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Post- Pandemic digital space integration in Lezha

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Abstract-*This article aims to evaluate the potential for digital space integration in the Lezha region by taking into account Albanian urban planning practice and some Western experiences in the problematic context of the post-pandemic period as well. The digital hybridization of space is a key component of European spatial planning and is one possible way to deal with the criticalities raised by the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic has deeply changed the European approach to spatial planning, highlighting the necessity to rethink mobility systems, public spaces and the relationship between space and health. The paper proposes to adopt a context-based and small-scale approach to maximize the positive effects of the digitalization of some spaces related to agritourism, mobility and environmental conservation. This approach would allow a regional way to the digitalization of space connected with the local culture and in dialogue with the informal capacities of the territory.*

Keywords: Planning, Post-pandemic, Digital space, Lezha, Methodological approach

Introduction- The theoretical and practical context of spatial planning in Albania is extremely complex. Indeed, the relationship between social, political and administrative levels has been marked by a non-linear history ever since the dictatorial regime collapsed (Aliaj, Perna 2021). The complexity of these processes influences also the spatial planning strategies. From a methodological point of view, we have at the same time a tendency to pursue the Europeanization of planning philosophy and the awareness that «Emulation of spatial planning system of more developed countries it is not a solution, in fact that is a facade which can create other problems in future» (Janku, Allkja, Aliaj 2017). Moreover, the Albanian territory is characterised by a deep divide between the larger cities – especially Tirana – and the rest of the country, where the population is scattered in small settlements. These settlements, often informal, characterize both the peripheral areas of larger towns and the rural areas and certainly constitute an issue but also an opportunity from a planning perspective (Kacani 2017). This pattern is present also in the Lezha region. The municipality of Lezha consists of two main towns – Lezha and Shenjin– and 65 villages. Both The region and the municipality of Lezha have a rich cultural and natural heritage. Indeed, the city of Lezha is regarded as a centre of cultural attraction deeply connected to the Albanian identity and the city of Shenjin is one of the most popular destinations for seasonal tourism in summer. Furthermore, the Lezha region, which lies between Tirana and Shkodra, is crucial for the connection between the northern border and the capital. These are among the most important reasons why the spatial planning of this region is so pivotal for the Albanian development.

Dealing with the context

The Albania 2030 Manifesto distinguishes two main approaches to spatial planning: on the one hand, a hard approach dealing with large scale and regional or national level of governance, on the other hand,

a "fuzzy" more flexible and task-specific approach (Janku, Allkja, Aliaj 2017). This difference is particularly relevant also when it comes to digital space planning. Indeed, nowadays spatial planning needs to consider that we live in an increasingly hybrid environment in which technology has changed as much the materiality of our experience as our ability to interpret it (Floridi 2014, 2020). This transformation has given rise to many debates in architecture and urban planning, defining new aesthetic and compositional standards (Carpo 2017, Curasano 2017), bringing out the smart city paradigm (Harrison et. Al 2010, Shelton, Zook, Wiig 2015) and opening up fundamental questions for the future regarding the relationship between urban space and artificial intelligence (Batty 2018, Cugurullo 2021, Bratton 2021). Moreover, the impact of the digital revolution on spatial planning nowadays has to be connected with the issues raised in spatial planning by the COVID-19 crisis: re-shaping streets and public space, re-thinking urban space in a more local way, engaging people in a more resilient and sustainable way of life and accelerating circular economy (Neuman, Chelleri, Schuetze 2021, Afrin, Chowdury, Rahaman, 2021). Indeed, Covid-19 has challenged some established trends in spatial planning by bringing out new needs and risks. It is in this problematic context that a mode of digital space integration needs to be shaped, addressing the specific needs of the Lezha region and trying to avoid the mistakes that have been made elsewhere in the implementation of digital technologies. Indeed, the digital integration of space in western countries, especially with reference to the urban dimension, has come under severe criticism in recent years for an excessively top-down approach, a lack of attention to the peculiarities of places, modest community involvement, and an essentially technocentric approach (Greenfield 2013; Trencher 2019).

In the regional context of Lezha, the digital integration of space could be relevant at least in three ways: agritourism, sustainable mobility and monitoring environmental issues. First of all, a strong agritourism proposal is being developed. This proposal is based on the presence of small farms capable of attracting both national and international tourism. The coordination of this Bottom-up network of small business could be made more efficient and visible through a digital integration of space. Moreover, increasing sustainable mobility is surely an objective for the region. This will be pivotal in the necessary perspective of a traffic reduction – increasing the liveability of spaces and decreasing pollution – to intensify tourist attractiveness and the possibility of healthy mobility for citizens. Finally, Lezha region has some criticalities connected to pollution and climate change. The main issues are polluted water and coast erosion (WDF 2021). Also, in this context the implementation of a network of sensors for the monitoring of water pollution and costal erosion levels could be extremely beneficial.

Perspective: Seeds of digital integration of the space

Certainly, digital spatial integration is an opportunity for regional development, promotion and conservation for Lezha: tourism, mobility and nature preservation can certainly be the focal points of this intervention. However, reflecting on the approach and ethical framework through which this integration is to be implemented seems equally crucial. Indeed, the applications of technology, even the most sophisticated, present us with human and ethical choices that inform the outcome. As mentioned above, there is an awareness in Albania that following the model of more developed countries uncritically cannot be a solution. Moreover, the amount of informal settlements present in the Lezha region can also be interpreted as a way of land appropriation by the population in which a potential for creativity and adherence of planned solutions to the concrete needs of the communities is enshrined. In analyses of the digital integration of space in more developed countries precisely creativity and the ability to dialogue with communities have been two key themes of critique. In fact, according to Richard Sennett, an overly standardized implementation of technology can lead to a lowering of the creative potential of citizenship by proposing an oversimplified relationship between citizen, infrastructure and services (Sennett 2018). Moreover, Shannon Mattern points out how conceiving space exclusively according to a technological rationality leads to a neglect of the practices of knowledge and appropriation that that territory has expressed in its tradition and history (Mattern 2021). These two examples warn against the risk of impoverishing a space instead of enriching it through digital integration. The alternative between land depletion and land enrichment is not only a merely technological decision, but also concerns the ethical dimension and the approach through which the technology will be implemented. In conclusion, in order to avoid risks and mistakes already made at other times and in other places, it should be understood how a major part of the success of a digital integration of space in the Lezha region will depend on the ability of planners to recognize and value what this region has spontaneously produced and the courage not to eliminate these practices of life and knowledge in favour of blind technological development.

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