

RURBAN SEQUENCES

Inquiries on Dropull's states of Liminality

Besnik Aliaj
Sotir Dhamo
POLIS University Tirana

314

"Rurban Sequences: Inquiries of Dropull's states of Liminality!" - is a professional and scientific tentative to develop a new intellectual position towards the failures of aggressive ultra-liberal urbanization and the need for new models of life towards the new rural-urban balances, in the conditions of post-crisis society/city. The case of participatory drafting and the approval of the General Local Plan (GNL) of the Municipality of Dropull in the South of Albania, represents in itself a good example of how the social responsibility of the professionals and institutions must act in the ground, in order to be able to initiate constructive development processes. Of course, it is already clear that it must first all start with the professionals and institutions reforming their own mentalities on the role of the city planning in society. Interestingly enough, such a planning example started with no financial resources, but with the maximal will to work together with people, community and authorities. It also ended up by generating the necessary energy and resources for a successful and useful experience toward the local needs. The work has been further elaborated scientifically by the joint International PhD Program of U-POLIS and Ferrara Universities, demonstrating how research could become useful in planning a sustainable and resilient world.

At the beginning of this project, we stated that the condition of liminality - being an intermediate state, phase, or condition, an in-between, but also a transitional phase - in the context of the sequence of villages in Dropull, Albania, was the main objective

of the research study. We also believed that it can serve very well as an inspiration for the detailed design speculations and strategies that ought to be developed for certain areas, especially after the approval of GLP. We hoped that such logic can generate different research paths and stimulate critical discussion among academics, researchers, students and professionals, thus setting the foundations for further scientific contributions in Albania and beyond it.

Given the rural character of Dropull and the potentials inherent to it, the lack of local reference landmarks (despite the richness of the landscape and its territory,) pushed for a Strategic Objective of the project that aimed to consider Dropull Municipality as a "linear city" with five main centers. The five centers are developed in proximity with the main motorway and around five main villages, which have distinct characteristics and development potentials. Such potentials could be used as energizers for the development of the surrounding areas. Indeed, the concept behind the "linear city" also helps the reading of Dropull as a link between the two main regional hubs, Gjirokastra (Albania) and Ioannina (Greece).

The aim was to transform the role and weight of Dropull's territorial gravity from an area with a mere 'transit status' between two main/bigger cities, to a "complementary network of settlements and services" that uses its own local potentials and regional competitiveness to develop as a whole. This means concentrating exclusively on the

development strategies and investments in the targeted areas and living settlements (villages).

In the end we intended to develop an alternative way of territorial planning that goes against the logic of dominance by means of the strong "urban language" imposed by the practices, instruments, laws, bylaws and guidelines of the traditional territorial planning. Instead, we aimed at developing/adapting new methodologies and instruments of planning for large territories of rural, agricultural and landscaping character as well, where heritage and tourism potential can be highly useful for resilient economic growth.

From a theoretical perspective we can summarize the selected findings as below:

Prof. Arch. Alessandra Battisti – investigates the "2030' UN Agenda for Sustainable Development" and identifies 17 Objectives of SDGs (2015), which implicitly formulate a j'accuse of the current model of the world growth and the respective evolution from an environmental, economic and social point of view, an evolution that overcomes the misleading idea that ... the sustainability is only an environmental issue ... (UN 2017). She refers to rurality and landscaping as potentials for tourism and economic growth, as well as for sustainable development. She points out that currently, about 28% of the EU population lives mainly in inner peripheries and rural areas, 32% in small cities and suburban

areas (intermediate areas), while the remaining 40 % are concentrated in larger cities (Eurostat, 2017). Battisti also refers to the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in 1887, who identified two concepts "Gemeinschaft - Gesellschaft" and translated them into two different spatial notions, in order to illustrate the contrast between the "village" and the "city". From her theoretical reflections, Battisti concludes, regarding the practical case of Dropull, that ... "Despite being considered a symptom and not a cause to the rural decline, due to poor accessibility and lack of economic opportunities, depopulation represents today one of the main factors introducing the need to address and manage the complexity of the change, especially in the inner/cross-border peripheries.

This produces the emergence of the new political visions – that sees such areas (at least in the declarations of principles), less and less configured as of 'agricultural' profile, and increasingly more and more as 'rural', 'touristic' and 'landscaping' one, in terms of potential. In a more incisive way than other forms of design, the one that pertains to the inner/cross-border peripheries tends to present itself as a general approach towards a positive change in society and a constructive framework of life, capable of reading its rich diversities, proposing places "to size" the community that resides there."

PhD. Artan Kacani – elaborates the concept of liminality in terms of territorial development, looking at it as a theoretical research on the bio-politics and property

right theories. According to Kacani, liminality has two main definitions: i) the first definition is related to the position of the planer between the concepts of consciousness / supraliminal, -and- unconsciousness / subliminal; ii) the second, has to do with the definition the planner uses in relation to the dimensions in-between. Kacani investigates the structural articulations of the dimensions in-between and their similarities with the territorial/spatial development. He points out that the territorial development happens with a certain level of human consciousness, and includes all the in-between dimensions of liminality - time, space and subjects on it, from individual to groups, society, and the state. He investigates probabilistically the articulations of liminality dimensions, and consequently the respective results of the territorial development, including its similarities with the property rights theories.

The limits of his research are defined by: i) the liminality dimensions, ii) the number of articulations, iii) and the level of consciousness of the local context. The main conclusion for him is that "the higher the number of articulations is, the higher would the consciousness of territorial development be. Fewer articulations there are, the more authoritarian/centralized would the territorial development be". He points out that such model correlates with the property rights theories and various definitions of bio-politics. The article is a first attempt to catalogue forms of territorial sovereignty, territorial values, and land development models. He invites other researchers to reflect and contribute further on the exploration of a broader number of articulations in order to produce new models of comprehensive territorial development.

