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Aesthetic quality of the historic urban landscape Historic city image and Townscape tradition

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A pleasing experience related to the city perception is one of the most important qualities of the urban environment. Since antiquity, this element of appeal and appreciation of the city was considered as crucial in city and architecture treatises. Aristotle sustained that the city should be built in a way to transmit happiness. This atmosphere is evident in the traditional cities, in which monuments, residential buildings, squares and roads make up together a harmonious whole.
Referring to the visual quality of traditional cities, in his influential book "*The Art of Building Cities*" (1889, 1945) Camillo Sitte states that they transmit a sense of nostalgia that remind us of happy times and argues that this feeling of nostalgia is perceived due to the artistic harmony of the city image. The art of building discussed by Sitte includes the idea of the city as an arrangement of its parts into a harmonious whole. This design unity that characterizes traditional ensembles is the key element of visual appeal. Unity happens at different scales. Elements composing the urban structure must be interrelated visually and contribute to reliving the overall image as a whole.

In his study, Sitte was focused mostly on the small-scale urban elements in order to understand the complexity of the city by analyzing its core parts and the way that are connected to the urban fabric. By analyzing the spatial characteristics of the most successful medieval plazas, he put into evidence the principles that rule their form and create a whole with the buildings that limit this space. The building on the other hand, was not conceived as a sculptural architectural object, but one with a façade that contributed to the definition of the inside space of the urban square – a building that should be conceive in relation to the logic of public space formation. In this regard, urbanism for Sitte was considered as a science of relationships (Kostof 1991) and was determined by what people visually perceive walking in the streets.
In the beginning of the XIX century, Benedetto Croce in his essay "*Folk Poetry and art poetry*" (1929, 1952) compared popular architecture to architecture as in "*prose to poetry*", separating it from ordinary constructions. He used the terms "*vibrant*" and "*lively*" to define the character of vitality and exiting rhythm which enabled them to transmit life.
Despite these first isolated attempts to draw interest on traditional architecture, the first important, influential event was the Bernard Rudofsky's "Architecture without Architects" exhibition at MoMA, in 1964 and the landscape illustration book "*Architecture without Architects*" (Rudofsky 1964). In this occasion, Rudofsky openly declared his interest on the "primitive", or the so called popular, rural, anonymous, non-pedigreed architecture and urban settlements formed as a result of aggregation with an accent to the urban landscape. As a result, these ensembles present a perfect expression of the cultural level of the community which makes the best use of context constrains and potentials responding to social needs and reflects an ecological approach to urban development. In fact, even their

growth and transformation over time is incremental and organic and embodies the genetic code of the existing pieces. This unitary morphological code of the historical cities was also noted by Marco Romano (1993), who refered to European cities by emphasizing the role of the "*collective themes*" in the perception of an aesthetic quality, including both the system of buildings and the sequences of public space or squares. In fact, the beauty of the European historic city according to Romano (1993) relates to the beauty of the façade of its houses, its public buildings and the way they are interconnected, forming coherent spatial visual sequences. This exhibition intended to point out exactly the aesthetic values of the traditional/popular/vernacular ensembles, which suggested an integrated approach to urban design. Architectural objects do not work independently as separate entities, but are conceived as parts which contribute in the construction of the city as a major work of art.

The most significant critics on the indifference to '*minor*' architecture were declared by Bruno Zevi. Revisiting popular architecture in his "*Controstoria dell'architecttura moderna. Dialetti architettonici"*, Bruno Zevi (1996) highlighted their expressive voltage as well as vitality: "*...medieval towns are "organic, alive, modulated by the needs of users, capable to expand; free from any formalistic taboo as well as symmetry, alignment, and perspective's rules*" (Zevi 1993, p.29). Here Zevi tried to objectively define the aesthetic qualities of the historical urban landscape by using concepts such as symmetry, alignment and capacity of organic growth. In fact, analyzing the architecture of traditional historic centers Zevi noted that the apparent formal simplicity, instead of being regular and ordered as in the "*classical*" architecture, was a blend of surprise and adventure of an apparent disorder: from this marriage emerges the unique character, the identity of every single street, and altogether the symphonic complex as a whole.

