authentic experience of the tourist. These buildings identify an exhibition path as an urban-scale loop, making the activities accessible through an easily identifiable way. The exposition route in the city of art intercepts abandoned buildings of historical interest, duly converted, to perform functions related to exhibitions, art productions, and public services. These activities, planned as a management strategy of tourist routes, will contribute to define the first step to improve the tourist accessibility and city management and create opportunities for potential stakeholders.

The city of Gjirokastra needs a strategy that promotes economic development while maintaining its cultural identity as much as possible. The proposed strategy aims to identify a way of intervention inspired by those realities that have already faced such process. Activities already tested allow evaluating more consciously which initiatives can be more effective in the Albanian context and which not. Art and culture are a significant driver for the economic revival of historic cores in a state of gradual abandonment. The dialogue between ancient and modern cores is a primary objective. Promoting cultural activities involving both the historical core and modern expansion ensures that new facilities are no longer necessary.

In the European city, the historic centre plays a significant role in the definition of cultural, social and historical characteristics of a community. Around this nucleus, man's activities are developed and consolidated, generation after generation, contributing to the formation of the social structure of the community that dwells there (Pickard 2002). Such "historicized" cores, however, are affected by a relatively new issue, but drastically rapid in evolution. From the Industrial Revolution to today, we have passed rather quickly from a

predominantly agricultural and commercial society to an industrial and service society. This evolution has led to a change in the needs of the people who live there, quickly making buildings that have been perfectly functional up to that point both unsuitable and uncomfortable. The urban cores involved, therefore, need political, social and economic interventions in order to trigger adequate redevelopment (Council of Europe 2008). The identified solutions must be translated into actions that meet the requirements of the contemporary urban development. These interventions are therefore to be planned with great care and competence, mediating between the historical and cultural importance of the subject of the intervention and the characteristics required by the new needs of those who have to live there (Icomos 1987). Only in this way will the oldest cores be able to survive the progressive depopulation that affects them, avoiding becoming places of abandonment or soulless tourist centres. Similar problems can also arise in more modern urban areas, where a delicate socio-economic balance rules the presence of new production facilities and residential areas mainly used by those employed in the field. This connection means that when production capacity is no longer available,

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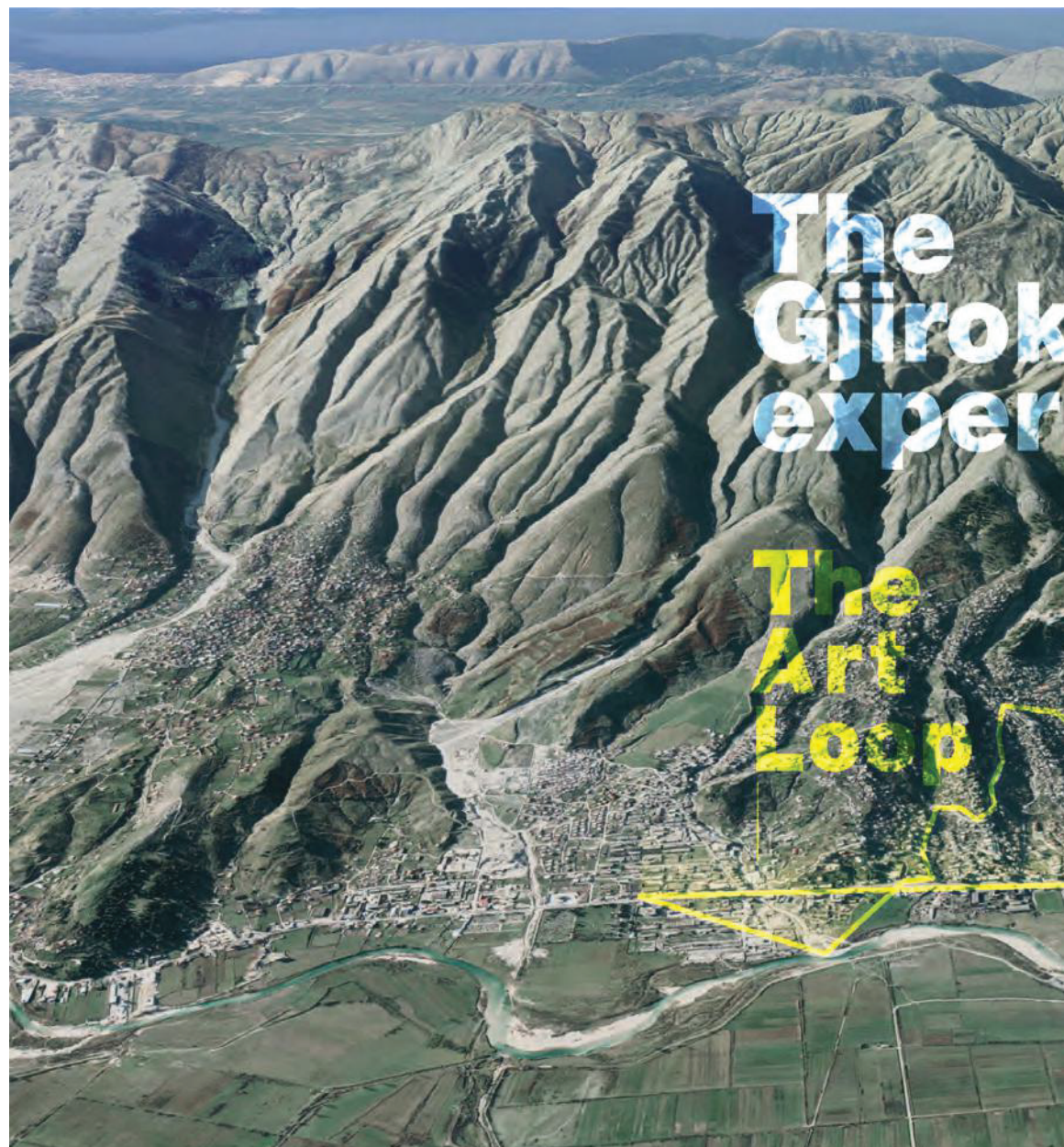