Translating these theories into an actual outcome for Dropull, gives such municipality the possibility to play an important integrative role in the region, by: i) providing space for production (development of agriculture and farming); ii) processing of local products (support and expansion of services-and-industry-based economic areas that make use of local produce and contribute to the circular economy); iii) promoting and trading of the local productions in the region and abroad (improvement of infrastructure, facilities, and development of a regional market, connected to five smaller local markets of each of the five main urban centers of Dropull); iv) developing a R&D area of cross-

border importance (which would provide quality assessment services, product based research, experimentation with new innovative products, professional courses fit for the local people and economy, etc.); v) balancing the sprawl and expansion of other neighboring urban areas in the region, into natural and agricultural realms, in order to contribute to a more balanced territorial performance on social, economic and environmental terms; vi) managing Dropull's state of rurality and many other states of liminality that characterize the municipality; vii) managing and regulating the production of thresholds within this rural territory and preserving main natural and landscape features, etc.

PhD Laura Pedata and PhD Eranda Janku attempt to understand Dropull via "liminal spaces and thresholds" from several theoretical and scientific perspectives. They define the "Liminal space" or "in-betweenness" as "a space resulting from passage and transition, an area of uncertainty, often also a mobile border, where the concept of liminality facilitates the understanding of the dynamics between the spatial form of the border and the border function of space." They underline liminality as a twofold issue: i) a process of social change, and ii) as a process of spatial production. They see liminality as a conceptual tool and point out the use and meaning of liminality under political and cultural changes. Pedata & Janku distinguish from the anthropological perspective three mentalities: 1) pre-liminal rites, or rites of separation, which consist of leaving a former behavior and breaking with former practices and routines; 2) liminal rites, or the transition rites, which represent the passage through the threshold that marks the boundary between two phases; 3) post-liminal rites, or the rites of re-aggregation, which celebrate the successful completion and overpassing of the transition.

Both authors focus on elaborating the criteria and conditions that produce liminality and thresholds, as they appear to have 'thickness' and reside between different conditions throughout various scales. This includes: i) the geographic terrain; ii) road infrastructure; iii) high fragmentation of agricultural land; iv) vicinity to economic areas; v) provision of day to day services and commuting patterns, etc. They conclude: ... By activating all these instruments, potentials and capacities that Dropull currently has, Dropull would then be able to invite back and host back the migrant population that

has left the place, and even attract new population in the area. This would also make possible what Kacani proposes: the balancing of sprawl, the management of rurality and preservation of the natural and landscape features.

PhD. Saimir Kristo and **PhD. Joana Dhiamandi** give an account of their own experience with other Greek-speaking communities and the encounter and interaction of POLIS University's students and staff with the local residents of Dropull. They document - via site visits, direct interviews, urban charrettes, drawings and pictures - the liminal cultures of Dropull communities. By referring to the theories of Kevin Lynch and Vassilis Nitsiakos they draw a very basic map of the local identities. In the end, they draw three main conclusions related to the concept of a "Border Area":

i) The historical border. Even though the border between Albania and Greece was fixed by international treaties, the lack of correspondence between the national borders and the ethnological context on the ground, continued to be a problem for a long time; as ethnic groups and even families and kin were often divided separated.

ii) The political border. The symbolic and ideological boundaries of the 'cold war' were influenced by the political borders, yet their functions operated differently in each country. This was a result of the contexts and conditions of negotiations between collective and individual identities, a phenomenon which depended on the historical conjuncture and the various social-political situations in each of countries.

iii) The trans-border context. The relations formed due to the trans-border context of the post-communist period, are examined in relation to the "political economy" of the particular mobility. Therefore, the concept of asymmetry, the inequality between the two sides of the border, etc., have been decisive for the actual situation, especially from the current context of the relations between the Western Balkan Countries and EU (of which Greece - the neighboring country - is part of). The very movement of people from one side to the other, is also part of a broad dynamic that develops with the opening of the border. Such dynamics are determined by the tendency and pressure to leave the country because of the present social, political, and economic crisis, and by the general perception of Greece as a "place to live" by many people.

The concrete proposals from: i) the POLIS academic staff and teams; ii) and the PhD researchers of POLIS/UNIFE PhD Program are outlined below:

The first set of contributions comes from the ideas put forward in the approved GLP General Local Plan of Dropull Municipality in 2019.

General Local Plan (GLP) was prepared by a team of experts of POLIS University: Prof. Dr. Besnik Aliaj, PhD. Sotir Dharmo, and PhD. Dritan Shutina led the initiative; Dr. Eranda Janku was involved with the Planning Component on a day to day basis; Prof. Sherif Lushaj led the environmental assessment component; PhD. Amanda Terpo led the GIS component; PhD. Godiva Rembeci led the statistical component. GLP is not a mere local plan. It represents an important bottom-up methodology of territorial planning in the municipal units of strong rural, agricultural and landscape character. Therefore, it is an innovative methodology of planning that reverses the dominant existing logic of territorial planning aimed at municipal units of strong urban character, driven by the construction industry.

PhD Ledian Bregasi is also a member of the POLIS planning team who focuses on communicating the plan to all the stakeholders of such peculiar context. Bregasi believes in "using innovation as a tool for inverting emigration trends in abandoned and depopulated municipalities." He thinks that "digital manufacturing could leap the technological gap and strengthen the connection between the community and its territory." Bregasi concludes that "prior to the planning actions, planners must focus on the education and the governance of innovation, which constitutes an indispensable basis to be able to develop new policies." Although the need for contextually informed and place-based policies are unanimously accepted in countries like Albania, where the capacities are scarce and the inclination towards "global north" models is strong, more often than not, the adopted policies are imported from the transitional/ developed countries.

