Architecture and the City in the interplay of socio-cultural instances: Gjirokastra in a (Post-)Modern Condition

Keywords / (Post-)Modern City, Urban Energy, Urban Editing, Cultural and Natural Heritage.

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Abstract

Our understanding of an architectural phenomenon is interrelated with political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. As Friedrich Jameson would put it: architecture, politics, economics, sociology, technology, film, painting, etc., are structurally connected instances (Jameson, 1991).

Therefore, to interpret an architectural creation – a building and a city – one has to look at all configurations formed out of the combination of these instances. In this context, current global conjunctures make the city face challenges posed by the capitalist system, globalization process, migration, and uncontrolled growth of the cities. Today's society is constantly confronted by a global crisis emerging from such issues, a crisis which impacts the operation of architectural practice.

This paper studies what occurs in the city within architecture's interplay with political, economic, social and cultural instances. The discussion will focus on the modern and postmodern period, their relation to the pre-modern history and to the vision for the future city. The concept of the city and its transformations are framed within specific changes in politico-economic and socio-cultural systems, looking at (post-)modern architecture and city planning as representations of radical ideological shifts.

This paper will discuss the conditions of the shrinking cities through the city of Gjirokastra (Albania) as a case-study. Gjirokatra's historical part is under UNESCO protection since 2005.

The discussion for the future vision of the city of Gjirokastra relates to its historical part, which "lost" its "urban energy" to the modern part of the city. The objective of this paper is to think Gjirokastra and its future differently by framing the city in a (post-)modern condition: by providing a development scenario based on urban editing, rather than growth and new building programs.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to stimulate a critical way of thinking about the future city. It is concerned with the concept of the city within the conditions created by postmodern political, economic, social and cultural developments, changes and transformations. The paper thinks architecture as a (re)creation of the city, contextualized in the discourse of post- urban transformations (post-war; post-industrial; post-socialist) occurring in historic cities. When discussing about architectural or cultural values, interventions in historic cities – especially in those that are protected by law – were/are more complex because of the impact on historical sites and buildings. Thus, this paper will study the interplay of postmodern instances in architecture, city planning, politics, economics, and so forth, within the relation between historic cities and their current and future development. In doing so, it will propose a language through which we communicate between different aspects of the city. And, if architecture is considered a re-creation of the city, then it is also a re-creation of languages, relationships and 'urban energies' occurring there.

In the history of philosophy, architecture

is used as a metaphor for creation. As Kojin Karatani has demonstrated, architecture creates new situations, new environments and new societies (Karatani, 1995), occurring in the city, which is thus, a re-creation of architectural practice. To some extent, this relationship is also studied by David Harvey in Neoliberalism and the City. Referring to the sociologist Robert Park and philosopher Karl Marx, he shows that the city is the man's attempt to re-create the world where he lives, as he pleases (Harvey, 2007). Thus, in the re-creation of the city, he also re-creates himself (Harvey, 2007). In this context, a hypothesis can be formulated, that there exists an 'urban energy' between architecture and society, which is reflected in the city. We interpret this 'urban energy' as a tool for regenerating the historic cities and deal with their current crisis. This will be illustrated through the case study of the historic city of Gjirokastra, framed here as a modern city with a historical part, a university, a hospital, a stadium and an industrial zone. By framing Gjirokastra in a modern condition, we will rethink it as a whole: as multifaceted and not simply as an historical city.

Theoretical Framework: The City Within Shifted Social and Cultural Systems – (Post-)Modern Transformations
The paper discusses the modern and postmodern society and architecture, in order to understand their impact in the existing structure of the historic city. For instance, high modernism is credited with the destruction of the fabric of the historic city and of its older neighborhood culture,