Fig.1 / Gjirokastra_Art Loop. Source / the author

there is also a gradual abandonment of the residential part and consequently also of all those service buildings that serve the community.

The city of Gjirokastra is historically identified as one of the most important cities in southern Albania, founded in the 13th century on the top of a very articulated hill overlooking the valley of the river Drino. The city is distinctly characterised by an urban fabric that comes from the topography of the land on which it lies. This particular formation shapes the road network and morphology of the houses, which are naturally oriented in accordance with the terrain. These aspects, together with the traditional use of stone as a building material, define the most interesting characteristics of the typical residences of this area (Tower-house) (Mileto 2015). Many of these houses are abandoned, some even in a

very advanced state, due to problems that make maintenance activities very complicated. These difficulties are, on the one hand, the result of the current economic situation, and on the other hand, linked to the number of owners for each single building.

The road network is particularly affected by the topography, mainly in the historical centre of the city, creating a network of streets that are often very narrow and unsuitable for vehicular traffic, irregular and steep. The grid that is created between the vehicular and pedestrian traffic is also affected by a further complexity, insofar as it often coincides with dried riverbed created by the outflow of meteoric events. The issue related to the drainage of rainwater has always been present and certainly deserves a more in-depth reflection. In the historic city centre, buildings erected in the early



twentieth century during the Italian occupation of the Albanian territory are inserted in contrast to the old town. These buildings are characterised by the revival of compositional styles and construction methods typical of Italian architecture of the early twentieth century. These buildings were created for the affluent merchant families of the area who made use of Italian designers who were very fashionable at the time. To encourage the race to modernity, service buildings such as hotels, schools and churches were also built. Many of these buildings occupy central positions in the urban fabric, but they are now abandoned, having exhausted their primary function as economic and social conditions changed. Nowadays, organised tourism is concentrated in a few specific spots such as the fortified Citadel, the Bazaar and a few museums, leaving no margin for other activities. These points of interest in the

periods of highest flow concentrate many presences in a small area, giving rise to problems that come about in terms of pedestrian congestion, vehicular traffic and overloading of services that support tourism.