Therefore, a genuine place-based approach counts as novel. In these terms, the recently approved GLP is for him a starting point. Additionally, the deliberate focus of the "project on the place-makers" rather than on the "land policies and instruments" constitutes a welcomed departure from the existing traditional



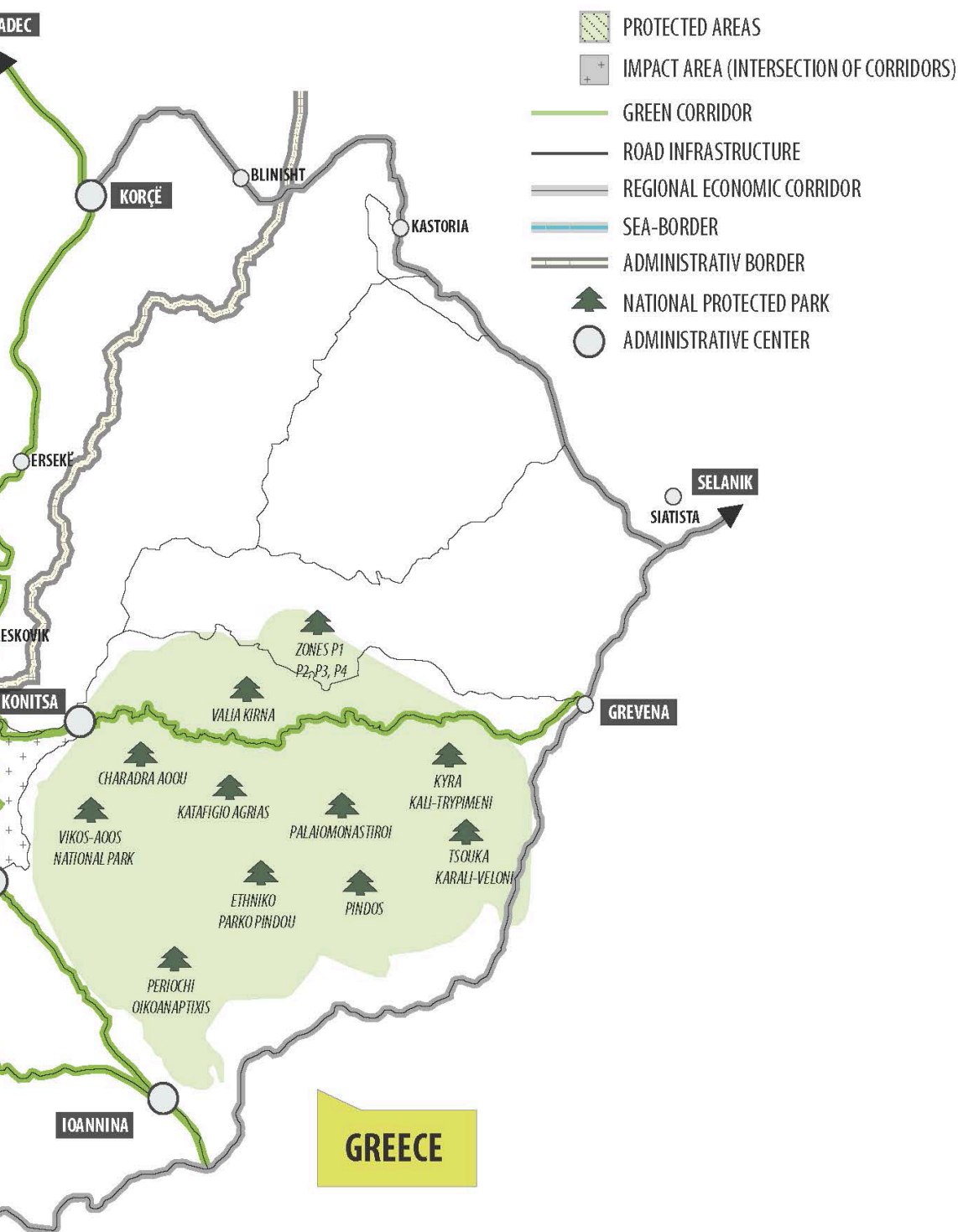


Fig. 1 / Regional Network of Green Corridors. Source / Albania 2030 Manifesto

policies. The ambition to overcome the local scale is also faced with a multitude of challenges. The current size, experiences and capacities of the local actors are such that being competitive beyond the local Albanian scale is highly unlikely. Therefore, the organization into a “network of place makers”, which can also become part of disembodied value-chains with the neighboring territories in Greece, becomes a significant instrument to place Dropull into a cross-border and inter-regional setting.

PhD Amanda Terpo investigates how the planning team of U-POLIS gathered knowledge on the Dropull territory via geographic data, in a situation with practically no data and no capacities to generate them. The establishment of the GIS practice was a two-year process. As the new administrative reform had just taken place in 2015, the drafting of the GLP-s was practically the moment of the “first” plans that the newly established local entities would have. Yet Dropull Municipality was not included into the scheme of public grants for the development of the new plans. It all depended on the good will of the POLIS/Municipal respective staff and leadership. The plan faced many challenges, but Terpo focused on the issue of data gap during the planning process, a gap that was addressed through a mixed methodology. For Dropull Municipality the planning process was challenging due to lack of data, cadaster registration problems, shrinking population (from about 22,000 to about 7,000 inhabitants), not mentioning many property conflicts.

