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# (Un)margin the Shkodra's gate / An opportunity to regenerate an important landmark

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## Abstract

*The Shkodra's gate is located in the southernmost point of the city, where there is the confluence of Buna, Kiri and Drini Rivers. This gate is not a simple access to the most import city of the North, but the Albania's main gate, towards northern and central Europe. The countless postcards produced through the years, mark its importance by figuring the two main symbols of this landmark: the Rozafa's castle, positioned in a very strategic point at the top and the Buna's river that springs from Shkodra's Lake. During the 19th century, its strategical position and the navigability of the Buna's river, encouraged the creation of city's harbor, tied Shkodra economically with many European harbor cities of the Adriatic basin such as Venice, that lately encouraged the concentration of many small artisanal enterprises and birth of the local market, too.*

*During Socialism, the centralized economic model implemented in the country banned private activities because of being in contrast with the ideology of the regime and it couldn't be different in Shkodra where the harbor, the local market and the surrounding buildings were blown away, erasing an important piece of history. Nowadays, this area isn't in a good condition because of the constant flood risk and the abandoned building that were expected to host economic activities are a clear demonstration of the lack of attention and investments from the public administration and the central government. The so called "bypass", supposed to act as dike to prevent floods, is no less than a huge amount of gravel placed in the limit of the city.*

*Despite suffering this quasi-miserable condition, a regeneration is vital to rebirth the lost identity and to assure protection from floods. The project proposal doesn't consist in the (re) building of a new harbor, as an attempt to restore the lost memory, but as part of a series of interventions to protect the city from the lake's and Buna's river behavior during their peaks also aiming to preserve and improve further the relation between them and the city.*

## Historic importance: preserved and erased fragments

Shkodra's southern gate, highlights through its history the importance of the geographical position to protect the city from the permanent risk of occupation and guaranteeing its protection and stability for centuries, too. Positioned in point where the Drin and Buna river meet, historical documents and archeological findings have been very useful to historians to reconstruct the most important historic events. Even though data are limited to

map the city's limits in Antiquity, Skodra was an important and a very difficult center to conquer and one of the main reasons was the difficulty to access from south. Indeed, well-known roman historian Titus Livius (Weissenborn, 2018), documented the several attempts of the Roman army which revealed to be unsuccessful to conquer it and from his witness emerges that Shkodra was surrounded by walls and its gates were narrow to prevent the city from eventual attacks, and there were also present towers.



Fig1 / Shkodra's gate before 1945  
source / [www.shkoder.net](http://www.shkoder.net)

Another important witness from him concerns with location and consequently the intersection of the rivers, stating that the two rivers that surrounded the city: Klausalit (Kiri), the river and by the Barbana (Buna) river that springs from Lake Labeat, flowing East and West respectively, both ending in the Oriund (Drini) river. This is absolutely important, because it reveals that the past Drini river's location was different from the current one beneath the Rozafa's castle and its continuous mutation covered the early traces of the old city. Traces of the Illyrian wall, built of carved stone blocks disposed on each other on dry, are present at the entrance of the castle, in between the first and the second gate. This polygonal-shaped wall, 12 meters long and 2.2 meters high, represents the first convincing evidence "of the transformation into an important civic and economic center between IV-II BC".

In 1988, the archaeological excavations led by Albanian archaeologist Gëzim Hoxha (Hoxha, 1986), brought to light a substantial portion of the perimetric wall of the Roman period in the south-western part of the castle's hill, considered to be the continuity of the Illyrian wall. Despite their immense value, it's almost completely destroyed because of the lack of maintenance and protection.

Another important evidence from this period is the Rozafa's castle built between the IV-II BC (Historia e Shkodrës, 2016). Located in a 130-meter-high hill, undoubtedly can be considered as the

striking element of this landmark of city and has been determinant for the protection of the city from the two consecutive sieges from ottomans after its definitive fall in 1479.

During the middle ages, the city under the Balshaj family and the Venetian Republic's rule reached important political and economic peaks, where in particular the last ones, made big struggles in order to preserve their control over the city. In fact, several marine expeditions made by the Venetians to suppress the local uprisings are the evidence of the importance of harbor of Shkodra and of the strategic connection between the lake and the Adriatic Sea through the Buna River.