by way of the radical disjunction of the new Utopian high-modernist building from its surrounding context (Jameson, 1991). Yet, insofar as modernism still believed in "some residual zones of 'nature' or 'being', of the old, the older, the archaic" and still believed that one could "do something to that nature and work at transforming that 'referent' " (Jameson, 1991:9), the future was projected on the past. For Jameson, from the 1950s onwards, premonitions of the future have been replaced by notions of the 'end' and 'crises' of this or that – the end of ideology, art, social class; the crisis of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state; etc. – constituting what is called postmodernism (Jameson, 1991). In this context, one assumes that what occurs after modernism, is often associated to specific crises, caused by intense and, on occasion, radical politico-economic and socio-cultural shifts, reflected in architecture and city planning. For instance, the concept of the "shrinking city", although it is not a modern phenomenon, in modern history has emerged within the conditions created from the shift from socialism to post-socialism and from industrialism to post-industrialism (Hemer, 2013). It is the spatial outcome of capitalism and globalization, caused by population loss and abandonment, deindustrialization, suburbanization and the decline of economic development (Fernandez, 2013). Thus, by introducing new ways of production and consumption, new political and economic systems, cities – traditional and modern –, on occasion, are faced with an emptiness and a lack of development.
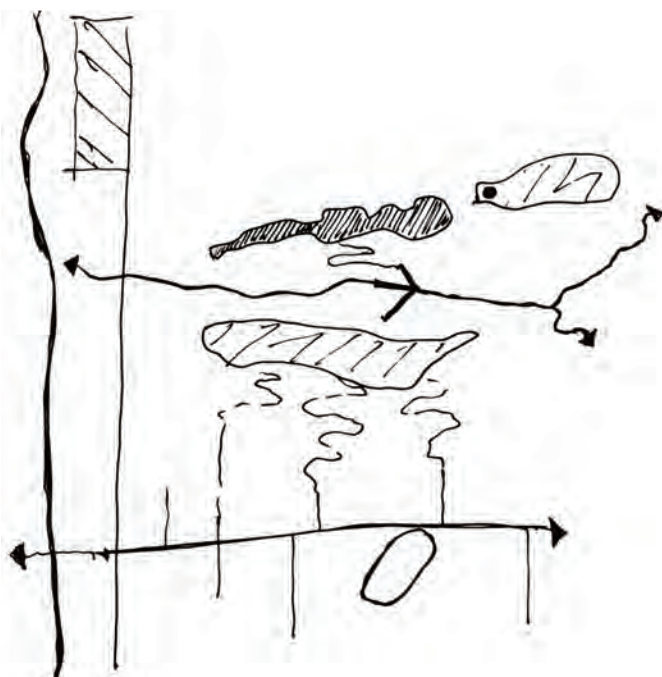
Fig. 1 / Sketch of Gjirokastra showing the historic city and modern city inside a diagram. Source / the author

This paper is focused on the context of Gjirokastra in Albania – a South-European country that experienced radical ideological shifts. The Post-WWII era is characterized by rapid modernization in architecture and urban planning, as in many European cities. (Hemer, 2013). Looking at the city of Gjirokastra, we understand that the new – modern – city was built as an extension of the old – historic – city. Modern buildings, such as the University, the hospital, the stadium and the residential quarters, represented economic progress and social emancipation through an architectural programme. Yet, in the aftermath of socialism (as in many countries of the Eastern Bloc), the shift to a democratic system took place as a "shock therapy" in the course of only few years (Aliaj, Shutina and Dhamo, 2010). In terms of the economic development, many state-owned companies did not survive privatization, leading to planned closures and a massive loss of industrial jobs (Mykhnenko and Turok, 2008). Thus, many people migrated towards Western Europe, leaving behind empty buildings and spaces – a shrinking city. Meanwhile, in territorial terms, the city continued to grow in an uncontrolled and informal manner. The "shock therapy" resulted in informality and absence of planning (Janku, 2018).