The GIS data-creation process aimed to ensure substantial data not only to facilitate the planning and decision making process, but to also establish sustainable and long-term quality governance. Therefore, GIS system was mainly oriented towards online data record and overlay of information to bring together both quantitative data with its geographical location. The research was the most substantial part of GIS plan-making process. The team had to deal with the interests of the stakeholders and agencies involved, in a coordinated effort to contextualize the planning process for a specific municipality. The use of GIS system was in itself another crucial challenge, since the municipality had no previous experience, and their own cartographic information was mostly fragmented and damaged. The main conclusion and final recommendation for Terpo is “to acknowledge the sustainable

development approaches at a multilevel decision-making logic, while at the same time enrich the territorial information in order to enable a development strategy based to the real context and advantages of the specific municipality.

Dr. Godiva Rembeci points out that statistics are very important in enhancing good governance and appropriate policies. Rembeci says that trustworthy statistics - such as GDP indicators, income per capita, living conditions, inflation rate, unemployment rate, projection of population, etc. - are essential in monitoring the achievement of both national and local development goals. But in order to guarantee better public services to communities, society and government, both at a central and local level, the statistics for finance allocation should be used on the basis of consensual visions and projections, like those used on land use planning, housing, health care, and education facilities. From this perspective, the setting up of the information databases on urban/territorial planning processes, represents an indispensable and imperative tool. The author emphasizes that the warehouse of microdata creates opportunities for compiling various statistics, which should be used to measure and monitor the achievements related to the objectives of development strategies.

While there is no doubt about the role of statistics in the development and monitoring of national and local strategies, the availability of microdata becomes even more essential when we talk about the production of statistics. The lack of data is more likely to occur when we refer to small or remote administrative areas such as local units, communes or municipalities. In these terms, the Dropull case study consists in a difficult but creative planning experience, and a complex but proactive process of data-sources/statistical validation, focused on people and on demographic indicators. It also shows the role of statistical data in defining the demographic profile of a specific Municipality. Therefore, desk- and field-work was combined with data collection from archives, INSTAT and other institutions, while the extrapolation of historic data and present information was combined with a participatory method of data collection and qualitative interviews with people and local administrators. The GLP planning experience for the Municipality of Dropull has been an historic “moment-zero” for the establishment

of the statistical data, GIS data system, and territorial planning in itself, in such a newly established municipality. Therefore, the best thing is adapting to a proactive attitude by doing something, even if not perfect, rather than waiting and 'crying' about 'bad luck'.

Prof. Dr. Sherif Lushaj investigates the methodology of the environmental assessment of the Dropull Municipality. The latter was lately established by the union of three rural entities: i) Upper Dropull, ii) Lower Dropull; iii) and Pogon commune. It all comprises in total 41 villages and a surface of 448.45 km². The emergence of the administrative reorganization pushed for a new planning and development relationship, with a special view to the sustainable development and resilient future.

Among many urgent priorities, the new municipal administration has identified three issues:

- 1) establishing new urban-rural balances;
- 2) protecting the environment and improving community services;
- 3) promoting long-term sustainability, while dealing with growing risks of erosion, fires, flooding, forests damaging, informal activities and other socio-economic crisis.

Despite drafting a new GLP for a strategic development period of 15 years, the municipality also undertook also a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA - locally known as VSM). According to the legislation, both GLP and SEA had to go through a process of public consultations at all stages, including four specialized public hearings on SEA. The assessment was considered as an environmental status analysis, aiming to identify the environmental consequences of GLP plan and its policies, as well as ensuring the implementation of environmental-friendly projects. Throughout the process, the potentials and opportunities of Dropull have been identified; the environmental problems and risks areas were analyzed critically, as well as measures to reduce the negative impacts of the plan and projects were identified, in close exchange with the local, regional and national environmental institutions.

Main environmental considerations and recommendations for Dropull are:

- i) Topography and territorial systems;
- ii) Scenarios of the environmental assessment plan;
- iii) Analysis of the environmental situation in the territory of the municipality;
- iv) Geo-hazards and natural stressors;
- v) Compliance with the

objectives and environmental impacts of the plan. The innovative finding for Dropull Municipality SEA is that the team that performs a SEA must also be set up to respond to the interactive and multi-disciplinarity needs that satisfy three main components – 1) the technical process, and communication; 2) the Integration of the environmental and health monitoring systems which would help to either establish or better monitor health outcomes from certain risk factors; 3) the obtainment of better results by ensuring the implementation of the GLP Plan and other specialized/sectoral plans and programs, 4) the identification of the "environmental priorities" and public participation in the process. SEA is an important mechanism that creates increased accountability for the policymakers in enhancing good environmental governance. It also strengthens democratic institutions and addresses potential mechanisms for dialogue and policy influencing.

The second set of contributions comes from the International Workshop and PhD researchers themselves from POLIS and UNIFE:

Aida Ciro starts with the fact that today almost 6 million foreign citizens visit Albania annually, marking also the existence of a stable 2-digit annual increase. This proves that the importance of tourism in Albania is a factor of growth. As result, the number of communities adopting tourism development initiatives as a strategy for local economic development is growing, including the "liminal places" that once were considered 'undeveloped' and far from tourism's interests. Ciro focuses on exploring the concept of liminality, and how it can be reversed through tourism into a development initiative. A number of specific cases ranging from the local to national ones, are used to illustrate the relationship between this state of in-betweenness and the entrepreneurial ecosystem within a tourism development context. The case studies of the village of Fishtë Village, Lezhë (North Albania) and Gramsh Municipality (Central Albania) are two among the used examples. They show a way how tourism development can serve to reverse (social and economic) liminality.

The author concludes that ... tourism development could reverse liminality, or any of its attributes, including temporal, spatial and subject-related. At least the "#EjaNëGramsh" campaign and "#MrriziiZanave" case, although different

in approach and scale, are clear examples of how liminality was reversed thanks to the bottom-up tourism development processes. But liminality as a reversible condition in relation to tourism demand also shows that tourists are increasingly looking for previously unexplored places or liminal destinations at the verge of unlocked the untapped potential that lies in the liminal attributes of such places.

