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Islands and Fragile edges / Reclaiming the river landscape in Berat's Historical center

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Introduction

This new publication of the Observatory of the Mediterranean Basin (OMB) tries to build on the previous investigations related to water issues, but shifting the focus from the Albanian Riviera to the river basin. The choice of title for this volume intends to convey importance to the idea of the river as a connection between land and sea. "When the river flows into the sea" offers a twofold reading: on one hand it confers relevance to a condition present in the Albanian territory which is still waiting for an intervention; on the other, it proposes a project for the future in terms of resource investment prevision, contributing to the preservation of the river. Continuing the tradition started three years ago, and thanks to the national and international contributions to each volume, our PhD publications have become a reference point for the research community, whereby the meaning of the project can be tested through theory and practice.

As it often happens in the architectural research disciplines, we have very limited opportunities to understand the potential of a certain topic, unless we try to transfer and validate theoretical approaches through practical and research activities. Therefore one of the main objectives of the Polis/Ferrara International PhD workshops is to train PhD students on the idea of 'research by design', producing, in a relatively short time, operative tools and defining methodologies that are replicable in similar contexts. Today's Albanian context appears as a field of

great relevance, our role as practitioners and academic researchers is to observe and select specific topics which will open international debates. The topics selected for the PhD Workshops that take place every year, relate to the issues that Albania is facing in this precise historical moment. The structure of the book reflects one of the peculiarities of the Polis/Ferrara International PhD: the multidisciplinary approach to research in architecture and planning. The topics that evolve around the Albanian Rivers, can be found between nature and artifice and they include deliverables ranging from the formulation of new sustainable tourism strategies, to infrastructural development proposals. The book is divided into four main sections. The first section includes the introductory chapter and the presentation of the Workshop, emphasizing the impact that such publication could have on the local authority and in the field of professional activities.

The second section is entitled "Interdisciplinary exchange" and it explores architecture's ability to absorb information from other fields of knowledge. Architects, Planners and international expertise coming from a broad range of research fields, are normally involved in the workshops and often team up with POLIS and Ferrara University when taking part to architecture and urban design competitions. In this section three main aspects concerning rivers are explored: watershed management, restoration of biodiversity and industrial pollution. Such aspects were a matter of discussion since



*Fig1 / Surrounded Islands, Christo and Jeanne-Claude Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida, 1980-83
source / arqparaelarte.wixsite.com/arquitecturaarte/1965---1970*

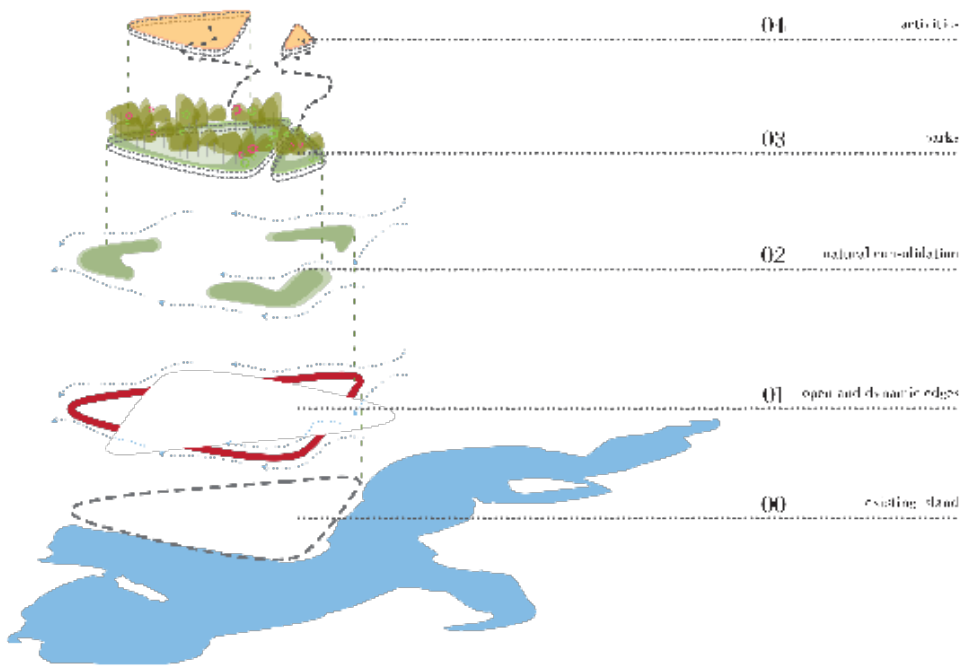


Fig2 / An image of the possible preservation of Berat Island
 source / Metropolis, 3ti lab and dsb landscape office report.

the very first stages of the workshop, and they generated several debates, which ultimately led to the decision to adopt strategies that would emphasize the capacity of the river landscape to activate remediation processes.

