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AUTHOR: *Doriana Musaj*  
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# Placemaking Gjirokastra.

Keywords / urban space, placemaking, city image, heritage site, Gjirokastrë

Doriana Musaj

PhD researcher / POLIS University

## Abstract

*The purpose of this study is to identify the urban elements which contribute to placemaking. By developing the quality of public space in collaboration with insider and outsider inhabitants, using the theoretical frameworks of Lynch, Alexander, and Jacobs, this study aims to explore the roots of the concepts, criteria, and experiences of placemaking. Field observation and interviews were used as primary data sources. Cityscape, its relief, landscape, and urban elements, and the data collected underwent descriptive analysis, the results of which served as a ground for the construction of research questions addressed during the qualitative study. Interviews as primary sources were part of the exploration of how people perceive their city, and which city images took part in creating the local activities. Results of the study show that there are great potential green areas inside the city core, which are disconnected from the urban space representing a fragmented edge. By revitalizing restoring and regenerating the original activities Gjirokastrë as place could be rebuilt. Places we can't reach can't be valued or recognized as city values. A great public space is the one that is easy to get to, easy to enter into it, and walk-in or walk through. The city forms read two different frameworks: Kevin Lynch's Image of the City, and Christofer Alexander's The Nature of Order. Then the elements of the city are observed and analyzed through the lenses of Jane Jacobs, on their contribution to people's perception, and how they contribute to the city life.*

## Introduction

During the pandemic year the citizens flooded back to the parks inside and outside the city. Yet, what this health crisis evinced was that not everyone was granted equal access to the green areas. The green space inside the city core is considered a highly valued space for city life and community integration. In terms of human activities and relaxation, the concept of the green area is now being reevaluated, especially after the COVID-19 crisis took place in early 2020. Google statistics show that park attendance in countries across the globe has increased during the pandemic lockdown. The urban areas, especially those with high density, have fewer green areas, which makes residents go to parks in order to get in touch with nature.

Gjirokastrë is one of the main cities of the south of Albania and part of the Adriatic corridor. The city is well known in the country

as one of the most distinguished and unique cities for its astonishing historical architecture, lifestyle, and culture. The old town of Gjirokastra is the first UNESCO site in Albania, so labelled since 2005, and a good example of Ottoman architecture. Nowadays the city is developing as a pivot for the development of cultural heritage tourism in the south of Albania. With a rich network of cobbled and steep streets the old town consists mostly of two-story houses constructed from the 17th to the 19th century. In terms of landscape, itineraries, and architecture, the old part of the town is a separated from the new part, which developed during the 20th century. The distinction between these two parts is also created by the territory; while the old town is built on five hills that are interconnected at the Bazaar node, the new part is built at the bottom of the hills, mostly on a flat area.

## Methodology

The research brings an explanatory methodology based on field observations as a primary source. Explanatory research aims to explore the main aspects of an under-researched problem, through city maps, photography, and data gained from observation carried out in the field. Interviews as primary sources were part of the exploration of how people perceive their city, and which city images took part in the local activities. The interviews were conducted mostly in city squares and vital city points such as a coffee shop, grocery shops, and souvenir shops during the three days of the observation.

## Background

The medieval town of Gjirokastër, built during the Ottoman period XVI-XVII, expanded outside the castle by following the organic configuration of the terrain, typical of Ottoman cities. The neighborhoods were built organically in line with the topography, following the terrain with typical narrow streets. The buildings aligned with both sides of the road, and sometimes were set in a distance from the road. The hilly terrain influenced the formation of separate neighborhoods. Several areas are dead-end roads, creating small plazas, surrounded with high walls and two to three storied buildings. The old town is covered in grey and white stones, while public life takes place mostly at the Bazaar node, a junction

of four neighborhood itineraries. Ismail Kadare, the well-known Albanian writer, described the city's life and culture in his books and novels. Born and raised in "the city of a thousand steps"<sup>1</sup>, he captured the small details of urban life, particularly how the citizens perceive and negotiate between the common and private aspects of the town. In *Chronicle in stone*, Kadare describes how Gjirokastër – its difficult terrain, materials, and urban configuration impacted the daily life of people.