This provides a real opportunity to shift from the ambiguous state of limen towards a new structural/stable state achieved through a new purpose in favor of tourism development.

Blerim Nika focuses on the Sofratika village, as a particular case of Dropull. Sofratika is situated among a natural system, an historic site (Aadrianopolis), and a rich agricultural system. Agriculture has been the most important sector of the economic development during the centralized economy period (1945-1990). The aftermath following the fall of the regime in 1991 was catastrophic for most of the productive areas, as they suffered major changes due to the closure of many productive activities, abandonment and uncontrolled privatization. Abandoned or not properly used for almost three decades, the space is left to the mercy of the sprawl of informal/urbanization activities, which increased uncontrolled exploitation. This harmed the local environment and landscape, and it also limited the possibilities of local governments for urban requalification. Nika analyzes how such "raw-material extraction areas" can be repurposed and regenerated in the existing economic situation. He analyses the relationships between the "raw-material extraction" facilities and the urbanized/living centers on the one hand, and the broad natural eco-systems in which such facilities are contained.

Then, he elaborates the extent of the damages of the connection of the place with the natural system. However, he is aware that the recovery of an abandoned quarry area is a complex activity that, by its very nature, requires to be tackled with adequate and long-term resources. It requires obtaining relatively short results, while the outcomes would manifest in time, after hundreds or even thousands of years. Nika underlines that the choices that are made at the time of planning are in some way definitive since they assign land-use function(s), which affect the long-term development substantially. These considerations make it essential both for

planning and its realization via projects that need extensive planning, agricultural and environmental competences.

Emel Petërçi - examines the concept of historical landscape in the state of liminality, as well as their vague nature and associations to modern landscapes, in terms of research and practice. She gives specific consideration to the associations of conventional landscapes with the subject of identity: history, culture and heritage. The answers to such dialogues could be identified within the so-called review of the traditional or historical landscapes. Peterçi sees some of the answers for the existing developing agendas at the pre-modern roots of the local context; often appearing as an historical continuity of the local landscape in terms of shapes and practices. She stresses the fact that during different historic periods, Sofratika and the territory of the Drino valley nearby, has been administered by different regimes that influenced its landscape in different ways.

Petërçi examines how the state of liminality has affected the different elements of such a historic landscape, which, in this specific case, includes a rich Archaeological Park/Area (Adrianopolis as part of the neighboring National Archaeological Park of Antigone). The area is supposed to have had enough strong legislation and practical instruments to preserve the local historic landscape. The question is: how does Sofratika benefit to be part of its own rich historical and archaeological context?

This is possible only when the residents themselves are aware that assets like archeological sites are a unique reality. The proposal of "landscape viewed" methodology of Peterçi offers a conceptual framework by which one can imagine how built environment reflects the gradual process of historical change. Indeed, the liminal landscape of Sofratika allows simultaneously a "backward- and forward-looking approach". The conclusion is that in cases of transition of the liminal landscape in a settlement with rich historic assets (back to its past-liminal landscape), its transformation is a very slow process, if not done with the help of responsible authorities. A "layering" strategy remains the main recommendation of Peterçi: an alerting instrument that helps one understand if the transforming/damaging elements begin to change the landscape functions. This is exactly the moment when it becomes clear that the liminal landscape stage has come to an end.

Ilaria Fabri investigates the issue of the aging population and migration trends as concerns that raise diverse questions about present and future of villages and rural areas on a range of issues, from social exclusion to the dismissed buildings, and the decline of public facilities. In particular, those areas that are more dependent on agriculture are facing stronger challenges, as rural exodus has gradually left behind elder residents who rarely have the necessary mobility and motivation for intensive land work. Indeed, they risk isolation. On the other hand, the lack of job opportunities and the shortage of agricultural workforce are closely connected. The shortage of jobs is generally the main push-factor for migration or emigration. The second one, the shortage of agricultural workforce, represents the real consequence of massive youth migration from a rural context towards big cities and abroad. Fabri investigates the possibility for the rural community to be an active player in inverting the trends of shrinking villages. She identifies a set of possible actions at neighborhood scale that, from the initiative of the local people, can lead to effective "rural revitalization" and "new social and economic value".

She undertakes a kind of exploratory study, where the village of Jorgucat is presented as an emblematic case study, as it epitomizes the issues of most low-dense and depopulated settlements with a land-related nature and agriculture vocation. Fabri's proposed strategies have: i) a special focus on community engagement, ii) an introduction of innovative public facilities, iii) the promotion of unconventional uses of the land and new working methods, etc. Their applicability to Jorgucat's context is explained with similar up-and-running projects. She argues that some valuable initiatives of rural development might start from the local people and entrepreneurs themselves, rather than as a response to government policy. Therefore she suggests possible opportunities for transformation and innovation at neighborhood level, including: 1) small scale interventions of innovative services at neighborhood level; 2) thinking of the rural villages as attractive place to live and visit; 3) top-down policies and investments in infrastructures and public facilities that are fundamental in creating the necessary basic conditions for a sustainable future in rural areas; and 4) active participation of the community as a pivotal agent.

But the main question is: ... How to achieve broad stakeholder and community

involvement in the enhancement of rural environment? Is there a will and ability of the local stakeholders and the community to participate in developing innovative change by means of participatory process? Fabri underlines that it is essential to set up events to foster community power and collaboration, directly engaging with the behavioral patterns of local stakeholders. For her, it remains crucial to identify local community leaders who would promote collaboration between stakeholders and the community. She concludes that ... the factors that facilitate local community involvement appear to be contextual, and therefore proposing a set of options in line with specific settlement potentials is urgent.

