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Innovative Urban Design Strategies for a Traditional City. The Case of Gjirokastra.

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Abstract

This article arises as a need to address a phenomenon that has affected all small towns that do not reach a certain population. The problem in question is related to the displacement of the population from small settlements to large urban centers. As a result, we have the shrinkage of small settlements creating what are called shrinking cities and the overcrowding of large centers that go from the Metropolis to Megalopolis or up to the totalitarian scenario of Dioxiadis, that of Ecumenopolis.

The main objective of this paper is to propose some intervention strategies in urban areas that can regenerate the image of the settlement to prevent the shrinkage of the settlement itself and to regenerate its image.

The preliminary hypothesis is that the use of these strategic interventions, in urban areas and settlements, can regenerate the image of an area or a settlement by improving its conditions and preventing shrinkage. The verification of this hypothesis will be done through the analysis of past case studies and the emphasis of successful cases in contexts that are at the same time as similar as are different from Gjirokastra. Taking these cases, both in different and in similar contexts, emphasizes the value of these context-independent strategies.

Introduction

The treatment of the topic of shrinking cities was decided to provide a solution to a problem that can be perceived directly from a simple and intuitive observation of small settlements in Albania. Following the research, our perception was confirmed by statistical data which stated that all counties in Albania, except for Tirana, have shrunk from 2011 to the present day and that the county that has shrunk the most was Gjirokastra which had lost almost 35% of the population.

In Albania, the problem of shrinking small

settlements until their total abandonment mainly affects settlements that do not exceed 100,000 inhabitants, while those that do not reach the limit of 2,000 inhabitants are being completely abandoned.

To solve this problem, Polis University addressed this problem in two courses, that of Studio and Theory of Urban Planning¹ and on the studies conducted in the first year of the International Doctorate in Architecture and Urban Planning (IDAUP)². The results of these two courses are included in this publication.

¹ / Studio and Theory of Urban Planning course, each academic year, addresses a specific topic related to the main issues encountered in the Albanian context. The methodology followed is dealing with the problem in theoretical and practical terms, suggesting at the end of the course recommendations and suggestions that can be applied in all those cases of the same character where a similar problem appears.

The course takes place, under the guidance of Prof. Dr. Besnik Aliaj and Dr. Llazar Kumaraku, with the third year of studies in the scientific masters of Architecture and Urban Design, and Urban Planning and Environmental Management.

² / In the joint Doctoral program with the University of Ferrara in Italy, in the framework of the joint workshop in the academic year 2019-2020, was addressed the topic of shrinking cities. The results of this research are published in this publication. To achieve this result we work intensively in the two workshops held one in Ferrara and the other one in Tirana but also throughout the first year of Ph.D. with further research to detail the analysis and to answer to the specific problem.

The problem of shrinking settlements, in this case also that of Gjirokastra, led to the abandonment of three different categories of spaces: the first relates to public spaces that in the old historic city are very few but also in the case that they are present, as in the part built during the communist period, appear degraded; the second relates to spaces abandoned due to the decommissioning of industrial areas, and the third with the abandonment of private dwellings. These three categories require three solutions with different characters and scales. In the following, we will seek to provide some strategies that are able to cover exactly these three categories of spaces.

Interventions in public spaces - The case of Roma

One of the most emblematic cases of shrinking cities, which through specific interventions has stopped the shrinkage and regenerates the image, is the case of ancient and medieval Rome. Ancient Rome reached its maximum population at the beginning of the second half of the second century, during the empire of Antonino Pio and immediately after the large-scale urban interventions made by Emperor Adriano. During this period the population of Rome reaches approximately 1,200,000 to 1,700,000 inhabitants. The first contractions of the Roman city began immediately after "il sacco di Roma" by the Visigoths of Alarico. Later in every "sacco" that was done to the Romans the population was halved and the city was abandoned leaving behind a host of buildings that were transformed

into ruins. The last shrinkage occurred immediately after the last theft in 1527. According to Spini (1965: vol. 1. p. 121) "La splendida metropoli di Leone X, coi suoi 85 000 abitanti si è ridotta bruscamente a una cittadina, con poco più di metà della popolazione". From this, it can be deduced that by the middle of the sixteenth century Rome had shrunk so much that it numbered a population of about 40,000 inhabitants. The city of Rome begins to be rebuilt and redeveloped based on the urban reorganization carried out by Domenico Fontana³ under the papacy of Pope Sisto V., The urban reorganization of Rome was based mainly on the requalification of public spaces and their connection with straight road axes. It should be noted at this point that these interventions were punctual and polar⁴. The result of the reorganization of Rome, through interventions in public space and the regeneration of the image of the city, was the increase of the population and the city itself, although it took more than a century for the realization of the whole vision of Domenico Fontana. The case of Rome clearly shows us, both in antiquity and in the Renaissance, that the requalification of public spaces is another strategy to stop the shrinking of cities. It should be noted here that these interventions are made in the space of the main squares and in the axes that connect these squares.

