



## Improving health and well-being in the cities

Keywords / Health, Wellbeing, constellation, community hub, visual communication

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### Abstract

In 1990 after the reinstatement of democracy in Albania, urban development was rapid and uncontrolled. The effects of informal housing and the lack of planned transportation altered the character of the territory fragmenting the landscape. There was an evident lack of accessibility of public space, as social interaction between the city and its citizens had drastically faded. Apart from the abandonment of the old traditional houses and the historic city center the same phenomenon had also affected factories and former industrial areas in the periphery of the city.

This paper aims to define how Gjirokastra can connect its intermediate spaces and can nurture the character of its community whereby aspirations, wellbeing and interaction can be improved. The paper investigates possible scenarios on how to stimulate social interaction as a dynamic and changing sequence of social actions between individuals or groups. In addition, well-being should be also improved through design for locals and visitors, unifying the image of traditional cities and as a result requalifying public space. 'Intermediate spaces' are leftover public, semi-public and semi-private or private areas between or among the adjacent existing buildings, which may be abandoned or not. This paper investigates the morphological relationship between such spaces and buildings. Further analysis demonstrates that there is a link between such relationship and the betterment of social interaction, which stimulates economic growth. To this end, actions must be taken for the restoration and protection of architectural landscape and social interaction values, enabling Gjirokastras' social energy, health and well-being. This research will rely on literature review and case study models on the requalification of public spaces, abandoned areas and terrain surveys, and analyses of the neighborhoods of Gjirokastra as potential areas investigating design proposals to enhance its identity and future development.

"Healthy cities breed healthy people." (Fernandes, 2018) Rethinking Gjirokastra as a model city of health and well-being in Albania in terms of the shrinking urban processes will help improve the socio-economic development level while evoking its traditions.

### Gjirokastra's Glorification

Gjirokastra, as a place rich with culture, guarantees a peaceful and healthy lifestyle in its hilly terrain. The medieval castle and the old bazar with its shops and Ottoman settlements are invested in a long life of tradition and culture. As the birthplace of the communist dictator, it was living

in a time of glory during his dictatorship. Industries, factories, agriculture, craftsmanship, traditions and customs were the engine of economic and social development. Gjirokastra used to "bear outstanding testimony to the diversity of urban societies in the Balkans, and to longstanding ways of life which have today almost vanished." (Centre, 2020)

### Abandoned Economic Resources

After the 90-s, Albania faced many difficulties in all levels of public administration. The 'Great Depression' started in 1990 with the fall of the communist party, which had ruled for

45 years. "Gjirokastra's economy was already declining rapidly. To achieve full employment, the communists assigned far more people to work in the already outdated and inefficient industrial complexes than were actually needed. The collapse of the communist system resulted in the catastrophic loss of thousands of jobs in Gjirokastra" (Foundation, 2020). Industries, factories and agriculture stopped production and cultivation, and public properties were mostly privatized (Fig.1). Public investments were abandoned with no hope for the future. The former industrial area is characterized by a large number of abandoned buildings. With the desire for a better future, thousands of unemployed people either migrate to the capital of Albania, or emigrate abroad, such as in the neighboring Greece, for work (Foundation, 2020). 'The last of Mohicans' were senior citizens of Gjirokastra as they lived with the void of space in time.

#### Lost Heritage

Albania went from extreme totalitarian control to absolute freedom. Unstable government resulted in lack of territorial management and mass migration. Statistical data from the Ministry of Urban Development in 2014 show that over 400.000 informal buildings (Fig.2) at a national scale were built, thus creating a challenging and complicating system for the national economy and social development. (Aliaj, Rossi and Porfido, 2018:174)

Traditional houses were abandoned by the original owners. This resulted in the long-

term problem of the loss and unprotected of cultural heritage (Fig.3). Additionally, while the government's priority was focused on public security and economy rather than in urban development, the national or local level investment in housing remained out of focus. The effects of informal housing and the lack of planned transportation altered the character of the territory by fragmenting the landscape. The transformation of landscape and configuration of the natural habitats started in this period (Aliaj, Rossi and Porfido, 2018:174).

#### Lack of Accessibility

There is an evident lack of accessibility and public spaces, as social interaction between and within the old city and new city of Gjirokastra has drastically faded. Apart from the abandoned factories and former industrial areas in the periphery of the city the same phenomenon has also affected neighborhoods of the old city with its Bazaar. (Fig.4) Such situation is compounded even more by the existing terrain configuration due to the hilly topography, characteristic of Gjirokastra. (Fig.5) Lack of infrastructure has generated problems in the public transportation system, slowed down the exchange of goods, and disconnected the two cities with its surrounding neighborhoods, thus resulting economic underdevelopment (Fig.7a,7b,7c).

