

The Time Agent

A hypothesis of a possible development of the city of Gjirokastra through a vital connection between buildings, public space and works of art.

Keywords / Art in public space; architecture; interaction; water; performance; empty-space; time

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Abstract

In this paper, we would try to investigate how art can act as a temporal agent and as a turning point to reflect on the past, present and future of cities. The city of Gjirokastra in Albania has been explored as case study, during a one-week workshop in December 2019.

Time might seem a simple concept, to a superficial reflection, perhaps because we all experience it in our life, considering that we develop our very existence within it, over time. The timeline that inexorably seems to flow in only one direction (from the beginning towards the end, from the present that becomes past, towards the future), is however the result of a superficial response to that complex structure which we call, for convenience, with a single name: Time.

Time is a complex structure, first because it is not unique. Einstein understood it and developed this concept in his Theory of Relativity. The theory evolves from the measurement of different Times in different spaces and the influence that these proper times have in relationship with things. Secondly, because there is still no law in physics that demonstrates a difference in structure between past, present and future, that is, no law can possibly prevent time from being cyclic rather than linear.

For example, if we try to imagine a cyclical Time, we can link it to the idea not only of the seasons on our planet in its movement around the Sun, but also to the idea of life and death of living beings and why not, of cities in their physical structure. Analyzing the temporal cycle of architecture and public spaces.

The fact that cities live by cycles is not a new thing, several authors in different fields have dealt with it, analyzing the intrinsic causes of the birth, life and death of some of them. In this case, in the case of Gjirokastra, we will analyze how in the old city, which is currently experiencing a phase of depopulation, art outside institutional spaces can become a temporal agent of analysis of the past, reflection on the present and lure for the future. Not simply as a tourist attraction, on the contrary as a subject capable of revealing a mechanism, located in the depths of a temporal, social and economic cycle.

Art outside institutional spaces, that is, located in the urban spaces of the city is an extraneous element that act as a vector in the context, to convey reflections, emotions, physical and social changes. The old town of Gjirokastra has in its urban fabric many abandoned or decaying buildings. These buildings can become integral parts of the structures of as many works of art that use architecture and nature. In this case, art becomes narration over time, through site-specific installation of artworks that can affect reality through reflection and interaction with people and spaces.

Introduction

This paper will investigate how art can act as a temporal agent and as a turning point around which to reflect on the past, present and future of cities. The city of Gjirokastra in Albania has been explored as a study case, during a one-week workshop in December 2019.

Time might seem like a simple concept, perhaps because we all experience it in our life. The timeline that inexorably seems to flow in only one direction (from the beginning towards the end, from the present that becomes the past, towards the future), is however "the result of a superficial response to that complex collection of structures" (Rovelli, 2017: 15) which we call, for convenience, with a single name: Time. Time has a complex structure, because first of all, it is not unique. Einstein understood this and developed this concept in his Theory of Relativity. The theory evolved from the measurement of different times in different spaces, and the influence that these times have in relationship with things. Second, the complexity of the temporal structure results from the fact that there is still no law in physics that demonstrates a difference in structure between the past, present and future, that is, no law can possibly prevent time from being cyclic rather than linear. For example, if we try to imagine a cyclical Time, we immediately visualize the cyclical rhythm of seasons, or the revolution of our planet around the Sun. But we can also relate this idea to a cyclical time of life and death of living beings and why not, other organism-like formations like cities. Analyzing the

temporal cycle of architecture and public spaces of the cities.

Problems

The fact that cities 'live' by cycles is not new. Several authors in different fields have dealt with it, analyzing the intrinsic causes of the birth, life and death of some of them. In the case of Gjirokastra, the paper analyzes how in the old city, which is currently experiencing a phase of depopulation, art outside institutional spaces can become a temporal agent of analysis of the past, a reflection on the present and a lure for the future. Here art is not seen as a tourist attraction, but as a mechanism located in the depths of a temporal, social and economic cycle.

Gjirokastra is one of the most ancient and beautiful cities of Albania. Its historical center is protected by UNESCO. After WWII, the city started to develop at the bottom of the hill where the old town is located. This provoked a movement of people from the old to the new city, because of all the facilities available in the new town, not to mention the possibility to intervene in the building without all the limitations imposed by UNESCO on the old city. Such conditions triggered a slow depopulation of the old city, which today looks like a beautiful place without any life inside it.