## State of the Art: Shared Cultures, Shared Heritage, Shared Responsibility

The concept of placemaking originated in the early 60-s, particularly through the work of the urban activist Jane Jacobs and William H.White. "Placemaking is the process of creating quality places that people want to live, work, play, and learn in" is a concept generated by Project for Public Spaces<sup>2</sup>, a project that defines how public space can create a sense of place and a place of sense. When first introduced, placemaking was defined as a collective process that makes the public dimension more tangible. The process can be described as a total reconceptualization of space according to a vision of collective community, one that is expressed in concrete spaces, such as parks, squares, streets, markets, and public buildings. What Jacobs and White emphasize the most in their work is that places that can't be reached, valued or recognized as city's

<sup>1</sup> / *The city of a Thousands Steps*\_How the author names Gjirokastra in his novel as its roads are sloppy and the sidewalks have stairs.

<sup>2</sup> / Project for Public Spaces <https://www.pps.org/article/what-is-placemaking>



Fig. 1 / The front porch doors. Source / the author, 2019

value. A great public space<sup>3</sup> is the one that is easy to get to, easy to enter into it, and walk-in or walk through. On the other hand, the activities involved in it or offered by the space to the people visiting it are also very important. Having something to do gives people reason to visit the public place. If the space is empty or abandoned, there nothing is interesting for people to do there. Are the urban design elements enough to generate a public place for city dwellers to meet?

While in *The Image of the City*, Lynch evinces five dominant urban elements that are responsible for creating the image of the city that functions as a dynamic organism interacting with people, Jacobs examines the city vitality through its users, that is, how they intermingle with the city's urban elements. By understanding how cities work, she perceives the city in terms of two fundamentally connected ecosystems - one created by nature, the other by human beings. According to Jacobs, for these ecosystems to sustain themselves, they require much diversity that develops organically over time and enables placemaking.

### Long-lasting communities: The case of Gjirokaštër, Albania

Gjirokaštër, the 'fortified' urban center of the south of Albania, became part of the World Heritage List<sup>4</sup> of UNESCO, as a rare example of a well-preserved Ottoman town, by meeting two out of ten selection criteria (iii) and (iv). According to

criterion (iii), Gjirokaštër bears outstanding testimony to the diversity of urban societies and to longstanding ways of life which have almost vanished today. According to criterion (iv), Gjirokaštër bears testimony to various types of monuments and vernacular urban housing including the urban landscape. It is this heritage that makes Gjirokaštër an open museum to be accessed by everyone. Even though separated by the terrain, the five neighborhoods, share the same common values and are interconnected with the radial itineraries that intersect at the Bazaar. The people of Gjirokaštër inherit the tradition and culture of the old city.

Traditionally, the street has been the public space where the social and economic activities took place. The old town has a particular urban element: at each doorstep there is one stone as a place to sit. Even though the stone-seats are present, there are no people frequenting this traditional public space. During field survey, several casual interviews were done to the local habitants met on the street, -"The roads are empty now. Some decade before you could still watch the children playing on the sloppy paths, and grandparents guarding them from the porch door", an elder habitant describes, on the question that, why there are so many doors with the big stone to sit in front of the porch (Fig\_1) -"A corner to sit and watch, communicate and talk with the neighbors is we have lost

<sup>3</sup> / <https://www.pps.org/article/grplacefeat>

<sup>4</sup> / <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/569>





*Fig. 2 / Green wild area inside the historic center of the citadella, inaccessible.  
Source / the author, 2019.*

today. Most of the locals have bought an apartment in the new part of the city and many others just left the country”.

The lack of public life seems to be one of the main reasons for the abandonment of the city. As the sloppy terrain makes life more complicated, especially during snowy winters, the inhabitants tend to leave the medieval town and search for a new lifestyle. The current inhabitants, mostly retired people, are concerned for the future of the town, also because according to their perception, the younger generation do not prefer this part of the city any longer. “The life in the new part of the city is much more vivid, and the younger people prefer coffee shops and restaurants to meet and gather. The town is vivid only during summer when tourists come and visit”- says the owner of a hotel in the historic center. The existing public spaces, such as the green areas and public squares seem to have been abandoned for the most part of the day. Their urban role is replaced by coffee shops and restaurants, mostly in the new part of the city.