Here it is important to understand the visual complexity of the historic city in relation to the aesthetic qualities and to identify series of parameters base on observed constants that contribute to its aesthetic qualities and can be further used as tools in design.

Visual complexity and aesthetics of the historical urban landscape.

The attempt to explain the aesthetic features of the historical city is based on the understanding of its visual complexity. The latter has to do with the way its components and single entities relate to each other and constitute a whole. Vitruvius defined the visual harmonic composition of the urban parts which fit with each other through numeric relationship as Eurythmia (Vitruvius 2005). L.B.Alberti reinforced the idea of harmony and concord of all the parts to form a suitable whole based on the mutual relation between them and the relation as a whole, so that "*nothing could be added or taken away or altered except for the worse*" (Alberti 1986, p.131).

Christopher Alexander was one of the first modern theoreticians who tried

to understand the principles of the city structure in relation to the visual quality of the urban landscape. He intuitively realized that there were some structural laws in artifacts such as buildings or urban landscapes that attributed them with a "*quality of life*" which makes them more pleasing to the view than others (Alexander 2002). Based on a cognitive approach, Alexander tried to objectively define the aesthetic visual quality of artifacts that characterizes living structures and constitutes the source of the coherence embodied in these objects. In fact, according to Alexander (Alexander 2002b), human building activity creates a physical order in the world. This order is reflected in the visual quality of the built environment. Thus, the most pleasing buildings or urban environments present "a high degree of life" and a deep quality of order, which means a particular kind of geometry or a structure that creates a quality of life in the object, which consequently makes it more pleasing to human sight. In fact, he appreciated traditional cities, having a high degree of life embodied in their urban structure.

This assertion is quite similar to the definition of Leon Battista Alberti on beauty as concinnitas or "the harmony and concord of all the parts achieved in such a manner that nothing could be added or taken away or altered except for the worse" (Alberti, 1485). The high level of interaction between the parts makes them, in fact, part of the whole since every single entity influences the image as a whole.

Ch. Alexander (1965) in his seminal paper published in 1964, "*The city is not a tree*" used two mental structures to describe the complexity of urban morphology by analyzing the city as a structure made of sets: one based on a high level of organization and a rigid hierarchical relationship between parts which was described as tree structure, and the other presenting a high level of interaction between the single parts which was called semi-lattice structure. These structures that represent different models of generation of the city can have a great influence on the city image, and the "*degree of life*" it transmits. The metaphor of the tree structure describes the zoning restrictive approach in modern planning with a high level of hierarchical organization among the urban parts. In contrast, semi lattice, as in mathematics, constitutes an open structure, where the single parts can have multiple interconnections at different scales, by creating overlapped systems of a relationship between the parts, which enable an organic growth, piece by piece or transformation of the urban fabric, guaranteeing a continuous whole. The semi-lattice structure, in fact, holds a quality of adaptability and is able to support heterogeneity, variations and a variety of combinations which attributes a vital character to the traditional urban environment.

Understanding the organized complexity of traditional urban landscape can help bring new insights to the objective aesthetic quality that exists in natural cities as organic complex structures, in contrast to planned cities that ignore the role of complexity in the city image. With regard to the organized complexities, Ch. Alexander introduced the theory of "*wholeness*" and "*centers*", which provided a method in analyzing and describing objectively the beauty of a complex structures. Based on this theory, the beauty of a living structure relates to the idea that its parts are working as a whole, and it contains many wholes within. This means that an object, a building or built environment is not perceived as an isolated fragment but is part of a wider context, a world which includes the garden, trees, streets, natural landscape and territory, and so on, at different scales: "*The whole is unbroken and undivided, and its parts work in a holistic way*" (Alexander 2002).
In fact, wholeness is seen as closely related to other living qualities like beauty, eloquence, good health, well-being and—most integrally—vitality and life, which characterize livings structures and represent the necessary criteria for urban visual quality. Living structures are complex networks made up of numerous centers at different levels, which, because of their position, shape, dimension, and visual strength in relation to the context, exhibit centeredness along with their area of influence. They represent focal points within the visual composition.