In the city of Gjirokastra, this strategy can be used mainly in the part of the city built during the communist period and in the one built in the last thirty years because in the old city the presence of public

space of squares is limited. In fact, due to the special orographic character and its tradition, the old town of Gjirokastra does not have real urban squares but has urban spaces and "pits" which together with the whole old circulatory system can be considered as a large public space that can be regenerated⁵.

This strategy, as in the case of Rome, appears to be effective in halting the contraction and restoring hope in a city that is currently experiencing a state of great spatial degradation. The regeneration of these spaces will have the consequence of reducing the abandonment and increasing the possibilities to offer as much environment as possible in the service of the tourism economy.

Spaces of Industrial Archeology: Land Banking and their transformation into cultural areas.

One of the aspects that have influenced the shrinking of the city of Gjirokastra is the deindustrialization of society. This phenomenon, which according to Clark (2013) is one of the main that influence the shrinking of industrial cities, has affected even those cities in Albania where there was a kind of embryonic industrialization. Among these cities is even Gjirokastra, with its industrial areas which after their destruction in the last thirty years have caused considerable unemployment and have also highlighted abandoned spaces without function.

Regarding this second category of abandoned spaces in Gjirokastra, more precisely, those of industrial areas can be used the strategy of the Land Bank⁶. This strategy, which has been used mostly by administrations in the USA, has given good results in the regeneration of settlements. Once a territory "bank" has been established by the local administration or a specific association, the aggregated territories can be given for use to users with time limits according to

their interests. Some of these territories can be transformed into public parks of different characters or simply "blocked" to be used at another time.

Another strategy for the regeneration of the city of Gjirokastra is the requalification of abandoned areas to become green areas, now or in the future⁷. This strategy as pointed out by Schilling, J., and Logan, J., (2008) in the article "Greening the rust belt: A green infrastructure model for right-sizing America's shrinking cities" has given effective results in all contexts where it has been used. This strategy, combined with that of the Land Bank, can guarantee the regeneration of all areas of industrial archeology.

Another strategy, In addition to Land Bank, for abandoned industrial areas is their transformation into areas that can be used for various activities ranging from educational, tea to cultural or those dedicated to various activities in the world of the spectacle. In Italy, there are many cases of these industrial areas transformed into university campuses, museum areas, various offices for the administration, or even television studios. An emblematic case in the city of Rome is the transformation of "Mattatoio" which is located in the "heart" of the city and which now contains almost all the functions that were mentioned a little while ago.

Interventions at the level of abandoned dwellings. The case of "Albergo Diffuso".

The shrinking cities in Albania and especially those located in border areas are closely related to the financial aspect of these areas. As Gjirokastra is a city with a weak economy bordering areas with a more stable and developed economy, there has inevitably been emigration of the population mainly to Greece, but also to other areas. Due to this high emigration of the population in the city of Gjirokastra, we are in the presence of a big number of

³ / For the intervention of Domenico Fontana Fontana can be consulted: BENEVOLO L., (1993 6ED), *Storia della città - La città moderna*, Roma-Bari: Laterza. Pg. 56.

⁴ / About punctual and polar interventions can be consulted the articles of KUMARAKU LL., HOXHA E., (2018) *THE ANTI-POLE - A strategy to intervene in the urban context*, Forum A + P 19, Tirana: Polis-Press. ISSN: 2227-7994 pg. 62-74 and article by KUMARAKU LL., (2020) *Urban and Territorial Planning paradigms in transition. Academia 100+ Villages and Dropulli case*. In Alij, B., Rossi L., (eds) *Rurban sequences: inquiries on Dropull's states of Liminality*. Tirana: Polis-Press. ISBN 978-9928-347-01-5

⁵ / Some interventions for the old town of Gjirokastra, with polar character, are published in the article of KUMARAKU, LL, PAPA, D, DOBJANI, E, (2016) *The Adaptation of the Traditional Cities to Contemporary Use Interventions in Historical Areas: The Case Study of Gjirokastra*, *Online International Interdisciplinary Research Journal, {BiMonthly}*, ISSN 2249-9598, VI, (1), pg. 156-169.