Setting the Context: Gjirokastra as a Case-Study
Gjirokastra is a medieval city in the south of Albania, punctuated by the Castle, built on the hills expanding from the mountain-chain "Mali i Gjerë" (i.e. Wide Mountain). In 1961 Gjirokastra was proclaimed a "museum – city", by a decision of the Council of Ministers of Albania. Since 2005 the historic city is under UNESCO protection (Kumaraku, Papa and Dobjani, 2016). During the Ottoman period, Gjirokastra developed and expanded outside the castle walls in the direction of the Drinos valley (Kumaraku et.al., 2016). The Old Bazaar area became the centre of the city, which was used as a marketplace and for social exchange. The urban morphology followed the topography of the city, by creating an organic street pattern, developed in the northeast-southwest direction. The same direction characterizes the modern city built in flat land in the outskirts of the historical city in the north-west direction, together with the industrial part in the south-east direction [Fig.1]. The new centre represented the communist ideology – the progress and social emancipation – through public buildings and modern types of residential buildings. Thus, the modern city was developed separately from the historic city. It seems that there are two cities in Gjirokastra that speak different languages. In this context, Ismail Kadare writes that the old city of Gjirokastra rejects all comparisons:
"The traveller seeing it for the first time was tempted to compare it to something, but soon found it impossible, for the city rejected all comparisons" (Kadare, 197:5).

The term "urban energy" is used in this paper as a metaphor for expressing the cultural and social life of the city, the relation between the individual and the city – its built and natural elements. One
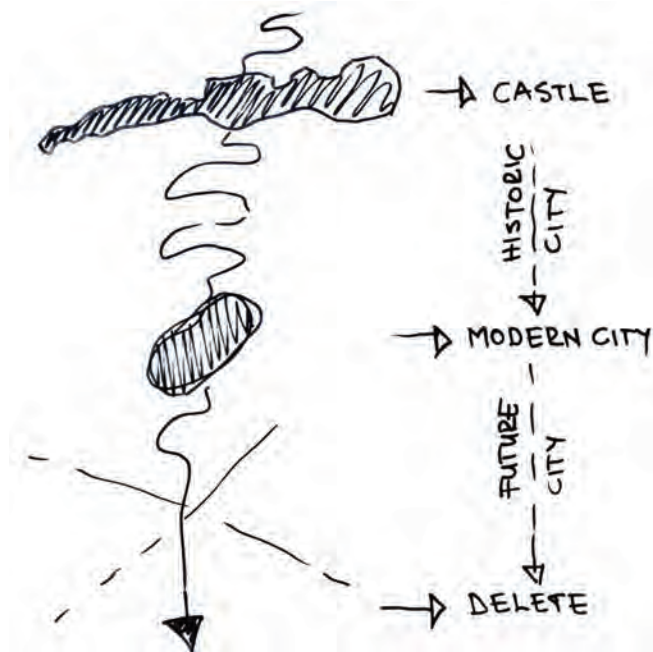
Fig. 2 / This diagram shows the modes of intervention in the city.
Source / the author

can assume that Gjirokastra had this energy in the city centre, with the old bazaar which is similar to the concept of Italian Piazza or Greek Agora. But, in the name of modernization, people moved down to the modern city, where this "urban energy" was regenerated. During the 1990s, Gjirokastra was one of the Albanian cities with the highest rate of emigration, thereby causing a population shift from a dominant young age to old age (Filipi, 2014:24). Being a tourist attraction, the historical centre of Gjirokastra is threatened by the side effects of gentrification, loss of shops for residents in favour of tourist shops, as well as the destruction of not only the urban landscape, but also of people's daily lives, neighbourhood life and social customs (Casanovas, Bañeres, Sjekloća, 2016). The architectural heritage is in the process of destruction because most of the protected houses are left empty and there is a lack of economic development. Thus, the "urban energy" is not that present anymore, and Gjirokastra today is a city in a shrinking process.

Analysis and Discussion: Gjirokastra in a (Post-)Modern Condition
When discussing the relationship between the past, the present and the future, – represented here through the historic city and its (post-)modern condition – we will interpret the city as an architecture of collective memories (Ungers, 1979). Thus, Architecture (as an ideology) can be interpreted as the imaginary relation of the individual with his/her real conditions of existence (Althusser, 2001), occurring