In Pattern Language (1977), Christopher Alexander proposes a language that explains the organized complexity of the city by displaying the structural relations between elements that are related to the form but are more flexible and adaptable to different situations. Hence, they can be repeatable and usable in urban design. The common properties of geometric (form) or structural patterns that sustain wholeness are tools that help define the visual harmony and coherence of the whole and guide designers achieve an increased

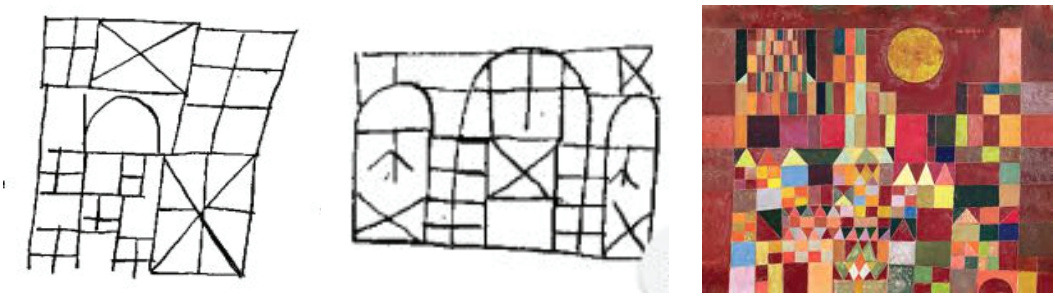

Fig. 1 / Paul Klee, Study on structures in elevation. Source / Klee, P. and Spiller, J. (1969). The thinking eye. London: Lund Humphries, p.236) and "Castle" landscape painting

