Against the grain.
Two theoretical studies for re-thinking Gjirokastër

Alberto Grando
PhD researcher / Ferrara University

Abstract
The aim of this paper is to seek an approach that goes beyond the dualistic - and maybe simplistic – contraposition between the old and new part of Gjirokastër; an approach where the method is more important than the result itself and where design is not predetermined by the initial conditions. An approach, therefore, where the old and the modern part of the city are seen as two sides of the same urban entity, where the imposition of an idea "a priori" is the tool that helps to think "against the grain".
This article refers to two different research fields, both raised within the contemporary discussion of the urban planning. The first one refers to the postmodern debate: starting from some of the most important studies of the post-war period, which are largely based on the theoretical work of M. Ungers and lately R. Koolhaas, the case study of Gjirokastër takes inspiration by imposing an ideal grid (or bands in this case) as a governing principle. This hypothesis makes us see the entire urban landscape trough a pattern of bands, like a strong array of directional sectors, perpendicular to the intuitive NE-SW direction of the main streets. In addition, this method allows a process of de-contextualization and re-composition of different "pieces" of the city, in a dialectical action of relating the singularity with the entirety urban complexity. The second study refers to the pioneers of the psycho-geographical approach like that of Guy Debord, which helps develop a distribution model of how visitors experience the urban space, in order to give useful inputs for the final urban design proposal. A set of images describes the design concept, which aims to enforce and strengthen the relationship between the different neighborhoods of the city - in particular between the old and the modern part. The design aims to achieve this target in two ways: as a physical one, by implementing a set of paths that can mend the different parts, and as a programmatic one by encouraging to relocate different functions in the city in order to drive the future development.

Introduction
Gjirokastër is known for the importance of its historical center and the charm of the old houses perched on the hillside. While these elements make the city one of the most important touristic spots in the region, the city is more than that. The last century imposed a new planning paradigm, which drove the urban evolution of its modern part through zoning, axial organization, and geometrical regularity. The two parts of the city are in a state of dynamic equilibrium: one the one hand, we have the historic part, which has started in the last years to be an important cultural-touristic destination; on the other hand, we have the modern part or 'socialist city', which seems to rehash the urbanistic premises that generated it.

In fact, even if the modern part of Gjirokastër cannot be inserted within the bigger post socialist cities paradigm[1], its urbanity suffers the same lack of identity that characterizes some towns of the post-socialist era. The spaces that used to serve as places of social and architectural

experiments have turned into ordinary localities, whose spatial logic, external shape and urban planning has no other symbolic meaning beyond the recent Albanian history. In total opposition with such condition, the old city is characterized by centuries of cultures and connection with the surrounding landscape.

Due to the complexity of the problem, this paper refers to two important research fields that enlivened the discussion around the urban spaces during the last century.

The first one refers to the postmodern theories of urbanism, which started back in the '60 by Matthias Ungers (author of the pamphlet Grossformen im Wohnungsbau), who undermined the ideas of postwar urban development. This theoretical framework supports the analysis and serves as the starting point for a contemporary paradigm in which the urban tissue and the new developments carry renewed relevance beyond their bounded form and shape.

The second one is the psycho-geography approach, a form of research and design inquiry that focuses on the perception and exploration of the urban spaces. By filtering the analysis through these two theories, the design suggests connecting different parts of the city by two different means: a physical one, by implementing a set of paths that mends different areas, and a programmatic one, which encourages relocating different functions.

State of the art

Gjirokastra is a medieval city (south of Albania), built on the hills expanding from the mountain "Mali i gjerë" and culminating with the Castle of Argjiro. During the ottoman period (XVI-XVII) the city expanded and developed outside the castle walls toward Drino's valley [2]. The Bazaar area became the center of the city, which was used as a marketplace and for cultural and social exchange. Besides its historical stratification, the urban fabric of Gjirokastër is made even more complex by the morphology of the site, marked by steep slopes that affect not only the form of the urban environment, but also its perception. The old town, in fact, was built on hilly areas by following the ridges, thus taking advantage of the defensive slopes to control the valley underneath. The highest point of the old part is about 310 above the sea level, while the modern lays at 195 m, which means there are likely more than 100 meters of difference in elevation. This configuration creates an urban structure based on some ramifications developed alongside the main streets, which mostly follow the cliffs, taking advantage from the gentlest slopes.