The third section of the book presents the Workshop results. First the design experience is described through project presentations; while, in the second part of the section, the publication leaves room for the scientific contributes of PhD students, who address the topic of the river and offer their personal reflection through a scientific paper.

The fourth and last section deals with design practice and academic experience. Architecture and Urban projects are used as references to generate ideas and practical solutions applicable to the Albanian context. One of the main projects, which became a focal point for this PhD workshop, was the International Design competition promoted by Atelier Albania in cooperation with the Municipality of Berat and the office of the Prime Minister: Osumi Island in Berat, Albania (Agency 2013). The Observatory of the Mediterranean Basin, together with Metropolis architecture office, 3ti-lab (Rome) and dsb office of landscape in Milan, were one of the shortlisted groups selected to present their design proposal. Also POLIS University, in cooperation with Felixx, a landscape architecture office based in Rotterdam, was selected and participated as a separate group to the same competition.

Evocative morphologies

For several reasons the Berat Island Design Competition was a source of inspiration to identify design tools as well as theoretical references applicable to similar contexts. In particular, the idea to intervene on the Berat Island in the Osumi River (which was a brief competition request), opened up interesting debates about the potential of a natural morphology, such as Islands, in establishing new ways in which human activities can interact with natural elements that belong to the river. Working with issues related to the preservation of the Osumi Island¹, and given its proximity to the historical center of Berat, calls for reflections on the strong contrast between two elements which have been matter of discussion for centuries: the natural environment characterized, in our case, by the strength of the River, and the artificial built environment generated by man (fig.1-2).

This apparently simple dichotomy gave way to a stimulating design opportunity. If, for a moment, we concentrate our attention on the concept of natural versus artificial, we can argue the importance of certain existing morphologies of the surrounding environment. The interaction nature - artifice, and vice versa, is regulated by repeated transformations operated by human activities, always trying to improve the coexistence of human and natural environment. Architecture has the capacity to exchange with the natural context operative structures defined by specific morphology and clear characteristics. Because of this, the word

