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**Title: Revisiting Durrës, a critical analysis on the
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Abstract

Durrës, a seacoast city with an uninterrupted urban life and a history spanning several millennia, has seen the influence of numerous civilizations, from the Illyrians, Greeks and Romans to the Byzantines, Venetians and Ottomans, embodying and displaying a rich inventory of archaeological, cultural and architectural heritage.

Its consistent strategic importance has continuously attracted urban development often negatively impacting layers of history and unfortunately erasing in many cases significant tangible archaeological and architectural testimonies from different periods. It is worth noting that the historic layers of 20th century including neoclassical, premodern and communist architecture is one of the layers that is mostly unstudied and generally underrated. Triggered by the fact that the underground of Durrës was one of the three first Albanian urban ensembles designated as “Museum City” since 1961 and that there was a specific regulation drawn for the protection of the historic centre since 1986, the question remains: what constitutes now the historic centre of Durrës?

In attempting to respond to this question, this paper examines the city’s morphological evolution in both urban and architectural scale, aiming to define what can now be defined as the historic core of the city. The study adopts the Historic Urban Landscape approach, promoting a holistic understanding of the heritage urban layers and their significance.

Keywords: *Archaeological Heritage / Durrës Historic Centre / Historic Urban Landscape / Urban Morphology*

Introduction

Durrës is an Adriatic seacoast city destined to be a gateway between east and west. From a physical-geographical standpoint, Durrës is situated in the western lowlands, on a flat alluvial plain between the Erzeni and the Ishmi rivers, and from the inside, it is surrounded by a hill slope. Most of the territory is a plain shaped by the reclaim of the Durrës swamp in the last century¹. Rich in both water and fertile lands, the territory was considered as very favorable for settling since antiquity. With a rich and uninterrupted urban history spanning several millennia, Durrës has been the crossroad of numerous civilizations, from the Illyrians, Greeks and Romans to the Byzantines, Slavs, Normans, Venetians, Ottomans and Europeans, embodying and displaying a rich inventory of archaeological, cultural and architectural heritage. Starting from its first official designation in 1961 as a “Museum City” it is considered as one of the most significant protected historic, cultural and archaeological heritage sites in Albania.

Its consistent strategic importance has continuously attracted urban development often negatively impacting layers of history and unfortunately erasing in many cases significant tangible archaeological and architectural testimonies coming from different historic periods. Thus, in the last 25 years, the historic urban landscape has been deeply modified and transformed due to the construction of highrise buildings which have negatively impacted both archaeology, and historic core as well as the vistas from the hills of the city to the sea and vice-versa, and visual corridors in / from

its fortification walls.

The “Old part and the underground of Durrës” was one of the four first Albanian urban ensembles designated as “Museum City” in 1961 and that there was a specific regulation drawn for the protection of the Historic Centre since 1986. Triggered by this fact the questions raised by this study are: “Can we talk today about a historic centre in Durrës”? If “Yes” - What constitutes now the historic centre of Durrës?

This paper’s discussion focuses on the fact that with time the historic urban and architectural features of the living built environment above the ground have been underrated and undervalued. Due to this fact their reference in the designation documents has diminished through the years, favoring more the archaeological values which are in large part destroyed by uncontrolled high rise developments but also in large part still unearthed and unknown.

The study aims to promote a holistic understanding of the heritage urban layers and their significance. In order to display this holistic view of the historic urban landscape of Durrës, it firstly analyses all the historic layers of the city referring to main historic periods that have left their mark in the city. It further lists different legal documents that starting from 1961 have aimed the protection and preservation of the historic urban and archaeological values highlighting the fact that the term “historic centre” is not mentioned in the most recent designation documents. Lastly it examines the city’s morphological evolution in both urban and architectural scale, aiming to define what can now be defined as the historic urban core of the city.

