



**Title:** *On Berat, the City of the Necklaces of Light*

**Author:** *Skender Luarasi*

**Source:** *Forum A+P 26 | Crafting 'Scientific' Research in Architecture*

**ISSN:** *2227-7994*

**DOI:** *10.37199/f40002611*

**Publisher:** *POLIS University Press*

## On Berat, the City of the Necklaces of Light

SKENDER LUARASI

*POLIS University*

A lot of facts and stories have been recounted about Berat in history, by historians, architects, tourists, and travelers. But one question has not been asked yet, or it is taken for granted: What is the *form* of Berat? We think we know it, given that we have seen so many pictures of the old quaint city, or have taken these pictures ourselves, particularly the famous one of Mangalem with on the right side and Gorica opposite the River Osum, as if to prove to ourselves that we have really been there... But no sooner one takes a pencil to draw the form of Berat (or its neighborhoods), the mental map disappears, as if sucked out by the narrow, empty ‘canyons’ of Mangalem, or the mute walls of Gorica. It is easier to draw the form of, say, Gjirokastra. One could start with the topographic or street lines and then infill nodes or buildings. The form of Gjirokastra has a rather legible syntax, predicated on distinctions and oppositions, the open and the closed, the continuous and the interrupted, the street and the building, the skeleton and infill, the public and private, the individual and the collective; Gjirokastra has parts that can be taken apart and analyzed; Gjirokastra is more modern... Berat, on the other hand, while sharing similar morphological features with Gjirokastra, it resists such binary structures. And if one were to insist, in an act of methodological obtuseness and arrogance, to ‘divide and conquer’ Berat in terms of such structures, then one would find oneself either outside, or drowned in it, which

amounts to the same thing... The old town, Berat, is “generous” (to quote Papastefani) on everything, except its ‘overall’ underlying form, if there is such thing at all... Indeed, it is the very possibility of an *overallness* of form that the town throws into question. In essence, it is this problem of form that Papastefani’s book addresses: how to draw the form of a city that does not yield easily to one, *overall form*. The solution given is to draw multiple moments or ‘folds’ of the city’s body and then string them in a necklace, which is the book itself. The thing with necklaces is that they do not have a beginning or an end; one enters them from anywhere and discovers journeys anew. The question of form is one of drawing, which is about drawing parts in relationships, until they make a form. But which part is drawn first? That is the radical question in and of every drawing. Because if part two were drawn before part one – and here lies the inexhaustible virtuality of drawing, then there would be a completely different (reality yielded from such) drawing... This is the difference between photography and drawing: photography requires just one click and things are captured simultaneously in the image; drawing, on the other hand demands choosing a first part, and a second..., and then a third one, which radically and irreversibly depends on the first two. What would be the first part of drawing (in) Berat? Where would we start? Berat does have a form, but it is a *form without parts*. One

could argue that Mangalem, Gorica, and the Castle, among others, are its parts. But they are far from being parts that form a whole, which, in Albertian terms, nothing can be added on or taken away from. There is no formal relationship between, say, Mangalem and Gorica other than the fact that there is a river between them. Together they do not form one whole but rather a com-position of two things: Mangalem + Gorica, being always more or less than a whole. Mangalem could very well exist without Gorica and Gorica without Mangalem. They are not parts but more like zones or *patches of figural intensity* whose form is not determined by their extensive border or contour. The last time I was in Berat with Andi we climbed all the way up to the last house of Mangalem, where we were also offered a glass of raki by a hospitable owner. It was amazing to see that that last house and did not partake in any bordering or thresholding function. Mangalem simply ended there.

It is only upon entering and walking in these zones that one could start to read its form. Upon entering Mangalem, for instance, one is immediately trapped in narrow streets bounded by crooked and tall blank stoned walls, occasionally punched with a door, and ending with flying cantilevered volumes with rows of windows above – a dramatic experience of involution and oscillation between contraction and expansion, between pressure and release. But these are not streets in the sense of a skeleton or a spine organizing the town – they often end abruptly into dead ends or front doors. Or in the sense of a public space vs. private one, there is a minimal interaction between the interior spaces and the streets, other than the one provided by the doors. These streets are more like bowels or intestines that have only one function: to upload or download people to and from the houses. These bowels often end with multiple steep steps and abrupt platforms that enable access to the front doors of the houses. Sometimes these steps and platforms are accommodated inside the houses and continue in the exterior spaces either as part of the *çardak* or as stairs within interior spaces. These cracks, tunnels, and chutes bring people in the upper floor, toward the light. Mangalem has only one formal idea: the transformation of topography into light. Both Mangalem and Gorica (which never receives any actual sunlight) are kaleidoscopic forms, but not for viewing Osum's valley or Tomor – though that is a desirable by-product, especially in a touristic milieu..., but about receiving light. *The form of Berat, is the form of light: the food of life...*

Where in Berat, then, would we start to draw these forms of light? And where would we start to draw other, new forms of light? The thread can be picked up anywhere in Papastefani's book. These drawings capture the *form of reaching light: how topo-graphy – as a writing or drawing of place becomes a photo-graphy* – but now understood in both its etymological and expanded sense – as a writing or drawing of light. These drawings reach for light *elementally*, through the architectural elements and details of the house, the mute stones of the ground floor walls, the door porticos, the white stucco protruding volumes,

the cubist *erker* foldings of the walls, the dark *çardak*'s carving the mass of the house, the flying *qoshk-s*, and finally the dark windows, the *retina* of the city. Because each of these drawings draw the form of light, then it is simply a matter of piecing or stringing them together into necklaces, without a blueprint.

*The current perspective has already been documented and published in the following book: Luarasi, S. (2022) On Berat, the City of the Necklaces of Light. In A. Papastefani (ed.), In Berat walking and sketching (pp. 29-36), Tirana: Gent Grafik.*