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## The city of design and culture

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### Abstract

*Gjirokastra is the main city of the Ionian region in the south of Albania. Since 2005, the city was included in the UNESCO List of World Heritage as a Cultural site. This article aims to develop a proposal for rethinking Gjirokastra, which has become a shrinking city. Its main goal is to propose through the analysis of case studies a model with strategies to turn Gjirokastra into a city of design and culture. The proposal seeks to emphasize the strengths of the city such as tourism infrastructure, like hotels and restaurants, restored buildings, and courses and workshops organized by the municipality that focus on the culture and history of the city, by pursuing new sources of income and taking advantage of the tourist development that have taken place so far. This proposal also aims to empower the citizens of Gjirokastra to have their own businesses and be an active part of the development of this new city.*

*This paper focuses on two main strategies: first, the development of Summer Schools (two to four weeks in length), and second, the Artistic Residence (one to three months length) for local and foreigner artists, designers and architects. The summer schools will be conducted by local masters to teach techniques of working in stone, wood and fabric. The in-residence artists will work with the urban space, buildings, landmarks or local materials. The process consists of producing and working with a plan that includes where to stay, what to eat and what to experience in the city, and how to generate historical, cultural, natural and gastronomical paths inside the city and in the surrounding areas for different time periods. The selected case studies that we will analyze are from Latin-American and Europe: from Chio Lecca, Peru; Bauhaus Foundation Dessau, Germany; and Manos de colores, Ecuador. We will work with concepts from Participatory design and co-creative design.*

*As part of the school, each designer, artist or architect is expected to develop a design product of high quality for everyday life with the learned techniques and local materials. At a later stage, these objects will be produced and distributed in the city for the Albanian market and subsequently exported. The in-residence artists are expected to generate unique pieces of art that will be exposed in a gallery for locals and tourists to visit. The choice of the case studies was based on the programs and outcomes they have had when they were developed. The result of the proposal will be a group of strategies that the municipality or associations of citizens of Gjirokastra can implement in the city. Also, as conclusion guides lines will be presents for the process after the implementation of these strategies.*

### Introduction: State of the art

This article aims to develop a proposal for rethinking a shrinking city, Gjirokastra. This proposal comes from the workshop "Rethinking Gjirokastra" developed in December 2019 by the POLIS University of Albania, for the group of students of the 35th cycle of the International PhD in Architecture and Urban Planning.

"Berat and Gjirokastra 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. The town also retains a bazaar, an 18th century mosque and two churches of the same period.

Gjirokastra was built by major landowners. Around the ancient 13th century citadel, the town has houses with turrets (the Turkish kule) which are characteristic of the Balkans region. Gjirokastra contains several remarkable examples of houses of this type, which date from the 17th century, but also more elaborate examples dating from the early 19th century." UNESCO (2019).

Gjirokastra is the main city of the Ionian region in the south of Albania. This region is part of the "Albanian riviera," known for its cultural sites (some already inscribed under UNESCO) and for its proximity to the sea that makes it suitable for maritime tourism. The city has had an important place in the history of Albania, and in 2005 it was inscribed by UNESCO in the List of World Heritage as a Cultural Site. Since then, UNESCO has been working with the Albanian government to develop strategies to preserve the city. UNESCO has identified several factors that have an impact on the city: ground transport infrastructure, housing, Illegal activities (Illegal construction dating from the late 1990s and later), management systems/ management plan, and other threats like the lack of adequate firefighting arrangements in the historic urban zone. UNESCO (2019). Through doctoral research thesis and projects POLIS University has also recognized several factors that have put the preservation of the city at risk: the migration of its citizens to Tirana, the lack of cadastral information, lack of diversification of activities, lack of jobs, and lack of civic agency on the

management of urban space, heritage and the city itself.

Taking this context into account, the main goal to this paper is to propose a model and strategies through which to turn Gjirokastra into a city of design and culture. The proposal takes advantage of the strengths of the city, such as the tourism infrastructure, hotels and restaurants, the few restored buildings, and courses and workshops. Then, through case studies, the development of the strategies will be situated in the cultural context of the city. This proposal also intends to empower the citizens of Gjirokastra to have their own businesses, pursue new sources of income, and be an active part of the development of this new city. The strategies will generate a dynamic between the activities, people and different parts of the city.

Touring the city, a cultural heritage of objects, fabrics, fashion, graphics and spaces of everyday life unfold. Understanding and engaging this heritage will enable the citizens to regenerate the identity of their city as part of Albanian culture. Techniques, materials, and landscapes are specific to this city and its history. These important elements will be framed and engaged through summer schools and artistic residence. As a summary, this proposal highlights as city characteristics and problems, and aims to involve all the actors in the process of the rehabilitation and regeneration of the city and its heritage.