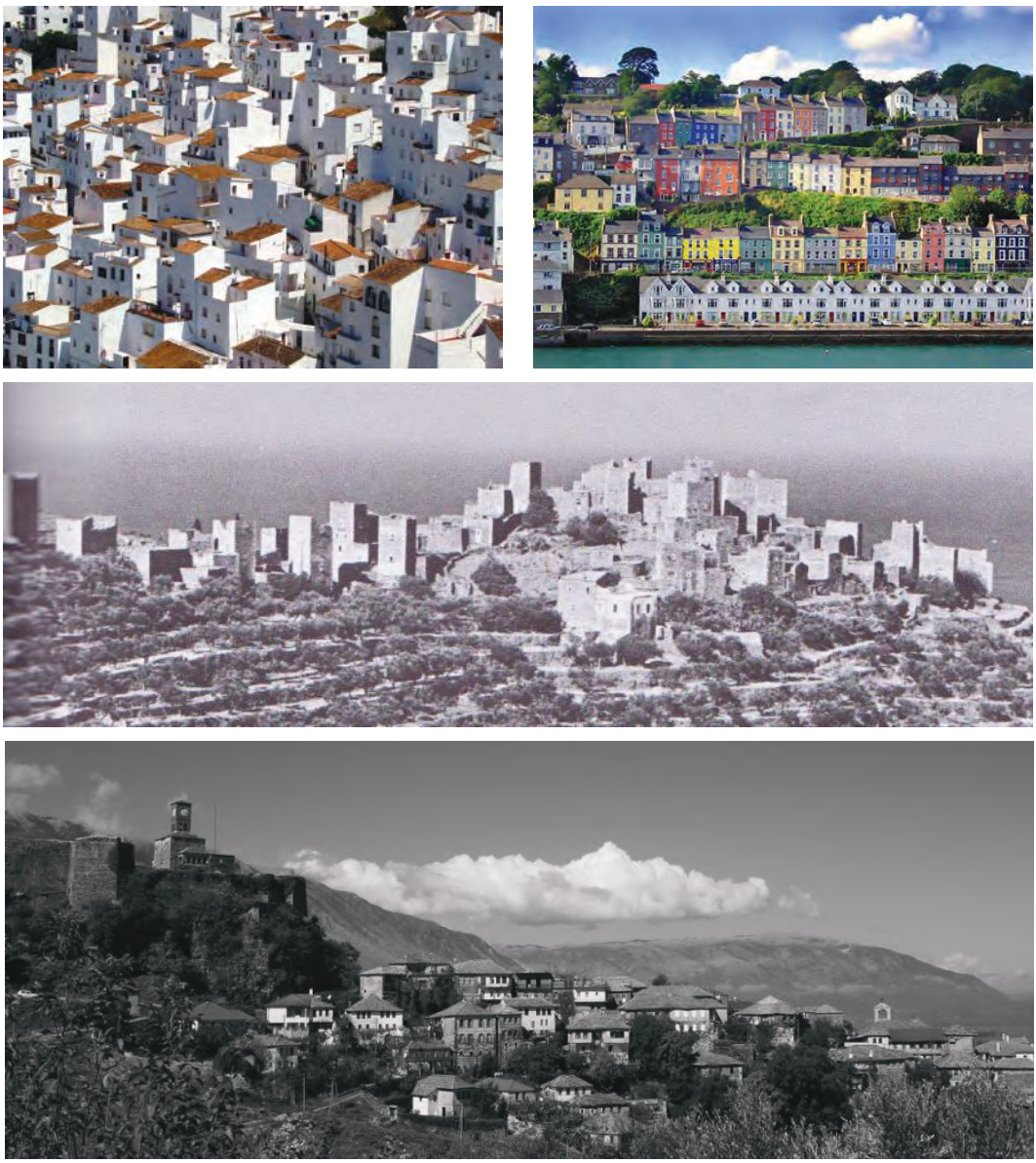

Fig. 2 / Distinct cultural built environments and their visual character given by the housing typology Fig. 2.a Cobh, Ireland. Source / http://citywallpaperhd.com/fr/photo/374-fond-decran-irlande.html), Fig. 2b. Casares Andalusia, Spain. Source / http://www. greekarchitects.gr/site_parts/doc_files/238.15.11.pdf); Fig. 2c A view of Vatheia, in the Peloponnesus. Source / Rudofsky 1964, p.62) Fig. 2d. Image of historical urban landscape of Gjirokastra. Source / Photo by Lav Lutalica (flickr)

coherence. In his attempt to decode the physical idea of life in living structures Ch. Alexander identified a set of geometrical proprieties characterizing all things which have life or objects which present a wholeness quality. The geometrical features he defined are: Levels of scale; Strong centers; Boundaries; Alternating repetition; Positive space; Good shape; Local symmetry; Deep interlock and ambiguity; Contrast; Gradients; Roughness; Echoes; The void, Simplicity and inner calm; Not separateness-connectives. Each of them does not work separately but can help strengthen the character of the others (Alexander 2002). This can be easily verified in traditional historic cities and is valid also in the case of Gjirokastra.

Fig. 3 / The role of color in the integral image of the historic city: Ostuni, Italy.
Source / https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ostuni.