⁶ / On the Land Bank strategy can be consulted the following link >>> www.thelandbank.org/downloads/gcl-b_10th_anniversary_booklet.pdf; (retrieved, Jul 2020)

⁷ / The strategy of reserving areas to use in the future for public parks or greenery has been used for almost two centuries. As pointed out by Alij, B., (2014) *Levizjet e Planifikimit ne Shba*, Tirane: Polis-Press, this strategy has been followed since the XIX century in American Urban Planning strategies.

⁸ / About the Albergo Diffuso concept can be consulted the publications made by Giancarlo dall'Ara on the website www.albergodiffuso.com; www.alberghidiffusi.it and <http://albergo-diffuso.blogspot.com>. Dall'Ara published with the publishing house Franco Angeli in 2015 "*Manuale dell'albergo diffuso. L'idea, la gestione, il marketing dell'ospitalità diffusa flessibile*" which explains the concept, conditions and innovation contained in the idea of albergo diffuso.

abandoned buildings. Buildings which due to non-use suffer constant degradation. To stop the degradation and to restore these former vitalities, it is necessary to adapt them to new functions or services that are in line with contemporary needs. For more than twenty years in Italy, the concept of "Albergo Diffuso"⁸ has been used for the revitalization of settlements and the reuse of abandoned buildings. This concept is very innovative and respects the local tradition and culture of the settlements where it is applied. The Albergo Diffuso concept is not just a network of buildings managed by an organizational center at a certain point of the settlement, but it is an ecological and sustainable organizational type. First, this concept excludes the construction of new spaces and uses those that exist and that have become obsolete or abandoned and therefore is not a built hotel but created where the rooms are scattered throughout the settlement. Second, Albergo Diffuso is a "horizontal" type of organization that can spread throughout the historic settlement. In the case of Gjirokastra, this organizational type is in line with the characteristics of the old city. Third, Albergo Diffuso appears to be an efficient space in terms of social distancing norms and tourist models that guarantee healthy spaces. And at the end, this is a model the lives of visitors to the settlement intertwines with the life and culture of the settlement, thus stopping a "territory consumption" model as Guy Debord described it in *The Society of the Spectacle* and introducing a new concept where tourism is not just a consumer but builders of new values.

In the city of Gjirokastra, the use of such a concept would regenerate abandoned houses and give an economic impetus to the whole context. The amount of buildings in the historic city of Gjirokastra is large and their reuse would return to this context the former vitality. From this point of view, the historical and traditional offer of this city makes it compatible with having several different "diffuse hotels".

Conclusions

This article sought to read the structure of the city through three different layers: public spaces, decommissioned industrial buildings, and abandoned houses. In Gjirokastra, these three physical components of urban space currently appear degraded. Their location covers specific points in the settlement which are scattered throughout the city starting from the historic city, to the one built during communism and to the city built in

the last 30 years.

To address the image degradation and shrinkage of the city, three strategies have been proposed to intervene in urban space. The first strategy, that of the requalification of public space is a "lesson" that comes to us from history through the study of the case of Rome which after the great shrinkage it had throughout the Middle Ages managed to regenerate immediately after the first interventions made by Pope Sixto V. The second strategy, that of Land Banking is currently being used in many cities in the USA that are shrinking as a strategy to stop shrinkage and improve the quality of settlement space. The third strategy has to do with the organization of abandoned dwellings in "alberghi diffusi", thus creating a solution that regenerates certain parts of the city and introduces an innovative and sustainable organizational type.

Through the use of these three strategies which have been proven for their effectiveness in different geographical contexts, the shrinkage of the city of Gjirokastra can be stopped by giving it a contemporary image through the use of potentials and cultural and historical tradition that it has as a UNESCO city.