Joan Ikonomi investigates emigration, depopulation, population ageing, and the limited use of agriculture, livestock, and tourism potential, thus resulting in the marginalization of the local life due to market/service centralization and poor infrastructure. Konomi states that "the present conditions of isolation and rural decay push for the creation of an easy two-way connection between territory and the people, which can open up new opportunities to revitalize rural areas." The crucial role of these networks is to collect community potentials, create partnerships and offer benefits to the rural community. Innovative digital technologies can become an important instrument to develop virtual networking that can provide information, knowledge sharing and interconnection among different sectors, institutions and communities - through a smart multimedia interactive platform.

EU has already launched and promoted these concepts through "Smart Village Initiative", paying particular attention to the use of innovative digital technologies that create a new form of network cooperation beyond the village boundaries, involving the surrounding countryside and the surrounding towns. A "Smart village" presupposes an effective and efficient service delivery to the local residents and businesses, in order to improve their economic, social and environmental conditions. But such logic creates also conditions for "digital innovation" based on computing, communication and information technologies that act as accelerator in better exploring the hidden potentials of a village or a territory. In the case of Dropull, the first step in developing virtual networks is to provide digital infrastructure, broadband internet and a rural digital hub.



Fig.2 / Typologies of interventions in the village of Pogon unit, referring to the example of PPV Zagoria.
Source / PPV Zagoria, Gjirokastër



Fig 3 / Typologies of interventions in the village of Pogon unit, referring to the example of PPV Zagoria.
Source / PPV Zagoria, Gjirokastër

Such a multi-service hub structure could be located in Jorgucat, which is also the municipal center. It will manage the digital services that respond to the local needs offering support and training for the community. Ikonomi proposes the creation of a network between local community and other actors in different fields, aiming at facilitating the delivery of public services and offering new job opportunities. Based on the community needs, the municipality can create a fast network of information and exchange among the territory, people, and governance. Such network will inform people, customers, and tourists. In order to create such network, different e-tools (apps) could be used to support and facilitate the process, focusing on the following local aspects: i) Accessing to e-health, e-education, e-training and other essential e-services; ii) Online marketing and promotion of the local products; iii) Online booking services promoting tourism, heritage and cultural activities; iv) Faster mobility of people goods and ideas; v) Promotion of good governance.

The tools are considered a catalyst for the proposed networking, which serves to reactivate human, environmental and financial resources in the villages and improve the attractiveness and competitiveness of rural areas. Successful networking models and e-tools can be introduced in order to understand the structure of the information system and its management. This will constitute the basis for the development of specific networking models inherent in the particularities of the villages.

These steps that need to be followed in order to overcome the rural divide in the region of Dropull through digital innovation include: 1) Understanding the rural context and identifying local potentials and community needs, as well as building potential networks for serving the community; 2) Creating a development vision and plan for the digital investments in the area and providing good internet connection between all villages/businesses/people to support future applications; 3) Collecting data of all the resources and actors in the area such as governmental, business, civic, and on people; 4) Considering multi-sectorial services rather than single sectors separately; 5) Identifying qualified people in the village to guarantee the performance of the project; 6) Considering the cost of the project and identifying different potential funding sources such as public, private (related to local industries), and EU funding initiatives.

Johana Klemo deals with the shrinking phenomena of the living settlement as a reverse process of growth and urbanization. She underlines the fact that more than half of European cities shrank in the period of 1990-2010. This kind of urban transformation is a multidimensional process, and it impacts the economic and social domain. Shrinkage is also a phenomenon on several cities and rural areas in Albania and Western Balkans. Dropulli is a shrinking area, since it has both a decreasing and ageing population and economy, (23,000 residents in 1990, and about 8,000 inhabitants now). While Shrinkage is mostly caused by massive (e)migration, it is also a condition of liminality, and a transition phase of urban transformation. Klemo focuses on the urban aspects and elements of liminality, in terms of the liminal threshold both in its material and relational dimension. The material dimension of liminality refers to the physical assets or consequences of the shrinking process, which might be of temporary nature. Amongst the challenges that migration/depopulation causes, it is also the ruining of housing stock and the abandoned vacant infrastructures. The relational dimension of liminality refers to the detachment of migrants from their social habitat, lack of interests and lack of activities on the origin, and deterioration of public spaces. She concludes with a question, by offering also a path toward the solution for the existing situation: ... In the effort to restore a sustainable urban settlement and a sustainable population number, the question is how the component of liminal character helps the process of rebuilding an identity in the national/international markets?

Laia Gemma García Fernández also deals with the subject of housing and the rapid depopulation that is emptying many rural areas around Europe and Albania as well. The countryside areas are currently facing serious social and economic changes due to the abandonment caused by two decades of wild urbanization and the social-economic decay of the smaller town/village centers. The average age of their inhabitants is growing every year due to migration of young population toward urban areas. The lack of infrastructures and facilities for the community, as well as for potential tourists, brings about the necessity of re-thinking how to redesign a rural development model that satisfies the social, economic and environmental sustainability. The overview of the villages in Dropull shows how depopulation has given rise to the degradation of vernacular

architecture and the decline of the construction and the local businesses. This has forced the Albanian government to launch the initiative “100+ Villages Academy”, whose main objective is to design custom-made development models for the rural areas, based on tourism and other economic potential. Therefore, finding strategies to promote the gradual reactivation of buildings, public infrastructures, community services, monuments and other tourism attractions is also the key to succeed in the development of rural Dropull. Fernandez aims to better understand the vernacular buildings, housing typologies and urban fabric of Dropull, by focusing in Jorgucat. She thinks that design and construction are key in triggering economic development, a sustainable environment, and fostering a strong sense of place and community. She asks:

How do we want to continue building our cities and villages? In which direction do we want to develop our knowledge, in order to focus on our history, communities and dynamics of the country? How do we promote a more sustainable way of living and building? Fernandez concludes: No matter what the choice is, both the people living in cities and those in rural areas already possess the resources and the possibilities to develop their skills and knowledge. The proposed actions include some local approaches that aim to increase the resilience of communities that takes advantage of their traditions, culture and people.

