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Covered Embers: The rebirth of Gjirokastra from its ashes

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Abstract

One depopulated city with three separated identities: this is what Gjirokastra looks like today. On the slopes of the mountain, the historical city center consists of small buildings, many of which are left abandoned, disposed on the ground, following a natural, almost biomimetic, sprawl. On the lower part, there is the industrial area, an axial development alongside the national road, which is full of unfinished and abandoned buildings. The most recent urban sprawl is characterized by a dense urban fabric made of big structures, a pattern renamed as solid proximity.

The depopulation of the city seems to be unrestrainable and its death unavoidable: this fate was considered as the inception of the project proposal, which aimed at exploiting the abandoned and unused buildings and making them the impulse for a new vitality of the city, by taking advantage of the neglected private buildings and by returning them to the community as places for socialization and gathering.

The attempt to stop the depopulation of the city should start from the unification of the three different parts of Gjirokastra into a single project by establishing a connecting loop. This is not enough, however, to keep people in the city and keep the city alive, so the adopted approach considered a more forward-looking intervention by attracting and involving people in the city. This was considered possible by using of Art as a catalyst that brings the inhabitants and visitors together, as well as a resource for the administrators. The resulting "Art Loop" project will be distributed throughout the territory, and it will consist of abandoned and ruined buildings which are given new life through aesthetically beautiful, socially useful, and economically advantageous functions, as well as through new cultural places for the community recovered from carelessness and the unceasing passage of time that leaves them empty.

This project is made of knots or focus points, which stand for relevant abandoned buildings, and will assume new essential functions for the new life of the city. The stadium, an empty school, a typical house, and a modern reinforced concrete villa will be transformed and assigned new functions. A net of different types of ruined buildings will put these knots together: broken, ruined and unfinished structures will be converted into public spaces for citizens, ideal stages for occasional performances and temporary pavilions for a Biennale in Gjirokastra.

After an initial period during which the only expectation is the continuous depopulation of the city, stabilization of the situation with a greater attachment of the inhabitants and a stronger attraction of tourists interested in the artistic performances throughout the city is expected to gain ground. In a longer period, there will be a trend reversal and Gjirokastra will become a landmark for the Balkan region.

While controversial, this self-sustaining project exploits the weaknesses and exacerbates the actual conditions to find a lasting solution to the unstoppable depopulation and the total abandonment of the city.

Introduction

The city of Gjirokastra, located south of Albania and capital of the prefecture with the same name, is known for its mediaeval towers and unusual architecture (Seidl, 2014:164). It lays on a 300 meter-hill on a valley between 'Mali I Gjerë' (the 'Broad Mountain') and the Drinos River. Its historical city centre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site together with the city of Berat, as they "are inscribed as rare examples of an architectural character typical of the Ottoman period. [...] Gjirokastra, in the Drinos river valley in southern Albania, features a series of outstanding two-story houses which were developed in the 17th century" (whc.unesco.org). Its unique character was described by Ismail Kadare, a contemporary writer born in Gjirokastra, as "...a strange city, and seemed to have been cast up in the valley one winter's night like some prehistoric creature that was now clawing its way up the mountainside. Everything in the city was old and made of stone, from the streets and fountains to the roofs of the sprawling age-old houses, covered with grey slates like gigantic scales. It was hard to believe that under this powerful carapace the tender flesh of life survived and reproduced...It was a slanted city, set at a sharper angle than any other city on earth, and it defied the laws of architecture and city planning" (Kadare, 2011).

Although the city is affected by the illegal construction of the late 1990s, its authenticity is strongly preserved through its typical houses, stone walls and the way of life of the citizens. Together with other historic countries in Albania, it is "a unique cultural heritage in the Mediterranean

area" (Bashi, 2015:89).

The city, however, has expanded during the last decades and this has led to the formation of the other two settlements: the new city centre and the industrial area. The former is a residential and commercial expansion made of multi-story, concrete-structure buildings that stand compactly alongside one of the city's main roads. This dense urban fabric has been recognized as solid proximity. The industrial area is the late 20th-century factory development along the SH4 national road, part of the European E853, that connects Durres and Tirana to Greece. Almost all the buildings face this main road, a sign of a city that had played an important role in the Albanian industrial scenario. This configuration has been renamed 'axial development'.