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Fig.1 / Vison for the city of Gjirokastra. Source / Author



Fig.2 / Render of the Çerçiz Topulli square. Source / Author

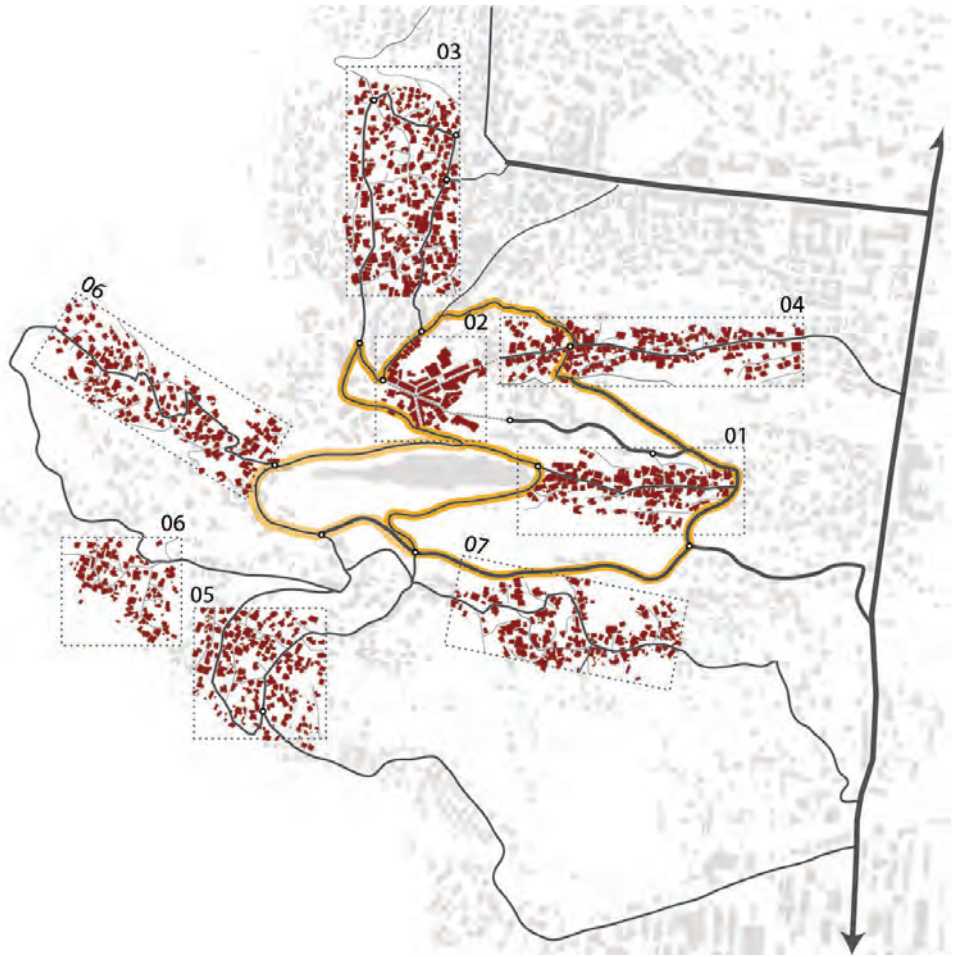


