

Beyond the tourism-led-development logic: the role of art and culture in outlining new spatial planning policies in post- pandemic Lezha.

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Abstract- *The article deals with art interventions' role in developing new spatial planning solutions for the Lezha region in the post-pandemic era, from a perspective of social and economic sustainability. Lezha is a strategic area for tourism development in Albania, but this opportunity also gives way to some emerging issues in its development, most of which have been further emphasized by the pandemics: the main one is avoiding the development of an economic model entirely dependent on tourism and improving locals' quality of life by addressing an increasing need for quality public spaces and participation. In fact, as demonstrated by the pandemics, tourism's revenue is not always a reliable economic source. Furthermore, when planning economic strategies to make a region wealthier, it is crucial to think about parallel social interventions to improve locals' quality of life. The article explores on the one hand art's potentialities linked to placemaking, critical reflection, creation of sense of belonging and locals' involvement, thus going beyond the mere promotion of cultural tourism, on the other hand its limits: the final aim should not be to create one more "open air museum", but to address public interest. Finally, the paper suggests some possible applications in Lezha, including a program of artistic residencies to be organized once a year in collaboration with agro-tourisms in Zadrima, with the objective of introducing socially engaged art projects all over the region.*

Keywords: Public art; Tourism development; Placemaking; Public spaces; Quality of life. Key words: Smart infrastructure, traffic congestion, internet of things, sensors, accessibility

Introduction

Lezha region is considered to be a strategic area for tourism development in Albania, due to both its very favorable geographic position and good climate. In fact, infrastructural connections are possible both by sea through Shengjin's port, by train through the international Lezha-Shkodra-Montenegro railway and by car through the Tirana-Lezha-Shkodra highway. Furthermore, Lezha gathers a wide variety of natural and cultural heritage sites, which represent a precious potential to build new touristic itineraries: among the most important ones are Rana and Shengjin's beaches, the Kune-Vain and Patok valleys, the Lura Lakes, Lezha's

castle, Scanderberg's tomb and the cave of Shenavlash, but there are many more. For these reasons, the Regional Development Strategy for Lezha region, drawn up by Lezha's Regional Council with the support of REC Albania and UNDP in 2005, insisted not only on building touristic villages and tourist ports along the coast, but also on fostering mountainous, archaeological and historical tourism (Regional Council, 2005).

Tourism is seen as a key element to ensure long-term economic development and social-environmental prosperity, thus making Lezha a wealthy region and giving a better future to its inhabitants. Albania 2030 Manifesto turns the spotlight on



Figure 1. Proposed scenarios in the Shengjin-Lezha segment (source:<https://www.openstreetmap.org>).

Albania's touristic potentials, pushing towards the diversification and extension of its touristic offering, going beyond coastal areas and summer seasons, by promoting new products including combined destinations and itineraries in inland regions (Aliaj, Janku, Allkja, Dharmo, 2014). According to this document, the main problems for tourism development in Albania have been the lack of the population's awareness, local and private actors' poor capacity building and absence of national spatial visioning policies.

Lezha being one of the poorest regions in Albania, with national records in illiteracy, unemployment and lowest own income p.c. rates, the Regional Development Strategy suggested mountainous, coastal, cultural and fishing tourism development as one of the strategic interventions to reach Goal 1, that is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. In particular, the project aimed at reducing the unemployment rate and the percentage of families receiving economic aid and improving the Human Development Index (Regional Council, 2005).

If tourism unquestionably remains an important opportunity for Lezha's economic growth on the one hand, on the other one the Covid-19 pandemics highlighted some emerging issues related to tourism-led-development logics. Due to the health emergency, borders were closed and touristic influxes were blocked, thus showing that tourism-linked incomes are not always a reliable economic source. Among the main concerns are: fostering a slow-and-safe tourism during the whole

year by promoting access to local cultural heritage, naturalistic and agro-touristic sites; avoiding the development of an economic model entirely dependent on tourism; improving locals' quality of life by addressing an increasing need for quality public spaces and participation; reducing traffic by introducing more sustainable and attractive mobility alternatives.

