



**Scientific Journal of the Observatory of Mediterranean Basin.**

Polis University / Ferrara University /

UNECE Center of excellence / Co-PLAN Institute.

TITLE: *A breathing city: Shkodra and its representative places on the water*

AUTHOR: MICHELE MONTEMURRO  
SOURCE: *Scientific journal of the Observatory of Mediterranean Basin,  
Volume 4 / 2018, pp. 68-77*

ISSN: 2959-4081

ISBN: 978-9928-4459-9-5 (V. 4)

PUBLISHED BY: POLIS-Press

DOI: 10.37199/o41004108

# A breathing city: Shkodra and its representative places on the water

*Prof PhD Arch Michele Montemurro  
DICATECH / Polytechnic University of Bari*

The Albanian settlement and anthropic system highlights the current crisis in the relationship between urban settlements and natural landscapes of the contemporary city. This reality can be assumed as a field of experimentation to verify new grammars of the urban space and of the architectural forms able to establish a constitutive relationship with the forms of the natural landscape. Shkodra, located on the shores of the largest lake in the Balkans, in an area of transition from the Adriatic coast to the mountainous landscape of the Albanian Alps, is the most important "lake city", in which deep relationships among urban, natural and rural landscapes, the forms of water and the forms of urban settlement, are recognized. In this sense, the interpretation of the boundary between city and water is an opportunity to give identity to those marginal spaces assuming them as constituent and identifying parts of the urban form of Shkodra.

The challenge contained in the research is to offer a model of intervention that can guide the strategic choices related to urban and environmental rehabilitation actions, towards those aspects of material and immaterial reality on which the economic and social reconstruction of Shkodra can be founded. This could combine the needs of local development with the most advanced sustainable tourism processes, recognizing for Shkodra a role of reference in the Adriatic basin as a gateway to the Balkans, accentuated by the presence of the great lake and its value in defining the

identity of the city. In this sense, morphological operations conducted in the Shkodra abandoned territories such as the marshy margins, the Rom areas, the residual areas of infrastructures and commerce, allow us to experiment with new models of cities able to become instruments of proactive urban economic and social development.

## Introduction

The Albanian settlement and anthropic system highlights the current crisis in the relationship between urban settlements and natural landscapes, a condition due to the "widespread" dimension of the contemporary city, its indifference to the geographical forms, the formal and constructive identity of the places and their history (Monestirolì, 2010: 60). This reality can be assumed as a field of experimentation for the elaboration of new "city ideas" capable of expressing an urban identity congruent with the specifics of the places, to verify new grammars of the urban space and of the architectural forms able to establish a constitutive relationship with the forms of the natural landscape.

But it also represents "a historic opportunity for transformation that allows us to concentrate" attention to the environment not only in ecological but above all morphological terms" (Gregotti, 1990). In particular, the presence of lakes, artificial reservoirs, rivers and streams, channels linked to the reclamation and use of extensive cultivable areas, and the relative



*Fig1 / Reconstruction of the ancient bazar of Shkodra  
source / N. Azzariti, R. Dicuonzo, M. Korbi, E. Ferrara, M. Manzari*

cities built on their banks, is a condition of primary interest in the Albanian territory. Shkodra, located on the shores of the largest lake in the Balkans, in an area of transition from the Adriatic coast to the mountainous landscape of the Albanian Alps, is the most important "lake city", in which deep relationships among urban, natural and rural landscapes, among the forms of water, agricultural structures and forms of urban settlement, are recognized. In this sense, the interpretation of the boundary between city and water is an opportunity to give identity to those marginal spaces assuming them as constituent and identifying parts of the urban form of Shkodra.

### **Landscape spaces**

The territory of Albania, a region between the shores of the Adriatic and the ridge of the Albanian Alps, is strongly characterized by a rich hydrography, both natural and artificial. The hydrographic system formed by rivers, natural and artificial lakes and land reclamation channels, and the valley bottom path system, define the natural and anthropic connective structure that unites the shores of the Adriatic to the mountainous hinterland.

The territory of Shkodra, in north-western Albania, is a model of this structure due to the presence of the homonymous lake where the rivers Drin, Buna and Kir meet themselves. The river, the lake, the navigable canals and the exclusively irrigation ones of the land reclamation represent, together with the routes and the actual settlement, the constituent elements of a stratified territorial

structure, starting from the Illyrian anthropization, through the Roman one and then Ottoman, constitutes the foundation of the settlement forms and the forms of the landscape.

