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Strategies for urban regeneration through the intervention on the existing buildings / A proposal for the city of Shkodra

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Abstract

A strategy for the urban regeneration of the city of Shkodra has been developed for answering to the actual critical issues identified.

The proposed approach aims to define effective sustainable strategies for the urban regeneration of the historical town through the development of a set of interventions for the revitalization of the inner-city spaces and the recovery of the obsolescent existing buildings. Starting from the provisions of the General Local Plan, already in force, classes of light actions to respond to the above-mentioned critical issues has been developed in order to intervene on a more detailed scale.

The intended strategy seems also suitable for all that contexts with similar problems due to the low impact these kinds of intervention have, able to minimize costs, meet community needs and avoid an excessive consumption of resources.

Introduction to the case study: the city of Shkodra

The city of Shkodra (also known as Shkodra, in Albanian language or Scutari, in Italian one) is located in the north-west of Albania, in a geostrategic position between the Adriatic Sea and the rest of the Balkan region, just across land-routes and access-roads to other important cities in the surroundings.

It is one of the oldest and most historic places in the whole country and its municipality covers an area of about 870 km², extended from the Albanian Alps to the Adriatic Sea.

Always considered the cultural capital of Albania, the city of Shkodra has been chosen as a case study due to its historical importance as well as its location, within a singular geographic surrounding rich in complexity as a result of the existence of an urban development in the middle of a watershed area between lake and rivers, thus characterized by the strong presence of water and by the great impact that it has on the whole territory.

The municipality, main urban development of the area, is located in the north-west of the region, into a valley between the Lake Skadar, the largest lake in Southern Europe – on the south-west border – and the river Kir, that skims the city along the east border and enters a distributary of Drin river just below Shkodra.

During the last years, and especially since the communist regime has collapsed, the whole community has radically changed. Starting from the 1990s, mainly its peripheral areas but also the inner-city core, has witnessed great demographical changes as well as migration phenomena from the mountain area that led to a huge increase in population.

Thus, it has resulted into the conversion of a big amount of land from rural to urban use with the consequent development of wide and informal occupations, coupled with several forms of illegal buildings, mainly consisted in individual houses built by new migrants coming from surrounding rural areas.

As a matter of fact, most of new



Fig 1 / Areal picture of the city of Shkodraken from the Ruzafa Castle
source / the author

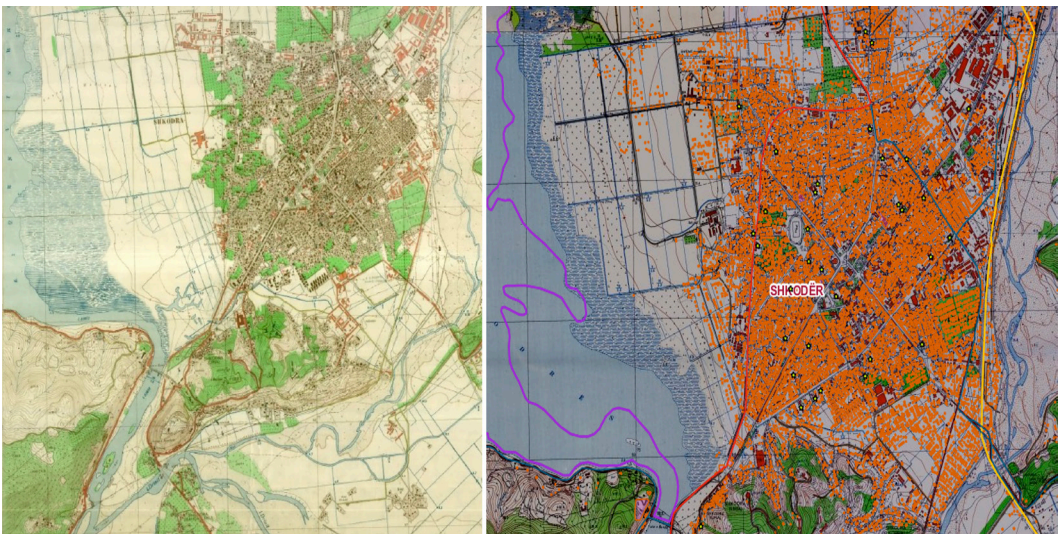


Fig 2 / Development of the city of Shkodra, before (on the left) and after (on the right) the fall of the communist regime in 1985 and in 2015
source / Krymbi E., Kopliku N. and Bosina I., 2015

constructions recently¹ built, that take approximately 40% of the whole total housing, are informal systems of poor quality located in the suburbs. Although part of these developments are now almost fully incorporated in the urban pattern, these informal areas still require specific actions to become integrated with the historical nucleus through connections and infrastructures between them.

Shkoder's features and critical issues

Starting from the previsions of the General Local Plan, the initial work upstream to this proposal started with the recognition of the main features of the municipality of Shkodra, analyzing the historical city,

the watershed area and the informal settlements mainly developed in the northern area.