When the ottomans conquered the city, many Albanians abandoned their homes and many historic buildings were ruined, but the city's importance remained unaltered through the years. Between 1499-1500, the first bridge on the Buna River was built there. The southern gate preserved its importance and nearby grew the local market called "Pazari i madh" [the big bazar], proving the growing interest for this area. For more than four centuries it remained the economic pole of Shkodra, among the most important of the Adriatic basin, transforming it into one of the most developed Albanian centers. Unfortunately, after Albania's Independence from the Ottoman Emperor up to the end of WWII, this area underwent through very tough times. Starting from the siege of 1913, where after a six-month siege the Montenegrins destroyed the

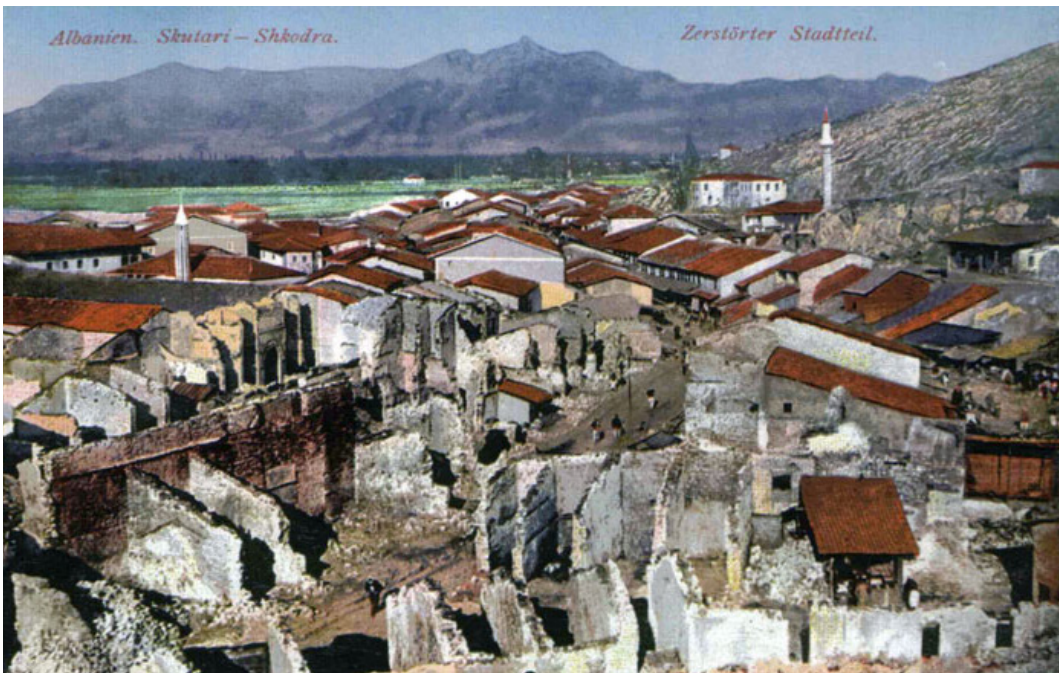


Fig2 / Ruins of the old Bazaar after the siege of 1913  
source / [www.albanianhistory.net](http://www.albanianhistory.net)

bazaar (Fig. 2) representing the first shock in terms economic decay and architectural heritage, that took years to be restored. But the worst had yet to come, because immediately after the end of the WWII, the socialist regime implemented the centralized economic model and because of being in contrast with it, the entire bazaar was totally blown away from the authorities erasing a precious piece of memory that permitted Shkodra to reach an unseen development. Since then, it has still been the main access from South with the difference that the road was widened to facilitate the vehicles traffic and the plot of the old bazaar was transformed into a public space, a configuration to be considered optimal for the urban design the city took, but totally unjustified for the memory erased.

### **Economic importance and attempts to restore the past**

Despite being in its early years known and exploited for defensive purposes, the southern gate of Shkodra became the economic pole of the city. The harbor has been fundamental to facilitate the navigation in the Adriatic Sea and around the Lake Labeat - the old name of Shkodra's lake, transforming the city into an important economic center and capital of the Illyrian kingdom, too. Precisely the navigability of the Buna river, was the main factor that ships from the most important harbor cities of the Adriatic basin such as Venice and Ulcinj could have access to Shkodra's inland and vice versa. Obviously, its activity became even more intense and catalyzed the concentration

of several artisanal shops and the creation of the local market. In the XIX century, its economy grew at high rates and the local bazaar counted 2500 shops (Abdyli, 2008) built in Persian style, where the most common products for export were national dresses, fabric, leather, tobacco, gunpowder, caviar. There were not built housing units but only shops distributed in 1,8 km distance and dived in different "sokake" - the streets of the old bazaar, according to the craft or product offered by the artisan masters. Between 1807-1809, the "Bexhisteni" - a cluster of small shops - was built by Ibrahim Pasha and continued by Mustafa Pasha Bushatliu. It was a real modern gallery and it would have remained so if it would have not been blown away, contained 40 shops mainly for gold and antique precious objects of that time.