Due to the morphology, the urban fabric is branched into different "fingers", which start from the old bazar and the Castle area and slowly descend. This shape not only reveals something about the historical development of the city, but also affect the way people experience the site. Hills and steep slopes influence the paths and

[2] / Kumaraku, Papa, Dobjani, The Adaptation of the Traditional Cities to Contemporary Use Interventions in Historical Areas: The Case Study of Gjirokastra Online International Interdisciplinary Research Journal, pag. 157, Volume-VI, Nov 2016 Special Issue (1) 2016
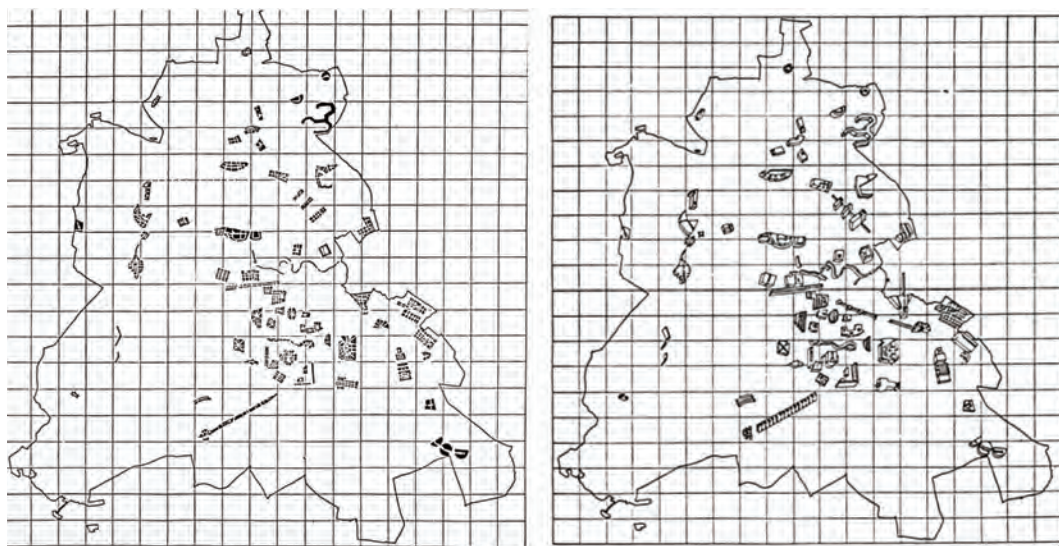
Fig. 1 / Image from O.M. Ungers. Berlin as a Green Archipelago, pag. 197.
This image is taken a s a reference for the implementation of the design concept.

connections between the different part of the city, creating a perceptual pattern and distorting the perception of the urban space. Places which seem near in the map, are felt distant when people experience the city: this phenomenon is even more evident if we consider the relationship between the old and new part. The modern city, in fact, lies in a flat area at the foot of the old center, and is well connected to the national road. However, the need for better connections and easier transportation shifted the importance towards the more functional and modern part of the city, thus triggering the replacement of shops and activities. Using a device like a band, as it will be seen in the next chapter, allows to decontextualize and re-contextualize portions of the city and helps to find new ways to see the urban fabric.

Methodology
The band
Back in the 60's, starting with M. Ungers, a line of thought began to question the quality of the urban space in the modern cities. Grossform im Wohnungbau, one of the first works by Oswald M. Ungers, set the stage for all the subsequent discussion on this topic:

The city made up of "complementary places" consists of the largest possible variety of different parts, in each of which a special urban aspect is developed with a view to the whole. In a sense it is a system of the "city within the city." Every part has its own special features, without however being complete or self-contained. […] and therefore combines with other highly developed places to form a complex system,

a kind of federation[3]

The power of this idea, however, is to set up a conceptual framework (Figure 1), in order to activate a dialectic relationship between the single architecture and the overall plan: it uses analogy and metaphor as catalysts of a "superordinate idea", that is, in other words, a starting point for "an overall concept that binds all the parts together"[4].
Two main things are taken as an inspiration for urban design intervention in the city of Gjirokastra:
- First, it is the increasing relevance of the program beyond the style in urban planning, which became one of the subjects of speculation for all the contemporary architecture[5]. For the purpose of this project, the program is a key element in order to relocate some function that reactivates parts of the city and creates synergies. Some of the old abandoned buildings are in fact used to insert civic functions in the old town, trying to balance the urban role with the modern city and avoiding to let the old bazar like an unanimated open museum.

- Second, the use of a theoretical spatial framework as a device for setting the ground of the project. If in the case of Berlin, the grid is used to find meaning in a non-hierarchical, isotropic and almost formless space, in this case the grid is used differently: it is modulated on the complex morphology of the site (see Figure 2), which helps us think against the more intuitive way of the existing streets. If in Berlin the grid is a tool that helps create meaning, here it helps think outside the box.