In order to be successful, cities need to be destinations that offer an identity and image of their community. Gjirokastër is one of the main historic sites of the country, and as such, it is an important tourist destination. The interviews with three hotel owners revealed the fact that until now tourism has not been economically sustainable, and its public spaces are not generating enough people and the green zones, are not accessible. A public place,

according to Jacobs and White, can be transformed into a living place through the design of places, the experiences they make possible, and the consequences that these public spaces-living places could have into our lives<sup>5</sup>. Providing for a range of various of activities at different times of the day or periods of the year, like a playground or sports activities, can bring people together at the same place and at the same time.

As the town is shrinking, the image of the historical center must be rebuilt, in order to attract new residents, businesses and investments. Lynch's *The Image of the City* provides a theoretical framework to address how the image can be rebuilt through its underlying patterns and characteristics. Even though Gjirokastër has a lot of green areas inside the old town, there is no public access to these spaces. Several of them are in steep terrains, at several points impassable, and rarely exposed to view. This is the case of what Lynch named a fragmentary edge. The edges, as one of the five city elements, although probably not as dominant as the paths in the case of Gjirokastër, are important organizing features, particularly in the role of holding together common areas. The town silhouette is perceived as an extension of topography, with mountains and valleys, where the slopes alternate between urban zones with green wild areas in between. From above, they seem very similar to the stripes of

<sup>5</sup> / <https://www.pps.org/article/whyte>

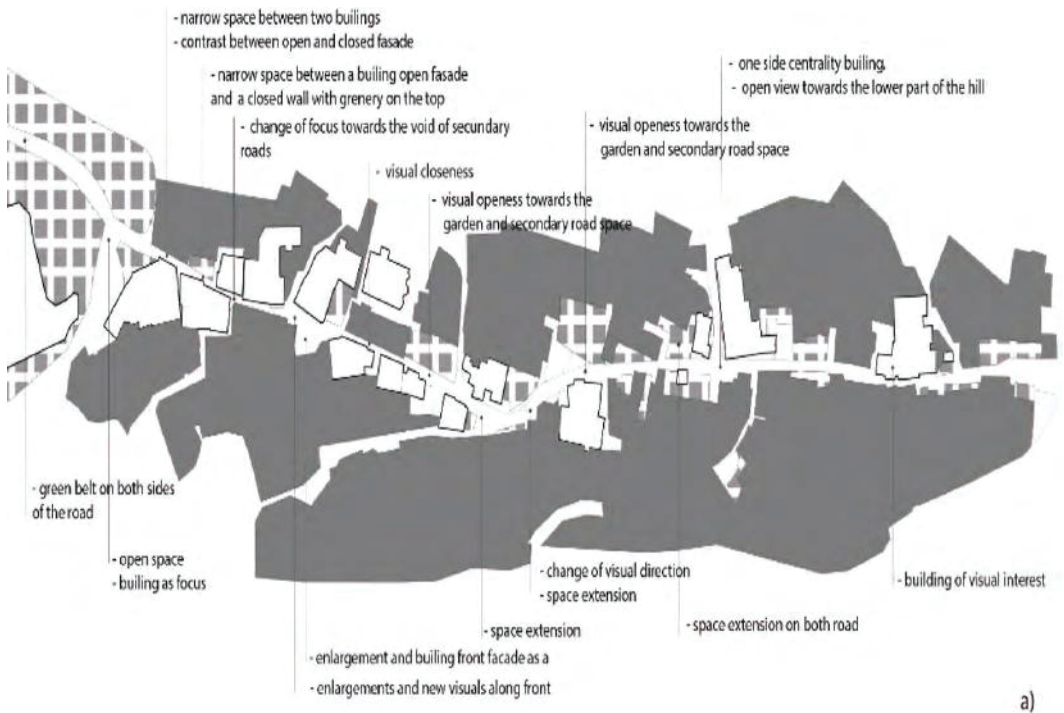


Fig. 3 / The Positive Space. Source / Papa, Dissertation thesis, 2017 / Lecture Workshop 2019

a zebra, with visible fragmentary edges (Fig.2).