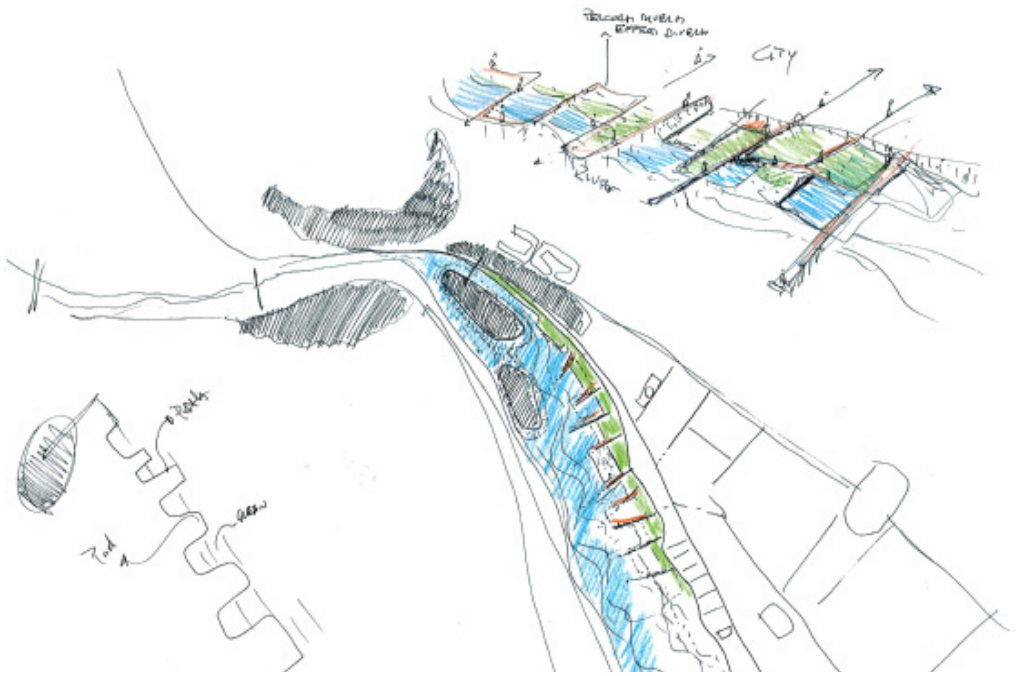


Fig3 / Sketch on the idea of fragile edges
source / the author

'island' can be considered as an analytical tool as well as an operative one due to its capacity to absorb information coming from the artificial environment as well as from the natural one. For this purpose, it is rather interesting how in 1971 Italo Insolera (Italian Architect and Urban Planner) argued how, in the eternal fight of men to control nature, there was always an attempt to build an environment dominated by an established social class and constituted by consolidated typologies: "Precise, defined, concluded and conclusive environments are created: place that reflect the perfection of a world, the rationalization of a world, its codification and transmission"². Later on, in his text, he makes a list of consolidated architecture examples, choosing between building and city structures, but as common element he always underlines the relationship between Nature and the built environment.

In Italo Insolera's reflection we can find a prolific field of ideas. His words remind us of the main characteristic of an architecture, its precise edges, clear autonomy and function; a kind of artificial island submerged in a sea of

connections³. The issues put forward by Insolera about consolidated typologies, belong to a well known historical process, whereby between the conflict nature-building construction, the strength of the natural ecosystem is always dominated by specific technologies and consolidated morphologies elaborated by men. The impetus of nature has been controlled and adapted to human needs for centuries thanks to technological innovations that belong to the artificial environment.

What has been discussed so far brings us to reconsider the totality of Berat's shape, composed by a compact mass of buildings sharing similar architectural characteristics and expressing the ability to be in harmony with the surrounding topography. A first attempt to define design tools aimed at reclaiming the river landscape, resulted in the identification of three fundamental operations: identification, selection and regeneration of natural as well as artificial urban islands. Such operations are aimed at intervening in a consolidated urban context, improving the connection between the Osumi River and Berat's city center.

1 / One of the main objectives defined by the tender, was to explore the capacity of the Osumi island to be resilient to the Osumi river's constant change in water level and the high risk of overflow. For more information see: <http://competitions.planifikimi.gov.al/beratisland/>

2 / Translated from the Italian text "Vengono proposti ambienti precisi, definiti, conclusi e conclusive: ambienti che riflettono il perfezionamento di un mondo, la razionalizzazione di un mondo, la sua codificazione e trasmissione" (ITALO, 2010, p. 7)

3 / It is important to underline the importance of this issue treated by Insolera especially considering that, years later, in the 1977 Oswald Mathias Ungers and Rem Koolhaas wrote the famous manifesto for the city of Berlin: "The City in the City" (UNGERS, KOOLHAAS, REIMANN, KOLLHOFF, & OVASKA, 2013). Certainly the two cases are different in terms of content, but it fits almost perfectly with the Berat Island case in reference to the idea of using operative morphologies, selected in the natural environment, to deal with the fragility of cities. It must be added that Insolera didn't explicitly mention the idea of 'Island' in terms of pure operative morphology but, as it frequently happens in architecture, specific words can activate principles and define clear pictures that can be applied to a different contexts.