The GLP indeed, properly identifies strategic objectives to be pursued in order to make Shkodra a sustainable city with livable building and spaces. The plan's directives ranging from proposals for the infrastructure (for which has been recommended the improvement of the connections with Montenegro maintaining the north-south corridor), for the existing pathways that connect the Kiri riverside with Shkodra's lake and for intermodal connections between the train station and the city center.

The first author's exploration concerned

¹ / The statement refers to all of those housing stock built after the fall of communist regime, since the early nineties.



*Fig3 / City plan concept after proposed intervention's strategies: in the 1:5000 map the three main areas analyzed have been indicated (the historical city, the watershed area and the informal settlements), the proposal of the infrastructural bypass and the improvement of the existing pedestrian routes through the city center (thanks to the enhancement of residual spaces as well as the linkage between the main city squares).
source / the author*

exactly the city center, analyzing its urban pattern, the traffic and pedestrian routes and the vocational capacity of each area taken into account.

As many other historic city, Shkodra's ancient town is characterized by road systems made of narrow streets, lined with high stone-walls. Therefore, part of the critical points identified – coincident with issues stated by the existing plan – concerned transports and infrastructures, connections between the old town and its edges (Shkoder lake and Kiri river) as well as with the train station, recognized as a potential interchange hub to integrate different forms of sustainable mobility and promote strategic connections through the center and its surroundings.

To overcome these criticalities, actions in line with the GLP proposal have been suggested. The first concerned the creation of an infrastructural bypass on the east side of the municipality, in order to unload the heavy traffic on the main axes to access to the city, providing in this way a corridor between south and north Albania and Montenegro.

At the same way, in order to facilitate the connections between the two banks (lakeside and riverside), sewing interventions on the historical town through the enhancement of the existing pedestrian routes has been proposed.

The aim was to provide new pathways, using local and permeable materials, to strengthen connections between the two borders of the city by passing from it;

another point was the will to link the main city squares (already identified from the GLP due to their distinguishing identities) in an integrated walkable and functional network able to capitalize the relations with river and lake, thus taking advantages from the natural qualities of these landscapes. Also the proposal to restore the ancient canals that flow away from the River Kir down to the lake has been made, in order to give them visibility especially due to the strict and complex relationship that Shkoder has with flooding.

Secondly, an analysis of the built and of the physical quality and conditions of the urban fabric has been carried out.

Basically, it has been recognized that building stock within the historical city center is a mixture of several construction products with different quality, maintenance and identity features, expression of city's history as a reflection of the multitude of culture that passed through it over the years.

The majority of Shkoder's building stock is composed of old constructions that belong largely to the period between 19th and 20th century and of buildings constructed after the Second World War in the rationalist style, made of concrete frame structures – often pre-fabricated – and linear building typology, with a completely different architectural aspect compared with ancient constructions.

Multi-story buildings with large floor spaces (currently often non-occupied) stand near modest buildings in a very poor



Fig4 / Existing housing stock in the inner city of Shkodra
source / the author

state of repair; also referring to historic homes, just few within the central area have been restored, while several was torn down, ignored or renewed in modern styles. During the communist regime indeed, as much as after the Second World War, the common idea was that any ancient construction had a small value; this, in addition with the economic and social pressure on the inner city, led to a great elimination or alteration of the older housing stock.

Nowadays, most of buildings concentrated in the inner parts of the city are in a state of physical deterioration although there are exceptional cases as for instance the Shkodras Historical Museum, a typical ancient merchant's home surrounded by fortified walls, constructed in 1815 and recently restored to its old state.

In addition, as part of the efforts made from the Local Authority to improve the living conditions of the residents of the old city, an area of more than 22.000 square meters of pedestrian alleyways and streets have been paved over the past eight years within the historic fabric, located among the Kol Idromeno street and the area Gjuhadol and Dugajt e Reja.

This area has now a strong identity, due to the presence of buildings recently restored, and it's fully experienced during the whole day by Shkoder inhabitants thanks to the presence of several meeting places, bars and street-front commercial activities that have significantly increased its vitality.

Classes of actions for urban regeneration

The main critical issues figured out from this analysis, related both to the urban as to the building scale, have led to the definition of a two-scale intervention strategy for the inner city and the neighboring housing areas, in order to improve the urban quality of these places. First, regarding urban and functional issues, the strategy proposed wants to deal with empty residual spaces between buildings, often present in central areas also in streets with pedestrian priorities.

The proposal is to reuse them by providing new cultural and recreational functions (such as, for instance, informal libraries or small thematic gardens) to improve livability of the inner city through the revitalization of its public spaces. Also the existing abandoned buildings have been considered in order to revalorize the city's heritage, proposing to reuse these structures to generate new forms of urban life.