Objectives and Methodology

The proposed strategy aims to identify an intervention strategy that will allow better use and encourage interconnection between different urban areas. It is possible to identify a fairly defined stratigraphy in the evolution of the city. The historical core that grew up near the fortified citadel overlooks a more recent late-twentieth-century expansion that reaches the bottom of the valley close to the primary road network and the river. Here there is also an industrial and commercial centre, now in a state of abandonment. Taking into account the characteristics of each urban area, the proposed strategy aims

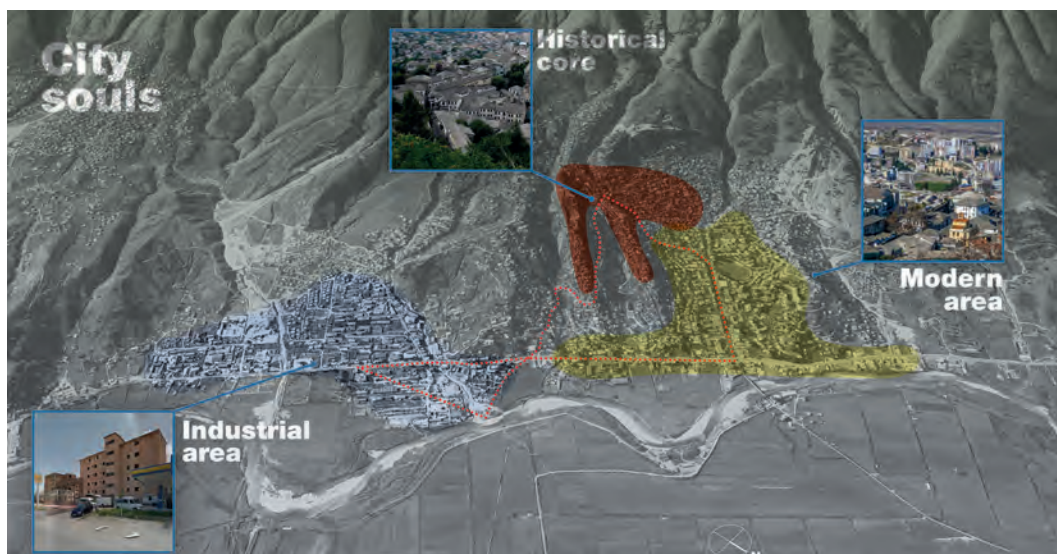


Fig.2 / The three loci or 'souls' of the city, the historic core overlooks the hilltop, while the more modern development area connects it to the main road network. The industrial area by the river witnesses the manufacturing past of the area.
Source / the author.

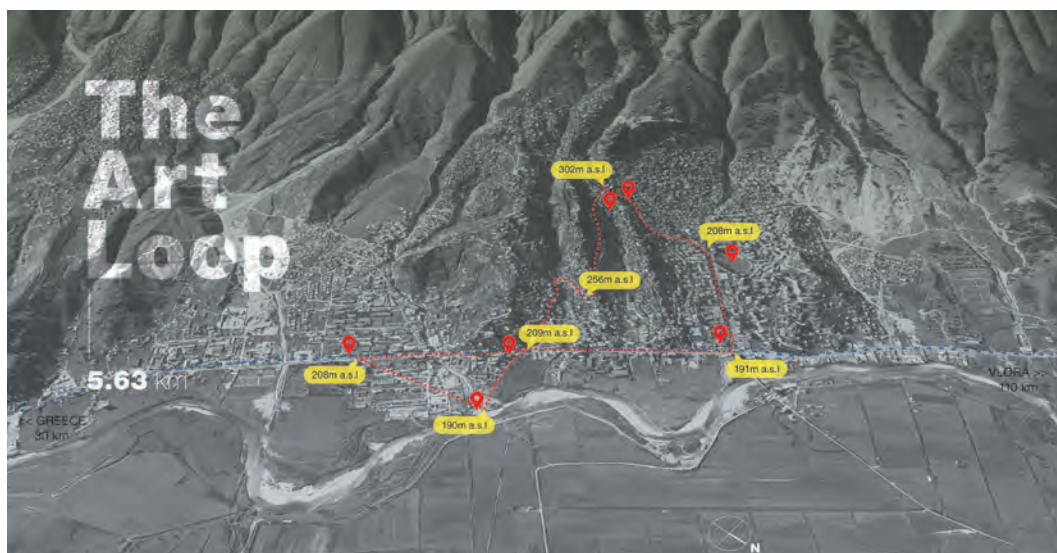


Fig.3 / The Art Loop path. The route of about 5 km intercepts points of interest that belong to the three souls of the city. Source / the author.