Unfortunately, after the proclamation of independence from the ottoman empire, the local market was seriously damaged in 1913 (Kisch, 1925) by the Montenegrins during their attempt to conquer the city, marking the beginning of the decay of this precious part and economic heart part of this 2500-year-old city. The final knock down, was given by socialist regime, considering it a bad example contrary to its ideology and by blowing it and river deck as well. The place where the Bexhisteni used to be became a public park were citizens and tourists could spend a nice time but it was totally unjustified damage for its history.

Fall of the regime in early 90's, was followed by a transition into a democratic political system and to the liberal market



*Fig3 / Buna river spring  
source / the author*

economy. Unfortunately, there was no balance and control of the high desire to invest on private activities and to plan the private activities, respectful of the urban standards, heritage and natural parameters of this area. Many illegal activities were settled on the lake front and beneath the Rozafa's castle by lowering its attractivity. It took years to demolish most of them but the new legal ones proved to be non-rentable and in particular the new complex of mix activities where previously was the old Bexhisten has currently many unsold/inactive shopping units because of the lack low quality of the area.

### **Natural and touristic potential**

The area has an enormous natural potential that makes it very attractive for tourism and it is not a casualty that it is very preferred by citizens and tourists as well. In less than a one-kilometer distance, there are present different pieces of landscape: from the riverfront to the lakefront; from the Shirokë and Tepe hills to the agricultural lands; and the wetlands on the side of the lake that are important in diversity of the ecosystem. The Lake influences the most the city's climate especially the humidity with values higher than 75% during the cold months (November and December) and drops around 55% in the hot months (July and August) (Dhora, 2016). With a total drainage area of 5490 km<sup>2</sup> (Dhora, 2016), its surface varies from 350 up to 500 km<sup>2</sup> and its level from 4,6 meters up to a maximum level of 9.8 meters. The Albanian part of the lake is estimated to be 142.5 km<sup>2</sup> (38 % of the overall surface) and with drainage area of

1030 km<sup>2</sup> (38 % of the overall surface). It is considered an important hydrological stabilizer because of supplying the Buna (Fig. 3) river when Drin river's supply is lower. Actually, there are present three habitat systems: the Lacustrine system, including limestone and littoral habitats; the Palustrine system, with habitats that differ in vegetation and presence/ lack of water; and the Riverine system, which includes continuously non-continuously flooded habitats.

Because of being shallow, most of its mutations occur on the surface rather than into the depths. This means that in the warmer seasons, especially in the northern, eastern and southeastern parts large marshland areas are developed and consequently vegetation there is more developed than in other parts. On the shore or wet soils that are covered by the water, only during the period with heavy precipitations do the communities of high-body plants dominate (Phragmites, Scirpus, Typha, Sparganium, Cyperus, Carex) that together with the flotation plant community (Nuphar, Nymphaea, Trapa) meet in the marshy and shallow waters are also the main biomass and main lake production.

All the characteristics mentioned above make it particular and very attractive for tourism, meaning that the entry of Shkodra can be considered a natural gate too, because of the enormous natural diversity. Traditional food, culture, architecture and breathtaking landscapes are other strong reasons to pay a visit here. Sport water activities can be also performed more frequently, but the

actual infrastructure has to be improved somehow and most important by being respectful of the ecosystem.

### Ongoing decay

Fall of the regime, established the democracy and enabled the possibility to develop private economic activities as well, but the attention and vision to restore the past importance the area had, was missing. Except a few interventions for the modernization of road infrastructure like the new bridge built in 2011 connecting Shkodra and Shiroka and the broadening of the Mbreti Gent street leading to city's center. New private activities built legally and illegally on both sides of the main street did not have a positive impact in the attractivity of gate.