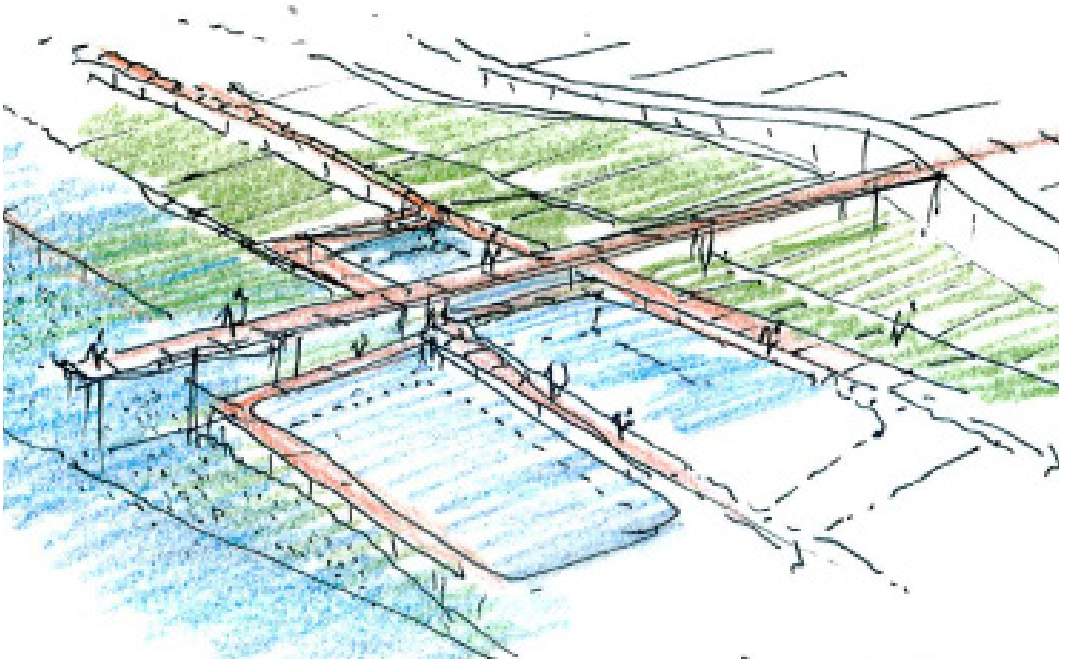


Fig4 / Sketch on the riparian river bank with natural pools and transversal city connections
source / the author

Observing the city of Berat from above, it looks as if the river excavates and wraps the constructive mass, separating parts of it and revealing its fragility on the river's edges, as well as in the urban and natural islands. All the above mentioned conditions perfectly describe the main characteristic of Berat's historical center, composed by a fragile edge and a more compact island. These are essential conditions to determine a new relationship between the intemperance of the Osumi river and the city it interacts with.

The Berat competition became emblematic, especially considering the objectives defined by the tender⁴: to connect Osumi Island to Berat's city Network, addressing also the delicate issue of the Osumi river flooding risk. Within the contact of this essay, I will not expand upon aspects concerning the issue of Osumi river resilience, because in order for it to be an exhaustive account, it would require taking into consideration multiple complex factors - we would have to analyze the river's geographical origins, something which requires specific expertise. Based on the previous considerations, the essay will concentrate on small scale interventions and design approaches that allow for the river edge to be reinforced while the city is extended. In my opinion what is more relevant for our investigation, is to underline the possibility of the river to become an organic part of the city. In order to understand the importance of the river as part of the city we need to focalize our attention exactly on the moment when the river transfers

its natural strength to the city and vice versa. The edge crated by the river is an unpredictable sign, which changes its appearance every time the water level of the river shifts. This sign, on both river banks, expands or contracts following the constant changes in the river energy. Based on the above observations, the river edges - especially the ones closer to the urban settlements - became the object of design actions: Architecture between the consolidate city and the fragile river edges. In this framework, and while searching for the relationship between city and river, the conceptual limits crated by Osumi river suggest a double approach: from one side the fragile edges seen as components for the elaboration of design tools; from the other, the idea of a totally new concept of 'river edge' within the water landscape of Berat. Both interpretations become active design exercises which attempt to operate in a new space, a blurred spatial interval, between Berat and its river.

To intervene in a such delicate field, requires the acknowledgement of the river's weaknesses, and the conversion of the latter into focal points of the design investigation. In other words, the goal launched by the design competition tender - to promote a new accessibility to the river and the Osumi island - needs to be linked to the unconventional activities of the river also in terms of nature and energy.