Local and foreign artists, designers and



Fig. 1 / Historic Centre of Gjirokastra, view from the castle. Source / the author, December 2019

architects, the participants will be mainly this target group for the summer school, but anyone who wants to participate will be welcome. There will be two programs, one for two weeks and the other for four weeks. In these programs, the participants will work with local masters to learn the techniques of stone working, wood working and fabric weaving, which are characteristic materials and techniques in Gjirokastra. In the first program, the participants will learn one technique tied to the material and in the second program they will learn the techniques of all the materials. Through the methodology of Participatory Design and Co-creative Design<sup>1</sup>, the interaction between the masters and the participants will result in innovative and high-quality products for everyday life. These products will be introduced to the local market and larger Albanian and international market.

Second, an Artistic Residence with the same target group as the summer school for one to three months will work with proposals that includes the urban space, buildings, landmarks or local materials. Such proposals are expected to generate

unique pieces of art that will be exhibited in local galleries. The municipality, the tourism sector, and the citizens must work together, creating alliances and a network of joint work and support.

**Methodology: Case Studies analysis**

The methodology was centered around two case studies. Latin-America and Western Europe. From Latin-America there are Chio Lecca, Peru and Manos de colores, Ecuador. These cases reflect principles of Participatory and Co-creative Design that combine the experience of the site, learning activities and tourism. From Western Europe, there is the Bauhaus Foundation Dessau, Germany, which contributes with experience in the field of tourism and Artistic Residence.

#### **Chio Lecca**

Chio Lecca is a Fashion Institute in Peru with two centers, one in Lima and one in Cusco. The latter is the nearest city to Machu Picchu a UNESCO World Heritage Cultural site and one of the most visited places in the world. For its Summer School, The Fashion Institute take advantage of the fact that Peru has high quality alpaca<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> / Participatory design (originally co-operative design, now often co-design) is an approach to design attempting to actively involve all stakeholders (e.g. employees, partners, customers, citizens, end users) in the design process to help ensure the result meets their needs and is usable. Participatory design is an approach which is focused on processes and procedures of design and is not a design style. The term is used in a variety of fields e.g. software design, urban design, architecture, landscape architecture, product design, sustainability, graphic design, planning, and even medicine as a way of creating environments that are more responsive and appropriate to their inhabitants' and users' cultural, emotional, spiritual and practical needs.

<sup>2</sup> / Alpaca wool is the natural fiber harvested from an alpaca, an endemic animal from the Andes region.



Fig. 2 / Historic Centre of Gjirokastra, touring the city. Source / the author, December 2019

wool, an endemic and highly prized material. The program for the summer school offers a complete service for the participants. They have a residence for the students while they attend the school. They have also arranged visits to Machu Picchu and to indigenous communities near the city; they have workshops with the women from the communities to learn the ancient techniques for spinning alpaca's wool, dyeing, and weaving it in handlooms.

The facts to consider in this case are:

- Generation of a pack for services that include tourism infrastructure, residency/hotels, restaurants and attractions.
- Identification of characteristic techniques of the city to establish the work between

the master's artisans and the future students at the summer schools.

- Strengthen and recover the use of endemic materials and artisan techniques typical of the city.

Through the facilities and services of the summer schools, Chio Lecca has promoted the participation of local, local people and foreigners and has disclosed the tangible and intangible heritage of Peru.

#### **Manos de Colores**

"Manos de colores is a Project that works with artisan communities with the aim of generating economic income for women artisans and their families. It has work with 6 of these communities, an artisan route that starts from the



Fig. 3 / Fabrics and textiles from Gjirokastra, touring the city. Source / the author, December 2019



Fig. 4 / Sequeiros, JC . 2018. Mujeres tejedoras del Cusco exponen lo mejor de su arte ancestral. Source / [online]. Available at: <https://diariocorreo.pe/edicion/cusco/mujeres-tejedoras-del-cusco-exponen-lo-mejor-de-su-arte-ancestral-video-818337/?ref=dcr> (Accessed: 5 march 2020)

province of Pichincha to Esmeraldas and the idea is to put a value and pay tribute to de artisans who care for and protect our cultural heritage.” Makiwan (2019).

Manos de Colores is a project in Ecuador from Probeta Design, an Atelier in Quito that works with indigenous communities and their small associations that are mostly women from all over Ecuador. This project has been going on for five years with successful outcomes in the communities. This project aims for the development of artisan products from each community, which have a powerful component of identity and endemic materials.