The variability of the aquatic landscape produced by the fluctuation of the water level of the lake produces an important spatial and landscape value of the city: the lake of Shkodra has natural and marshy shores, shallow waters that favor the horizontal diffusion of water, periodically bringing out vegetation and soil.

The reclamations dating back to the last decades of the last century have profoundly transformed the structure of the country around the city of Shkodra, which has been regularized and made productive and given a 'direction' through the canals that connect the lake to the city. Water structure and ground structure are integrated and related. The hydrographic, agricultural and settlement systems in the areas close to Shkodra Lake are strongly interrelated and determine the form of the landscape.

These channels allow the irrigation of the fields and the sliding of small boats to the city. Each channel is flanked by a towpath and a row of shrubs connected to "espalier"<sup>1</sup>, building a structured settlement system.

This system, acting as a filter between the 'urban system' and the lake, defines a "weak" form of the agricultural space that changes according to the seasonal variation of the water level and its extension, giving an agrarian and aquatic





Fig2 / Idrography and vegetation structures of Shkoder  
 source / N. Azzariti, R. Dicuonzo, M. Korbi, E. Ferrara, M. Manzari



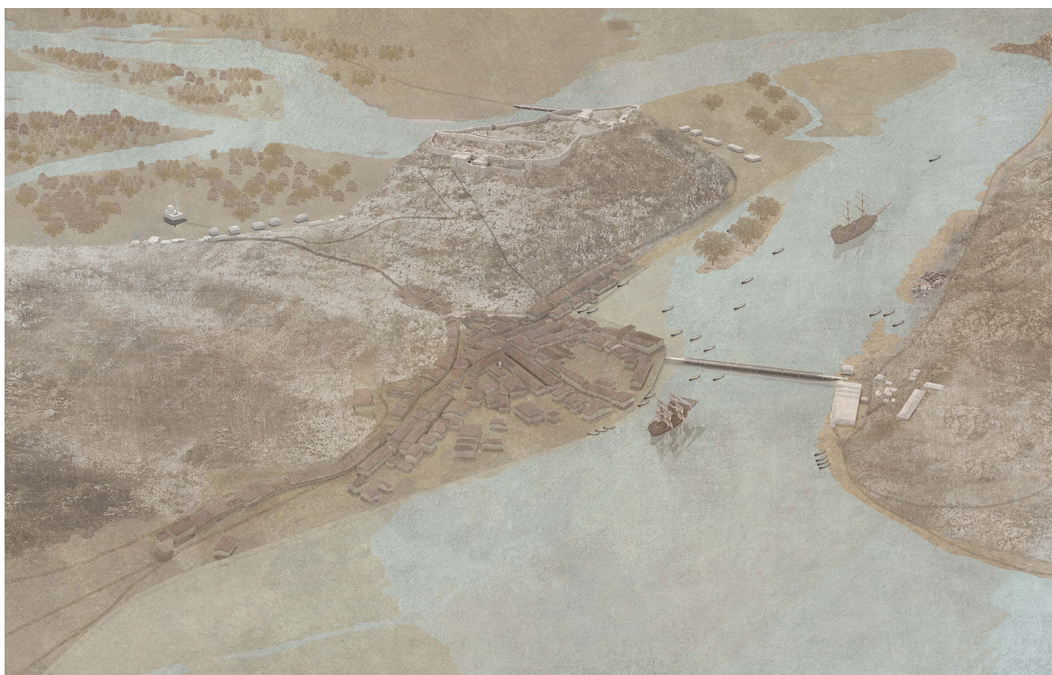


Fig3 / Reconstruction of the ancient bazar of Shkoder  
source / N. Azzariti, R. Dicuonzo, M. Korbi, E. Ferrara, M. Manzari

character to the space of the shore placed between the lake and the city.

### Reflections in the water / The construction of the urban form of a city on lake

"The city loves water" (Costanzo, 2009: 196) and it reflects itself in correspondence of its boundaries: the forms with which the city establish a relationship with the water represent their identity at a distance through interpretative elements of the relationship with the natural features such as topography (embankments, banks, quays), the orography of the coast, the geographical elements (bays, rivers, swamps), the type of water (sea, river, lake).