#### Tourism Improvement Districts

In the framework of the "National Tourism Strategy for Albania 2014-2020" (Ministry of Urban Development and Tourism, 2020)

the Albanian-American Development Foundation, created an Entrepreneurship Program which enlisted Gjirokastra among other Albanian cities. The program is known as "Tourism Improvement Districts" (TIDs): "This program strives to increase the number of overnight visitors and work as a driving force for destination marketing and promotion. With the work of businesses and the local government, TIDs are managed through a non-profit steering association between them. These associations are powerful funding tools which help hotels, craft shops, local artisans, and other businesses increase revenues in areas that are turned into local destinations" (Albanian-American Development Foundation, 2020).

#### Restauration as Economic Developer for Gjirokastra

As part of a series of development actions was the restoration of the Gjirokastra's Bazaar. The AADF, Gjirokastra Municipality and the Ministry of Culture of Albania inaugurated its completion in September 2018. "The initial investment from the AADF of US\$ 2 million will be followed by continuous support, capacity building and promotion of the businesses in the Bazaar area, for a total investment of US\$ 3.5 million in the coming years" (Albanian-American Development Foundation, 2020), (Fig.6 & 8). Such restauration projects have been a positive example in the revitalization of the space itself and in attracting the entrepreneurs and citizens of the old city. The created spirit and energy of life in Gjirokastra is also stimulated through organized activities such as periodic festivals (Fig.9) that try to engage the visitors and entertain the locals for longer amounts of time (Local Festivals, 2019).

#### Accessing Gjirokastra – Health and Well-Being

Despite these positive touristic investments, there are still numerous problems that Gjirokastra is facing that affect its citizens. Among the problems of lost and unprotected heritage and abandoned industrial buildings, transportation is the next big problem. The public transport does not offer full access to the city, there are no regular schedules. There is a lack of open spaces and activities that can trigger new possibilities for Gjirokastra. Access to drinking water is not the same in different areas of the city because of a lack investments and management in the water distribution system (Fig.10,11,12). Gjirokastra, with all its natural resources and cultural features,

should be featured as a model city of Health and Well-Being in Albania rather than a city that is fading.

#### Constellation as a Strategic Tool

The problems indicated above point to the need to reconnect the city with its citizens in a complex system that lasts longer than the touristic season. As professionals we are trained with all good intentions to "solve" fundamental problems of the society. This leads to a sort of neo-colonialist behavior of the designer who gives the solution in response to his personal intellectual knowledge (Aliaj, Rossi and Porfido, 2018:189). As a result, during this workshop we tried to solve the fundamental problem of accessibility of Gjirokastra at all levels. Accessibility was not perceived only as physical but also as a social connection. In terms of accessibility, we focused on the social interaction in physical spaces which promote Gjirokastra as a city of health and well-being. (Fig.13) Bonding the social interaction was conceptualized through the idea of constellations. (Fig.14) The concept is implemented by first evincing all the existing physical spaces (voids) and artefacts of Gjirokastra that can be revitalized and serve as important poles in the proposed constellation (Fig.15). The role of the outline or pattern is to properly to create visual and physical connection among these poles, this favoring health and wellbeing (Fig.16). "We must integrate our concepts of 'public health issues' with 'urban planning issues'. Urban planners, engineers, and architects must begin to see that they have a critical role in public health. Similarly, public health professionals need to appreciate that the built environment influences public health as much as vaccines or water quality." As stated by Richard J. Jackson and Chris Kochtitzky.

#### Constellation as a Strategic Tool

The concept of the healthy city was first promulgated by the World Trade Organization in 1988 (Charter, 2020). In 1996 ten specific standards for the healthy city by the World Health Organization (WHO) were issued. These standards provided for improved secure environment, nutrition, water, housing, health benefits and effective waste disposal systems. An important aspect was to have groups of citizens and various organizations assist each other and work in a coordinated manner to improve the health of the city. Involving the citizens in formulation of policies that affect the health and welfare of daily life was also



Fig. 1 / Rooted Industry. Source / the author



Fig. 2 / Informal Housing. Source / @shprehje.gjirokastrite, Facebook



Fig. 3 / Informal Housing. Source / @shprehje.gjirokastrite, Facebook

considered important. Providing a place for entertainment and leisure activities that would enhance communication among the population was considered fundamental. Respecting diverse lifestyles and race and religious beliefs, preservation of cultural heritage was considered crucial aspects of a healthy city. These principles will lead to a healthy, disease-free life and increased longevity (Yuming WANG, 2020).