3 / Oswald M. Ungers and S. Viehts, The Dialectic City, Pag. 20, Milan: Skira, 1997.
4 / M. Biraghi, "Le ragioni della forma", in Storia dell'architettura contemporanea, vol. II, Einaudi, Torino 2008, p. 312.
5 / Hättasch M., Form after Urbanism: the potential of Grossform: The Plan Journal. Pag. 59-76, 2016.
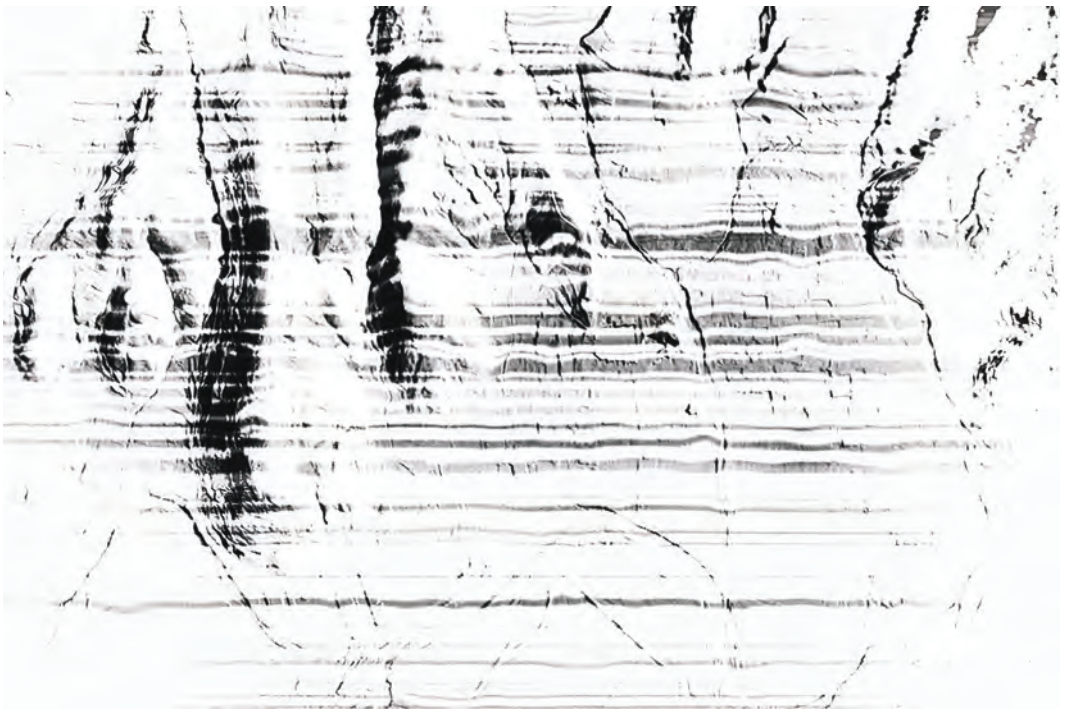
Fig. 2 / An elaboration of Unger' matrix. This image synthetizes the design approach: the adaption of the abstract geometrical framework to the site area suggests exploring the urban fabric along a set of bands, instead of adopting a matrix. The greyscale images emphasize the morphological characteristic of Gjirokastra. Credits: Author.

In fact, one of the most important steps in this project is the adaptation of the abstract rigid grid (see Figure 2) into long bands, which create a lateral cutaway of the town, against the direction usually people experience it. In this way, the band incorporates very different parts of the city: the fortress, a part of the old bazar, the neighborhood in the hills and modern town.

Psycho-geography: a study of spatial distribution
The other theoretical framework of this proposal is that of psycho-geography, which helps to develop a model which describes the way how people experience the city, in order to support and address the design choices for the project. The Scope of this section is to find information that helps us understand how people use and enjoy the urban space in Gjirokastër. Since there are no data regarding the numbers of tourists provided by the accommodations, the decision was taken to map the number of the pictures taken by visitors. Although this method doesn't represent a scientific and quantitative measurement of the touristic dimension and enjoyment of the site, it can provide precious information about the qualitative patterns or habits of the visitors. This approach can be found among the various situationist procedures developed by the psycho-geography movement - a field of study started in the '50 in France by Guy Debord. His research around the exploration of urban environments emphasizes the concept of playfulness and détournement[6] (diversion or drifting). In particular, this activity consists of quick passages through various environments where the ludic-recreational concept together with the whims of the moment represent the main operation of exploring the urban space[7]. In other words, this activity is closely linked to recognizing the effects of the nature of space and the affirmation of a playful behavior, in opposition the classic notions of travel and mapping. Diversion differs from the simple walk essentially in terms of the approach to the territory[8]. The one who "diverts" renounces the conventional way of moving and adopts an indeterminate walking strategy that does leads to moving randomly within a territory.
But how this study can be transformed into an empirical tool for understanding the fruition of the urban space? The