In particular, the lake is a spatial unit of completed form, defined by the profile of the shore that gives shape to the water in its border with the ground<sup>2</sup> (Norberg-Schultz, 1977:50). The shape of the water expressed by its profile, enhances the finiteness of its extension and makes clear the boundary with the land, a place where the lake city is often established and is represented through the elements appropriate to the hydrographic context: the city can accommodate the shape of the shore when the height of the water is stable, it distances itself in case of shores with shallow waters attesting on the paths, it can be on the hill surrounded by water as an island in the case of considerable fluctuation.

In the case where, as in Shkodra, the city develops in the plains and almost at the same level of water, the boundary between land and water loses its linear character of limit to assume an extended dimension of lagoon space, changing, with irregularly evolving edges, reversible and seasonal cycles.

In the urban structure two distinct parts are recognized, each with its own form linked to a water landscape: the first, more ancient, is located near the gate of the lake between two hills, where the three rivers meet themselves and feed it; originally it consisted of a system composed by the castle and the fortified citadel built on a hill, located at the center of the marshy and lagoon territory that receives and distributes the waters of the Drin, from the path that leads to the river, from the bazaar (now no longer present) and from the river port, the bridge and the urban core on the eastern shore of the lake at the foot of a small promontory.

The second part is the modern one that developed from the late fifteenth century onwards along the caravan route, according to the model of the linear city-road along the main territorial routes, which expands in the plain between the lake and the river Kir in a widespread and informal way, occupying the swampy and flooded rural areas towards the lake, today protected by an embankment.

1 / "Espalier" is a support used by local peasants to back over the liake the lake for reaching the city.

2 / The structure of the landscape is generally rather blurry. Only sometimes the elements have a clear definition as in the case of the lake.

3 / In this case, the landscape is considered as a cultural coexistence of geographical singularities and it is the result of an interpretation of the nature as a subject or aesthetic fact and therefore as an ideal subject.



Fig4 / Design of the new linear park of Shkodra along the shore of the lake  
source / N. Azzariti, R. Dicuonzo, M. Korbi, E. Ferrara, M. Manzari

## Research methodology

The research to which this essay refers has developed in two complementary phases but united in a unitary path: the first phase is analytical, dedicated to the formation of a cognitive framework; the second is synthetic and is considered as a verification and address of the analysis phase through an inductive (circular) design process (Monestirol, 1999: 153). The design approach is based on method and culture with a consolidated and identifying attitude of Italian architecture to consider the landscape as a purpose (Purini, 2008: 93), starting from the assumption that architecture belongs organically to it as the city is the sedimentation of a continuous renewal of the settlement paradigm always referred to a higher order consisting of the natural form of the territory (Zuaznabar, 2011: 161)<sup>3</sup>. Design is developed through research of typological and paradigmatic "foundation" conducted on individual projects and settlements forms that characterize the territory of Shkodra, to define the features of the architecture in a non-historicist way but through a process of abstraction and analogy. This allows to the definition of a renewed architecture belonging to the history but not historicist: an architecture then, which knows how to disseminate on a land become anonymous, new signs of cities that do not manifest the difference between what was and what will be, (Purini, 2008: 95-97) from the reconstruction of the foundational relationship between physical forms of the territory and forms of settlement and dwellings. The design method assumes

the problem of discontinuity of the historical stratification that characterizes the development of the Albanian city and proceeds according to a typological and inductive approach: the reconstruction of urban forms that are in continuity with the historical matrix of the city can be done by establishing a relationship of "similarity" (Foucault, 1967: 31) with the forms of the past, evocative and analog, as a result of a process of abstraction. The analogy makes it possible to build subtle similarities based on relationships, exhibiting an infinite number of possible affinities (Ravagnati, 2016: 85). The form of the historic water cities in Albania has its specific features, starting with the relationship of its location, the type of shore and the shape of water (sea coast, lake or river), and is characterized formally by monumental elements related to water such as bridges, towers and town walls, castles, harbors, bazar. The city on lake, unlike other water city, compares itself with a defined horizon derived from the spatial finiteness of a water basin delimited, an internality that becomes "territorial room" and space of relations between the banks, according to their limited mutual distance. They overlook calm and circumscribed waters by which it establishes continuity, proximity, mirroring relations.

