

Disrupting the 'art-touristic attraction' equation: reflections on public art's possible roles in Lezha's future planning

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Abstract- *The article deals with art interventions' role in developing socially sustainable spatial planning solutions for the Lezha region. Lezha is one of the poorest regions in Albania, but at the same time gathers a wide variety of natural and cultural heritage sites, which create great opportunities for tourism development. Nonetheless, tourism shouldn't be the only key to interpret art interventions, as the Covid-19 pandemic remarked: in fact, art could also be a tool for improving locals' quality of life by addressing an increasing need for high-quality public spaces and participation.*

Through a series of examples, the article explores on the one hand art's potentialities linked to placemaking, critical reflection, creation of sense of belonging and locals' involvement, on the other hand its limits: the objective of the contribution is, in fact, to raise awareness among planners and local authorities on how art could be integrated in planning processes in a critical and socially sustainable way. Finally, the paper suggests that Lezha's public administration could learn from the aforementioned practices, by disrupting the 'art = touristic attraction' equation and by proposing alternative ways to integrate art in the region's future planning processes.

Keywords: Public art; Tourism; Placemaking; Public spaces; Quality of life;

Introduction

The present contribution, aiming at examining public art interventions' role in developing socially sustainable spatial planning solutions for Lezha region, derives from a workshop experience which was part of University of Ferrara and Polis University's International Doctorate in Architecture and Urban Planning's joint program in November 2021. The workshop, dealing with planning cities in the post-pandemic era with a focus on Lezha, allowed the author to briefly visit the region and to meet its local authorities, as well as to access specific bibliography. The author, who has an art-historical background and is

interested in how artistic interventions can be integrated within sustainable urban planning processes, decided to take Lezha as a case study to reflect on possible future opportunities for public art to become part of this region's planning. Thus, the objective is not to outline new spatial planning policies, but rather to explore both the potentialities of public art for planning and the limits planners should be aware of when integrating art in planning processes.

Art in public spaces has been increasingly employed in urban planning processes from the 1980s on: this is due to the culture-led regeneration logic's success, which spread all around Europe between the 1980s and



Figure 1. Kerstin Bergendal, PARK LEK, Sundbyberg, 2010-2014. Source: Statens Konstråd

1990s, and to Richard Florida's famous creative city concept. Nonetheless, paying these interventions sometimes more attention either to the artistic object per se or to the physical space rather than to its social dimension, they have been often used by public administrations to increase touristic attractiveness and to pursue territorial marketing and city branding objectives, thus reducing art to mere decoration. The results have often been banal, not making room for new perspectives on what art in public spaces can be and for improving locals' quality of life. It is therefore important for planners and public administrations to act critically and to be informed when they choose to deal with public art. On the other hand, they should be made aware of the potentialities that art can have for transforming urban environments both from a physical and social point of view. In fact, 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 Swedish artist Kerstin Bergendal's PARK LEK project (Sundbyberg, 2010-2014), which, through conversations with the residents and long-term presence in Hallonbergen and Ör neighborhoods, resulted in proposals for an alternative way to densify the involved residential areas.

Having introduced the risks and opportunities offered by public art to planners and public administrations and provided some examples of good practices, the second part of the paper focuses on Lezha's case study and on how artistic interventions can be implemented within future planning processes in this region.

Lezha is one of the poorest regions in Albania, with national records in illiteracy, unemployment and lowest own income p.c. rates. The region has been putting considerable efforts into economic and social growth as well as in poverty reduction: important from this perspective has been the preparation of the Regional Development Strategy for Lezha region, drawn up by Lezha's Regional Council with the support of REC Albania and UNDP in 2005. The aim of the document was to define regional development goals and priority actions in harmony with the Millennium Development Goals. In this document, the presence of a wide range of human and natural resources for the region to develop and become wealthy was outlined, with specific reference to



Figure 2. Castle View. Source/ Author

yet unexploited and unexplored tourism potential. By fostering mountainous, archaeological and historical tourism, besides building touristic villages and tourist ports along the coast, the Regional Development Strategy aimed at reducing the unemployment rate and the percentage of families receiving economic aid (Regional Council, 2005). Also more recent contributions and documents continue to highlight the importance of tourism for Albania's development, such as Albania 2030 Manifesto (Aliaj et al., 2014), the National Strategy for Development and Integration (2014-2020) and the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy (2018-2022). In fact, touristic initiatives could be particularly important in terms of shifting attention and investments towards local resources (Ciro, Toska, 2018).