The Municipality of Gjirokastra has tried different strategies of repopulating the old city without achieving a real success. The municipality has organized Folk Festivals, Theatre Festivals, Painting Exhibitions

(mostly of local painters). The problem with these kind of activities is that they are not connected to a unique vision of the city, and they do not instill the identity or the uniqueness of such a peculiar city as Gjirokastra. How, then, can we transform an open - air museum into a real city, by bringing back people there?

In the historical center of Gjirokastra, there is the ethnographic Museum and the National Museum of Armaments. These spaces are mostly for tourists who have already decided to visit them as part of the cultural heritage of the city, yet such spaces do not directly contribute to a unified vision of the city. Because of its peculiar characteristics of a city-museum, Gjirokastra could use art and culture as pivotal elements to transform itself. The form of the city, that of the old buildings and the castle – forms a morphological network that can engage with the new city and its different identities. Gjirokastra has also iconic structures that can be re-thought as landmarks of a new contemporary, art-oriented identity. The old and mostly abandoned factories from the Communist time are of another time, yet they can be reactivated and re-engaged with the new potential developments and transformations of the city.

The art outside institutional spaces, that is, the one located in the urban spaces of the city is an extraneous element which is situated in the context as a vector to convey reflections, emotions, physical and social changes. The evolution of what constitutes a work of art, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, has witnessed a widening of the methodological spectrum of expression and media used by the artists. "Artists went out in the streets, outside the museum and the galleries, to confront with the real world and to involve a broader audience" (Bignami, Pioselli, 2011: 5). Descending from the idea of sculpture in the urban context, art in public space is a broader category, which fits into the contemporary discourse on the complexity of the very idea of a city. Artists nowadays use sculpture, installations, performances, but also video screenings and photography as interventions into the public spaces by always questioning the complexity of the city as an organism.

Objectives and strategies

The hypothesis of this research is that Gjirokastra can host permanent and temporary artworks that will transform

the city physically and will also change the perception of Gjirokastra to a broader audience. This idea stresses complexity as a generator of the new identity of the city, through the connection and interaction between the architectonic structures and artworks that must physically intersect buildings, spaces and other elements of Gjirokastra.

For just as the rain and the snow pour down from heaven And do not return there until they saturate the earth, making it produce and sprout, Giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, So my word that goes out of my mouth will be. It will not return to me without results, But it will certainly accomplish whatever is my delight, And it will have sure success in what I send it to do¹.

Rain was the main inspiration and starting point. The idea emerged by chance, during the workshop; it was an epiphany about the possibility of using the flux of water as an interstitial agent, capable of carving the architectonic structures, and at the same time being vital for the germination of life. The flux of water comes down from the sky and from the hill descends down to the new city, crossing it like veins in a human body. Rain works as a kind of Big Bang for the project, a performance that could function as a symbolic event of purification, a sort of final exodus from the old town toward a new Gjirokastra, now ready to face contemporary complexity. (Pict. #1) In this performance people take with them their most important stuff and leave the city exactly as a procession, in a row, following the flux of water from the hill to the new town. Now Gjirokastra, the old city of Gjirokastra, reaches a ground-zero level, a new starting point for its self-analysis.

Following the flux of the water of the city, some spots were identified as pilot elements of the new cultural identity and were analyzed as typologies of interaction and intervention on the city, through art. In this case, art becomes narration over time, through site specific installations of artworks that can impact reality, and through reflection and interaction with people and spaces. The role of the artist turns out to be different: "the artist is not so much a leader or educator as a conduit for collective hopes and desires" (Bishop, 2012: 97).

The first typology of buildings is that of those whose roof has collapsed. (Pict. #2)