The project recognizes the need to define the identity of Shkodra and its urban form through the reconstruction of new centralities in the spaces of nature, representative of a reconquered relationship between city and lake, able to build a new urban hierarchy in the spaces of informal building. The urban



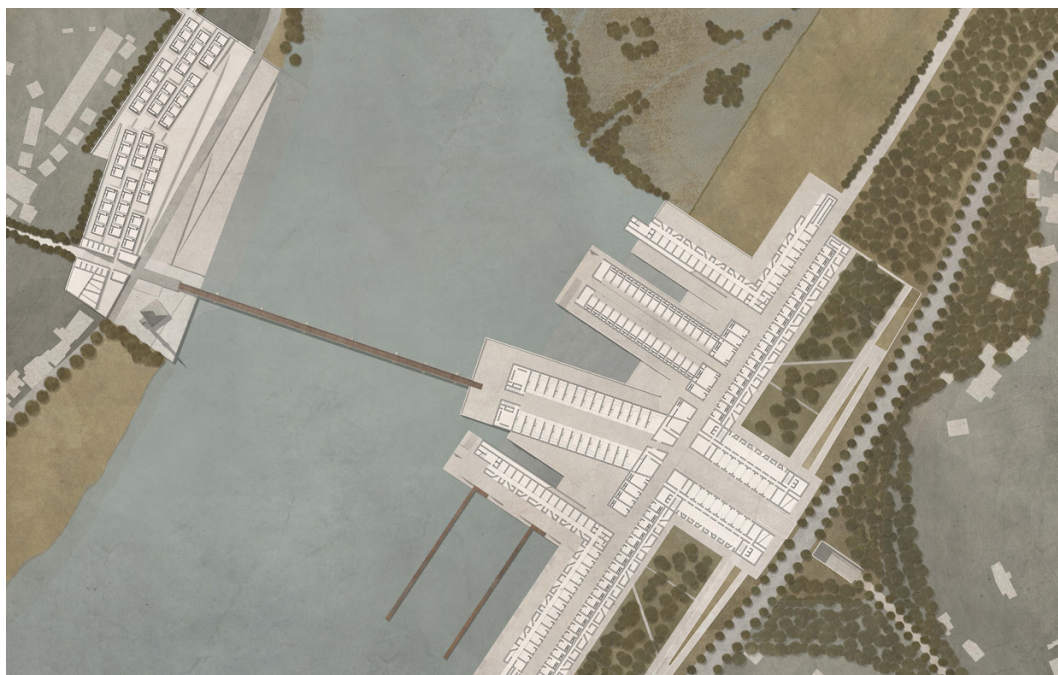


*Fig5 / The park on the lake of Shkodra: piers and spaces of the water source / N. Azzariti, R. Dicuonzo, M. Korbi, E. Ferrara, M. Manzari*



*Fig6 / The park on the lake of Shkodra: piers and spaces of the water source / N. Azzariti, R. Dicuonzo, M. Korbi, E. Ferrara, M. Manzari*





paradigmatic forms identified, such as the street, the bazar, the terracing, the urban gate, the irrigated and reclaimed countryside, are able to express that "etymological" continuity with the form of nature and ground (Martì Aris, 2008: 131), in which the urban spaces of greater collective value coincide with the places of conspicuous or notable nature, to build what Aldo Rossi calls the "permanencies" of a city (Rossi, 1978: 178).

### **A breathing city: Shkodra and its representative places on the water**

The "breathing" of the city, that is the transformation of the landscape that takes place during the periodic filling / emptying of the lake basin, highlights the representative places of this vital alternation and suggests the creation of urban forms able to assume and represent this condition as distinctive character of the city of Shkodra. The aim of the project is to restore the harmony between architecture and nature and build on it a distinctive value by highlighting the seasonal variations of the water landscape through the construction of public places in nature and paths to cross and stay in these parts of the emerged / submerged countryside, able to connect city and lake. The project experimentation deals with the theme of the reconstruction of the relationship between city and lake, giving form to the agrarian landscape, 'form to water', 'form to urban and extra-urban routes', 'form to representative places', as well as an underlying order to the changeability and to the apparent multiplicity of aspects of the lake

landscape. Two significant places have been identified from the landscape and urban point of view of Shkodra, where the city can re-establish a formal and spatial relationship with the water, recovering the lesson of the ancient city, its ability to recognize topological and topographical features of the site and assume them as the "etymological root" of its form. The first is the city gate at the confluence of the three rivers, Drin, Buna and Kir at the mouth of the lake where the ancient city, walled and fortified, settled on the top of the hill, integrated the exceptional geographical nature of this conspicuous place, building an urban system with the bazar (today demolished) at the foot of the hill, the wooden bridge and the degraded rom district on the opposite bank beyond the bridge. The second is constituted by the western edge between city and lake, an area interposed between the city and the water, partly reclaimed, parcelled and cultivated and partly natural, a landscape made changeable by the emersion / submersion of its lands according to the water level and separated from the city by the by-pass embankment.

