

Liminality components as a response to shrinkage

Restoring attractiveness, The case of Vrisera, Dropull

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Abstract

More than half of European cities shrank in the period 1990-2010 (Wiechmann 2013). This kind of urban transformation is a multidimensional process. It impacts economic and social domain. Shrinkage is also a phenomenon on several cities and rural areas in Albania. Among others Dropull can be considered a shrinking area as it has notably a smaller population and decline in economy compared with its past. Shrinkage can be seen as a liminality, as a transition phase of urban transformation. Liminality has many fields of study, but this research will examine the urban one. This paper will designate the main components in a shrinking area seen from the perspective of liminality as a threshold in time and place with its material and relational dimension.

The material dimension of liminality refers to the physical consequences emerging during the shrinking process, consequences that might be temporary. Amongst the challenges that migration/depopulation brings is also the housing stock, the abandoned vacant structures. The relation dimension will examine the abandonment of social habitat due to emigration, lack of activity and the deterioration of public spaces. In an effort to restore a sustainable urban settlement, the question of how can the component with liminal character help the process of building an identity emerges?

This paper is part of the research activity organized under the framework of the International PhD POLIS/ Ferrara in Architecture and Urban Planning, which focuses on the liminality state of Dropull's area. The background which strongly impacted the research process during the workshop was the drafting of the Local Development Plan compiled by Polis University. In this document Dropull is seen as a "linear city" with five main centers developed around the five main villages with a rural character and distinct development potentials.

An area in decline

The debate on the shrinkage of the urban/rural areas dates since the second half of the 20th century. The term was first used by Häussermann and Siebel while considering the deindustrialization of the Ruhr area in Germany. The decrease of industry sector productivity in the 80-s

after a prosperous industrialization period in the 60-s and 70-s led to population decline and city shrinkage. Even though many European cities were subject to shrinkage since the 60-s, several studies show that this phenomenon became more prevalent than urban growth in the 1990s (Turok and Mykhnenko, 2007:173-175). More than half of European cities shrank in the period 1990-2010 (Wiechmann, 2013)

Due to the political changes in Albania after the 90-s and the opening of the borders many people emigrated. The transition from a closed socialist regime to a democratic political regime was accompanied by the failure of the factories and industries, which led to a massive loss of industrial jobs. The life of industrial cities/towns was in question. Most state-owned companies had undergone privatization. The difficulties in managing the shift toward a free market

resulted in economy decline, which was the main reason of depopulation in a national scale. Based on the Census data the population of Albania had a negative population growth since 1989 with 318 000 habitants, and since 2001 with 306 800 habitants (INSTAT Census 2011). The social and political changes were an incentive for the shrinking process, which impacted the city organization. Population movements were directed toward major cities where economic opportunities were greater.

Gjirokastra and Dropull are listed as the most affected regions by the population loss. As the demographic analysis of Dropull Regional Plan states, the causes of the demographic changes at the country level are the same with the causes of population changes at the national level: high immigration, low birth rate and mortality. Even though there are wide-spread researches and publications on this phenomenon, the concepts on shirking haven't touched the rural areas outside the big countries. (Pužulis and Kūle, 2016:90) Dropull is a rural region and home of Greek minority. The region developed in a linear way, aligning with the national road where the economical industrial activities are developed. The prolonged extension of the development is strongly determined by the territorial morphology. The four main villages, Dervican, Sofratik, Jorgucat, Vrisera are mainly agricultural and livestock-based, but they also have natural and historical resources that are not exploited yet. The question is how to stabilize the population loss and try make these settlements sustainable.

The dimensions of liminality

The concept of liminality can be analyzed from several aspects, in the context of Dropull. Geographically, Dropull developed in the border, and this proximity has encouraged the emigration toward the neighboring Greece. Demographically, the depopulation process is a liminal situation of transition and uncertainty of passing from one state to another, a state of between and betwixt, as conceptualized in the theories of Van Gennep and Turner. This paper considers shrinkage as liminal situation, with a potential toward transformation. The first dimension of liminality is the material one. This refers to the physical assets that emerge during the shrinking process, the potentiality of which might be temporary. Urban transformation is a multidimensional process. With population declining, it starts a chain reaction of economic decline, a loss of jobs, a decline of public and private investments, and then emigration and so on. But the biggest assets affected by the population movements is housing.