The facts to consider in this case are:

- Building a sense of collaboration between the municipality, tourism sector and the community, working together and leaning on each other.
- Reestablishing almost lost artisan techniques.
- Encouraging the youngest citizens of the community to return and learn the artisan’s techniques

The aim is to develop methodologies and techniques from Participatory design and co-creative design, generate a sense of belonging to the territory and the community and valorize their work. In addition, the products that have been developed are commercialized, thus completing the design product cycle, and generating economic stability for their families and thus of the community.

### **Bauhaus Residence**

“Since 2016, the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation offers an Artist in Residence program that enables contemporary artist from all over the world to live and work in the Georg Muche | Oskar Schlemmer House. Each Bauhaus Residency ends with the presentation of a new work that will remain in the Gropius House. This exhibition with the title Gropius House || Contemporary is open for visitors.” Bauhaus, (2019, p. 7)

The Bauhaus Foundation in Dessau has a project called the Bauhaus Residence, in which artists, designers and architects propose projects in the Bauhaus master’s Houses. They will live and work in these houses for approximately 3 months. The artwork will then be exhibited in the Gropius house. The participants of the Bauhaus Residence experience the city and its infrastructure and interact with the citizens and the tourist that visit Dessau. The facts to consider in this case are:

- The urban infrastructure that provides the artist elements to develop the artwork,

the generation of the local economy, and the need to have urban spaces and stores among other services.

- The city is known through the artwork.
- A different type of tourism will be encouraged through culture.
- The city will get enriched with the experiences from artists, designers and architects from all over the world.

Gjirokastra must provide the participants with infrastructural, hospitality and cultural services. For the summer school and the artist residence the hosts must guarantee comfort and accessibility; the restaurants and bars must be adequate to taste the local and regional food for which Albania is recognized. The experience will be complemented with cooking workshops. For the weekends and for the afternoons/nights there will be different options, such as cultural events (theater, cinema), adventure (camping, fishing, hiking), relaxation (spa, pool) and historical tours (Hadrianopolis, Antigona, Gjirokastra’s castel).

These services will develop in the old and new part of the city and in the surrounding areas. It is important not to concentrate the activities only in the old neighborhoods of the city in order to engage the people with the place. It is also necessary that the largest number of citizens, regardless of gender and age, are involved in this program because collaborative and cooperative work is needed.

### **Results**

Through these case studies we have identified strategies that have worked successfully and that can be implemented in this context. they are:

- Generate a pack for services that include tourism infrastructure, residency/hotels, restaurants and attractions, as well as guided tours to the castle of Gjirokastra and the places near the city, such as Hadrianopolis and Antigone.
- Identify characteristic techniques of the city in order to establish the relationships between the master’s artisans and the future students at the summer schools, as well as reestablish almost lost artisan techniques (stone).
- Strengthen and recover the use of endemic materials (stone, wood and textiles) and artisan techniques typical of the city.
- Build a sense of collaboration between the municipality, tourism sector and the community, working together and leaning on each other.
- Enable and encourage the young citizens



Fig. 5 / *Manos de colores*. 2019. Products of masapan [online]. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/manosdecoloresecador/> (Accessed: 5 marzo 2020)



Fig. 6 / Exhibition in the Gropius House, Artistic Residence, Dessau. Source / the author, February 2020





*Fig. 7 / Exhibition in the Gropius House, Artistic Residence, Dessau.  
Source / the author, February 2020*

to return to the city and learn the artisan's techniques.

- The urban infrastructure should serve as a stage and context for the artwork, which in turn will revitalize local economy.
- Make the city known through artwork.
- Encourage tourism through new infrastructure
- Enrich the city with artistic and architectural experiences from the local region and beyond.

### **Conclusions and future developments**

After having established the strategies and after having structured the programs, it is proposed to carry out the second phase of the project, which involves the restoration of the industrial zone. This space must be adequate for the production of the designed objects. A new graphic system must be also developed for the city, a brand for the summer schools, and for the products that would



Fig. 8 / Hadrianopolis, near Gjirokastra. Source / the author, December 2019

be developed there. A Gallery must be set up for art of residence artists, by using an already restored building in the old part of the city or an adequate space in the industrial zone. There must also be both a permanent and moving exhibition. These activities will trigger jobs for people and motivate them to remain in the city. With this proposal, we aim to generate a cycle through learning, development and production of objects with the identity and soul of Gjirokastra.

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