Laura Boffi investigates the concept of “thickness” in liminality, as a distance between the opposite sides of something. She states that If an object is thick, then it is difficult to see through it. In light of such definition she looks at an object from the outside, recognizing its opposite borders, and from the inside, appreciating what populates the distance between those borders. Thickness consists simultaneously in the opposite borders of the evolving entities, growing within them. Therefore, discussing thickness as a concept in a territorial context implies a dynamic zooming in-and-out. Boffi highlights the liminal spaces as physical thresholds between the rural and urban areas and works further towards the logic of growing the thickness between the boundaries. The approach allows the author to build a proposal on interdisciplinary. Boffi supports the idea of the designers’ and professionals’ knowledge in action, according to which designers and professionals are able to

know more than what they ‘explicitly’ are able to describe and plan. Such counterpoint approach has enabled all disciplines to produce interdisciplinary knowledge that serves the professionals and designer on the one hand and the beneficiaries and stakeholders on the other. The recommendations for Dropull are based on such interdisciplinary logic: 1). The “hosted experiment” consists of the collaboration of a designer with external factors of design; 2) the “technology appropriation” consists of prototyping interventions, drawing from the advantage of being first in the local markets and contexts. The placement of such counterpoint would suit the designer and the plan to generate the “thickness” of the design research process by interweaving it with other different disciplines and research domains.

Martina Suppa investigates “acupunctural interventions” that reveal liminal landscape potentialities in Dropull. She looks especially into the liminal characteristics and potentials of Sofratikë village, in order to understand the positive features related to the liminal dimensions of the general landscape, metaphysical landscapes, and landscape experience. Her analysis moves between two main driver topics: Landscape and History. By employing these two drivers, a first general strategy is designed to define acupunctural interventions at a later stage.

To Suppa, acupunctural systems like: water, roads, mountains, valley, archaeological sites, and villages; are part of landscape and design strategies aimed at identifying specific sub-areas of intervention in the macro landscape unit. Indeed, they are considered as parts of the landscape, which, if interconnected, allow an overview of the macro-landscape units. Therefore, the acupunctural interventions become actions of modification and sustainable development for the territory. In order to achieve these aims, the author identifies a specific methodology that focuses on the layers and stratifications of the village landscapes: i) the archaeological area; ii) the historic-settlement, and iii) the rural and agricultural landscape.

The settlement landscape is initially mapped and, at a later stage, overlapped on the main physical layers: the mountain, the village, the quarry, the agricultural fields, the archeological site, and the river. After an overall photo screening, a first general strategy is outlined, which focuses on the identification of two main liminal directions: i) The longitudinal liminality, connecting

the village and the archaeological area, through the main physical infrastructure (the national road), to the natural systems (agriculture landscape and Drino River). ii) The transversal liminality, connecting the Sofratikë systems of natural, rural and infrastructure systems (which are embedded in the historic city of Adrianopolis) , with other archaeological sites like Antigonea and Melan.

Once this framework has been established, the main acupunctural strategy is to achieve the revitalization of the site. Four principal clusters are identified as driver-systems to plan the punctual redevelopment strategy and the related acupunctural activities. In order to promote a coherent revitalization of Sofratikë, which could involve the adjacent villages and identify appropriate acupunctural actions, an integrated survey approach and procedures are needed. This yields an analytic knowledge of the city system, through documentation and data collection (using different devices and methodologies). The procedure allows transferring and aggregating the main aspects – the layers- of the historical, cultural, and landscape heritage, by using "semantic" models (connecting different information, documentation, plans, historical data, etc., to survey drawings or models). This allows for landscape valorization of the whole area. It also enables the connection and overlay of different levels of data and information, relating both to the general strategy, and the strengthening the related acupunctural interventions.

Using a multidisciplinary approach, the integrated documentation and survey procedures allow for reading, analyzing and explaining the main layers of this area. By involving in this process as many actors as possible with different and specific skills, it is possible to open new research avenues towards the knowledge, understanding, conservation, safeguarding, redevelopment and valorization of the architectural, urban and environmental heritage of the whole Municipality of Dropull. Suppa underlines that such approach will be carried out through survey methodologies, integrating existing devices (3D laser-scanning, digital-photogrammetry, GIS-system, etc.) with the collected data in an H-BIM environment.

This ensures the analyzing and decoding of the liminal dimensions of Sofratikë. In conclusion, applying the "integrated survey methods and procedures" on the

level of a local village/town could be the first validation step of an approach that could be also extend to the neighboring landscape units. Through the integrated survey procedures and methods, a protocol of decoding and representation of the entire municipality in a single macro landscape unit can be one of the main instruments of good territorial governance. Therefore, starting from the mapping of the potentialities inherent in the liminal stratigraphy that characterizes Dropull area, such an integrated decoding and representation code (once verified) can be applied as a knowledge tool for the documentation, conservation, restoration, monitoring, valorization and planning of possible scenarios of good governance. Above all, it ensures the revitalization and the socio-economic development of the overall Municipality of Dropull.

Nikola Vesho focuses on the settlements of Dervişan, located next to the important urban/regional center of Gjirokastra - a World heritage city of UNESCO. Dervişan is the largest town/village of Dropull, and has served as an urban/administrative center for many years. Due to massive migration trends in the past, there are many abandoned houses, which exhibit their own distinct architectural characteristics and reflection of the past cultural and historical values. The villages that have been abandoned during the recent decades present a serious problem which is common all-over Balkan countries.