in the city. This relation can be mapped. For instance, Kevin Lynch demonstrated that the alienated city is a space in which people are unable to mentally map either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves (Jameson, 1991). But, the process of mapping is possible in the traditional city through traditional markers – monuments, nodes, natural boundaries, etc. (Lynch, 1960). Thus, by framing the city of Gjirokastra as a whole structure – a modern city with a historical centre – we can regenerate the social life and the 'urban energy' through architecture. In this context, architecture as the interplay of cultural heritage, topography and hydrography (built and natural elements), stimulates a possible vision for the future city: a vision constructed on the premise of urban editing, by re-thinking the city in its fixed territory – in its streets, its buildings and its emptiness.
This approach towards city planning, was proposed by Ungers, Koolhaas, et.al., in "The City in the City: Berlin a Green Archipelago". They believe that the city cannot be repaired to its former substance and configuration (Ungers, et.al. 1977), thus, it has to be edited. The proposal consists of a collage of different urban islands and "emptiness" between them. The urban islands have an identity in relation to their history, social structure, and environmental characteristics (Ungers, et.al, 1977), while "emptiness" represents now valueless structures that could be gradually transformed into natural (green) zones, without any rebuilding (Ungers, et.al, 1977). The development
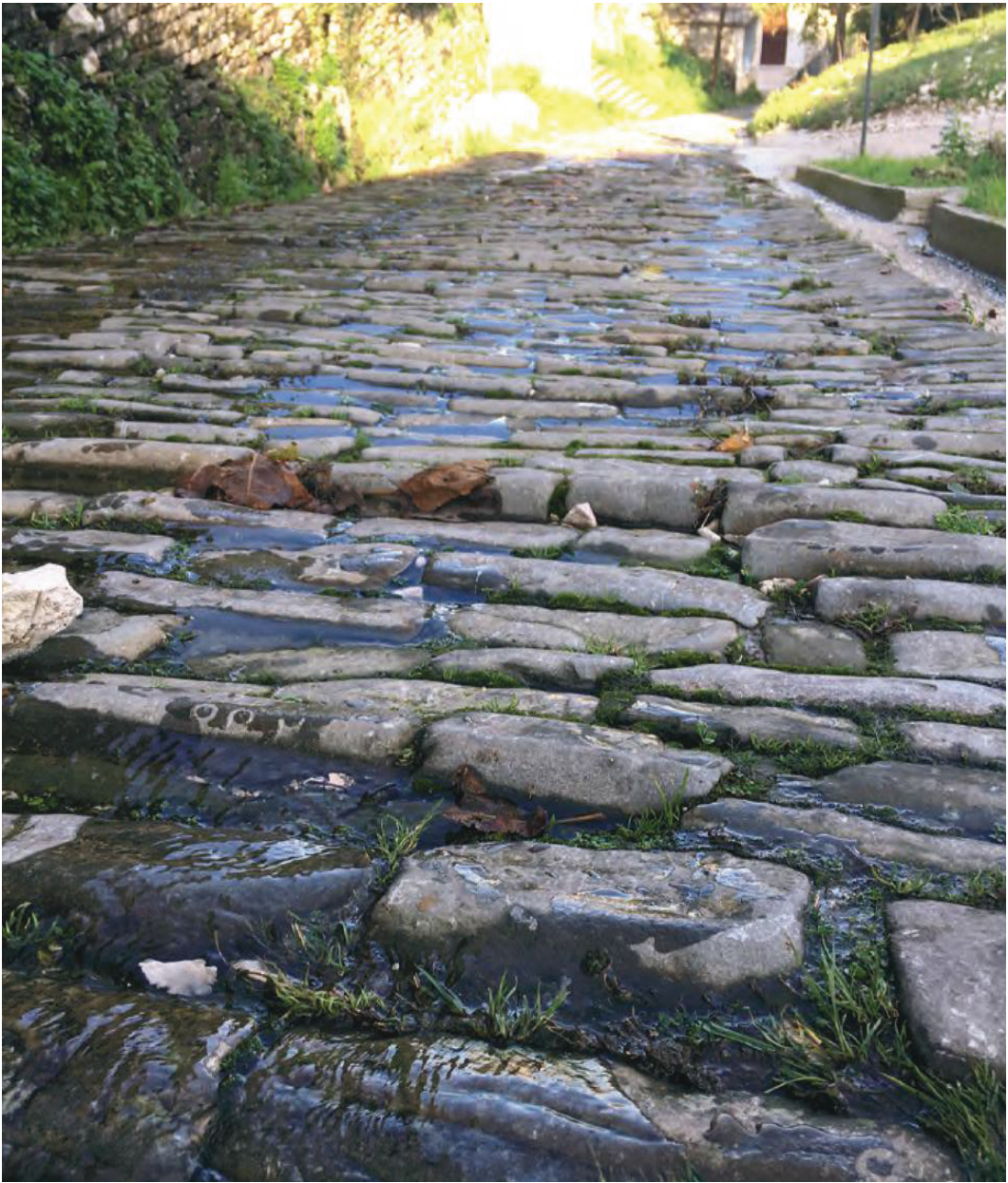
Fig. 3 / A photo of the water flows along the streets of the city. Source / Alberto Grando.