"Healthy cities breed healthy people" stated director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus when addressing the delegations of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network Summit of Mayors, held in Copenhagen, Denmark. He mentions that while we get better health services and better opportunities for education and employment in cities, the latter are exposed to many health risks (crowded living conditions, sedentary lifestyles, more processed food, pollution, traffic accidents, etc .) If people are healthy, cities and communities thrive. Solutions for a healthier city are simple and affordable. Bike paths, car free zones, parks, reliable public transport, responsible waste management are samples that he lists referring to successful examples such as Copenhagen and Curitiba. Health depends on reducing gaps between the best of and worst of communities. For cities to thrive and be healthy, we need to ensure that everyone has access to Public transportation, safe and attractive outdoor spaces, healthy foods and affordable health services (WHO, 2018).

A reference for this paper was the Ph.D. publication of the architect Elena Dorato titled "Preventive Urbanism, The Role of Health in Designing Active Cities". In her essay she explores and explains the increasing connection between the medical field with all of its curative abilities

to the urban analysis of Healthy and Active City. Dorato highlights the possibilities of urbanism as essential in providing a prophylaxis of a qualitative life and health of the citizens in the urban developed areas. She analyzes the importance of urban health in the built environment, which will create the possibility of "organs" of urban life to work qualitatively and effectively, especially in the cases of the global pandemic that society faced in 2020.

Dorato tackles a list of elements related from urban and human bodies, to the cities and their well-being until the scale of design in urban and planning. These relations were perceived in a long period more as epistemologically and from the social point of view where the system and characteristics of the urban space as the key leading elements of the qualitative aspects of health and physical activity. Even though those elements and relations were investigated superficially and hardly analyzed in detail. (Dorato, 2020)

"Nowadays, health and the practice of physical activity must be seen as relevant goals to be achieved also through comprehensive and integrated interventions in the physical environment, where communities live and develop, addressing through urban policies and programs, and from a design perspective, the problem of urban living in terms of sustainability, safety, accessibility, and attractiveness."<sup>1</sup>

The bonding between the territories and spaces through the practice of health and well-being is fundamental to re-activate Gjirkastra. This city must be restructured and promoted as the city of "ευ ζην"<sup>2</sup>, where life flows quietly through connections and activities that will occur in different territories of the city will and stimulate the



<sup>1/</sup> Dorato, E., 2020. Preventive Urbanism. The Role of Health in Designing Active Cities. Macerata: Quodlibet.

<sup>2/</sup> The art of living well, welfare.

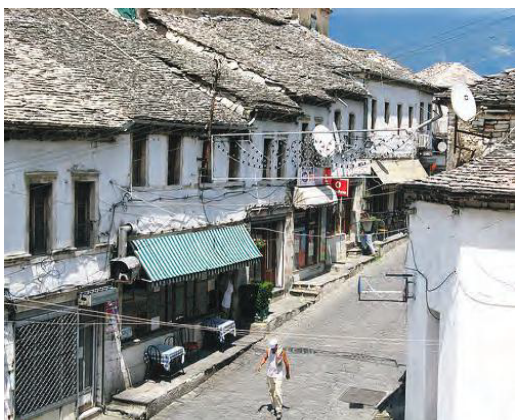


Fig. 4 / The degradation of Bazaar.  
Source / Sanne Aabjerg Kristiansen, Flickr



Fig. 5 / Orography of Gjirokastra.  
Source / the author



Fig. 6 / Restauration Process at TID Gjirokastra Bazaar.  
Source / Albanian-American Development Foundation



Fig. 7 / a,b,c / Fragmented Perceive of Landscape Due to Orography.  
Source / a. Blero Topulli, Unsplash; b.the author; c. Anita Hendrieka

active life of the citizens. This active city will guarantee the well-being and health of the territory by taking advantage of the qualitative aspects of climate, landscape and heritage, and linking them with multi-leveled connections.