[6] / Guy Debord, Théorie de la dérive, in Les Lèvres nues, n. 9, November 1956
[7] / Guy Debord, Psychogeographic guide of Paris. Rosengreen 1955
[8] / Jouet, Jacques "Frise du métro parisien (Poem of the Paris Subway)," Studies in 20th Century Literature: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 13. 2002. On April 18th, 1996, Jacques Jouet set out to write a particularly panoramic subway poem. The mathematician (and Jouet's fellow Oulipian) Pierre Rosenstiehl had devised an itinerary that would take the poet through every station of the Parisian subway system in a single day, boarding the first train and descending from the last at the same arbitrarily-chosen station, with a minimal number of returns to a given station and of changes of line.
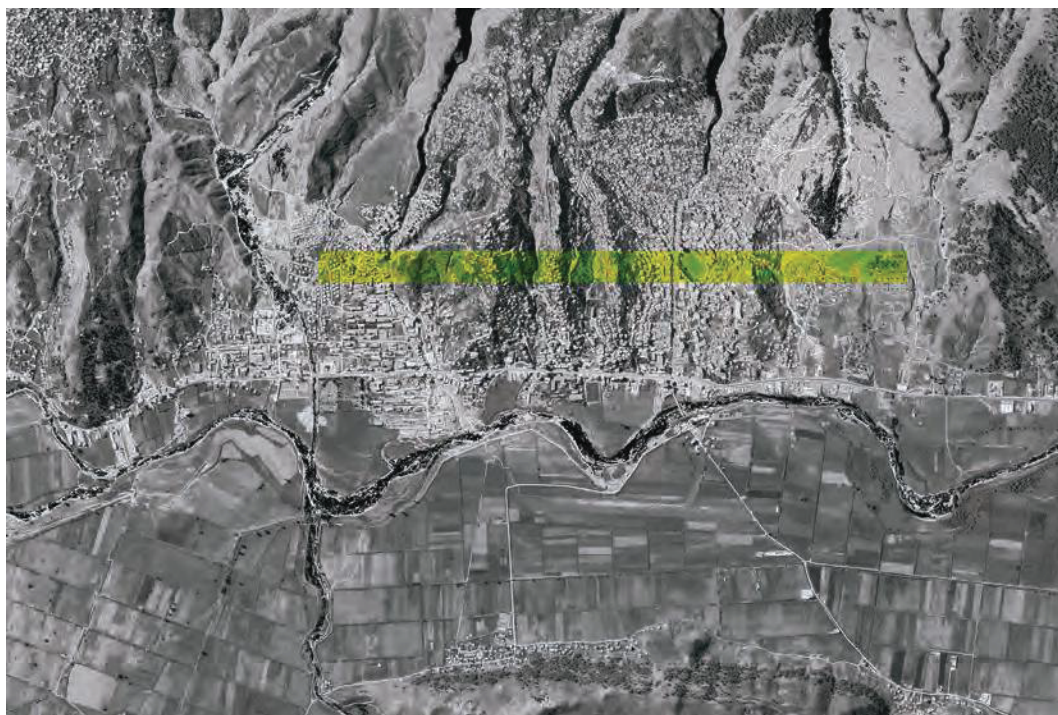
Fig. 3 / View of the cityA of Gjirokastër, heading S-W. The yellow band describe the project idea, which analyze the urban environment along the yellow strip, in a process of de-contextualizing and re contex tualizing the fragment of the city. Source / the author.

mass-utilization of GPS devices (including the smartphones) opens new scenarios of research in this topic. In particular, the method used here consists of showing the distribution of the pictures provided by the Flickr[9] database: since every picture is geo-referenced and datable, it is possible to produce maps that visualize the distributions of the photos in the space, revealing which are the more visited and enjoyed places. The map of Gjirokastër (Figure 5) is divided by 100x100m squares, and each one shows through a color the number of pictures-day in the span 2007-2012. For each cell, the model adds the number of photo-user-days for all days from 2005-2014 (or a user-defined range within those years), and returns the average annual number of photo-user-days. The results show, as expected, a high concentration in the old bazar area and the castle. Such result tells a lot about the difference in the way people experience the old and the modern part of the city and suggests an intervention that helps people experience other parts of the city that are not visited as frequently.

Results
Studying the city along the sequence of bands is a counterintuitive move, which goes against the phenomenological experience of the city. Many studies refer to the concept of sequences and repetition as a category of space[10]. It's important to highlight that the notion of sequence is directly connected to some visual arts: many examples of film footage and editing, use this concept not only to describe a space, but also as a narration tool[11]. An interesting topic is also the notion of repetition connected with the description of urban space in pop culture, as a researcher like Adam Krism points out: in the pop and rap music tradition[12], the musical video is often taken by the car, showing the repetition of the streets, in an attempt of recomposing the urban space like photograms on a film. In the specific case presented, the bands are a device - a frame - that limit and at the same time stimulate the perception of the urban space. In particular, the operation of decontextualizing the strip shows an interesting rhythm between the urban zones and the green narrow valleys (figure 8). This particular configuration is due to the natural morphology of the sites, which encourages building on the ridge of the cliffs, letting the greenery growing in the small valleys in between. The project proposes to reconnect these different