to provide feasible and economically sustainable proposals that take into account the current cultural, economic and political situation of the territory in which they will be applied (Faoro 2019). Another objective is to provide useful indications for the implementation of scalable interventions, taking into consideration the possibility of intervening gradually, favouring approaches that are not invasive and reversible on the historical urban fabric. The preservation of the status (Leask 2016) of a UNESCO World Heritage city is a primary objective, an added value to be enhanced, so as not to lose the possibility of focusing also on the percentage of international tourism linked to UNESCO network. It is necessary to operate according to the directives issued by UNESCO, and by other authoritative bodies (Icomos 1999) in the

field of intervention on the historic building (Casanovas 2013), in order to foster interventions that are not compatible with the status of a "World Heritage city".

This strategy proposes to apply a deductive approach to the urban renewal process. It starts by identifying a set of "key criteria" on which to develop a comparative methodology. The identification of comparative criteria allows a deeper understanding of the issues involved, helping to outline structured and sustainable ways of intervention. Through the study of the characteristics of the historical city, the modern city, as well as the industrial city (Douet 2013), we can identify measurable and comparable criteria. These criteria will be organised to allow direct comparison with those of similar case studies, and thus evaluate



Fig.4 / Identification of some possible case studies. XXsec buildings, built in the period of the maximum economic boom of the area. Abandoned historical buildings, collapsed buildings of which only the external walls remain. Going down into the new city one comes across abandoned specialist buildings, unfinished reinforced concrete structures and abandoned factories. Source / the author.



Fig.5 / Rainwater management can be integrated into the re-functionalisation activities of the Art Loop route. A large part of the rainwater flows along the streets of the historic city, flooding the lane. The adoption of a drainage system placed under the road helps to solve this criticality. Source / the author.

their effectiveness and adoption. This can optimise the intervention process, working with methodologies that have already demonstrated their effectiveness. Proposing a strategy based on interlinked interventions allows us to provide a sufficiently comprehensive overview of possible future intervention on a larger scale.

It is, therefore, to be considered as a starting point for a more extensive reflection, foreseeing already in the definition phase of the strategy the possibility to create further interventions of the same type operating on different areas. The proposed methodology also makes use of methodological definitions already adopted by the scientific community in the field of interventions on the existing building of historical and bounded interest.

Strengths and weakness identification
Beginning with an initial analysis of the city, carried out both through inspections and the study of documentation, it is possible to identify some critical aspects on which to focus an intervention strategy (Unesco 2015). Taking into account that the proposed strategy will have to be feasible and economically sustainable, the aim is to put in order the possible proposals favouring those solutions that can provide greater results with less effort in economic and social terms (Genao 2018).
The main strengths of the city are identifiable both in the historical and modern core. The Cultural uniqueness (Unesco) of the historical centre is still intact even if a large part of the buildings is in a state of abandonment. Only a small part is currently used, and this