The housing typology in Dropull is the single-family house. A considerable part of the houses are empty due to the abandonment of rural area. It appears that the housing stock is both a burden and a solution. There are different solutions to such dichotomy. Literature shows (Szafrńska, Coudroy de Lille and Kazimierczak, 2019:43-45) (Wiechmann, 2008:434-436) in Eastern Germany after 1990, the abandoned housing blocks from socialist period were demolished. The situation was different in those post-communist Central and Eastern Europe



Fig.1 / The remains of village bridge. Source / the author



Fig.2 / Drinos River. Source / the author

counties where population decline turned out to have a positive impact due to the shortage of housing from the communist period and the failure to cover the high demand for shelter. While these are urban examples, this dual character of this asset also occurs in rural areas. The massive emigration of Dropull caused a population decrease of about six times in comparison with that of the early 90s. Data from the demographic analysis,

referring to the General Local Plan for Dropull, shows about 7,200 habitants in the 2015 while the population in 1990 was about 20,000 habitants. Migration created a housing stock, part of which is occupied for a few weeks per year. Census 2011 shows a housing stock of 78%, 3800 uninhabited residences out of 5000 existing. Vacancy posed the problem of maintenance. Degradation is the most common scenarios for the old traditional



Fig.3 / Village upper view from the public center. Source / the author



Fig.4 / The border. Source / the author

structures. For the owners living away, but also for those that live there, maintenance is a burden. The demand for houses is low which can also explain the low number of the new constructions, only 500 houses built after 1990.

Material liminality in housing stock is about the transition from a fully exploited status to the status of abandonment, accompanied with economic uncertainty. The relation dimension is the second

liminal dimension taken into account. It implies the relation amongst the public space and its inhabitants. In the situation of rural shrinkage and economic decline, another problem is the decline or deterioration of service infrastructures. The negative trend of population has an impact on the physical environment. Yet such trend affects differently the public and private investments. The detachment of the emigrants from their original social

habitat results in a lack of activity and alienation of assets. Each dimension deal with a realm. The material dimension is associated with the private sector, housing. The relational dimension is coupled with public space, the urban void. These liminal dimensions can contribute of the adoption of the built environment to the existing needs but also as a starting point of a more optimistic population projection.

The case of Vrisera

Vrisera is a village lying in the upper Dropull, strongly impacted by the phenomenon of urban stagnation. Territorially, Vrisera is the placement of several typologies next to each other that often do not interact but just 'slide' among them. From this perspective, the village is more a transition space than a destination, thus relating to the concept of liminality as a state of in-between-ness. Visiting this border village, we perceive the depletion of natural assets, a lack of orientation and a lack of identity in the area. Vrisera does not offer any cultural attractions; it lacks the traditional stone buildings that other villages have. Agriculture and farming have been the main economic areas. But in recent years, few industrial activities have developed, taking advantage of the accessibility to the nearby national road and the proximity with the border. However, it is very important to emphasize that the economy of the area is not determined by the number of active companies, but by the employment these companies offer to the local economy. One of the consequences of demographic change which is ageing. Ageing is a social consequence which directly impacts the economy, the labor force and social life. Thus, a wave of emigration took emptied the region from the working-age population. The demographic decline is attributed mainly to the emigration in Greece and in urban areas like Gjirokastra or even further. Few are the families remaining in the village. In 1993 the village counted 311 inhabitants. (Kallivretakis, 1995) Today it has a permanent population of 100-150 inhabitants.