The current asset of Gjirokastra is the traces of the old city, a glorious city characterized by the prosperity of its inhabitants together with its fortified architecture (Mezini, Pojani, 2015). It appears impressive and its history amazes researchers and tourists, but many buildings are now empty, and their maintenance is difficult. The entire region of Gjirokastra has suffered from a consistent depopulation: at least one-fifth of the population has left the country since 1990, and in the surrounding area this rate triples (Grevsjö, Noorzaei, 2014). In the historical city centre, there are plenty of abandoned buildings and crumbling structures that contribute to a distorted and degraded image of the city (Dipasquale, Carta, Galassi, Merlo, 2020). The industrial area is affected by this kind



Fig 1. Gjirokastra viewed from the castle. On the lower part of the picture the historical city centre, on the upper part (further) the new city centre. Source / the author.

of growing depopulation, too. Empty and unfinished buildings are scattered along the national road, and only a few of them are occupied. All the above-mentioned buildings are private properties that would need private investments to be settled and repopulated. In a scenario of continuous decrease in the number of inhabitants, private actions are quite unlikely, thus demanding initiatives from the public administration to avoid the departure of those that still live in Gjirokastra. This would be possible through two different ways of intervention: first, through actions focused on public property in order to improve services and facilities for citizens; second, through a policy that encourages buying the abandoned private buildings and recovering them.

Both these options are hardly feasible at the moment due to a lack of public properties on which to intervene and the economic possibilities through which to afford these interventions.

However, if there's a continuous decrease

in the number of inhabitants on the one hand, then there is an encouraging increasing but still limited number of tourists on the other. Between 2009 and 2013, for instance, the number of tourists doubled reaching about 30,000 visitors, mostly from eastern Europe (Kotollaku, Margariti, 2015). This becomes the inspiration for the project, which aims to further increase the number of arrivals in the city and offer an innovative experience of a unique city.

Objectives and Methodology

The research aims finding possible instruments to avoid the progressive depopulation of Gjirokastra and preserve its role as a commercial and touristic hub for southern Albania. After the site inspection, the question - "Can architecture and city planning stimulate hope and growth for shrinking cities?" - became: "Why should architecture and city planning stimulate hope and growth for this shrinking city?". Gjirokastra appeared as disjointed, made



by three different identities and every idea seemed unachievable.

In the historical city centre, there are small and predominantly two-story buildings, seemingly chaotically displaced, but which follow the natural morphology of the mountains in a configuration renamed biomimicry sprawl. Many of these buildings are abandoned and are collapsing since there is no maintenance after each frequent heavy rain and the drainage system is insufficient. This problem is affecting the entire historical city centre, compromising the integrity of a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

As previously mentioned, the other settlements of the city, the new residential and commercial expansion and the industrial area, are not linked to one another and the historical city centre. Therefore, the answer to the initial question has to start from thinking about the unification of the different identities of Gjirokastra as the only way to prevent its complete depopulation.

The main problem of Gjirokastra is related to the progressive abandonment by the inhabitants. As a result, there is now a collection of ruined and unsafe buildings scattered around the city belonging to private owners together with empty public buildings, all detached from the urban fabric, buildings on which the public administration cannot intervene. This problem affects all the three cores of the city and will be considered as an optimal starting point of the urban strategy in this project.

The strategy is to identify some unused buildings that will be linked together by a loop which will have a dual objective: to connect these buildings in order to give them a unique and more powerful meaning and, at the same time, a connection with different areas of the city. These buildings will be chosen based on two main criteria: their state of conservation and their location. Regarding their conditions, buildings must be empty, in ruins, or decaying, i.e. gutted buildings whose



Fig. 2 / A ruined building in the historical city centre of Gjirokastra, typology A. Source / the author

perimeter walls or roof have collapsed. Regarding the position, the first to be chosen will have to be in focal positions, in order to create a path that crosses the city in its entirety and is along the route of inhabitants and tourists.