In the first area the project reconstructs the continuity of the castle-bazar-bridge-Rom district system between the two banks of the river as the identity root of the city, facing the redesign of the bazar, the fluvial port and the Rom district according to a principle that through a deep-rooted and terraced urban form allows to individual forms of self-construction. In the second area the design theme is the enhancement of the marginal space between the city and the water as a lagoon-agricultural





*Fig7 / picture name and source / N. Azzariti, R. Dicuonzo, M. Korbi, E. Ferrara, M. Manzari*



*Fig8 / The Rom district on the other shore of the river source / N. Azzariti, R. Dicuonzo, M. Korbi, E. Ferrara, M. Manzari*

park at the territorial scale, which unites the south and north doors of the city, able to represent and preserve the exceptional natural and anthropic characters of the area, through the recognition of a measure and the definition of a form of interposed space.

The by-pass, an embankment against flooding the city, is transformed into a green promenade overlooking the lake, and a suture element that is a linear connection structure between the lagoon park, agricultural park near the lake and the urban fabric with vegetables gardens, public gardens, services and poles. The promenade joins the north gate and the south gate of Shkodra connecting the

"cornerstones" and the polarities placed on the edge of the city towards the lake that link the agricultural system and the canals with the city.

### Conclusions

The current crisis in the relationship between urban settlements and natural landscapes, derived from indifference to geographical forms and the identity of the places of the contemporary city, is an important opportunity to experiment with new grammars of urban form based on the close relationship with the forms of nature. The challenge contained in the research is to offer a model of intervention that can guide the strategic choices related



to urban and environmental rehabilitation actions, towards those aspects of material reality (nature, landscape, city, tourism) and immaterial (beauty, culture, social cohesion, participation) on which the economic and social reconstruction of Shkodra can be founded, combining the needs of local development with the most advanced sustainable tourism processes, recognizing for Shkodra a role of reference in the Adriatic as a gateway to the Balkans, accentuated by the presence of the great lake and its value in defining the identity of the city.

In this sense, morphological operations conducted in the territories of waste and brownfields of the contemporary city such as the marshy margins, the Rom areas, the residual areas of infrastructures and commerce, allow us to experiment with

new models of cities able to become instruments of proactive development, not only spatial and urban, but also economic and social, starting from the valorization of identity places able to represent "the soul" of the city.

### Acknowledgement

This contribution refers to the partial result of a research conducted by the author together with professors Anna Bruna Menghini, Annalinda Neglia, Francesco Ruggiero, Francesca Calace, during the Graduate Workshop in Architecture of the Polytechnic University of Bari, composed by the undergraduates students Michelangelo Manzari, Marson Korbi, Eliana Ferrara, Nicoletta Azzariti, Raffaella Dicuonzo. All the images included in the previous pages are done by the above mentioned students.





*Fig9 / Design of the new bazar of Shkodra  
source / N. Azzariti, R. Dicuonzo, M. Korbi, E. Ferrara, M. Manzari*

## References

Dardi, C. (1988), *Reflets dans l'eau*, in Costanzo, M (2009) *Architettura in forma di parole*, Macerata: Quodlibet.

Foucoult, M.(1967), *Le parole e le cose*, Milano: Rizzoli.

Gregotti, V.(1990), Editoriale, in *Rassegna* n. 42, Electa, Milano.

Monestiroli, A. (1999), *La città come avventura della conoscenza*, in Monestiroli, A. (1999), *L'architettura della realtà*, Torino: Allemandi.

Monestiroli, A. (2010), *La ragione degli edifici*, Milano: C.Marinotti editore.

Norberg-Schultz, C. (1977), *Esistenza, Spazio, Architettura*, Roma: Officina edizioni.

Purini, F. (2008), *Il paesaggio come fine in La misura italiana dell'architettura*, Roma-Bari: Laterza.

Ravagnati, C. (2012), *L'invenzione del territorio: l'atlante inedito di Saverio Muratori*, Milano: Franco Angeli.

Rogers, E.N. (1997), *Esperienza dell'Architettura*, Milano: Skira.

Rossi, A. (1978), *L'architettura della città*, Milano: Clup.

Schwarz, R. (1949) *Von der Bebauung der Erde*, Heidelberg: Verlag.

Zuaznabar, G. (2011), *Lo spazio nella forma*, Milano: C.Marinotti.