XXth century building

40°04'29.2"N
20°08'20.3"E

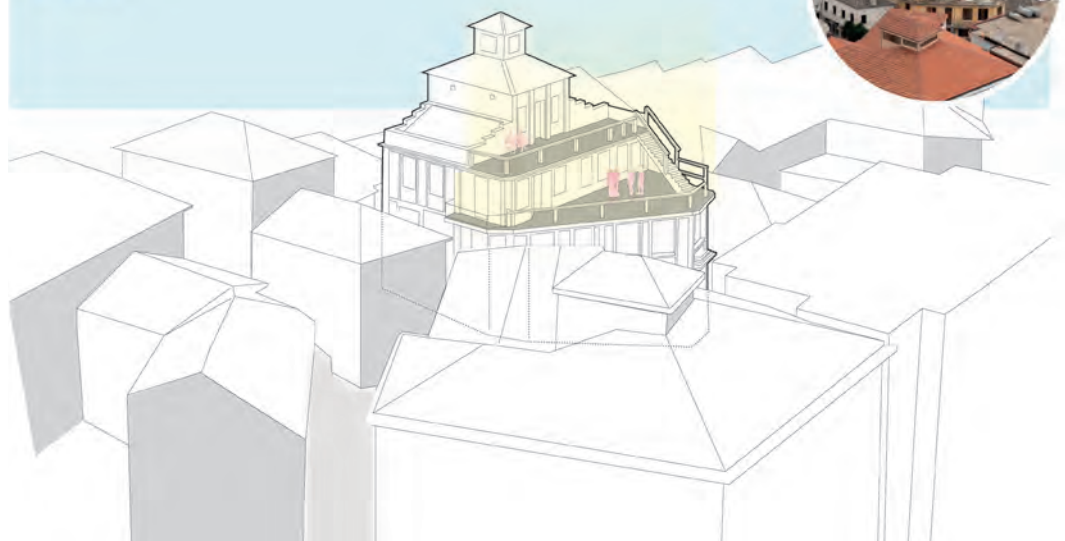


Fig.6 / The city has some buildings that belong to the early 20th century, a period when the wealthy merchant families of Gjirokastra commissioned important Italian-style buildings to influential Albanian and foreign architects. These buildings, duly refurbished, can host tourism service and accommodation functions. Source / the author.

Abandoned facility

40°04'19.4"N
20°09'23.6"E



Fig.7 / In the area close to the river we can find signs of the city's manufacturing past. From that period there remain a good number of buildings that can be considered industrial archaeology. Large covered spaces that have been functionalized can host activities that require large open-space. Source / the author.

guarantees a fair amount of buildings on which to intervene. Moreover, the area is historically characterised by a long-standing tradition of stone working, a peculiar and predominant element in the area. Furthermore, the historical-naturalistic aspect is not of secondary importance, as the town is located in a valley full of possibilities for activities linked to historical-cultural excursions. The new core, on the other hand, can

provide modern infrastructures and support services, providing receptive spaces in line with modern standards, and a modern road system designed for vehicular traffic.

Finally, the relationship with the river can be a further strong point. There are many weak points in the historic centre. Tourism is seasonal and is concentrated in some areas of significant interest, creating phenomena of congestion and



Fig.8 / In the historical part of the city, there are collapsed buildings. These buildings are fascinating and testify to the settlement's volumetry. These buildings, of which it would not be convenient to proceed with reconstruction, are consolidated and managed as testimonies. Inside them, they can host open-air installations. Source / the author. 385