of this proposal is a result of the process of shrinking as a general tendency and a global phenomenon.

In this context, the reduction of the population and the abandonment of specific zones (e.g. the industrial zone in Gjirokastra) and structures within the city, represents aspects of the shrinkage. As in Berlin, this process might provide an opportunity to redevelop zones that are no longer satisfactory on technical, social and structural levels (Ungers. et.al, 1977). In the case of Gjirokastra - "The City in the City", means finding the modern city in the historic city. "Edited" Gjirokastra would represent a system of modified nature, which will give back new land and opportunities by deleting and regenerating parts of the city [Fig.2].

A proposal for the future city of Gjirokastra should be concerned with developing (i.e. editing) existing potentials of both the modern and historical part, and recreate a connection between them, through a specific language. In doing so, this paper proposes to emphasize the activities between the two parts of the city and regenerate the cultural heritage by re-using abandoned traditional and modern buildings for public functions (e.g. former Bajo Topulli Primary School in the historical part or the industrial zone).

A key element of the identity of Gjirokastra that could be used to connect the modern and historic centre, is hydrography. Water flows along the streets of the historic city and goes down towards the modern part in a transversal way towards the river [Fig.3]. The connection between the two parts of the city can be improved by using water to create paths, which overlap with the existing connections. Creating a connection between the historic and the modern city by using water paths opens the way to the idea of a polycentric urban system related to the bold message of
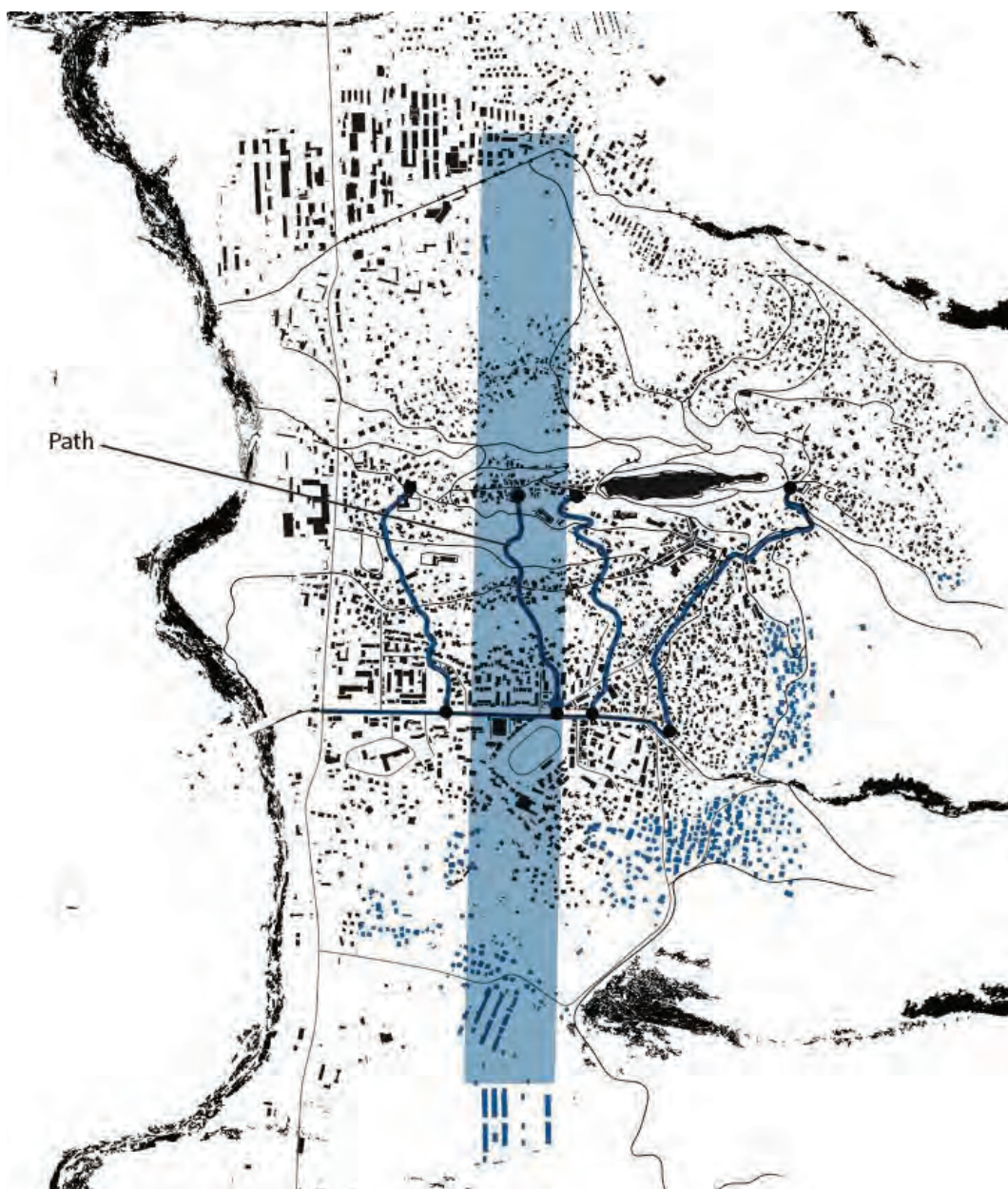
Fig. 4 / Map of the proposed interventions in the city. Source / Alberto Grando & Dasara Pula

Berlin: A Green Archipelago, suggesting a city of many islands instead of one condensed centre (Ungers et al.,1977). These paths would connect many islands in the city, thus creating a network, while the "emptiness" between the different parts of the city would be filled with new land, created from a process of deleting and editing.