Emigration and migration changed the balance between the housing stock and the demand for it¹. The maintenance of vacant houses becomes an issue when there is no rental or buying demand. Part

of this housing stock has undergone a restoration process from the owners, who live abroad and return to their houses for one or two weeks per year. In economic terms, the low number of habitants is translated into reduced income and reduced budget. Consequently, there are no public investments. This can be easily noticed in the center of Vrisera where there the administrative and public buildings are located. Only a small health center and the fire department are functional². The space around them is neglected. The bridge linking the river shores has collapsed thus interrupting the transverse connection.

What we need to consider when it comes to depopulation, and all its consequences, is the impoverishment of the city, and its competitiveness in the national and international market economy. In order to regain or attract population, a place should offer standards comparable to those of the nearest magnet poles, even if competing them might be difficult. This paper initially argues that the stagnation process and its multiple effects on the urban context raises the question of what are the components of liminality created by this situation, and what might their potential be?

Restoring the attractiveness of the town requires an in-depth analysis of the situation. Two byproducts of stagnation are the housing stock and the deteriorated public spaces, which are identified in this paper as the material and relational dimension of liminality. From the experience of East Germany cities, the response to housing vacancies, when they became a real concern in the shrinking Halle³, was the urban restructuring. (Haase, A., Rink, D., Grossmann, K., Bernt, M., and Mykhnenko, V. 2014:10-11).

Such restructuring meant demolishing needless housing and intervening in downsizing the technical and social infrastructure. The main actors in this process were the housing companies and the municipality utility unit. The answer to the situation in some CEE post-socialist countries is different. Interventions in shrunk areas has been a matter of urban policy, which cannot always be adopted to rural areas. As Hospers and Josefin pointed out in their book: "In academic circles, planning issues in rural environments coping with long term population decline is much less investigated. Consequently,

¹ / There are no detailed data at village level about the demographic movement and housing abandonment.

² / From site visit

³ / Halle has been considered to be Europe's fastest shrinking city for the past two decades. It lost 30% of its total population between 1986 and 2008.



Fig.5 / Abandoned structure. Source / the author

259



Fig.6 / School conditions. Deterioration of public spaces. Source / the author

parts of the literature on shrinkage have little relevance for rural areas." (Hospers, Syssner, 2018:10-11).

In the case of Vrisera, there is no shortage of housing stock, because the latter are emptied due to the emigration and migration of the population. Hence, the possible trajectory is the reuse, or the adoption to temporary usage, by putting this stock in the market with competitive cost in the area. "Housing can be considered a part of the problem

of demographic decline as well as a part of the solution " cited (Szafrńska, Coudroy de Lille and Kazimierczak, 2019: 444). But this offer must correspond to a demand. The shrinkage phenomenon can be seen from a different perspective, as Marco Bontje explains it when talking about Leipzig. In some cases, it offers opportunities that some cities don't have. He refers to spaces for innovation, green spaces, affordable rents, sub-cultures etc. Similar opportunities like affordable rents, innovation spaces for startup companies,

and land vacancies to host events are important to be taken in consideration in our case.

As mentioned earlier, several companies develop their industrial activities in the village. Upper Dropulli, the administrative unit where Vrisera village belongs, has a concentration of 41% of companies with a significant number of large companies. Brand new innovations and start-up companies are the target groups which may capitalize on the available empty space with easy access to the national road and the village center. The example of Leipzig dealing with shrinkage, underlines the impact of BMW factory construction and also the role of cultural and sports events⁴. The cultural components applied in the village center may help the shift from transition state to opportunity. In order to recover the settlement and restore its attractiveness, it is important to identify the possibilities inherent to community. The liminal nature of business and cultural activities, like the festivals, provides a temporary occupancy by triggering the demand for hospitality, shelter and other basic needs. Such demand necessitates in turn the rental schemes and utilization of renovated infrastructure and services. Empowering the village by constructing its attractiveness related to a specific development will help the social and economic interaction among villages and have an impact in municipal incomes.

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⁴ / Organized in 2002 Turnfest, with about 100,000 participants.

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