[9] / Flickr is an image hosting service and video hosting service. It was created by Ludicorp in 2004. It has changed ownership several times and has been owned by SmugMug since April 20, 2018. Photos and videos can be accessed from Flickr without the need to register an account, but an account must be made to upload content to the site. Flickr database contain millions of geo-referenced photo, that can be used to produce helpful analysis.
[10] / See Moretti L., Strutture e sequenze di spazi, «Spazio, n. 7» Gruppo Editoriale Spazio, Roma, 1953.
[11] / See Lynch, Kevin The Image of the City. The MIT Press, 1960.
[12] / See Kris Adam, Music and Urban Geography, Chapter 4, Taylor and Francis Group LLC, New York, 2007.
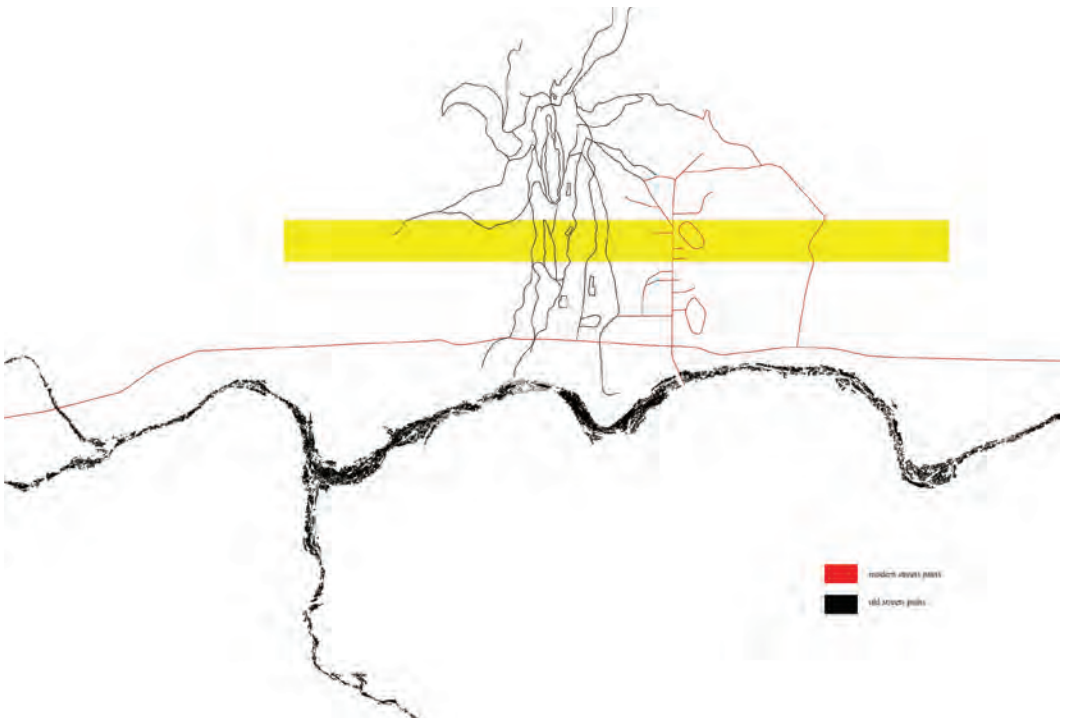
Fig. 4 / Map of the streets of Gjirokastër and the river Drino. The map shows the old streets (in black) and the modern one (in red) The yellow band indicates the focus area of the project.
Source / the author.

scenes, like "urban episodes" by working along the strip's direction and by modifying the program. The expected results overtake the apparent phenomenological separation between the old and the new part of the city and restore a sense of oneness to the community, which helps spreading the tourist and the visitors to different parts of Gjirokastër. The results establish a relationship between the different parts of the city in order to increase the connectivity between the historical part and modern city.

To be more precise, the two parts aren't completely disconnected physically, since there are some existing walking paths from the bazar. The project aims to highlight and restore some of these paths and improve the usability and the comfort for the pedestrians through small interventions in and around them. The actions foresee a renovation of the flooring by taking inspiration from the old stone roads and take some measures – Like ramps and facilities for access – in order to overtake the steep slopes which now represent an obstacle. The actions of the project along the strips are:
- Provide physical connection along the bands, which will encourage to experience of the town across different urban environment (old-new) and across different spaces (built – unbuilt);
- Going beyond the separation between the old and modern neighborhoods, thus creating thematic patterns that come down from the old cities to the modern part, and helping visitors to enjoy Gjirokastër from different points of view.
- Create a theme for every path by attributing a meaning connected with the characteristics of the area of that band.