First of all, physical connection relates to the improvement in the level of infrastructure – public transportation, minibuses, frequent bus lines that connect faster different areas of the cities within and between, the redesign of alleys and narrow street systems (softer slopes, added footsteps, handrails), the rehabilitation of abandoned industrial buildings, and the restoration of lost heritage buildings through the program of Cultural Heritage without Borders (CHWB, 2020) (Fig.17). The physical connection of spaces within and between cities are proposed solutions that stimulate social interaction and improve the physical body to move in the city. More or less those proposed elements transform the city topography into an open recreation center. Health and well-being are possible only if offered to everyone without extra cost<sup>3/</sup>. Secondly, visual connection is stimulated through landmarks of each pole. Landmarks have a vital role in the proposed strategy because they give an identity and orientation to the poles. Landmarks may be existing, like the bazaar, the tower and chimneys in industrial areas (which can be categorized as vertical landmarks) (Fig.18), while new ones can be added based on location, the characteristics of the zones where the poles are proposed, and previous famous landmarks references such as those of Luca Piazza Amphitheatre, Walnut- Public Spaces, Serpentine Pavilion etc. (Fig.19) Last but not least, it is important to mention the gazing. Gazing is perceived as a continuous process of participation: the time spent in a public space that guarantees social interaction. (Fig.20) There are possible scenarios that show how to stimulate social interaction as a dynamic, changing sequence of social actions between individuals or groups. Through the design of those “hubs,” the unification of the image of traditional cities and the requalification of public space is improved. Hubs are adapted to a location. In most spaces, there are intermediate spaces. Those spaces are leftover public, semipublic and semi-private or private areas which may have a relation to the abandoned or still occupied buildings adjacent to them. Therefore, the character of the buildings themselves can change according to their relationship with

the surrounding space. The concept of the intermediate space crosses architecture, city and the territory, and their related disciplines. Maciocco describes the symbolic-practical structure of the self-recognized society, denoted through the concept of the “intermediate space,” which is “not just or so much as a border area in the territorial sense as, rather, a terrain of cultural and disciplinary exchange, an attempt to cast off the established mental and cultural systems.” (Maciocco, 2014)

### Three Scenarios – Connecting pieces of memory

In the process of improvement, urban spaces will enable social connection and accessibility. In the strategic masterplan (Fig. 21) the focus is on three main spaces - scenarios of poles/hubs. The urban poles have different characteristics and are mainly an alteration of modern parts like the stadium and the industrial zone in relation to historical and cultural heritage zones of the city like the old bazaar.

New Bazaar – provides accessibility to main urban services. (Fig.22)

Gjirokastra, even if it is composed of two cities, an old and new one, is missing its own agora – a main square where all citizens of Gjirokastra can be gathered. In addition to the old stadium, the main public square in the space, as in Lucca Piazza Amphitheatre, should be established. In the ground floors of the surrounding buildings there are shopping paths. In the entrance of the square there will be an on-demand transportation hub. The existing stadium is re-used to fulfill the function needs of the square which will be designed to work as a park with its greenery and pavilions.

Innovation Park –accessibility to business innovation and market. (Fig.23)

In the innovation park all the existing factories will be retrofitted. Transportation hubs will be on-demand. In order to suit the needs of the innovation market, the abandoned industrial buildings will be reused in order to protect the image of the city and the surrounding natural landscape.

Community Hub – accessibility to neighborhood services. (Fig.24)

In supporting health and well-being, the abandoned and neglected ‘kulla’ will be refurbished (Fig.25 ). ‘Kulla’ are chosen in the nodes/poles, as they can play the role of a generator for social and economic development in different neighborhoods of the old city. Since Gjirokastra is known

<sup>3/</sup> \*cost is associated to the regular city maintenance taxes only



Fig. 8 / End of Restaurant of Bazaar. Source / Piotr Abraszek, Flickr



Fig. 9 / National Folklore Festival in Gjirokastras Castle. Source / Blerina Berberi



Fig. 10 / Lack of Qualified Public Transport. Source / the author

for its alleys, narrow streets and its private gardens, it improves the neighborhoods by transforming the private gardens into open shared space by removing the fences. This will let the traditional landscape architecture spread like a manifesto, from the gardens to the alleys and narrow streets which will visually open the perspective of the paths. The transportation hub is guided by pergolas that will be linked with retrofitted shops. These elements of vernacular architecture will settle the memories of the city and preserve its authenticity.

## Conclusion

Rethinking Gjirokastra as a model city of

health and well-being will help improve the socio-economic development, while evoking its traditions.

Gjirokastra has many potential poles/hubs which can work together as a constellation to revitalize all the abandoned/neglected spaces of the new and old city. With the proposed scenarios of the new bazaar and innovation park-community hub, the strategic management of the linking elements and the participation of the locals and authorities will become the first model city of health and well-being in Albania.

As a result, Gjirokastra as a healthy city, would be able to breed healthy people and maintain a sustainable economy.

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