Taking these problems into consideration, this paper aims at analyzing the role art interventions may have in developing new spatial planning solutions for Lezha region in the post-pandemic era, from a perspective of social and economic sustainability. In order to achieve these results, the applied methodology was characterized by three phases: the first one included fieldwork, visits in Lezha, observations and interviews with local authorities; this was followed by a project phase, carried out in a multidisciplinary team, working on settlements and infrastructures' proposals; the final one involved in depth study of bibliography.

Art in public spaces has been increasingly employed in integrated urban regeneration processes, especially from the beginning of the 2000s: this is due to the culture-led regeneration logic's success, which spread all around Europe between the 1980s and 1990s, and to Richard Florida's famous creative city concept. Several studies outlined that during the second half of the 20th century the idea of art in public spaces evolved as follows: from "art in the 20th century the idea of art in public spaces evolved as follows: from "art in public space", reproducing in open spaces and wider scale museum and art galleries'



Figure 2. Castle View. Source/ Author

artworks without paying attention to the context, to “art as public space” (site specific), interacting with its environment but not with its public, to “art in the public interest”, interested in social and cultural dynamics, a tool to bring together communities through community specific interventions (Mazzucotelli Salice, 2016). This last idea of art in public spaces may be the most fruitful one to consider when developing new spatial planning solutions for Lezha, as the idea is not that of simply beautifying the landscape and creating a new open air museum, which would function as a touristic attraction, but that of addressing locals’ needs and trying to improve their quality of life.

Many national and international cases have shown art’s potentialities in terms of placemaking, critical reflection, creation of sense of belonging and locals’ involvement when dealing with urban contexts: an Albanian example might be Nikolin Bujari’s Bus Stops (Tirana, 2006), which consisted in the creation of a map showing the bus lines operating in the capital and in its installation in several bus stops, thus dealing with the needs of the citizens and at the same time functioning as a protesting action towards Tirana’s Municipality. Another significant case is that of Haha’s FLOOD (Chicago, 1992-1995), which involved the collaborative building of a hydroponic garden devoted to HIV-infected patients, where free meals were provided and educational activities and events related to alternative therapies, nutrition and horticulture were held. One last example might be Austrian artists’ group WochenKlausur’s Medical

care for homeless people (Wien, 1993), which consisted in the creation of a mobile medical clinic providing free care to approximately 700 homeless patients per month and which became a permanent institution after some years.

These kind of socially engaged artistic practices can offer a new perspective on how to improve locals’ quality of life, on the condition that some limits are considered: in particular, the risk of sacrificing art to territorial marketing and city branding’s objectives through shallow beautification practices and the risk of using art as a replacement for urban policies instead of integrating it with them. These problems have been considerably frequent, especially when art interventions were aesthetically valuable and transformed the urban landscape (Urban Art’s murals are maybe the most blatant example of Public Art’s exploitation for commercial and touristic purposes).

Given this background, we would like to conclude this contribution by suggesting a possible application of artistic practices in Lezha, with the aim of improving its inhabitants’ quality of life and its public spaces, thus supporting the region’s fragile social fabric during Lezha’s economic and touristic development process. The main idea is to introduce a program of artistic residencies to be organized once a year in collaboration with agro-tourisms in Zadrime, with the objective of creating public artworks all over the region, with a particular attention to public spaces and sustainable mobility infrastructures such as cycle paths and the railway line. The program would host selected artists, who



Figure 3. Castle View. Source/ Author

would live in Lezha for a medium-long period of time and would study both the territory and the locals' needs, with the aim of activating social processes rather than producing material artworks.

If art interventions were to be realized in this way, we think that they may have a significant role in outlining spatial policies to address Lezha's post-pandemic development, paying attention not only to tourism-related economic concerns, but also to social issues.

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