Most of private activities shut down because of the low attraction that the surrounding spaces, proving that for the lack of attention toward it has been very evident. Only citizens grown up and living in the city since they were born don't abandon it because of having childhood memories. Besides admitting to dislike this situation, they cannot handle to ignore it because the strong affection they have with this piece of city makes them act like this mess is not present. The ongoing decay of this area can be summarized into main aspects: natural configuration of the area and lack planning.

The western part of the city (eastern part of Lake) where is clearly visible its slow inclination and the continuous mutations of the Lake's surface, make it the most affected area from these natural dynamics. Furthermore, the main sewage channels of the city ending up in the lake, represent not only an historic pollutive problem for the lake, but also a main reason of high risk of flooding. Another relevant aspect, is the fact that this area is a protected natural area and interventions are banned but initiatives/ action to deviate them have been missing. Despite the environmental restrictions, the central government and local administrations through the years have a huge responsibility for the current decay of the area proofing the inefficiency of the planning tools, too.

Improvised structures like the bypass (Fig. 4), as an attempt avoid the flooding action of the lake, is a clear demonstration of the absence of sensibility toward the southern gate of Shkodër. This mass of gravel (Fig. 5-6) is neither a protection measure nor a promenade for a walk or even a public space to attract people. Illegal dwellings and private activities like petrol station for example beneath the Rozafa's castle hills, are far from the configuration of the old demolished Bazaar and are strong reason

to avoid this part of the city on the future postcards.

If the old bazaar was blown away for being an opposite model for the regime, the broadening of the gate for the vehicle traffic might have been an indirect reason as well. The disorganized infrastructural system is another point to work on because the absence of a real bypass to avoid the main vehicular traffic flow coming from: the city's center, rural centers or even to Montenegro (and vice versa) pass through this gate. Its construction must not be seen as a priority concerning only Shkodra, but it must be included in broader vision for an interregional infrastructure like the Blue corridor which cannot pass through the Adriatic coast because of the presence of the Buna's river protected area and so the only solution is passing from the eastern part of Shkodra.

### (Un)Margin. A Strategic intervention for a better future

As emerged from the analysis, this gate has not only an important historic value, despite being mutated through the years, but it is the one and only gate of Albania toward central and northern Europe on road and probably in a near future on water, too. It's difficult to handle with a piece of city that has been drastically transformed many times and now it's in a desperate need of regenerative and requalifying interventions (Fig. 7). Before programming an intervention, there should be made some valuations on the base of the analysis made, in order to develop a strategic vision for this area. This approach should be based on these three main issues: mobility, nature and heritage. The first issue is fundamental for the future of the area and for the city as well, because it eases and drastically reduces the vehicle's traffic by making it a proper public space. The project of the Blue corridor, an ambitious project of the highway starting from Croatia and ending in Greece is constraint to pass from east of Shkodra for the reasons mentioned above and most probably it will be so. If this project will be implemented, in Shkodra's gate will also be necessary an intermodal station with parking spaces, too. The most suitable location is nearby the gate, in the area of the former railway station, in order to prevent the tourists' buses and daily visitors' cars to choke the entry of Shkodra, but to make the gate more pedestrianized above all. Another important benefit, will be the prevention of traffic jams on the way to Zogaj and Shirokë, by consequently stimulating tourists to use non-pollutive alternatives like the use of bicycles or



Fig4,5,6 / The bypass (above); the draining channels of the bypass infrastructure (center); and the lakefront (below). source / the author



Fig7 / Pedestrian bridge on the Buna river  
source / the author

maybe by having a walk on the river front. Furthermore, the bypass will help even more in the logic of not choking the gate with traffic jams by deviating the vehicles flow, regardless of their destination.

The other two issues: nature and heritage are resembled in the (Un)margin strategy that is focused on two main goals: the necessity to protect (margin) and the necessity to preserve (un-margin) the relation between Shkodra and the lake. Even though the strategy is focused in the two issues mentioned above, it doesn't exclude mobility, but it is totally based on it and on the necessary measures described above, in order to facilitate the other interventions for the improvement and revaluation of the historic heritage and natural potential of the gate.

