

## Rethinking Gjirokastra

### Can architecture and city planning stimulate hope and growth for shrinking cities?

#### International PhD Workshop

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#### Introduction:

This Workshop is a research activity organized annually under the framework of the International PhD Program of POLIS University (Albania) and Ferrara University (Italy), in the fields of Architecture and City Planning. Aimed at the 35th PhD cycle candidates, the workshop builds on the previous and ongoing research work, focusing in the territorial, city and architecture scales, and is developed under the framework of the Scientific Research Department (R&D Faculty) in cooperation with the Observatory of the Mediterranean Basin (OMB) a sub-unit of IF Innovation Factory, at POLIS University which is a "center of excellence" in housing, planning and development with focus on sustainability and resilience, established in cooperation with Co-PLAN Institute, Ministry of Finance of Albania, and UNECE. Each year the research activity promoted by the PhD workshop is aimed at a specific topic, which is then opens for

debate and critical analysis by each PhD student individually, in order to develop their capacity for operating, within any given planning context, by developing theoretical tools, able to generate design processes and new research paths. This year's topic will concern the case of Gjirokastra UNESCO city, as one of the key cities in Southern Albania with a high risk of depopulation. The historical city patterns is questioned under the cultural challenge of "Shrinking Cities", an international research platform created and coordinated by Philipp Oswalt in between 2002-2008. The social and political crises addressed by the Albanian nation in the past has opened a critical debate between local authorities and the different cultural disciplines like city planning, architecture, art, journalism and philosophy. One of the main objectives of this International PhD workshops since 2015 is to collect multidisciplinary experiences coming from different fields of architectural knowledge, in order to

consolidate a group of researchers and professionals with a capacity to accept new complexity and challenge for the future urban crises, thanks to a multi-disciplinary approach.

The idea to elaborate a critical thought around the concept of "Shrinking city" must be seen as an occasion to investigate the city of Gjirokastra through an approach established in the individuation of autonomous objects or urban fragments, within the existing city patterns, capable of injecting new hopes for the future of Gjirokastra. Within this frame of work one of the main objectives of this workshop is to define urban strategies in order to reestablish a new relationship between historical city and its interrupted objects due the depopulation crises. In other words, giving a second life, opportunity means to reactivate a cultural debate, starting by shaking the attention of the Albanian citizens and the local authority. As main idea the PhD students have to observe, select and investigate specific urban fragments in order to develop strategies involving different discipline and field of knowledge.

#### **Design experience:**

POLIS University together Metropolis Office l.t.d in the previously years have been involved in many projects concerning urban regeneration and planning development by the local and Albanian authority. In 2015 Atelier Albania at the request of the Ministry of Culture and mandated by the office of the Prime Minister, announces an international urban design competition to collect design proposals for a Bypass

Road in the UNESCO protected city of Gjirokastra . POLIS University, Metropolis Office l.t.d, G&K and CHWB were invited to give their contribution. The design project proposed was titled: "Gjirokastra Organic Loop". This Project will be for us starting point for the future developed strategy of Gjirokastra historical town.

#### **Historical background:**

(the below description is taken from the scientific paper: L Lazar Kumaraku, Dorina Papa, Etleva Dobjani, The Adaptation of the Traditional Cities to Contemporary Use Interventions in Historical Areas: The Case Study of Gjirokastra, in Online International Interdisciplinary Research Journal, {Bi-Monthly}, ISSN 2249-9598, Volume-VI, Nov 2016 Special Issue.

The town of Gjirokastra is one of the few historical cities of the medieval period in Albania which is still inhabited in nowadays. Despite Illyrian origin, the city took his form mainly during the ottoman period in the XVI-XVII century, expanding outside the Castle along the ridges of the hills in the direction of Vjosa valley and the mountain "Mali i gjerë", following the organic configuration features, typical of ottoman cities. With the expansion of the city outside the castle walls, the Bazaar area becomes an important center and is considered also as a public space that connects all the neighborhoods. Actually, it is located at the Castle's feet, in the barycenter of the historic city. Due to the presence of smiths, embroiderers, shoemaker, coopers, sculptors with their craft activities and the exchange of local or regional goods, made the area of the bazaar

the most important meeting place in the city, turning it in a sort of cultural and social "agora". From the architectural and spatial perspective, the Bazaar area differs a lot compared to the residential neighborhood configuration, since the commercial buildings that bound the road usually two stores high, were placed in line and escalated according to the configuration of the terrain. Usually, on the first floor were placed commercial activities, while the upper floors were used as storage of various goods, or as karvansaraje for regional merchants. Gjirakastra Bazaar has a trident configuration, opened towards the Castle in the east and extended in the other directions, in order to structure the neighborhoods through the main axes.