The site survey reveals some feasible paths that connect the old part to the new one. In particular, four main paths are individuated; each one starts form the historical part, which is the most visited and ends in the modern part. The paths don't require huge transformations that would alter the urban fabric of the city.
All the actions are limited to some small interventions which complete or improve the walking comfort for pedestrians and also the awareness for the citizens. The paths are studied in terms of linking some strategic public services like the post office, banks, shops (see Figure 7). Not only this: since the paths are crossing different environments, they also work as interesting tools in experiencing the city from all the sides (the old consolidated urban fabric, orchards, informal buildings, etc.).
Signage and information points can also help the visitors enjoy these paths, and they could be helpful in guiding the tourists to different areas. The interventions do not have high physical impact, and they are addressed to improve the quality of the existing paths, increasing the awareness of the historical heritage.

Conclusion
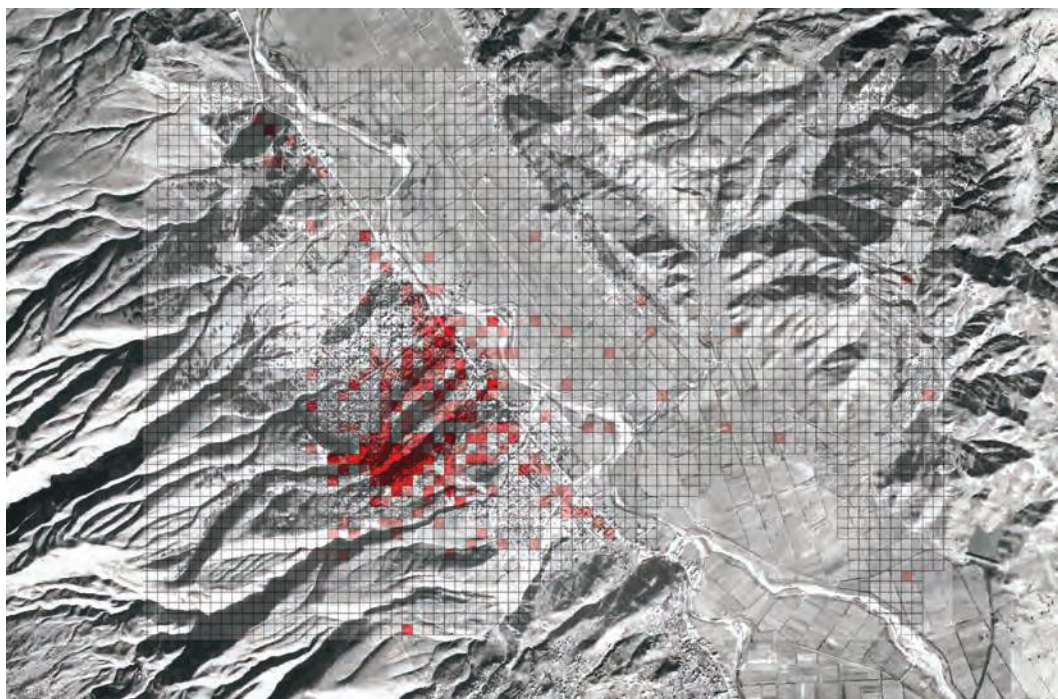Even if design remains in a conceptual level

Fig. 5 / This map shows the concentration of image taken by visitors in Gjirokastër, based on a matrix of 100 x 100 m. Source / the author.

and does not intend to be an exhaustive design proposal, there are some useful hints that put the basis for an overall strategy for further developments. The two main ideas raised in this paper - which are the imposition of a geometrical tool (the band) and the space distribution of the visitors - can trigger and enable a process of urban planning and transformation. In particular, the programmatic spatial distribution is one of the most important architecture topics of the last decades. It's interesting to notice that within postmodern discourse, the program alone is thought to be a sufficient organizing device of the space[13]. One examples of such premise is the Palais de Tokyo reuse, designed by Lacaton&Vassal, a building dedicated to modern and contemporary art:

Sometimes architecture is already there. That was the case with the west wing od Paris's Palais de Tokio, a hulking Neoclassical exhibition hall that had been occupied and abandoned by a string cultural institutions by the time the design competition for a new contemporary art center was held in 1999. The decision to add nothing was not a denial of architecture; it was simply a different way of approaching their role. "The work of an architect is not only to build" Lacaton explained in an interview in 2003. "he first thing to do is to think, and only after that are you able to say whether you should build or not."[14]

Even if this is still an open question, the program can have a huge impact on urban design and can give some precise directions to the development of the project. The strategy of the proposal is to identify the empty or abandoned buildings in the city and relocate the functions; the scope is to curb the trend of concentrating a lot of the civic function in the modern part of the city, which is easier to reach by car. There is a risk of draining the old part of the city of all the vital functions that used to animate the old bazar area.