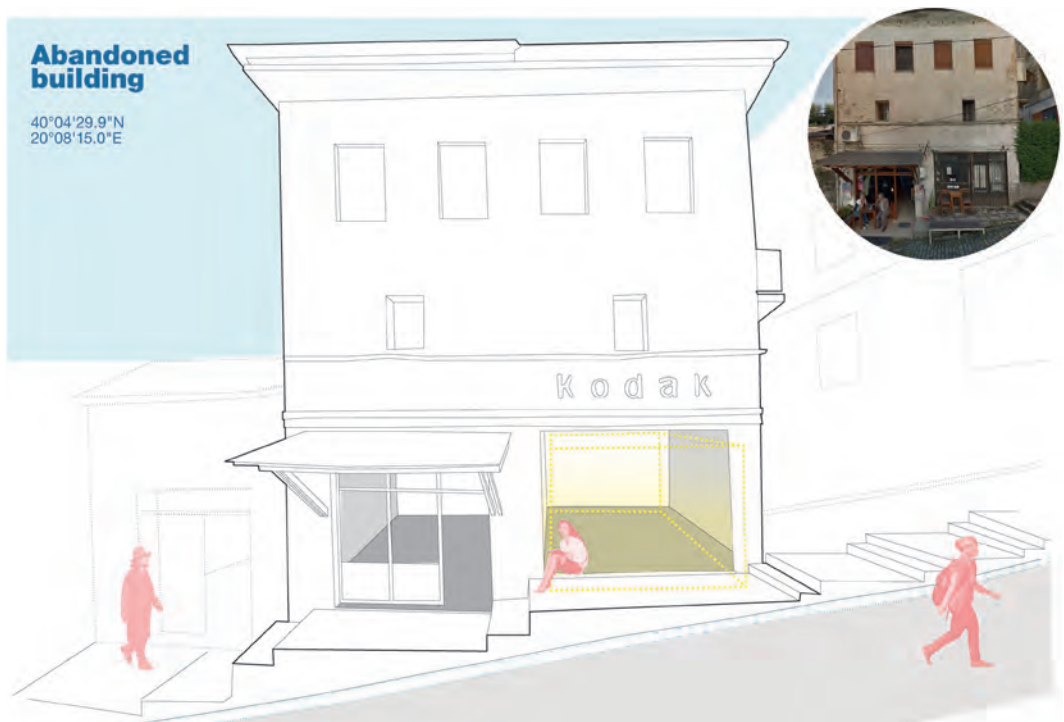


Fig.9 / Many buildings are partially abandoned. These buildings can host local handicraft activities or small artistic installations with commercial spin-offs. Source / the author.

inefficiency. Other issues are linked to the causes that contribute to the depopulation of the historical centre. Historical buildings require considerable investments to be adapted to the needs of modern life (functional abandonment), making this practice unattractive. Furthermore, problems are arising from the terrain's topography, and consequently from the configuration of the road network. The road system that has developed over the

centuries, flowing between buildings and the hillside, is not ideal for today's vehicular traffic. The topography of the terrain also influences the management of meteoric water, which was historically managed using roads as drainage. Climate change and the consequent changes in weather perturbations means that this system no longer works, making it necessary to take action to mitigate the erosion of the land. In the modern city, the economic

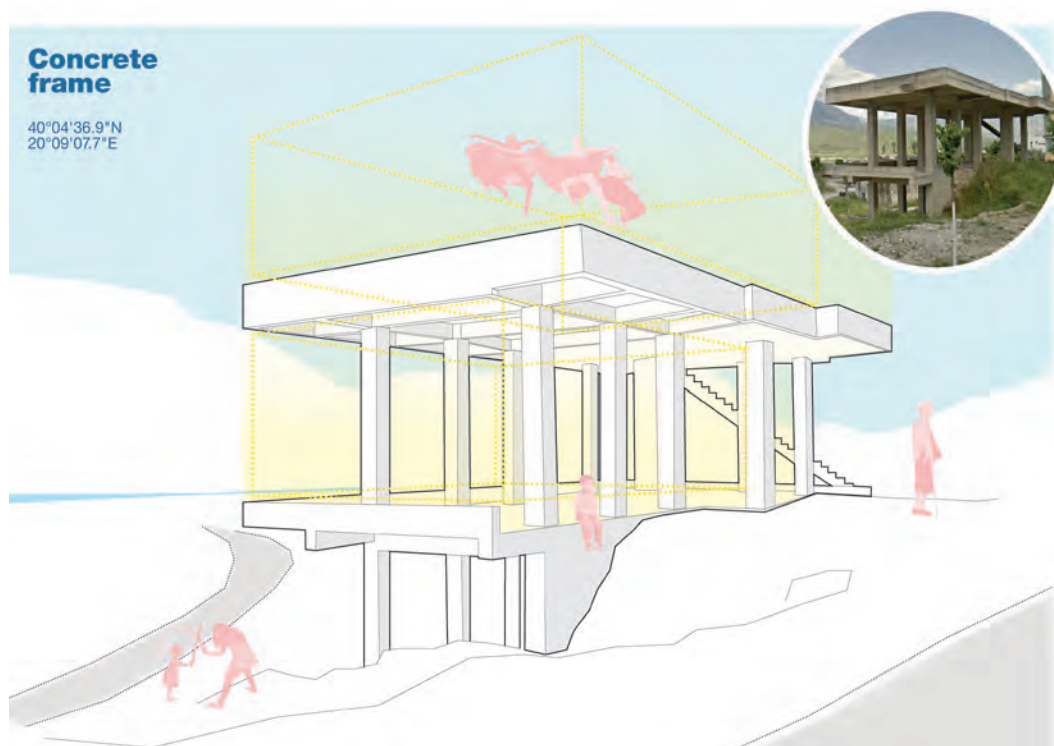


Fig.10 / Many unfinished reinforced concrete structures are also located along the main roadway. These frames can be used for artistic installations that require large spaces and can be displayed outdoors. Source / the author.

crisis in the manufacturing sector has led to the abandonment of productive areas, consequently triggering the phenomenon of depopulation that has also affected the residential sectors and services. Starting from what has been identified as weak points, we can identify critical factors and systemize them as key criteria useful to identify the most appropriate strategy and planning interventions that counteract them by exploiting the "strengths".