¹ / Isaiah 55:10-11

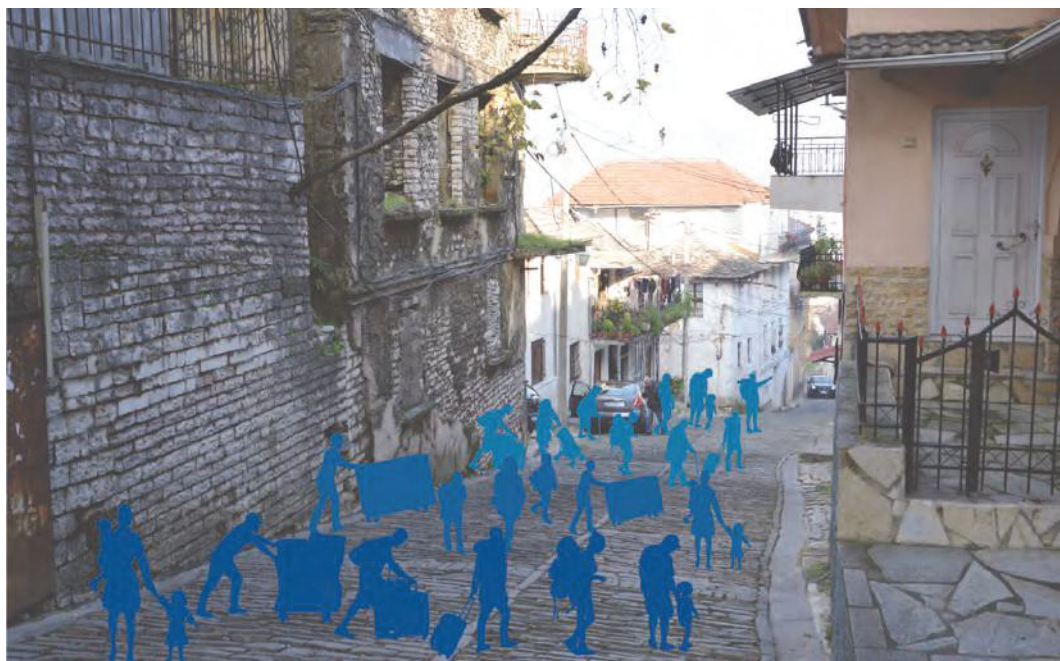


Fig. 1 / Illustration for the performance: Il grado zero Concept of the performance. Source / the author



Fig. 2 / Abandoned house in Gjirokastra city. Source / the author



Fig. 3 / Abandoned Shop in Gjirokastra city. Source / the author

This typology was titled 'the sky house'. This typology of buildings is very iconic because it reminds one about the common dream of breaking the borders of the place we live in. While the audience inside the perimeter of the house can see only the sky, it experiences a vertical movement of the body through the direction of the gaze that rotates from the horizon 90 degree up to the sky.

The second category of buildings are the abandoned shops. (Pict. #3) This typology was titled 'the horizon house'. This typology refers directly to the socio - economic situation of the city. It is strictly connected to its shrinking and the difficulties of people to work in the old town and keep it alive. In this typology the gaze is parallel to the ground, perfectly horizontal.

Descending downhill from the old town by following the flux of water, one arrives where the factories from Communist time stand (Pict. #4). One of these former factories was chosen as another typology of the new cultural identity of Gjirokastra. This typology was titled 'the astounding house'. Empty cathedrals of social utopia, mostly abandoned nowadays, they are bigger than the previous two typologies. Inside them the audience experiences a different feeling, one of being little in comparison with the architecture. One feels like a child inside an unexpectedly big space. The gaze goes around and around, moving horizontally and vertically, trying to capture the totality of the space.

The journey continues along the highway, toward the city center, in order to identify another building typology, that of unfinished houses. (Pict. #5) This typology was titled: the level house. This typology also relates to the social and economic aspects of society. These buildings have remained unfinished for different reasons; for example, their owners live and work outside Albania, and only when their economic situation allows them to allocate some money to the house, they continue to build. The other reason is that the construction companies that have built them may have gone bankrupt. In these buildings, one experiences a totally open situation where the gaze moves horizontally and the body vertically, in order to access all the floors of the structure.

In addition to these typologies, two other edifices that relate to the framework of this analysis are identified. One of them is an abandoned office building located at

the beginning of the boulevard. The other one is the stadium. As previously noted, the main proposal of this paper is one that makes Gjirokastra a hub for permanent and temporary artworks that transform the city physically and perceptually, through the typologies identified above.

The sky house (Pict. #6a)

Inside this house you can really feel the power of nature and how it immediately assimilates what remains unused by humans. The inspiration came from different artists, such as James Turrell, who cuts the ceiling of Museums and galleries to allow the audience to experience the sky as a work of art, or Giuseppe Penone, who transforms trees them into natural sculptures. For this typology, it is proposed to place big tree at the center of the empty space of the house as a permanent installation. The tree symbolizes the strength of the nature and its close relation with the abandoned buildings. As the level zero is reached through a procession of people leaving the old town, that's exactly the moment when nature reaches its maximum power and starts a silently and constant dialogue with the architecture of Gjirokastra.