The idea of the project, in a nutshell, is to individuate some dismissed buildings, like the old school building in Dunavat neighborhood, and relocate some civic functions there, in order to use the program as a tool to reactivate the urban and avoid the risk to transform the old town into an open museum. Thus, the concept proposes to the municipality to compile a report with all the empty and non-used buildings owned by the public body, which can be the key tool for the activation of the program strategy. Furthermore, the program can expand not only to the building, but also to the streets: mixed uses need to be understood in terms of urban grain, density and permeability. The distinction between private (residential) and public (commercial) spaces is defined by the typo-morpho-logical structure of building

13 / See Hättasch M., Form after Urbanism: the potential of Grossform: The Plan Journal. Pag. 59-76, 2016.
14 / David Huber, Beyond Belief: David Huber on the Architecture of Lacaton & Vassal Beyond Belief, «Art Forum» Vol. 53, No. 9, 2015.

Fig. 6 / View of one of the existing streets. The aim is to increase the quality of the paths by paving the ground with local stones, improve connection, remove barriers and put signposting. Source / the author.
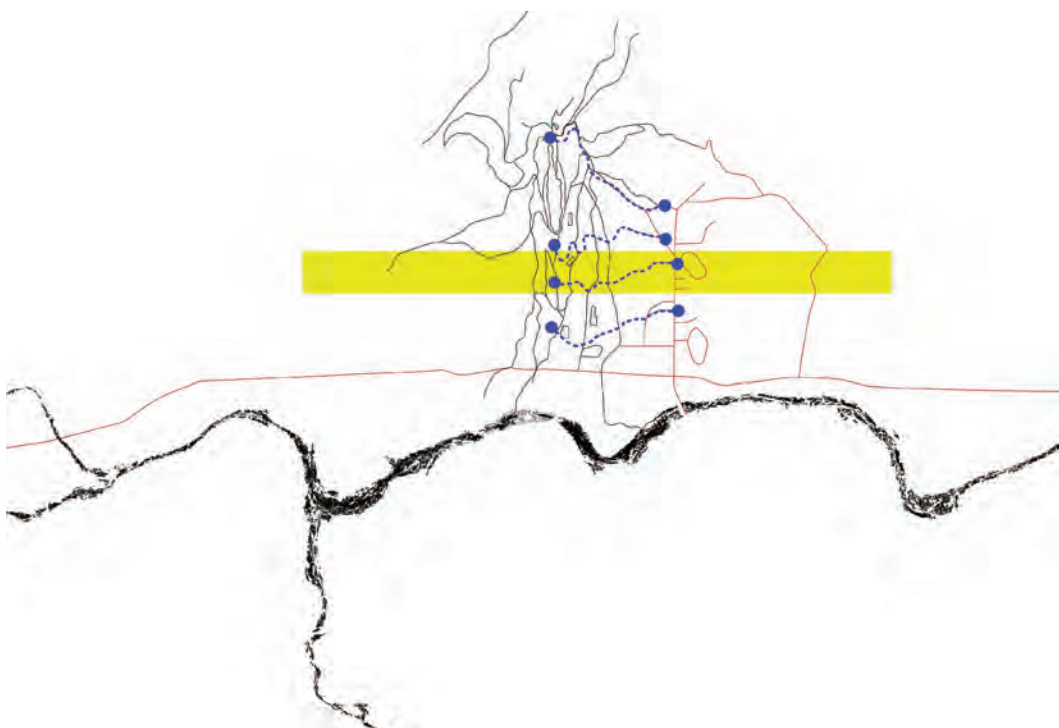
Fig. 7 / In this page: OLD urban fabric (black) and MODREN urban fabric (red) of Gjirokastër. The blue connections represent the new paths proposed. Source / the author.

fronts and backs, which can enable a transition to the public street life through private buildings addressing the street, as it has been discussed in this article in the Journal of Space Syntax (JSS):

the processes by which the mixing of uses takes place is important, such as diversity, conservation and regeneration. The diversity of activities in a street 'is a product not simply of the mix of activities within the buildings and blocks that abut a street but also of the design and public use of the street itself'. The issue is not only of design or the position of entrances in buildings, but also concerns how the street becomes an active space of mutual collaboration between the private and the public realm[15].

Discussion

The article illustrates how theoretical approaches can be instrumental in mending the separation between the historical cities and modern urban development, mostly created in the last century. In addition, it shows how some of the problems can be overcome by using very light interventions, like increasing the connection, adding signposting or create new paths. From a theoretical approach, this paper emphasizes a strong conceptual framework during the design process, which can help us find solutions that go outside the common path of urban design praxis.

By intervening into the street fabric, which represents the lymphatic system of the urban environment, it is possible to re-establish a oneness and modify the way to experience the city, both by visitors and citizen.

The reassignment of the program, together with the individuation of some strategic abandoned building, can relocate the program and create, along with the new paths, a positive synergy for the whole city.

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[15] / Narvaez, L. and Penn, A. "The Architecture of Mixed Uses". In Journal of space Syntax, Vol. 7 (1), p. 107-136, 2016.

Informal new development at the
border of the modern city

Informal new development.
Spread coltivations

Consolidated surroundings

+310 a.s.l.

Terraces, coltivations and orchards,
stream paths. View to the valley.