Fig.3 / Territorial and Urban Morphology. Source / Author

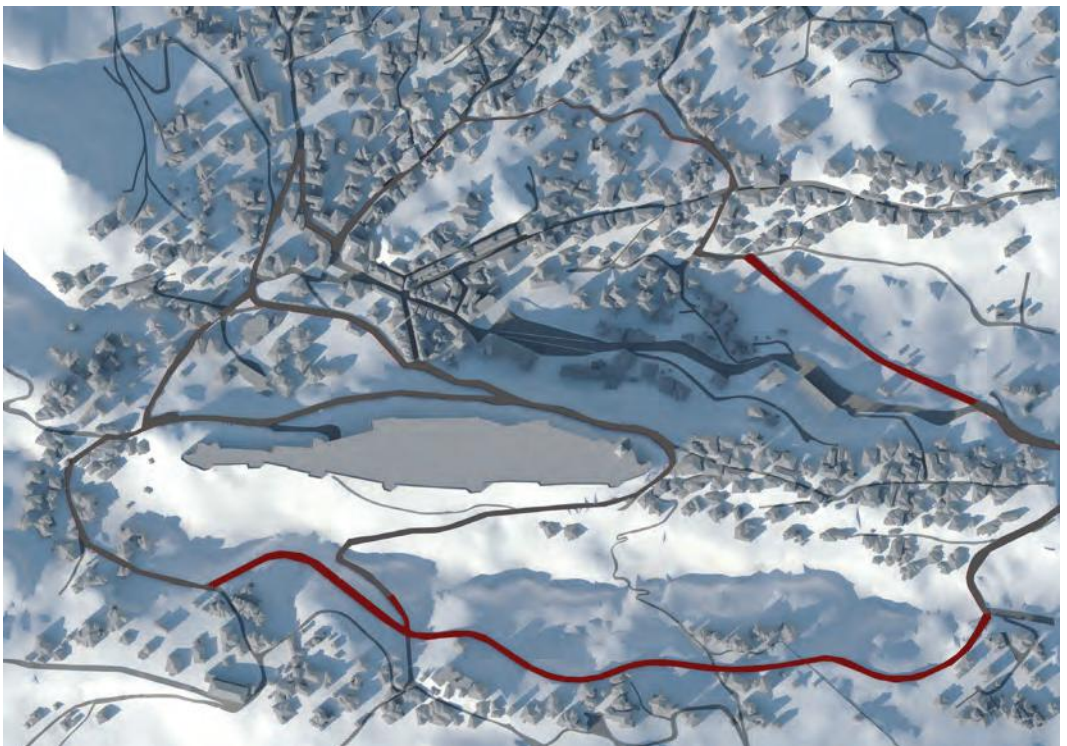


Fig.4 / Proposed Bypass for the old city. Source / Author

EXISTING ROAD INFRASTRUCTURE