However, this link may not be sufficient to avoid the depopulation of Gjirokastra, and a more forward-looking intervention is needed. One possibility is the intervention through Art, which is used as a catalyst to keep people in the city by giving them a reason not to leave it and a resource for the administration to carry out improving interventions. In this way, the whole city of Gjirokastra will be the setting of an outdoor exhibition, a sort of Biennale, which will attract artists who will bring their contributions and visitors that will be able to admire them.

This means engaging the number of tourists that, according to statistics, has increased during the last years (Qiqi, Rova, 2014).

Periodical events could be organized both by the city administration as well as private investors. Calls for artists could be opened and disseminated through social media and institutional sites, or competitions can be held within academies and universities. On the one hand, many ruined and unsafe buildings scattered throughout the city were selected to be part of the project. These were divided into three typologies. The first (Fig 2) is made of those buildings with nothing but the perimeter walls, a sort of empty envelopes. The second typology (Fig 3) consist of hollow buildings with at least one gutted wall.

These two typologies are concentrated in the historical city center, while the third one (Fig 4) occurs in the industrial area, and it is made of unfinished buildings, almost all with a columnar or pillar structure.

First of all, the unsafe structures will be consolidated and after that, all the buildings will be transformed into public spaces that can host urban gardens, playgrounds or social spaces, but meanwhile, they can be turned temporarily into pavilions for any exhibition. In the case of urban gardens and playgrounds, the spaces will be equipped with everything necessary for the enjoyment of the activities. For the social spaces to be transformed into pavilions, interventions will be limited to the floor finishing and the arrangement of benches and seats. The connection between these buildings through the above-mentioned loop will be realized through the homogenization of the flooring and the arrangement of urban furnishings in order to evoke the unity of the project, such as benches, baskets, streetlamps, information panels or drinking water fountains. Materials or even colors can be used as leitmotif for the project, so that in every part of the project visitors and inhabitants can feel to be part of it.

On the other hand, five relevant buildings are considered in terms of position, dimensions and potentiality that will support the activities in the pavilions. In the historical city centre, the first is a big and ruined house close to the city Hall that will be transformed in a public facilities office, i.e. ticket office, tourist information centre and refreshment area. The second is an



Fig. 3 / An empty and abandoned building in the historical city centre, typology B.
Source / the author



Fig. 4 / Unfinished building in the industrial area of Gjirokastra, typology C.
Source / the author

atypical house with concrete structure, close to the first one: considering its originality, it will become an exceptional performative space. Denis Santachiara did something like this, proposing an installation in Milan that turned the building into a lantern. In the newer city center, there have been identified other buildings that could be involve in the project, more specifically at the edges of the main road on which the built area overlooks. One is a disused school which will be converted in a residence for artists, a kind of hostel where foreign artists and visitors can stay while in Gjirokastra. The other is the stadium, an oversized structure nestled among all residential buildings, which is most of the time empty. The project wants to give back this space to the community, transforming the stadium into a stage available for any type of performance. A reference can be the Teatro Continuo by Alberto Burri in Milan, a simple installation that invites people to be an active part of the show.

The last knot to be considered is a disused factory located in the industrial area - a big open-space structure that has nothing but its envelope. In this case, considering the position on the national road and among other factories, the project aims to convert it into an atelier, a didactic place where industries can teach arts and crafts and rent it for periodical workshops. This activity will be an opportunity both to pass on the craft and to get an economic return by the rent of this space.

This "knot and sprawl" project aims to keep the city united, by taking advantage of its weaknesses, and be economically self-sustainable: all the interventions will be carried out gradually and without excessively upsetting the status quo. Within a couple of years, the sprawl should be outlined and the first events should begin. In the meantime, consolidation and redevelopment of the so-called knots should take place, so as to be functioning in four to six years. The interventions on the knots should be sustained by the income from the events organized along the sprawl.