Despite tourism being considered as a key element to ensure long-term economic development and social-environmental prosperity, it shouldn't be the only way to interpret culture and art: this is an important lesson taught by Covid-19 pandemics. In fact, if on the one hand travel restrictions, lockdowns and social distancing highly impacted tourism, hospitality, leisure and art sectors, on the other one they revealed the necessity to focus on proximity and local communities as art audiences. According to several studies, in times of crisis and emergency, the arts have a key role to play in supporting social cohesion, mental health and individual and group identity: in particular, during the Covid-19 pandemics people instinctively engaged in the arts as

a coping activity, as it was able to bring significance to their lives, improve their mood, help them connect with others and enable experiences of awe and beauty (Ascolani et al., 2020; Bradbury et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, as the author could observe during her stay in Albania, every time art and culture were addressed during meetings and lectures, they were almost always interpreted as touristic attractions, while what culture could do for local communities seemed to be a negligible and sometimes even uncomfortable question. In particular, when Lezha's local authorities were asked about cultural interventions directed to local people rather than tourists, the answers regarded making the Palace of Culture working again, the city library's reconstruction, building two bridges connecting the riverfronts, regenerating a public garden and rebuilding the stadium: no references were made to any artistic project, as to demonstrate the scarce attention devoted to this topic.

In the first part of this paper instead, alternative ways of integrating art in planning processes have been shown. In particular, the potentialities of making art in the public interest rather than of simply locating an artistic object in the public space were investigated: in fact, the idea is not that of simply beautifying urban spaces, but that of addressing locals' needs and trying to improve their quality of life. Given this background, we would like to suggest that art could be included in Lezha's future planning interventions proposed by local authorities: through socially engaged

Tourism & Services Analysis

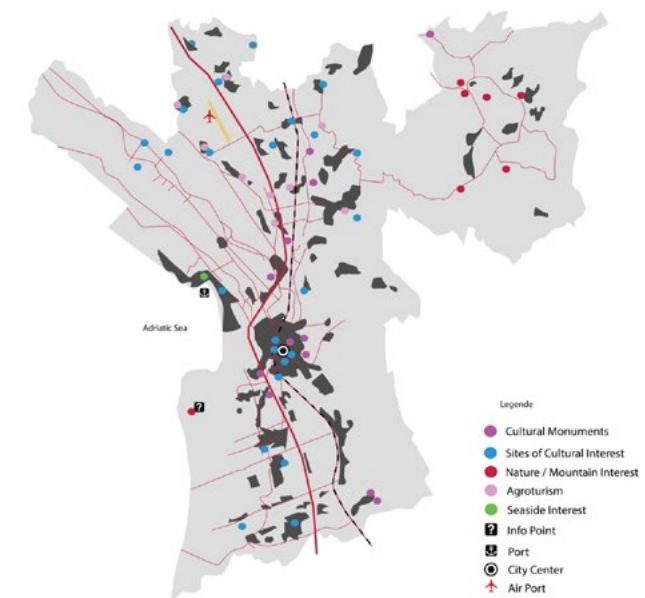


Figure 3. Tourism & Services Analysis, Lezha. Source: Irene Ruzzier

and participatory practices in particular, artists could help make public spaces more meaningful and foster bottom up, inclusive and sustainable planning processes. In order to reach this objective, this paper constitutes a first attempt to raise awareness about the opportunities offered by artistic practices in planning. Other useful measures to implement could be represented by organizing informational meetings and training courses addressed to planners and local authorities, and by integrating specific professional figures such as art consultants or curators in planning processes at an early stage, as it has already been done in Countries like Sweden (Statens Konstråd, 2021). In conclusion, awareness, knowledge and inclusion of artistic expertise in administrations and planning processes could allow art interventions to have a significant role in Lezha's future development, both avoiding their mere exploitation for commercial and touristic purposes and addressing local communities' needs and quality of life concerns.

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