Historic background of the development phases of Durrës

Protourban and Urban

The territory of Durrës is believed to have been inhabited since the Paleolithic². Casual archaeological findings such as work tools, jewellery etc. support this. However little evidence is yet found related to exact location of settlements from this period and the later ones Bronze and Iron Age (IX-VIII centuries BC). In many sources, the establishment of the city is referred as linked with the establishment of a greek colony in the 7th century BCE, however the preexistence of local settlements (Illyrian) is also mentioned and proven by archaeological evidence and ancient written sources³. The establishment of a greek colony mentioned in ancient sources as Epidamnos or Dyrrachion dates back to the 7th century BC, evidence of the intensification of the connections between the Greeks and the Illyrians of the Taulants tribe, who lived in this region⁴. In fact this cooperation resulted in a significant territorial expansion and economic development of the settlement. Among many motives leading to the establishment of Epidamnos / Dyrrachion as a greek colony, the most important ones were the need to control the trade routes to the Northern Adriatic, the inner territorial routes through the Illyria as well as the need to control the maritime intensive trade routes between Apulia and the Illyrian coast

Roman

Political and cultural influences that took place during the 4th and 3rd centuries BC in Epidamnos/Dyrrachion, aimed at raising its potential and domination in the Adriatic area. These influences are felt from all four sides: respectively from the two founding cities, Corinth and Korçyra, the Illyrian kingdom, the cultural influence of the Macedonian kingdom and from the approach of the Roman power to the Adriatic. At the end of the 3rd century BC, as a response to the call for

¹Theodoulidis N et al. 2022

²Based on Hidri H and Hidri S. (2014), the earliest evidences date back to the Eneolithic (2500 – 2000 BCE), continuing during the Bronze age (2100 – 1200 BCE) and intensifying after 1200 BCE during the Iron age having the highest peak during VI-V BCE.

³Hidri, H., Hidri, S (2014)

⁴Ancient sources (Strabo, Livy, Appian, Pausanias; Stephen of Byzantium) attribute two names to this city: Epidamnos and Dyrrachion and explain several mythological legends for this ambiguity: Archaeologists and historians still argue on the meaning of the existence of two names. Santoro (2004) supports the theory that one of the names refers to three pre-colonial Illyrian center located on the hill (so far it has not been found yet) and the other name to the Greek colony.

help of the locals, Dyrrachion became a military base of the Roman army during military operations against Queen Teuta's fleet⁵.

Hidri (2014) highlights that what the Roman Durrachium inherited from the Illyrian and Hellenistic Durrachium, was a city constructed according to the Hypodamus grid system. However a new urban system that highlighted the formation of insulae in line with the topography of the territory was applied during the Roman period. According to (Kacani, 2023) the main routes of the Roman Castrum respectively *Cardo*, coincides with today's "Aleksandër Goga" street, and *Decumano* coincides with today's "Adria" street.

Citing the works of the ancient Latin writers⁶, Santoro (2004), notes that they speak of a cosmopolitan city, commercial, powerful, attractive and active in the ports of the Mediterranean. The construction of the Egnatia road connecting Dyrrachium with Thessaloniki and the latter with Constantinople, triggered the further flourishing and economic development of the city. The road that connected Rome to the East was restored under the rule of the emperor Trajan. During this period, magnificent public buildings and structures such as the aqueduct, the amphitheater, the public baths and the library, which has not yet been discovered, were built. The Roman city was surrounded by walls, but in fact they had more of a symbolic role than a protective one.

Byzantine

During the 7th century Dyrrachion was a very important Byzantine fortress in the Balkans. Durrës particularly flourished during the reign of emperors Anastas I and Justinian. It should be noted that the today's fortification walls were constructed in bricks and thick layers of mortar are attributed to Emperor Anastas I (491-518), whose origin was from the city of Durrës. The fortifications of the time of Anastas I surrounded an area of about 120 ha reinforced by polygonal towers. During the 7th-12th centuries Durrës remained a major episcopal center; during this period the diocese of the city was very large and its bishops had a great influence. In the Byzantine chronicles of the 8th-9th centuries the region of Durres is mentioned as one of the largest and most important regions of the Adriatic coast, as the main base of the Byzantine military fleet and the central place of the commander of this fleet. During the VII and VIII centuries the city had direct contacts with Constantinople and Thessaloniki, but also with other important Byzantine cities. Until the end of the 10th century Durrës remained an important episcopal center. During the years 813-826, a monastery was also built in the city. Kacani 2023 notes that during this period the city is monocentric, with the administrative, religious and commercial in the center. Although following the same morphological pattern of the ancient settlement, the orthogonal system of the Roman Empire, with the demographic growth and the alterations, this infrastructure was rather altered, but traces remained.