Therefore the new river edge must be transformed into a dynamic system which respects the connectivity with

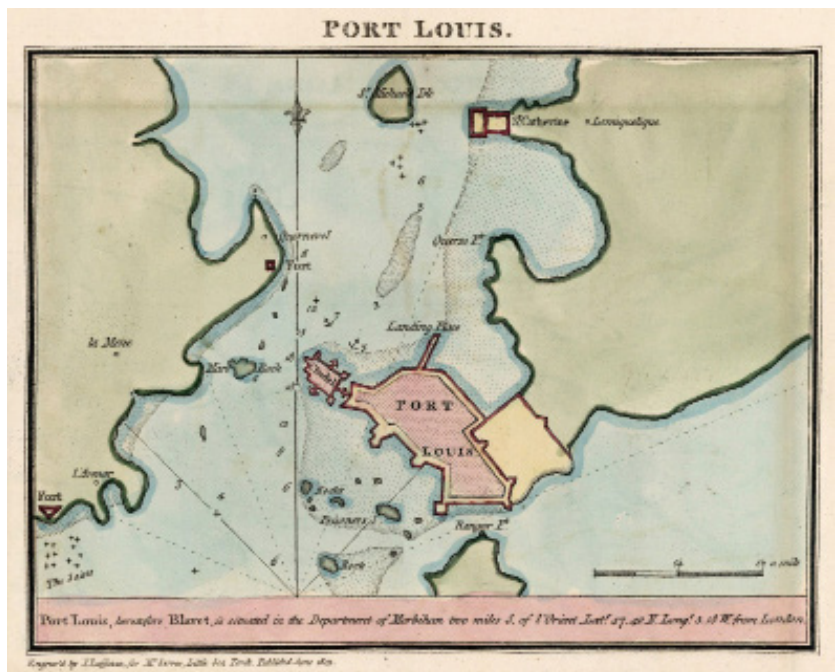


Fig5 / An Image from the book "Little Sea Torch"; by Serres John Thomas
 source / davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet

the city, while guaranteeing flexibility and responding to the different water levels. Such kind of flexibility needs to be aligned also with the objective of preserving the River's biodiversity and its structural soundness. In order to give a possible suggestion on how to operate in such a relevant site, the idea is to try to emphasize, once again, the connectivity between the 'natural' and the 'artificial'. The line formed by the river – seen as a separation element from the consolidated urban area of Berat – is considered as an edge which holds the potential to mediate and compensate mutations, given that we introduce enough flexibility to dampen its variations. In practical terms, the suggestion is to devise an artificial edge able to change and adapt to the different states of the river (fig.3-4).

The topic of the fragile edge became an opportunity to add to the existing river edge a new pedestrian infrastructure. The new infrastructure responds to access and connectivity needs of the city and links the artificial island with the existing natural one, while preserving and regenerating the existing riparian vegetation. This new path is characterized by a combination of factors that underline, without restraining, the real nature of the Osumi river. The beauty of the artificial line suggests new ways to use the fragile river edge. In most of the cases such operation is merged so harmoniously with the concept of

river landscape, that even when the river water level rises, the proposed path can be temporarily erased by the river without losing its original purpose: to guarantee mobility along the river during the other seasons. This infrastructure is meant to absorb the natural character of the river, to live in harmony with the existing historical city and, at the same time, to be welcomed and absorbed by the surrounding landscape, without compromising the image of the traditional city.

Another characterizing aspect of the above mentioned investigation consists in the importance of 'drawings' as tools to generate ideas in landscape architecture. The identification of new morphologies in the natural landscape becomes a fundamental operation to guarantee an organic coexistence between nature and artifice. In this case the importance of drawings, seen as an act of mediation between the realm of the natural and artificial, was most evident when it helped to identify and underline new landscape characteristics. Before being materialized in an artificial intervention, the concept of water landscape in the Berat Island proposal, must be understood as fragile edges and islands shaped by a natural energy. Following this principle and searching for new operative morphologies, the attention falls on some old maps, drawn with the scope of guiding sailors. It's interesting to notice how shifting the observer's point of view and thanks to the

4 / From the official tender: "The competition area is both a target and a test site at the same time. It is a small island in a relatively small historic city in Albania, the city center of which is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites" (<http://competitions.planifikimi.gov.al/beratisland/>).

peculiar characteristic of mute drawings, the land domain and the water domain acquire interchangeable meanings. The drawings by Serres John Thomas in his book "Little Sea Torch" (SERRES 1801) are an extraordinary schematization of the coastal landscape: a continuous line separating land and sea and surrounding the main harbors. It is an edge that borders a mute scenario which belongs to the land, but has the capacity to orient sailors during their trips on the open sea (fig.5).