The neighborhoods usually were extended along the ridges of the hills and were organically articulated in the line with the topography of the terrain through a strong connection between architecture, urban and landscape system. The harmonious combination of different variants of residential architecture created according to the orography, the ottoman urban system with narrow streets that follow the course of the terrain and the visible presence of greenery creates an ensemble of outstanding aesthetic, urban and landscape values. In this regard, the use of local stones for road paving, for containing walls and roofs of buildings has created a unique atmosphere which was described by Ismail Kadare in his book "A chronical in stone", dedicated to Gjirakastra: «Gjithçka në këtë qytet ishte e vjetër dhe e gurtë, duke u nisur nga rrugët dhe krojet e gjer tek pullazet e shtëpive të mëdha shekullore, që ishin të mbuluara me pllaka guri ngjyrë hiri, të ngjashme me disa luspa gjigande.» In this context, it is easy to understand what Christian Norberg-Schulz called Genius Loci (the spirit of place). Traditions and legends in Gjirakastra (legend of Princess Argjiro, etc) associated with the descriptions of Kadare, have put in to tangible evidence the urban and architectural qualities, the existence of a collective memory sculpted by strong and fierce nature of this city which prove the extraordinary human connection with the land and space. «Duke ruajtur me vështirësi jetën njerëzore në gjymtyrët dhe nën levizhjen e tij të gurtë, qyteti i shkaktonte asaj pa dashur shumë dhimbje, gervishje dhe plagë, dhe kjo gjë ishte e natyrshme derisa ky ishte një qytet prej guri dhe çdo prekje e tij ishte e ashpër dhe e ftohtë».

This symbiosis between the city and the character of human life was reflected throughout the centuries and had led

to the creation and persistence of the spirit of place. In the recent years, due to drastic social, economic and technological changes, typical of the modern time, the fragile equilibrium between humans, architecture, and traditional urban landscape system was put into risk. The abandonment of the historic city, the degradation of buildings, inconsistent interventions towards the existing context, new abusive construction, as well as the chaos produced in the city as a result of the increasing number of cars and their concentration in the bazaar area has decreased gradually the interest of tourists and is seen as a risk factor for such historical values that the city embody. That's why, trying to preserve a certain balance constitutes the challenge of intervention in such contexts, that necessity the activation of urban life, as much as the conservation of the historic image which in turn can contribute in activating urban life and touristic attraction.

### Thematic Groups of Reserchers

(A) Eleonora Baccega; Nicola Tasselli; Stefano Romano;

(B) Endri Duri; Marco Negri; Xhoana Kristo;

(C) Alberto Grando; Dasara Pula.

(D) Doriana Musaj; Ivonne Ortiz Sanchez; Luca Lezzerini;

### Main Objective

As main objective each group must elaborate a strategy in the scale of the city developing acupuncture interventions. All the groups will work under the same general strategy, developed under the framework of the International Competition: "Gjirakastra Organic Loop" by POLIS University and Metropolis I.t.d.

### Methodology

The workshop is structured in a way that promotes the merger of different expertise to address the diverse aspects related to the Gjirakastra and its region. The following steps will be used as a pragmatic approach to combine theoretical knowledge, physical environment and existing data:

1-Introduction to the Area

2- Theoretical Lecture + Case studies

3- Site Visit-fieldwork

4- In class work + Project discussion

### Expected Results:

A - Graphical material

B - Presentation + exhibition

C - "RETHINKING GJIROKASTRA.

Can architecture and city planning stimulate hope and growth for shrinking cities?" (scientific papers)

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