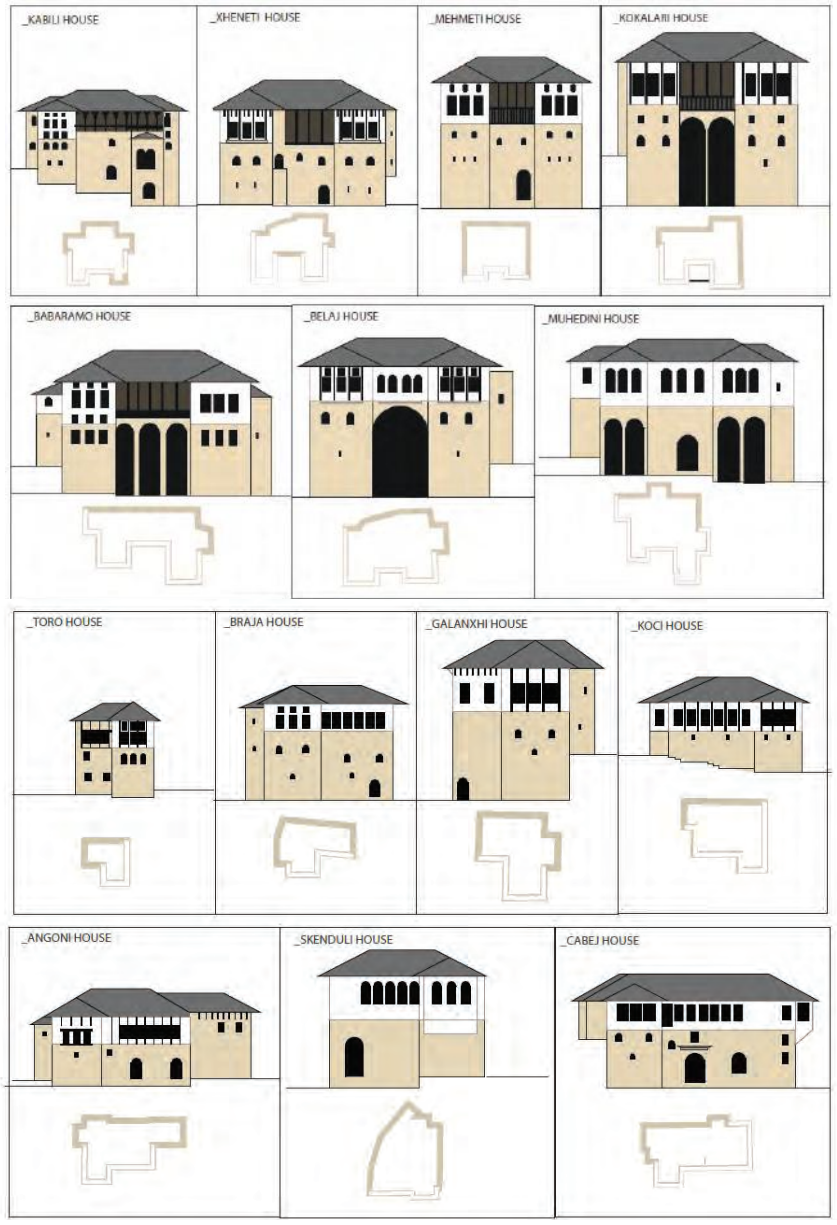

Fig. 4 / Analyses of color and texture perception in Gjirokastra house.
Source / Papa, 2020.

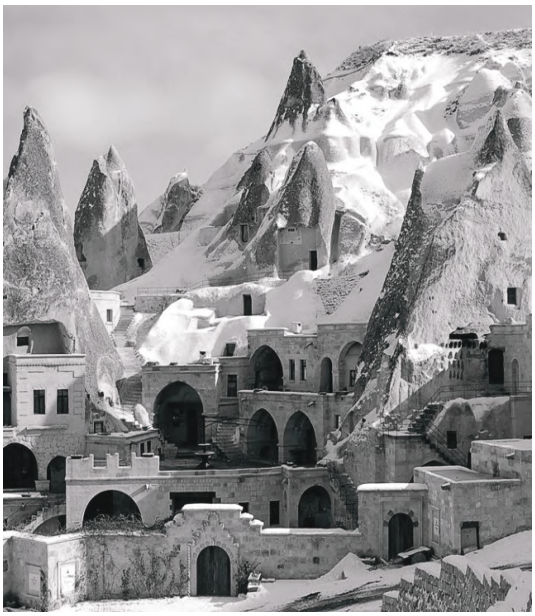

Fig. 5 / The buildings voids in the urban landscape of Goreme Valley, Cappadocia, Turkey. Source / http://www.art-et-loisirs.com

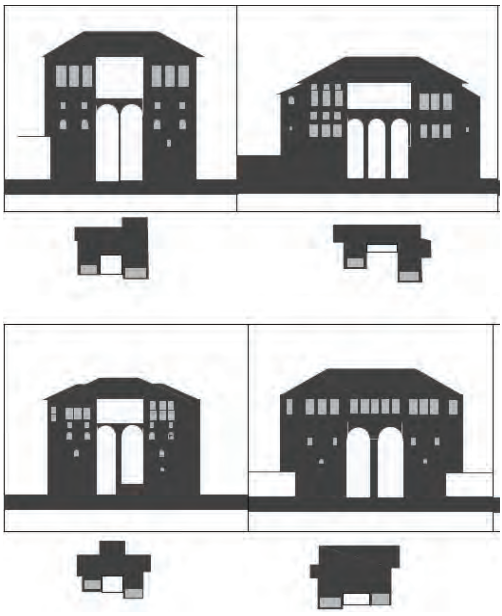

Fig. 6 / Analyses of significant voids in house facades according to the typology. Source / Papa, 2020)