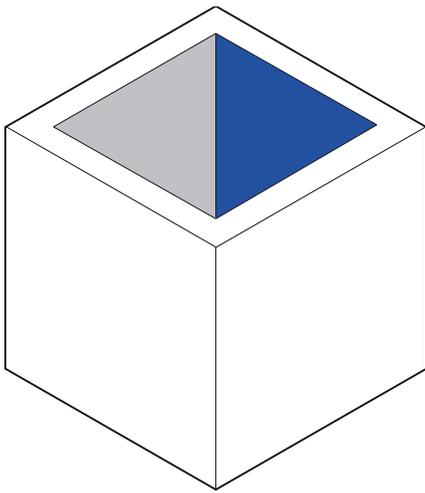
The users and stakeholders that are interested in the project can be divided into four different categories:

1. *Locals*: the public administration, for instance, can take advantage of profits from the rent of the spaces and, in general, from the establishment of an Art Biennale throughout the city.

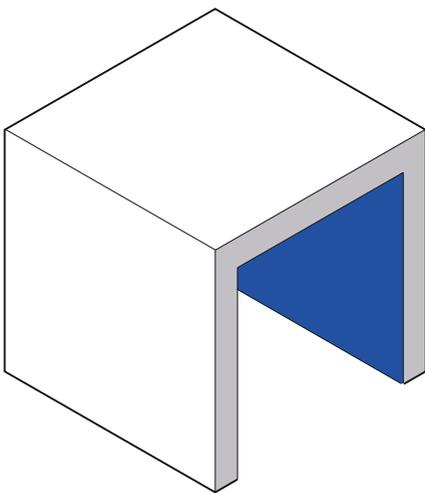
2. *Art sector*: national and international artists can perform in Gjirokastra, showing their abilities to visitors and thus increase their popularity, together with the curators and critics that can be involved in the exhibitions.

3. *Companies*: industries that can invest in the available spaces in the city, hotels and restaurants that can fully work during the exhibitions, or international investors that can support the activities.

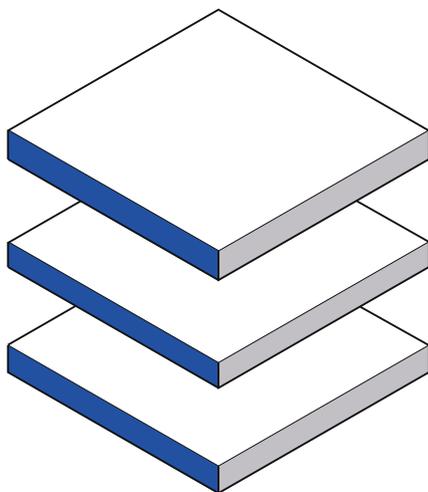
4. *Tourists*: national and international



Typology A



Typology B



Typology C

tourists, and occasional or intentional visitors, who can enjoy the activities of a dynamic and up-to-date city. Investments by the stakeholders and initiatives by the public administrators are the key to this project: they can ensure gradual but indispensable changes, using arts and crafts as the mean to make the strategy successful.

Results and Future Developments

As previously mentioned, the depopulation of Gjirokastra cannot be curbed in a short time, but the trend can be reversed only after a period of transition. This means that any approach to be taken will coexist with the continuous emptying of the city for a while and, in the meantime, the effect of the interventions will reduce this phenomenon. First of all, as mentioned before, the selected unused buildings will be turned into pavilions for exhibitions or in public spaces to promote socialization by consolidating the unsafe structures and by homogenizing the main elements, i.e. floor finishing, urban furniture, plants and trees.

Besides that, two different scenarios at different times are imagined: the first in 2030 (Fig 8), and the second in 2050 (Fig 9). In ten years, fewer people will live in the city and many other buildings are expected to be abandoned but, at the same time, the first actions to avoid the displacement are already put in place: the knots will be already defined and transformed, the sprawl of abandoned buildings will be identified, and these will be turned into public spaces for socializing, leisure activities and exhibitions.