The horizon house (Pict. #6b)

This typology of buildings provides the audience with a completely different feeling. These buildings were shops before being abandoned, and they are smaller than the sky houses. The main characteristics of this typology is the horizontal gaze and the interaction between people inside it; this interaction will continue to be crucial also after the artistic intervention we thought for it. The inspiration for this typology came from all the artistic practices under the category of relational art and/or interactive art, as, for instance, in the artistic practice of Rirkrit Tiravanija. Thus, in the sky house one sees the crown of a big tree, in the horizon house one sees the roots of, what you can imagine being the same tree, coming out from the facade of the shop. This could be read as the proliferation of nature, but also as a space-time continuity of the natural element in the life of Gjirokastra. The other characteristic - that of the interaction between people inside the building - will be experienced through an open laboratory for the audience inside the shop, where the audience can learn carving techniques, and where anyone can make art, which remains exhibited into the horizontal house.

The astounding house (Pict. #7a)

In this building one faces a change of



Fig. 4 / Abandoned factory in Gjirokastra city. Source / the author



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Fig. 5 / Print Screen from Google Street View's map of Gjirokastra. Source / the author

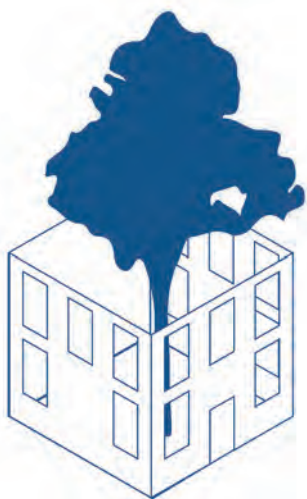


Fig. 6a / Illustration for the installation: Il cielo in una stanza Concept of the installation, Stefano Romano, Nicola Tasselli, Eleonora Baccega. Implementation of the idea: Stefano Romano, drawing by Stefano Romano



Fig. 6b / Illustration for the installation: A piedi nudi Concept of the installation, Stefano Romano, Nicola Tasselli, Eleonora Baccega. Implementation of the idea: Stefano Romano, drawing by Stefano Romano

scale; the dimensions are completely different from the previous typologies, and consequently one's relation to the space is also changed. Factories are places of wonder, where things come to life and become objects of your life. They are somehow magical; the gaze cannot really find a place where to stop but goes around and around trying to read all of space. But is it really possible to capture the totality of the complexity of our contemporaneity? The common element of nature is, again, the main protagonist of the installation into this typology. The space is imagined as a forest, an enchanted forest where magical things can happen, like when a fairy tale narrator narrates texts written by writers, artists, and different professionals. Site specific performances address the relation between nature and human constructions. The inspiration for this installation came from different artists like Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Furthermore, keeping its identity of being a place where objects are born, the astounding house will host a laboratory of arts and crafts where young students, artists, and professionals can experience different techniques and practices, in close collaboration with national and international companies.

The level house (Pict. #7b)

In this typology one finds again the relationship with the dimensions of a house, like those in the old town. Staying inside this building feels completely different because there are no walls, just floors and ceilings. One looks around horizontally, but to experience everything, one has to move vertically through all the floors. The inspiration for the permanent installation in this typology came from Gordon Matta Clark and his interventions in the structure of buildings which were transformed into giant sculptures. All the floors/ceilings of the edifice will be cut creating a series of holes in the middle to house a big tree, to reiterate the relation nature/human construction, but also to symbolize the idea of the fireplace. Around the tree there will be chairs arranged in concentric circles like waves that propagate in the water. This typology is situated along the Drino River in order to stress again the physical and visual relation with the flux of water coming down from the hill and reaching the river.

All typologies were titled 'house,' in order to create a unique code in people imagination, a code that reminds one of something familiar and known, a place that is a shelter and also a place to receive

friends and hosts. At the same time, we can consider them Heterotopies because "the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 2006: 6)

Approaching the new town center, just on the side the main boulevard, there is the stadium. Sports facilities are peculiar constructions, and in the case of Gjirokastra, the Municipality wants to change the function of that structure and build a new stadium in another area of the city. The decision of the Municipality was fundamental in defining the new function of the stadium. The inspiration came from an artwork by Alberto Burri titled Teatro Continuo in Milan (Italy). The artist created an open air stage where professionals and normal people have the possibility to perform their ideas. The idea is to create a similar structure inside the Gjirokastra stadium by keeping the stands in order to give people the possibility to seat along the pitch, and by opening the structure below the stands in order to transform the stadium into an open park. The field will maintain the game lines, like a memory of its past and will host a concrete stage on it in order to give professionals and people the possibility to perform 24hrs a day. (Pict. #8)

As noted earlier, along the main boulevard, besides the stadium, there's another building identified during the day of the workshop in Gjirokastra. This other edifice is an abandoned office building located at the beginning of the boulevard. In the framework of furnishing the city with a new identity, This structure will be transformed into a place where artists, architects, curators and other professionals can stay during periods of study and activities in Gjirokastra.