Comparative case studies

In order to define the intervention strategy that should be adopted, it has been decided to analyse similar case-studies, concerning urban agglomerations with historical centres affected by similar problems. These case-studies were analysed in order to identify which initiatives were taken as actions to counteract them, and which were effective. The realities examined are: Bussana (Giuffrè 2005) Liguria - now a location for artists, Favara Sicily, Farm cultural park, Gibellina (Camarrone 2010) Sicily, Trapani. Open-air museum, Grottaglie Puglia, Taranto. The ceramics district, Pennabilli Emilia-Romagna, Rimini. The poet Tonino Guerra and his Artists in the square.

- Bussana Vecchia and the artists' community (San Remo, Italy). The city destroyed at the end of the 19th century by an earthquake was abandoned for decades until it was colonised by a community of Italian and international

artists in the 1950s. The houses restored by the artists gave life to an active and internationally recognised community that manages to live on art, attracting even today artists and visitors from all over the world.

- Favara, the cultural park (Agrigento, Italy). In seven years, the Sicilian city, in the province of Agrigento, has gone from "the city of illegal buildings" to the "Farm cultural park" with 120,000 visitors a year, attracting public and private investment for urban redevelopment works, art installations and culture. The activities that are planned cover the whole year and make it possible to maintain a stable flow of visitors by directly employing 150 people.

- Gibellina and contemporary art. (Trapani, Italy). The city destroyed by an earthquake in 1968 was rebuilt a few kilometres away. On the ruins of the old town was built a majestic work of Land Art (Grande cretto, 1970) while the new town was transformed into the largest open-air museum of contemporary art in Italy.

- Grottaglie (Taranto, Italy). The city, having suffered a severe employment crisis at the end of the 20th century, decided to relaunch its economy by investing in the ceramic handicraft sector. In a few years investing in high-quality handicraft products, they have managed to set up their market, by creating a brand that

identifies and protects locally handcrafted products.

- Pennabilli (Rimini, Italy). For over forty years the small village of Pennabilli has become an attractive pole that appeals to visitors on a national and international level, taking advantage of its proximity to the Rimini Riviera. The village has been able to reinvent itself as a location for the international festival of street artists, staging theatre, music and circus performances in its streets. During the year, numerous artistic and cultural events are organised.

These all share a "soft" approach that does not aim at modernising and updating the historical fabric, but tries instead to adapt new needs to the existing fabric. The risk of the reconstruction of urban gaps from scratch is that of incurring the "Disneyland effect". This effect irreversibly removes the "patina of time" that distinguishes them (The refurbishment of the German Quarter of Tblisi, Georgia).

Art Loop: Identifying the strategy

The proposed strategy aims to create a path that reconnects the old part of the city with the new one, creating opportunities for economic development for the city. The Art route allows those who use it to visit the whole city and not only the most famous locations. The strategy also aims to bridge the historical and cultural fabric by connecting key buildings (Historic landmark) that need to be consolidated and re-functionalised. These buildings thus become functional nodes that host the accommodation activities or exhibition spaces that shape the route of the Art loop. The re-functionalisation of the route is also intended to be the starting point for a wider infrastructure that hosts the works needed to manage part of the rainwater under the roadway. The strategy is based on the identification of an urban path that runs in a loop (Möbius strip). This path connects nodal points defined by 20th-century buildings that will host specialized and service functions. The path crosses the city from the highest and oldest part of the city through the late-twentieth-century development to the riverside characterized by the former industrial area. From here the route goes up to the old part allowing the visitor to observe the majesty of the fortified citadel. The visitors will find a route about 5 km long (WHO 2016), through which they can compose a visit that allows the enjoyment of the whole city and which is not limited to the usual landmarks. The strategy takes into account the realization of the path as the possibility to operate

interventions that are useful for the mitigation of hydrogeological problems. The proposed strategy for the city of Gjirokastra is divided into three parts: the first part identifies buildings with specific characteristics that can be functionalised and host service activities, the second part identifies collapsed or abandoned buildings that are consolidated and conserved in their state, and finally, the route layout is designed to identify stormwater runoff paths, while the substructures that allow their management and disposal are integrated into the roadway.