The first goal, consists on protecting the city from future floods that run over during Autumn and Winter months. As long as the western part of the city, it is a protected area, but its lower slope facilitates the flooding action of the lake, too. The Dike (see the workshop report) is a friendly margin because of being respectful to the regular natural grid made by the draining channels that were built years ago, preserving the natural protected areas the best way possible because of being positioned to the limit of the city. Unlike the linear dikes (Fig. 8), its fragmentation made by the mirroring of its building section, facing the lake and the urban, suburban and rural territories of Shkodra in other tracks, is an attempt to avoid the sensation of boring and never-ending linearity common for the "basic" dikes. The

building section of each track is different from the basic well-known solutions, too. Despite of making a gradual-stepped or a variable slope section dike, its height is divided into three parts where in between there are two "natural" pools that may retain the sediments to facilitate the growth of green plants and trees when water retires, as well as reducing the visual impact of the dike by distributing the five-meter height in proportion with the slope of the area. The connection between city and the lake is not only preserved but is enforced even more along and across the dike, through the public spaces located in different tracks, giving to the dike a more social feature. In the ending points of the dike the new harbor (South) beyond the Rozafa's castle and the natural pool near Vraka's channel are positioned, where dike assumes the role of a "blue" axis connecting the transversal paths that are provided to strengthen the relationship between the lake and the urban, suburban and rural parts of territories of Shkodra.

Precisely in the intersection between the dike and these paths there are public spaces that fragment further this axis. This dike will also affect positively the accessibility of the most well-known monuments like the Rozafa's castle or the religious building nearby from tourist and local inhabitants. So, it will not only become a protective structure against the floods but it will strengthen the relation among the city with the lake, historical heritage and its natural attractions, thanks to the introduction of these measures.



**The new harbor. An impulse for a cross-border and urban development**

The new harbor (Fig. 9) is proposed to increase the attractiveness of Shkodra's gate and to become the catalyzer of its gradual regeneration. It is not a throwback that aims to the rebirth of the old memory like the historic bazaar blown up in the 40's, but to create a public space full of life, attractive for tourists and for its citizens, too. In order to guarantee the expected outcomes from this important project proposal, a shared cross-border strategy between the Albanian and Montenegrin authorities is necessary as long as they share Shkodra's lake and Buna river. The reactivation of the navigability of the Buna river, in order to guarantee the access in the Adriatic Sea requires consistent investments, but it cannot be sustained by a single country, in this case the Albanian counterpart. Obviously, this implies a series of investments in particular in the adaption of the river basins and in the construction of intermediate stops in order to increase the territorial accessibility but with a high attention toward the environmental issue as long as the river is part of homonym natural park. A similar approach can be adopted for the navigability on the lake, even if in this case only intermediate stops are needed and eventually a main harbor (in the Montenegrin part) to guarantee the access in the towns on both sides of the border. Another important outcome from this eventual collaboration, will be promotion of several investments in tourism from local inhabitants and the promotion of their typical products by also creating commercial ties between them. As long as the two countries have signed many agreements regarding the Buna's natural park and Shkodra's lake, the (re) building of the harbor in Shkodra's gate can give a new impulse to the future of the cross-border collaboration between Albania and Montenegro.

Focusing on the impact of this infrastructure on the local scale, referring to the city of Shkodra and nearby towns, there are expected positive outcomes, too. First, the blue corridor (intended as the blue routes along the Buna river and along the lake) will represent an alternative route to explore the territory and to strengthen the connection of the towns with main center (Shkodra), developing tourism and creating economic ties, too.

Second reason is the environmental issue, because it will induce people who want to visit those places to use a valid transportation alternative than driving their car. Especially for the villages on Albanian side, in particular Shirokë and