'Islands' and 'fragile edges' become architectural objects when drawings are able to become operative shapes in the landscape. The dynamic edges of the Osumi river suggest multiple ways to reconnect the city with its natural surroundings. The artificial signs proposed by the competition entry projects reverse the role of the river in the city: people can finally rediscover the missing links between Berat's permanent architecture and the continuous mutations of the Osumi river.

In conclusion, this publication wishes to emphasize the importance of the water related topics in Albania, suggesting useful tools to operate on its waterscapes. But, most importantly, the following pages wish to open new debates on the concept of harmonious coexistence between architecture and natural environment (fig.6).

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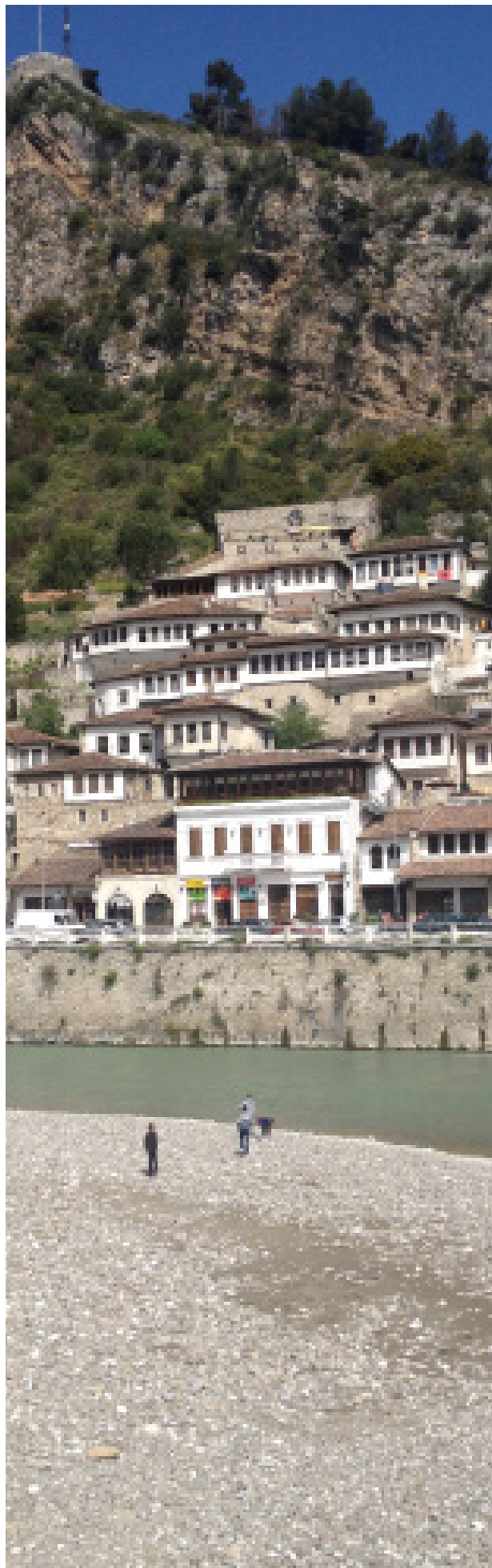
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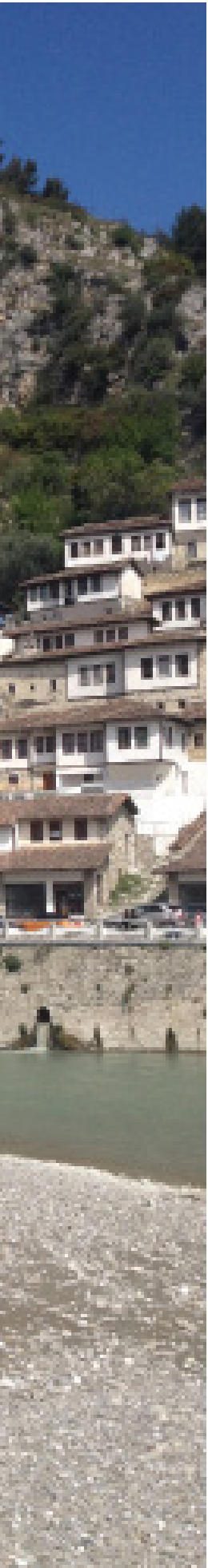
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*Fig6 / View from the Osumi river vs a view from Berat Historical center
source / Metropolis, 3ti lab and dsb landscape office report.*