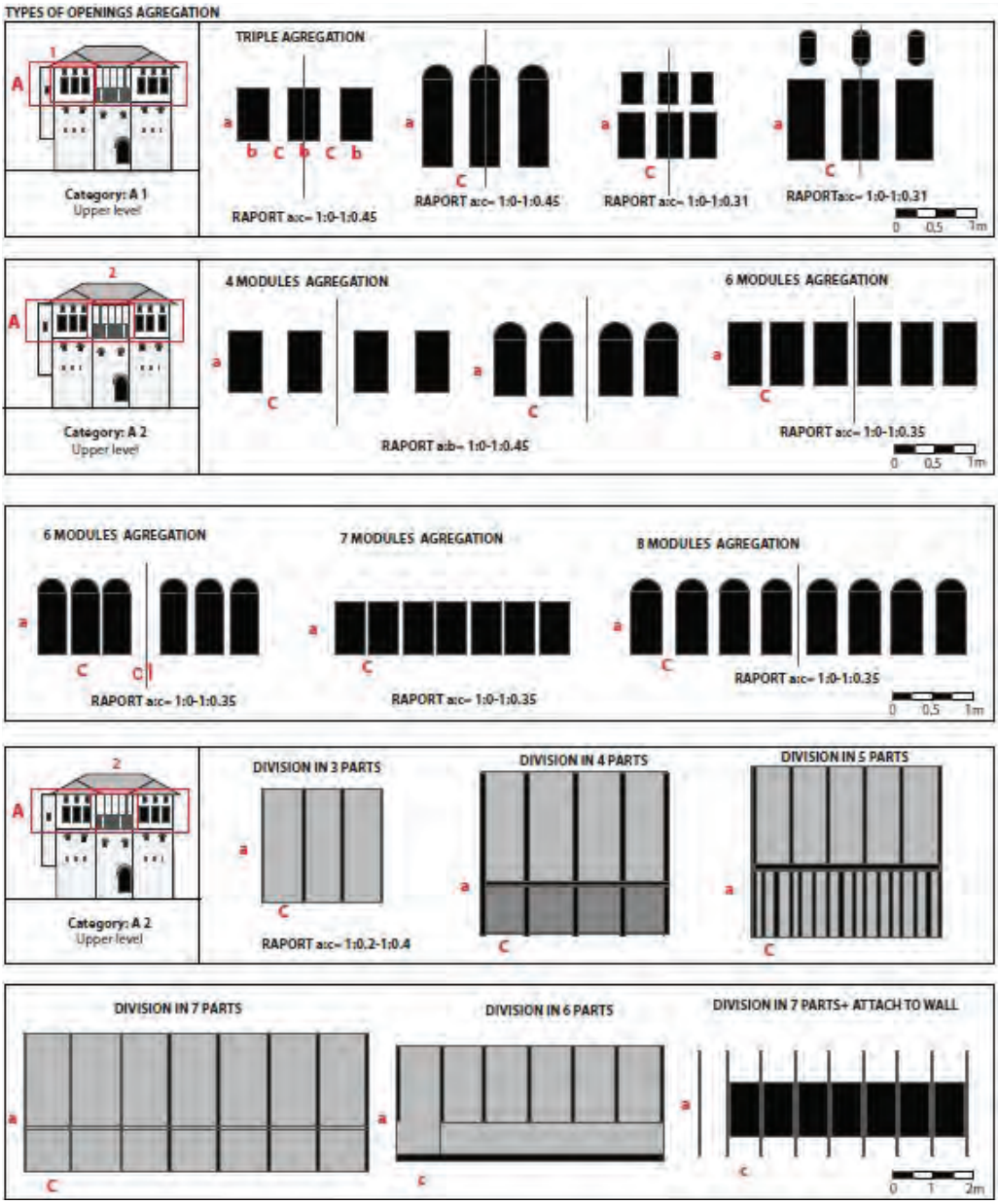

Fig. 7 / Geometry and proportion constants of openings in upper part of the facade of traditional house of Gjirokastra. Source / Papa, 2020.