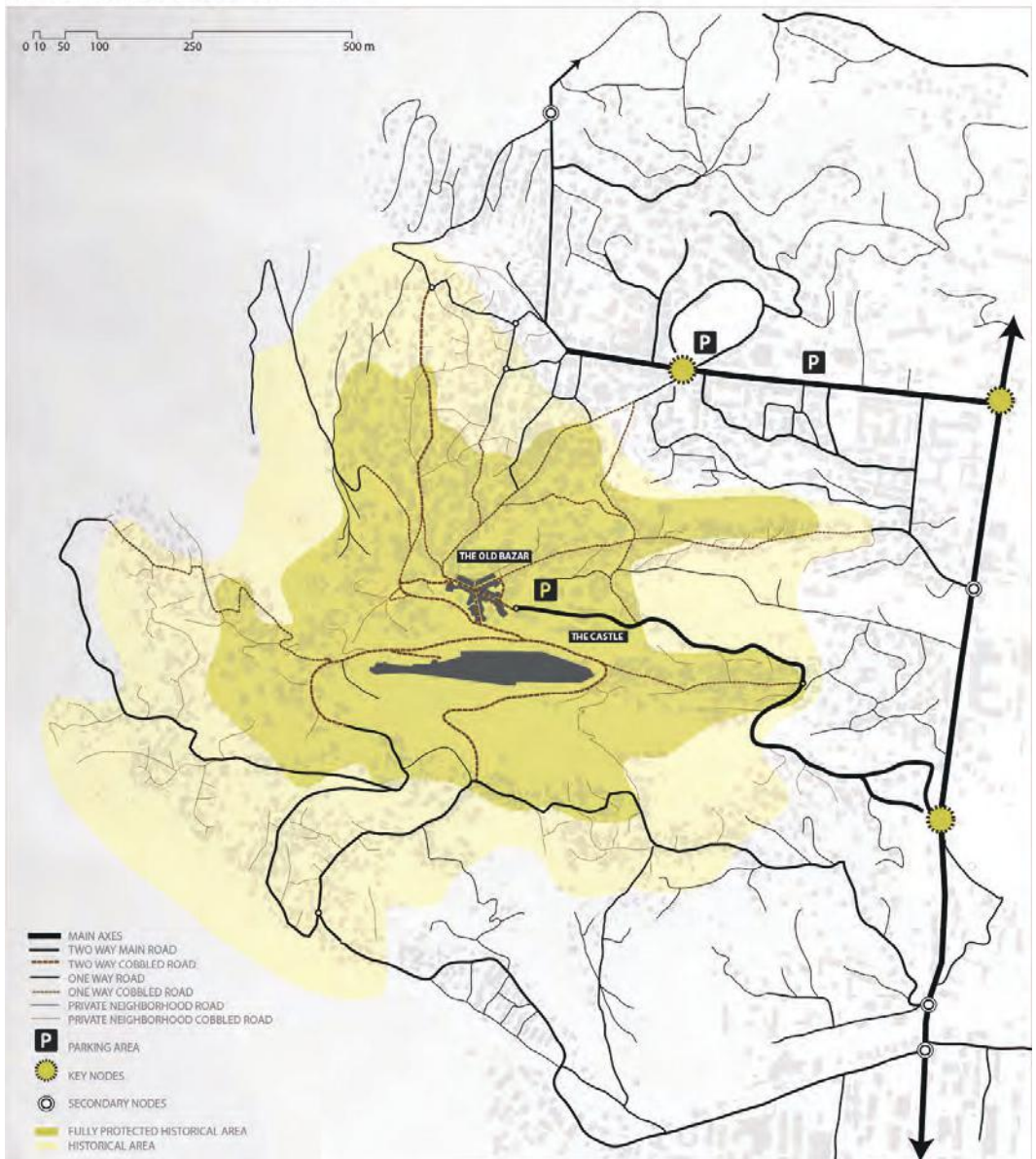


Fig.5 / Actual road infrastructure. Source / Author

PROPOSED ROAD INFRASTRUCTURE

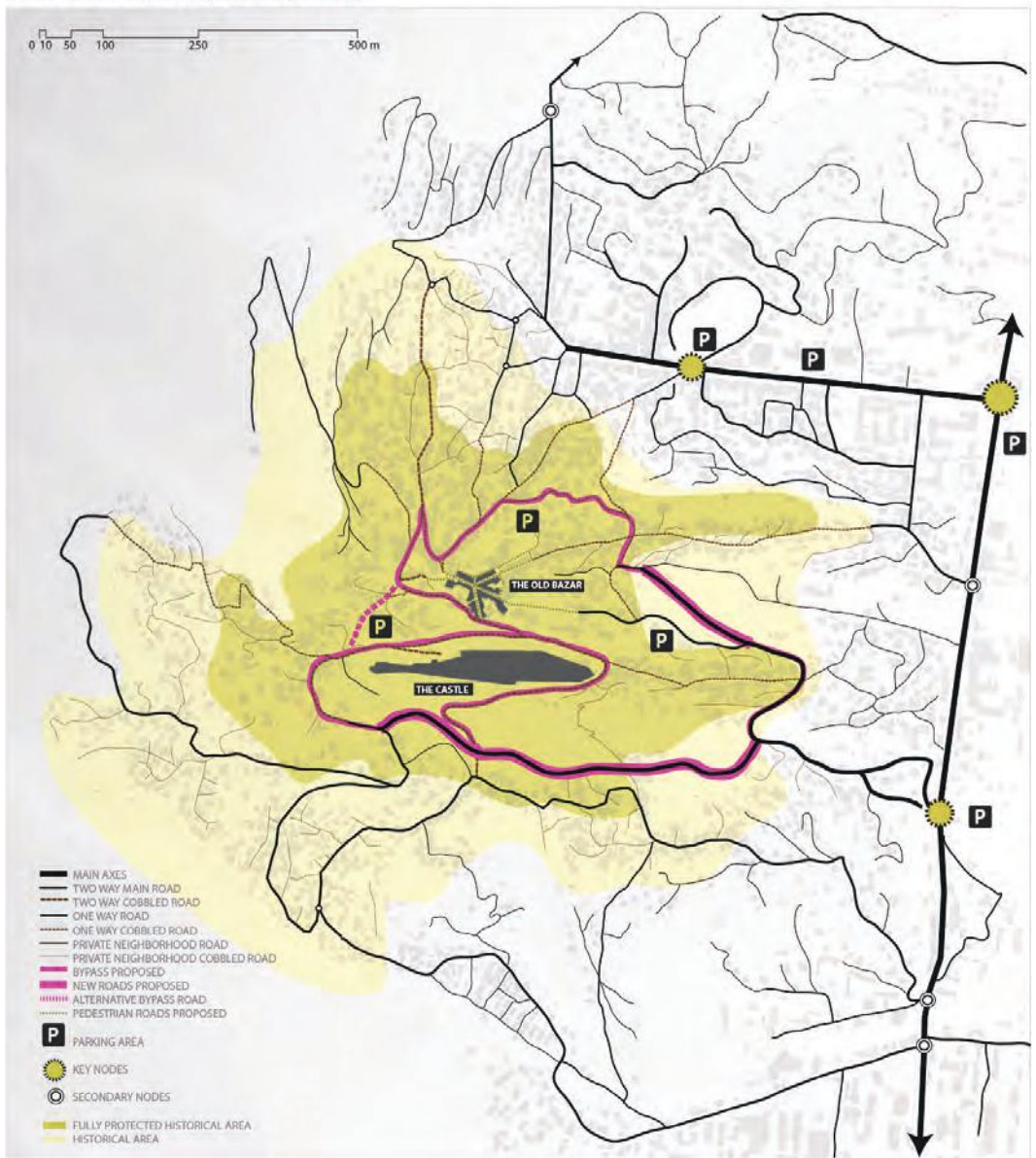


Fig.6 / Proposed road infrastructure. Source / Author