During this period, the above-mentioned Biennale in Gjirokastra will be established, starting to gain importance in the national and international panorama. However, the greatest changes are expected to be noticeable only after a longer period. In 2050, the depopulation is estimated to have ended while the adopted strategies have taken effect. This will lead to the re-population of Gjirokastra together with greater care both for the buildings that will be recovered and for the open spaces that which will be improved for citizens. The knots will be still visible, but their influence will have expanded to the surrounding area, involving other buildings and improving the quality of a bigger part of the city. This way, Gjirokastra will be a modern and up-to-date city, a destination for many tourists who, fascinated by the natural beauty and the artistic charm, will make it a crucial point for the whole Balkan peninsula.

Fig. 5 / Schematic representation of the three identified typologies. Source / the author

Conclusion

Gjirokastra is one of the main cities in Albania, located south of Albania, close to Greek border. The historical city centre stands on the slopes of the mountains and is flanked by two other territorial expansions: the newer city centre in the north and the industrial area on the east side. These three areas are not linked with one another and this character emphasizes the problems in the city, which now appears without a strong identity and any attractions.

This project focuses concretely on the current situation in Gjirokastra, which faces a continuous exodus of people moving to other cities, leaving Gjirokastra becoming the memory of itself.

The strength of this proposal stands in its concreteness, which aims to suggest feasible actions, both in economic and social ways, to avoid the disappearance of the city. The project starts by analyzing the current situation and the unavoidable trend of shrinking, and by recognizing the impossibility to stop such trend. Therefore, each strategy has to coexist with the shriking or depopulation trend for a certain amount of time until the strategy of the re-population of the city with new activities takes place.

This project starts from the selection of five relevant buildings, renamed knots, which will be converted into public spaces or will assume public functions to improve the quality of life in the city. Besides this, a lot of disused and ruined buildings are chosen to be part of a network, renamed sprawl, which aims to connect the three different identities of the city, thus creating a larger and stronger whole. The proposed interventions require limited initial investments, adapting to the needs and the possibilities of the city. This project may be considered controversial insofar as its first goal is not stopping the depopulation rather promoting it, as if the recovery could only take place after a complete defeat.

After a period of transition, Gjirokastra will recover its role as a focal point for the south of Albania from a social, cultural, as well as an economic point of view. This will undoubtedly improve the quality of life for all the inhabitants and will attract more people to live there. People will feel to be part of a brand-new city that is at the same time strongly anchored in the past, an enviable feature that only a UNESCO site with such an important history can boast of.

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Fig. 6 / "Teatro Continuo" by Alberto Burri in Milan. Source / <https://www.mymi.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/teatro-continuo-burri-ok>)