A Building defined path – KNOTS

In the urban fabric of Gjirokastra there is no shortage of buildings in a state of neglect, both historical and recent. The strategy is to propose the re-functionalisation of some of these, called "Knots", which will serve as pivotal points for the path playing a specialised role. These buildings will be redeveloped to meet modern standards. Considering the historical and cultural importance of some of them, it is suggested to adapt digital survey and diagnostic tools, combined with a data management system using BIM software, which will allow recording the original composition of the buildings and the following interventions (Garagnani 2011). (APR survey, Laser scanner, Monitoring). This approach allows to collect data which are useful for the management of the created path, and strategic in order to plan maintenance and for future implementations.

Memories of the historical fabric – SPRAWL

The collapsed, abandoned or unfinished buildings are reused as containers for artistic performances. These buildings are scattered throughout the urban core and can be adapted to their new function with a small investment. In the collapsed types, which can be found mainly in the historical area of the city, some installations do not require the presence of the public inside them. Being able to use them mainly from the outside means that structural consolidation and modest finishing works are necessary for their adaptation.

In contrast, for the more modern types characterised by a reinforced concrete frame structure, mainly present in the area near the river, it will be necessary to intervene on the accessibility of the interiors and on the safety of the raised floors to make possible the presence of the public inside the spaces. These interventions can be easily managed

through the use of digital survey technologies and parametric modelling in order to standardise the interventions and the fitting out procedures where possible.

The "Waterways"

In the city of Gjirokastra the problem of water management is an old and unsolved problem. Not being able to operate radically on the urban fabric, the strategy suggests continuing to use the roads to convey the rainfall for short sections. This use of the road as drainage can be done implementing expedients in the stone paving design that will slow down the flow and drive water to collection and management system using special paths. This method of water management breaks the impetuosity of the flow and rules the flow direction. This intervention helps to counteract the phenomena of erosion and collapses that are currently occurring, with a significant impact on the budget for maintenance. Operating in this way, the surplus water is quickly drained and directed to the riverbed downstream.

Conclusion and discussion

The proposed strategy aims to provide to the artistic path its own identity, a sort of "Wayfinding" (De Paoli 2015) that allows immediate identification of the same within the urban fabric, promoting its use. The proposed solutions require a political, economic and social effort, especially at a local level, in order to ensure that the necessary investments will be limited and guarantee direct repercussions in terms of supply chain. The case studies examined here also present implementation criticalities, but these can be exploited in advance by avoiding repeating the same mistakes. The artistic path thus developed becomes the cultural link that connects the historical and cultural soul of the city with its modern one. The artisanal heritage becomes an artistical driver and shows itself to domestic and international visitors. The proposed strategy does not aim to reverse the process of abandonment of the city or to provide solutions that restore the interest of the manufacturing industry in this area. The dynamics that drive these processes are too wide and difficult to predict. Such an articulated strategy takes into account the expected benefits in terms of linked activities for locals, tourists and investment companies:

- Activities for the design of the interventions, their implementation, management and maintenance.
- Activities related to the tourist flow, such as reception (from the hotel to the

B&B), Restaurants, travel, trade, logistics, etc..

- Service activities for the resident artistic community.

Cultural identity, conservative approach and local involvement are the most appropriate keys to intervene in such an articulated area. The involvement of the community and the economic spin-offs linked to the cultural aspects that have made Gjirokastra a "Unesco Heritage city" can be the key to the development of a virtuous strategy. If the Art loop works in an effective and structured way, guaranteeing to the guest an authentic and satisfying experience, it will be the driving force behind an economy based on the attractiveness that only a millenary culture can trigger.

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