These zebra stripes- green areas if accessible from public, could be identified as Alexander develops in his geomatics properties, the positive space, (Papa, 2017). This positive space identifies the continuous and unified spaces interconnected to each other, such as paths, nodes, and edges of the old town that seems to dissolve to each other through material, colors and architectural elements, by creating so a sense of space.

## Conclusions

Building Gjirokastrë's city image, especially its historical center, in order to attract new residents, businesses, and investments, means revealing what the city hides inside its pattern. Creating a new place for city dwellers to meet through urban design may not always be enough. The districts, edges, voids, nodes, landmarks, and itineraries have welcome people, in relation to the concept of placemaking as a collective process, makes the public dimension more tangible. Gjirokastrë's green areas, hidden and not accessible by public, are defined as appropriate city image elements that can offer such a dimension.

The expected outcomes by recovering these elements, preserving part of their landscape, and using them to connect the different islands of the city that are currently disconnected, can improve the connection and communication of city image elements. As field observation reveals, the creation of communications

through trans passing natural and artificial boundaries, is possible, and necessary to create Placemaking.

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Fig. 4 / City district fragmentation sketch. Source / Ortez, 2019.

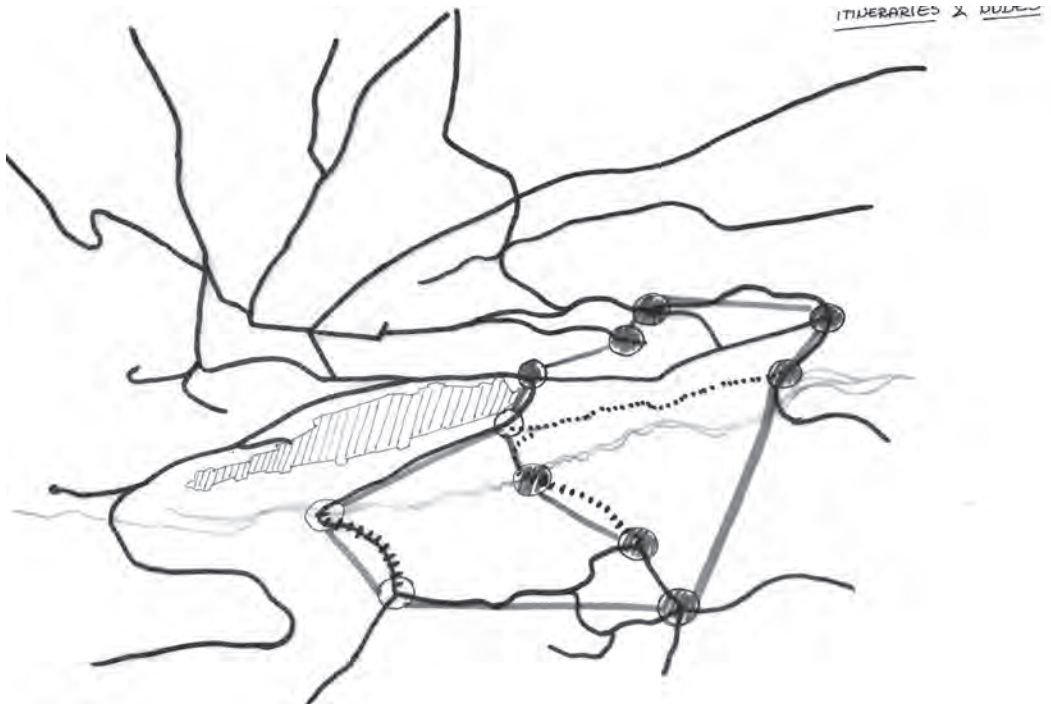


Fig. 5 / City elements sketch. Source / the author, 2019.

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