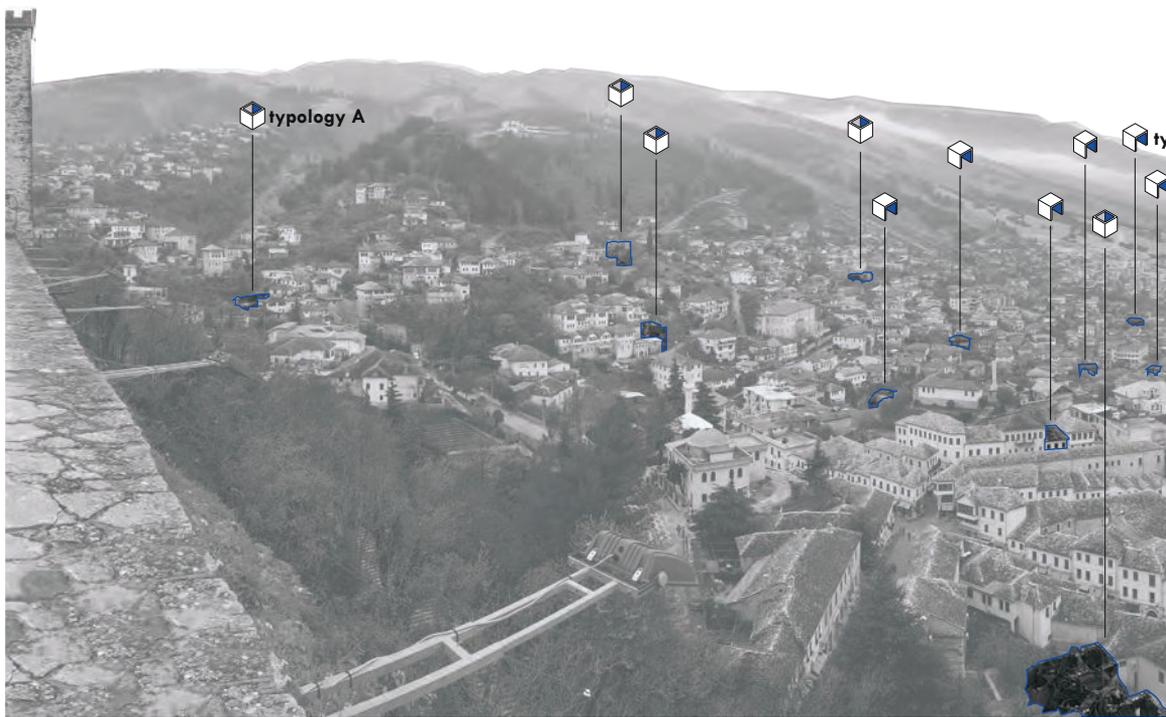


Fig. 7 / View of some of the interventions proposed for Gjirokastra. Source / the author.

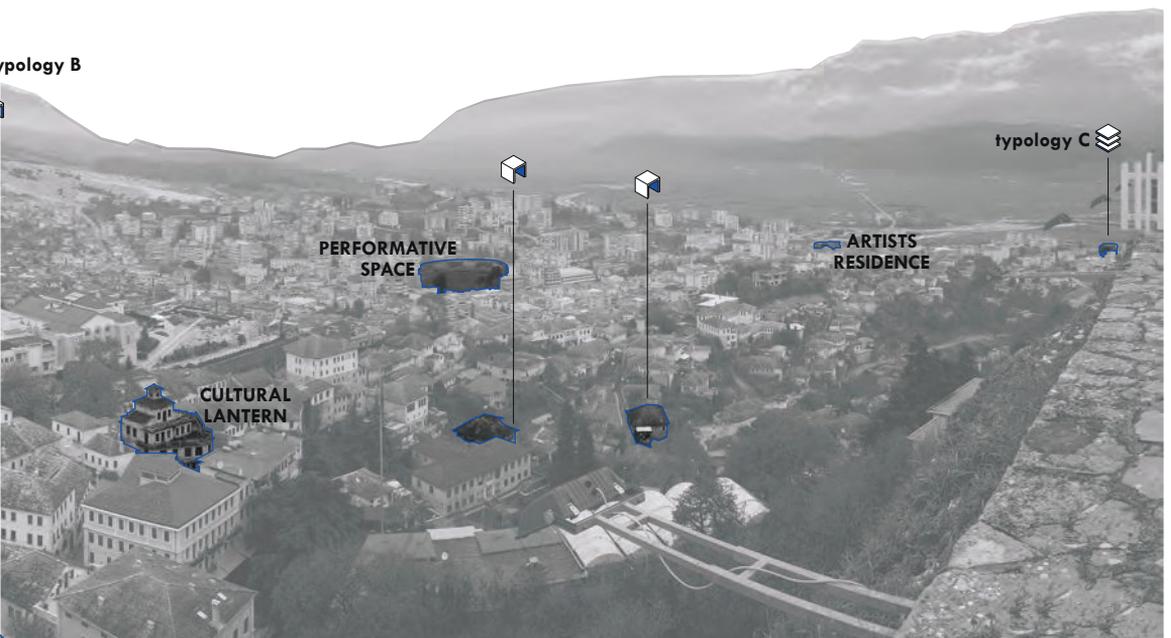




Fig. 8 / Hypotheses for Gjirokastra in 2030. The light-blue buildings are those considered for the first intervention (the so-called "knots and sprawl") which will be already transformed, while the blue ones are supposed to be the buildings that by 2030 will be abandoned and objects of new interventions. Source / the author.



Fig. 9 / Hypotheses for Gjirokastra in 2050. The light-blue buildings are all those already involved in interventions in the previous years, while the circles indicate the surrounding areas that by 2050 will benefit from the interventions carried out.
Source / the author.