+285 a.s.l.

Historical buildings

Historical buildings, castle

+269 a.s.l.

Terraces, coltivations and orchards,
stream path. View to the valley.

Historical buildings. Street to the
old bazar.

+245 a.s.l.

Terraces, coltivations and orchards,
stream path. View to the valley.

Buffer zone, old and new
buildings.

Modern town, regoular
plan, main axis.

+198 a.s.l.

Modern and functional city,
stadium and infrastructures.

Informal new development at the
border of the modern city

Regenerating same area by
increasing the connection to the
rest of the city.

+255 a.s.l.

The project aims to occupy
with greenery some area, in
order to stop the informal
expansion.

+219 a.s.l.

Informal city in the ciff. The project
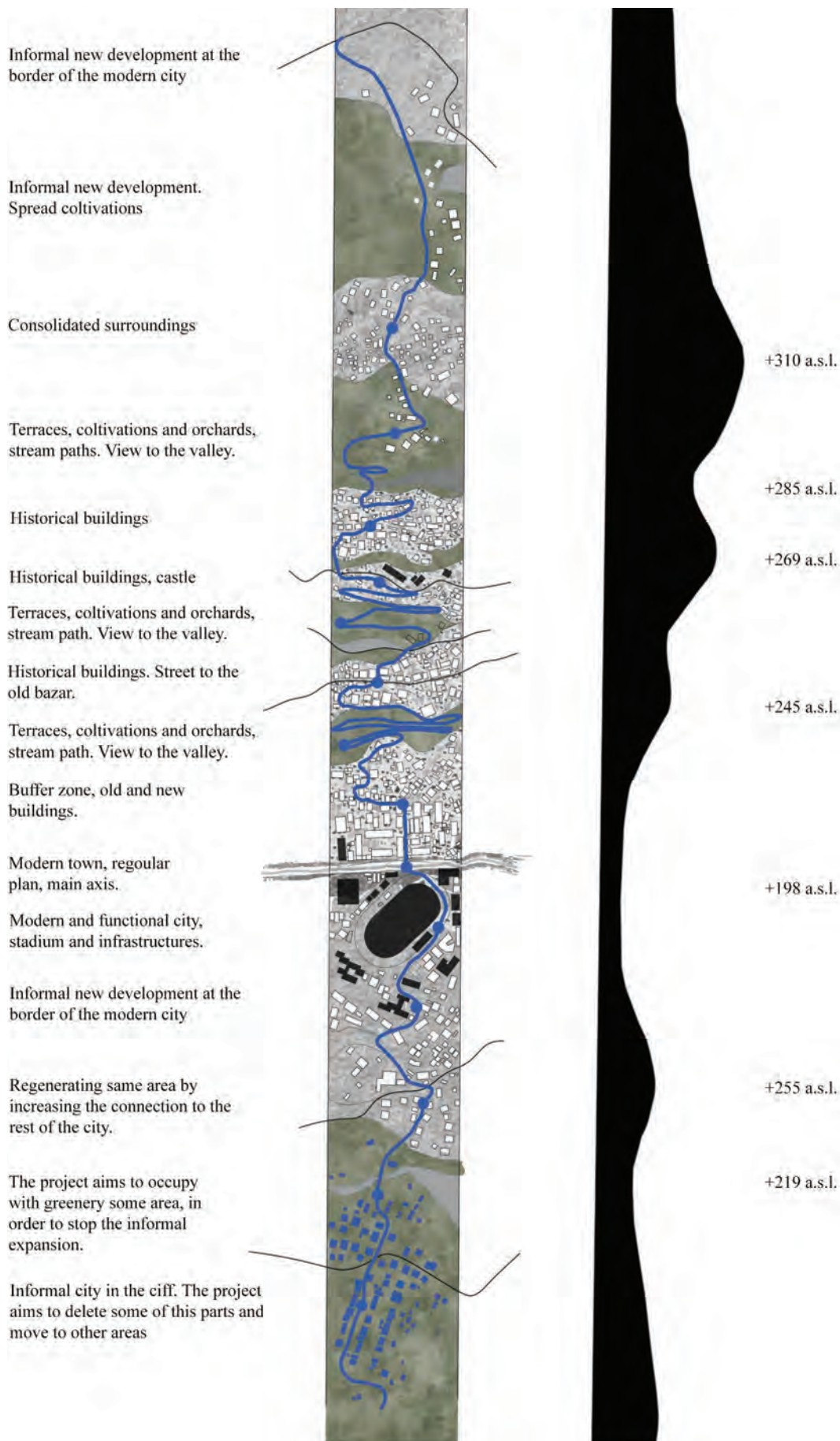aims to delete some of this parts and
move to other areas

Fig. 8 / Focus of the yellow band with the description of each area. The black shape represents a cut-
away of the site with the elevations along the band. Source / the author.