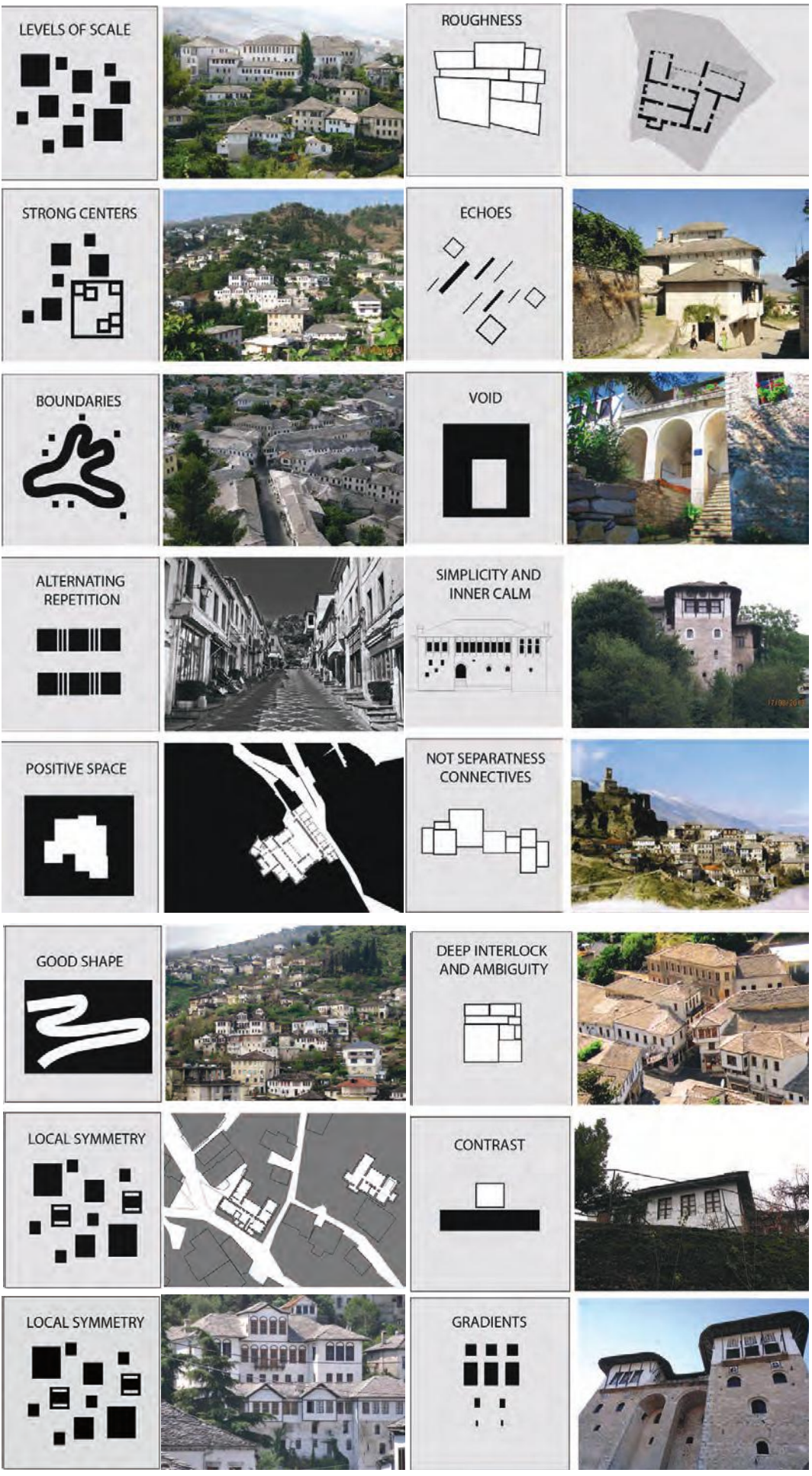

Fig. 8 / Diagram of Ch. Alexander geometrical proprieties and representative photo from Gjirokastra context explaining them in urban and architectural context (source: author's elaboration based on Ch. Alexander geometrical proprieties (2002).

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