Most buildings are in a degraded state, both in their architectural and structural aspects. Vesho examines the general problems of Dervişan's traditional houses, with a special focus on their structural aspects. He also makes a quick technical assessment of the present-day damages in order to propose a strategy of structural repairing that comes in a second phase. He focuses, then, on the analysis of the structures of the typical old houses in the village, especially those built with unreinforced traditional masonry, where a lot of problems has been identified as a result of the degradation of material parameters over the years.

There is also a need for a detailed analysis of the typology of buildings in this villages. The buildings made by traditional stone walls, and stone tiles without mortar, are of special importance. Therefore, after site visits and the identification of the structural problems, a matrix with the typologies of façade and structural damages is created. The most typical damages of this typology are: i) cracks in the walls and

carvings between the windows, ii) corner damage and wall displacements, and iii) water infiltration and damages caused by insects. The methodology also contains an assessment of the typical collapse mechanisms, and it is useful to define the seismic vulnerability for Gjirokastra region and other similar regions.

Veronica Vona – focuses the rehabilitation of rural villages with a strong heritage value, like Dervican. by investigating: how to prevent the depopulation risk as well as architectural ones, how to regulate the new expansion, and how to preserve the historical and architectural characteristics. For Vona, the most important matter is the knowledge of morphological development and typological analysis of the urban tissue and, as mentioned by Riccardo Dalla Negra- regardless of whether it is in the field of restoration or renovation. The methodological assumption comes from the School of Saverio Muratori, “who sees the typological and anthropization process not merely as a static categorization of building types and building features, but instead as a process that, under certain aspects, it is still evolving.” The analysis aims to identify the rules under which the buildings have changed over time and adapted to new ways of living, thus revealing numerous resources and potentialities.

The latter range from the application of planning rules in the new cities to an organic and integrated development strategy, and an identification of historical paths with a view toward valorization. It applies not only to the Dervican village, but also to the complex system of settlements in the Dropull Municipality. Thus, from a first analysis, it can be affirmed that the village of Dervican, initially developed as a high promontory settlement, near a punctiform polarity, and over time it turned into a low promontory settlement, attracted by a continuous cross-ridge, as a new linear polarity. This magnetic element is still active and has started to shift to a more or less planned way, until it resulted into the current motorway that leads from Gjirokastra to the border. In other words, this represents a new linear polarity, which, due to its characteristics, also acts as a limit to the expansion. On another scale, the analysis leads to a conscious action on the built environment, by respecting its identity, but at the same time allowing a transformation that takes into account the current needs. The identification of those legitimate changes within the historical building, respecting

what Riccardo Dalla Negra defined as “the physiological limitation of the historical building type of renovation”, is central to the methodology of the renovation or restoration.

For Vona, the solution for Dervican’s administration is to prevent any detrimental interventions on cultural heritage through the evaluation of the possible limits of the intervention, e.g., i) to repurpose a courtyard house trying to preserve its historical value; ii) to change the building’s interior, thinking well ahead on what masonry we must preserve and what we can re-build; and iii) to insert new functions. Starting from a morphological and typological approach, Vona proposes a series of possible strategies to prevent the abandonment of the houses and rehabilitate them. She concludes that a proper combination of the modern needs and historic heritage is the key to both conserve and promote and enhancement of the historical buildings.

Dr. Llazar Kumaraku, last but not least, gives an account of the interventions in the local villages carried out with the staff and students of Polis University in the framework of the cooperation with the “100+ Villages Program” of the AKPT / Albanian Government. This is a pragmatic research approach on the discipline of territorial and urban planning, based on analyzing the planning paradigms and their transformation in contemporary times. Kumaraku highlights the shift in spatial planning paradigms from the total planning to planning based on interventions with a limited spatial extent. He illustrates such shift through the application of territorial planning with polar intervention in the project “100+ Villages Program” in Albania. More he recommends such methodology for the development vision of the GLP General Local Plan approved for the municipality of Dropull.

This could also be a baseline for the study conducted within the International Doctorate in Architecture and Urban Planning IDAUP by POLIS and FERRARA Universities. It should be noted that the strategy followed by the “100+ Villages Academy” to create visions for the development of the rural settlements in Albania was not new to POLIS University, which used it in the planning exercises for the GLP of Zagori Commune, (South Albania), and the GLP of Has Municipality (North Albania). Such methodology has been further developed by the National

Territorial Planning Agency (AKPT) in Albania as an official planning tool for acupuncture territorial interventions. Kumaraku concludes by saying that "Polis University has been a protagonist at the local, regional and international level in changing the paradigms of urban planning and in the transition from the "total planning" to "polar planning" logic. This paradigm has been used both in academic and practice-based activities for building tangible urban development visions for various projects implemented by the University."

Among such implemented projects he mentions: i) the vision built for Tetova city in Macedonia 2009; ii) the vision for Durana metropolis 2013, iii) the Gjirokastra Bypass in 2015, iv) the vision for the cities of Shkodra, Burrel, Belsh and Gramsh in 2016, v) the vision for Prishtina as new European capital in 2017, vi) the visions for Lots 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 15, 16, and 20 of the "100+ Villages Academy" in 2018; vii) and the Vision for the city of Gjirokastra in 2019, etc. The scientific brainstorming with the PhD researchers and staff aims to make such experience applicable for local and international applications.

Kumraraku points out that "the changing of planning paradigms from total planning to the polar planning accelerates the application of visions in a particular context and makes them more realistic. This paradigm is more realistic because it is closely linked to the changing political and ideological systems that govern society. The collapse of the totalitarian systems that ruled through total plans, inevitably led to the fragmentation of planning into smaller and polar interventions yet capable of regenerating a city. Here lies the hope of a better future.