These actions seem, at the same time, able to preserve the value that these spaces have and to enhance the cultural and heritage tourism in the city. Furthermore, they aim to improve the quality of the whole urban space, avoiding the deterioration of free abandoned spaces that, if characterized from a disorderly appearance, could lead to the generation of physical and social disorder which, in the long-term period, would determine a perception of insecurity due to the decrease of informal social control² as well



*Fig5 / Existing housing stock in the inner city of Shkodra
source / the author*

as the loss of identity of these places. At a more architectural scale, other problems pointed out were the ones connected with road systems and with the need to guarantee access, light and visibility to all of those dwellings hidden by fencing or other buildings, therefore not easily accessible from the street front as a result of additional objects that prevent their view from outside.

Due to the high density of the city and the access systems, primarily by means of narrow alleyways between fragile fabrics (often made of disarticulated and disorganized spaces), the resolution of these criticalities faces significant logistical and technical challenges, because it entails the reorganization of the spaces between blocks.

The city indeed retains over years its characteristic appearance made of historical narrow streets that reflect its architectural heritage even if part of this ancient arrangement has recently been transformed with straight wide streets and tall residential and public buildings.

For these reasons, a series of interventions of development and an improvement of free spaces between buildings have been proposed, with the aim to preserve spatial density, respecting the structure and the texture of the streets, and to maintain the character of the areas while improving connections through the urban fabric by means of the creation of new corridors, to facilitate the access and fruition of the pedestrian across the city center.

The opening of new passages through the neighborhood can also help in reducing the energy metabolism of the buildings

by improving the air circulation during summer, in order to obtain the dissipation of the heat in excess, while contributing in a positive way to the internal environmental comfort of dwellings. Also the insertion in the street-networks of obstacles, built or natural, or of vegetation with perpendicular development with respect to the wind-direction, can have positive results in the protection from dominant winds. In contrary case, those winds that directly affect the buildings can significantly influence their thermal losses, proportionally with their speed. Arranging open, semi-open or protected spaces can determine compelling changes in wind-speed and flow directions.

Other questions identified concerned the maintenance and the re-functional issues of communist blocks that are currently suffering for high density and lack of identity.

At the moment, these buildings constitute the majority of the housing stock in the inner Shkodra and require to be restored to meet the change of actual social and housing needs.

Due to the fact that demolition and reconstruction interventions constitute a really drastic decision that involve very critic logistic and economic aspects – connected with the need to re-allocate residents, at least in a temporary way – so much that they constitute a witness of the history of the country, more light interventions of refurbishment and re-adjustment have been proposed, in order to prevent their increasingly obsolescence. Classes of actions that deal with building



Fig6 / Shkodra historical house, now becomes the city's Historical Museum source / the author

identity could be proposed and divided after the recognizing of common elements, trying to define different and precise line of interventions to optimize and reduce built energy consumption, providing for instance an improvement in thermal insulation, the replacement of fenestration systems with better performing ones (by using, for example, Insulated Glazing Units energy consumption can be significantly reduced) as well as the installation of renewable energy systems such as thermal solar and PV panels.

Subsequently, actions that encourage urban complexity of these housing areas have been proposed. They aim at intervening on ground-level spaces in some identified and strategical buildings (both new and old), providing suggestions to modify the use of them through the establishment of commercial or recreational activities.

The identified buildings have to be selected after an inventory of the different activities already existing in these areas, understanding if subsist the good combination of uses and functions and if the current social structure can sustain the introduction of new uses.

To prevent the consolidation of an urban layout that contributes to urban disintegration (as, for instance, area where is not realized an adequate functional and social mix) it's important indeed to provide a mixture of uses and activities rich enough to ensure the city's public and social contacts, able to give to ground-

level activities the right importance while ensuring the continuity of urban plots, essential to confer spatial and perceptual unit to the urban fabric. Also enhancement of the pedestrian routes is an action that has to be pursued to avoid negative consequences on traffic and pedestrian fluxes intensity because the breaking of these passages can easily determine a strong decrease of the vitality of the streets.

Finally, suggestions of introducing new functions within the city center and re-distributing the already existing ones in order to enhance pedestrian routes have been provided, following the vocational capacity of each area given by the GLP.

Conclusions

The proposed approach consists in a set of general actions to promote urban regeneration and to enhance local culture and history of the city of Shkodra, providing solutions to the identified problems and improving the life quality of residents while generating a positive economic impact on the whole territory, protecting the cultural asset of the city for future generations and preserving the genius loci and sense of place that gives to the historical nucleus its individuality.

In addition, the strategy has been developed to a specific inner-city traditional neighborhood but it could be applied to other ones hence taking into consideration their particular features.

2 / This mechanism, defined "Theory of broken windows" has been described for the first time in an article of March 1982 in The Atlantic journal, entitled "Broken windows: The police and neighborhood safety" from James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling.



*Fig7 / Current aspects of the pedestrian area along Kol Idromeno street after the re-pavement occurred in the last years
source / the author*

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*Fig8 / Author's photo-merge that provide a suggestion about the proposed public spaces' uses
source / the author*