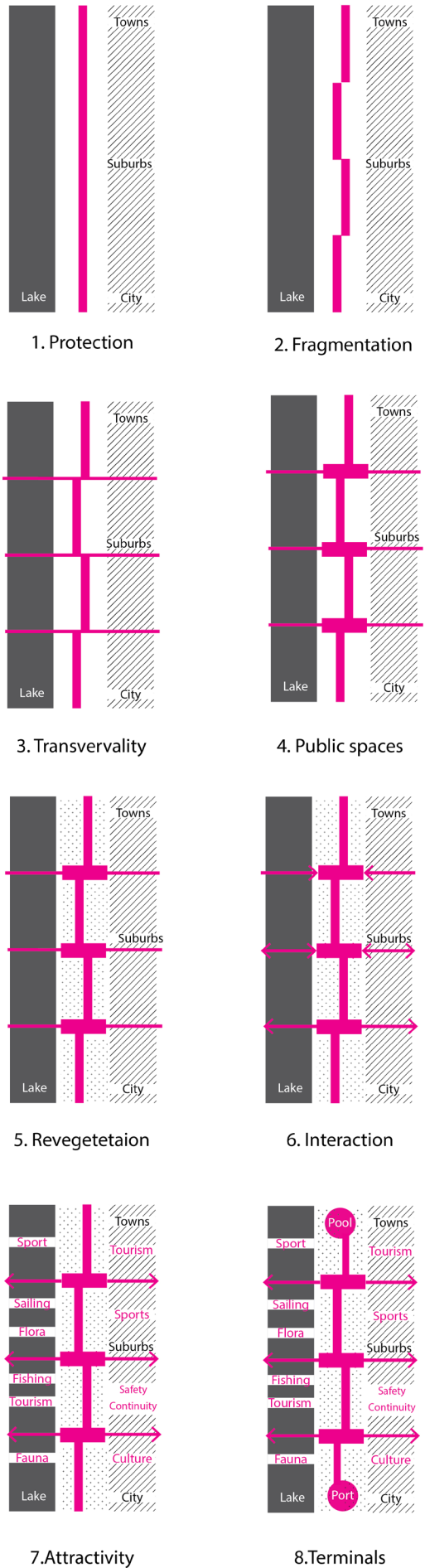


Fig8 / Conceptual diagrams of the masterplan source / Saimir Shtylla and Sara Codarin



Fig9 / Masterplan of the new harbour source / the author

Zogaj, that are connected through a narrow street and by considering that the morphology of the territory they are located doesn't guarantee parking spaces for all and in fact most of the tourists or weekend visitors park their cars at the side of the main road. Investing in the restoration of this road may be a reasonable intervention but the adaptations for new parking spaces is not economically and environmentally sustainable as it is the building of the (intermediate) deck to assure the connection with the main harbor in Shkodra.

Third reason and most important, it will encourage local inhabitants to invest on their home town and to pull them out from the pessimism that they are abandoned and not supported by central and local authorities. The intermediate stops in the small towns will offer an alternative territorial accessibility and consequently the possibility to promote trade of local products even in remote towns where road infrastructure is not good and eventually making them accessible for tourists, too. Fourth reason, its impact in the touristic promotion of the city will be evident, because the area beneath the castle will be a 24-hour active due to the impulse it will give and through the attraction of private activities. It will not work on daily base as it was in the past, acting as the economic pole of the city in the 40s. In the urban regeneration optic, the harbor will contribute in the reopening of the closed/inactive shops of the new Bexhisten complex built not a few years ago. Regarding the design, the harbor is not

expected to remain a random infrastructure for its main shipping activity concentrated in the management of the arriving/ departing boats or eventually private ones for fishing, sport activity etc. In fact, it is designed as public space accessible in every hour and connected to the dike that as mentioned above is also a promenade with several intermediate squares ending to Vranka's pool that somehow can be considered as a "mirrored" version of the harbor in the North. Its section (Fig. 10), made with a series of steps is divided on three levels in order to break the monotony that would have been in the case of repetitive-stepped section and to adapt to the different scenarios related with the water's level. If the water's level is low, then the boats will anchor at lower level and in the upper steps people can rest. During the peaks, the boats may anchor at a higher point and can normally perform their arrival/departure from the harbor. Last but not least, is the flood preventing aspect of its section that is designed to avoid the maximum level of 9.8 meters assuring the protection to nearby areas.

## Conclusions

The future of Shkodra's gate, is closely related to environmental safety, economic importance and touristic attractiveness of the city. A shared vision between local actors and central government is necessary to address the future development goals for this area. Simultaneously, a cross-border cooperation between Albania and Montenegro should be taken seriously into consideration, because it may reveal a turning point for the towns around the