Conclusions

The discussion about the problems, challenges and opportunities for Gjirokastra is often inside the discourse of cultural heritage. The objective of such discussion is related to the historic center – future plans for its development. But one should be aware that the challenges of Gjirokastra, are also related to the post-modern part. The city is shrinking in all of its spatial structure. Development, in this case, is not related to urban planning in the sense of growth and construction, but to

a process of editing what exists (Ungers, 1979). By using one of the proposed water paths as a model, the city can be studied inside a strip, proposing to delete specific parts in the future.

The idea is to delete informal constructions that are built in dangerous areas and are empty in some cases, by giving importance and creating another land and opportunity [Fig.5]. The abandoned buildings, without building standards, built in dangerous areas, and in non-appropriate land, should be considered for the process of deletion (presented in blue, Fig.5.).

Even though it seems like a utopian and radical scenario, Gjirokastra should make demolition part of its urban strategy for the next fifty or hundred years. Thus, this paper proposes that the new urban plans will not have to deal with urban growth, instead they will deal with editing what is already there. Creating new land, means

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creating space for natural transformations. This space would contain parks, greenery, walkways, or urban areas for agricultural use.
This proposal supports the regeneration of social life and "urban energy" between two different parts of the city. Furthermore,

it represents the post-modern city of Gjirokastra as an architecture of collective memories: a place where the cultural heritage, natural elements and social life of Gjirokastra would be reconstructed and regenerated as a whole to form and sustain the city's "urban energy".

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