Results

The project can generate a different city where people can engage culturally with a different reality, but also a city with a new economy as a result of a path. "The term «path» indicates at the same time the act of crossing (the path as the action of walking), the line that cross the space (the path as an architectural object) and the narrative of the crossed space (the path as narrative structure)" (Careri, 2006: 7/8). The economic aspect will develop as a consequence of the new identity of the area where pilot typologies of buildings are located and engaged through artistic activities. In the future, other edifices can be identified according to the previous



Fig. 7a / Illustration for the installation: La foresta Concept of the installation, Stefano Romano, Nicola Tasselli, Eleonora Baccega. Implementation of the idea: Stefano Romano, drawing by Stefano Romano

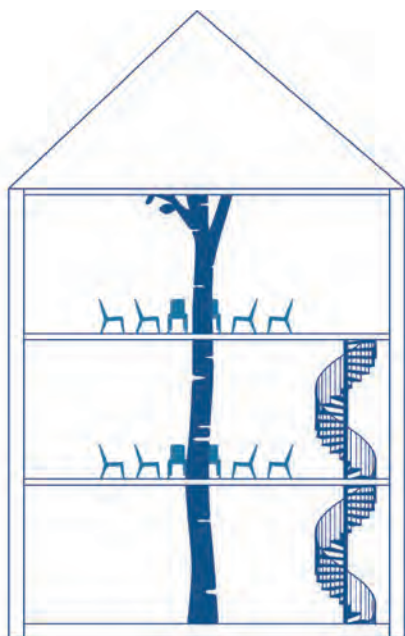


Fig. 7b / Illustration for the installation: Come il fuoco, come il mare Concept of the installation, Stefano Romano, Nicola Tasselli, Eleonora Baccega. Implementation of the idea: Stefano Romano, drawing by Stefano Romano

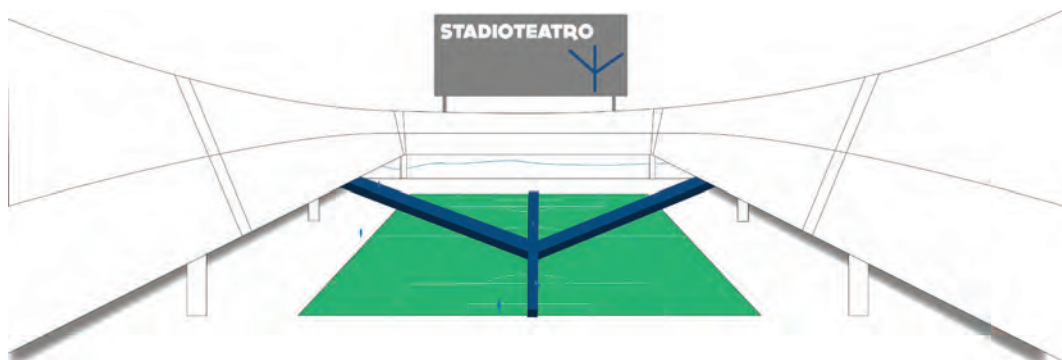


Fig. 8 / Illustration for the installation: StadioTeatro Concept of the installation, Stefano Romano, Nicola Tasselli, Eleonora Baccega. Implementation of the idea: Stefano Romano and Nicola Tasselli

or new typologies and will be used for artistic interventions, inviting other artists to contribute to the realization of the utopia of a museum city. Here, the word 'museum' is not used simply as a place where to display and preserve artworks, but in a more expanded sense, that of a place that becomes a space where the meaning and identity of the city itself and all those engaged in this process, can be built. Another important aspect from an economical point of view is the laboratory where artists experiment with different materials furnished by different companies.

Conclusions

This project changes the landscape of the city through five pilot typologies of buildings and transformations. This project will impact other constructions in Gjirokastra from a functional and aesthetic point of view, thus changing the city slowly yet constantly from a museum city to an experimental cultural city. In this case, art is a temporal agent, because through art, it is possible to reach the zero level of the city and clearly visualize the flux of nature that moves behind the surface of Gjirokastra. This flux becomes visible through time and change the shape of the city through an economy that transforms buildings into interactive sculptures and participative spaces.

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