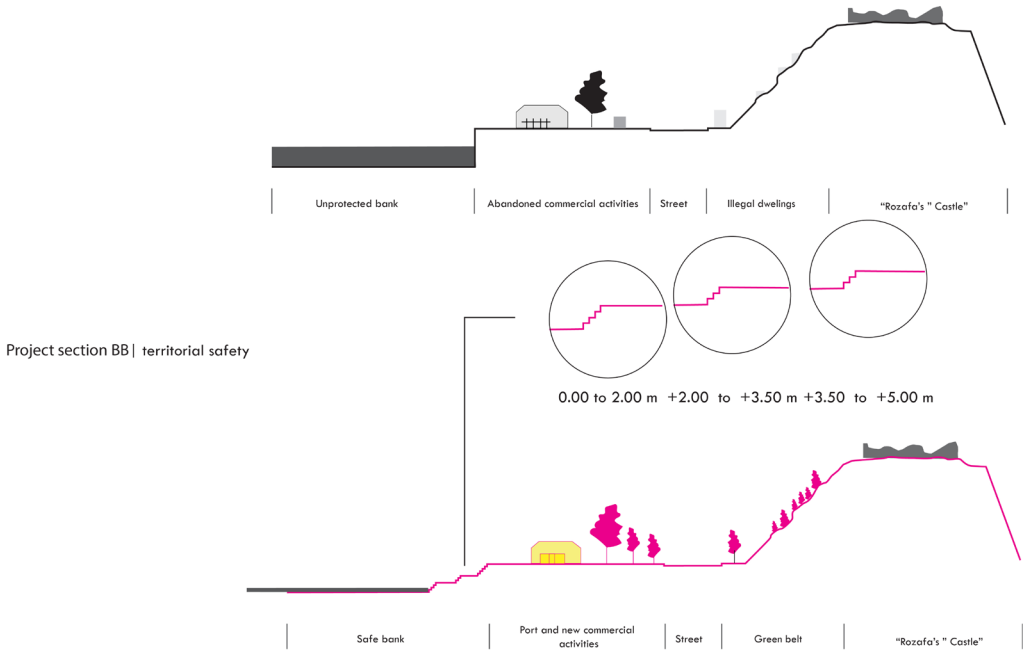


Fig10 / Sections of the state of art (above) and the project proposal (below) source / the author

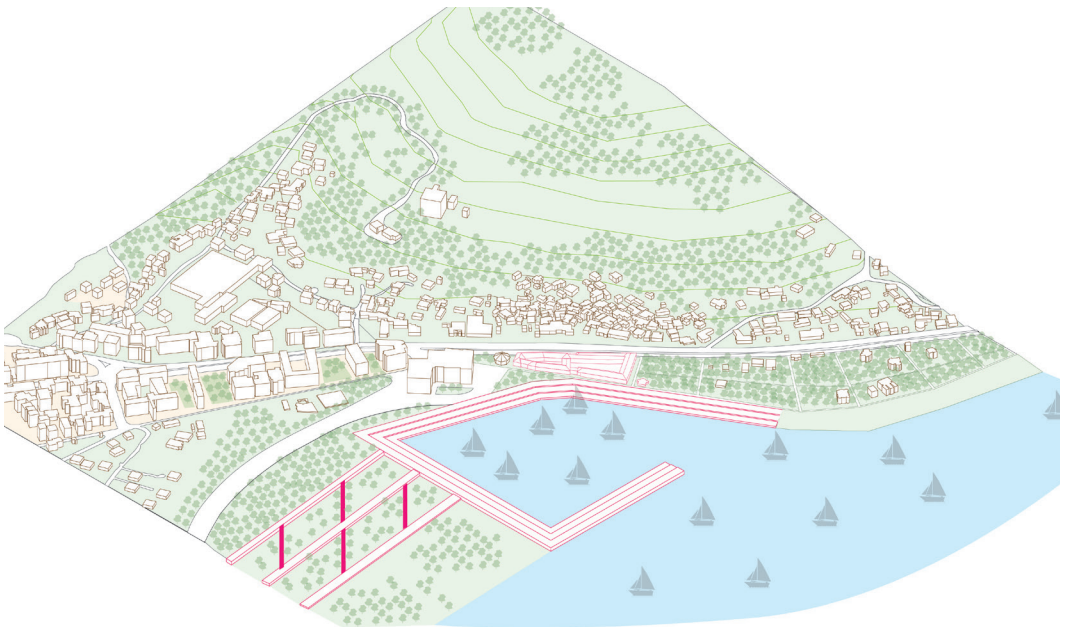


Fig11 / Birdview of the project proposal source / the author

lake, stimulating local inhabitants to invest on tourism and local activities. So, the (re)building of the new harbor is strictly related from cooperation at cross-border, national and local level because it will guarantee not only its best performance during its operativity but even the opening of other harbors of different scale on both sides of the border (Fig. 11). As it is part of general vision, that also involves the construction of the dike to protect the city from future floods, it expects a series of public spaces to furtherly strengthen the relation between the city with the lake and the Buna river. On these bases it can become a catalyzer for the renewal of the entire area even though the rebirth of the erased memories is practically impossible.

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