The excavations led by Santoro during 2001-2002 have brought to light walls from the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods. Fig.1 below shows the areas with concentration of archaeological findings from the different historic periods.

Venetian and Ottoman

During 1272-1285, Charles I of Anjou created the Monarchy of Arbëria with its center in Durrës and he called himself King of Albania (*Regnum Albaniae*), another testimony of the significance of the city. In the following centuries it was the Venetians who replaced the Angevins as the dominants of the city until 1502 when the city was conquered by the Ottomans. The Venetians and

⁵Santoro S. (2004)

⁶Santoro 2004 mentions Plauto in the comedy *Manakmi v. 258-264 Catulomus 36,15*, Santoro 2004. She also mentions other writers confirming the attractiveness of Durrachium such as Cicero and Epistula.

⁷Santoro S. (2004)

⁸Hidri et al (2014), pp.335-336

⁹Hidri et al (2014) pp.338 notes that the author of the urban plan was Luigi Luiggi and the implementation was undertaken by Mazzorana Association under the direction of General Tito Consigli.

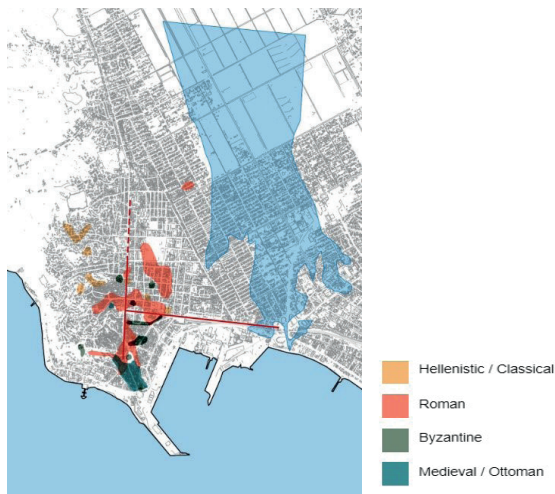


Fig. 1/ Map of Durrës showing areas with concentrations of archaeological findings based on respective historic periods, data source from the ARS Progetti S.P.A (2022), drawing from Buka I, 2024

Ottomans partially rebuilt the Byzantine fortification walls and the citadel in the center of the city. Following the Ottoman occupation, the economic relations with the rest of the Mediterranean were interrupted and as a result, the city lost its commercial importance. During the Ottoman rule, the inhabited settlement shrank becoming very limited in area and the number of inhabitants significantly diminished compared to the previous Roman and Byzantine periods⁷. It was during the 17th century that the city started slowly to regain its role as a commercial centre⁸.

Early 20th century

In 1923 Durrës numbered 4,785 inhabitants, a number which increased drastically in a period of 15 years (1938) when it numbered 10,506 inhabitants. This constituted a proof of the economic development experienced by the city in the early 20th century. The port of Durrës regained its role as a main port enabling and fostering the economic relations between Albania and the Europe Works for the enlargement of the port and the drying of the swamp were implemented during 1927-1929⁹.

During the 1920-1930 Durrës started to gain the look of the well -organized cities due to several urban planning studies and projects. The urban development plan of the city as designed in 1926 and its implementation was completed in 1936¹⁰. Among many works and constructions also the “Commercial Street” has been enlarged and revitalized with constructions of 2-3 floor buildings having shops at ground floor that today returned as pedestrian area and named as “Epidamn boulevard”, constitutes as one of the remaining ensembles related to this period.

Natural disasters and the city layers

Durrës and the surrounding region were hit by strong earthquakes ($M > 6.0$), in the past. The ancient city of Durrës (Dyrrachium) has been nearly destroyed by several devastating historical earthquakes in 58 BC, 334 AD, 346 AD, 506 AD 521, 1273, 1870, and 1926, because of which in several cases the abandonment of Durrës is also recorded¹¹.

¹⁰Theodoulidis N et al. 2022

¹¹Santoro S. 2008 p.10

¹²(source Buka I, Plyku Demaj M., 2024)

¹³Decision of Council of Ministers No.172, dt. 02.06.1961 “On the Proclamation of Museum Cities”

¹⁴Buka I.,Plyku Demaj M. (2024)

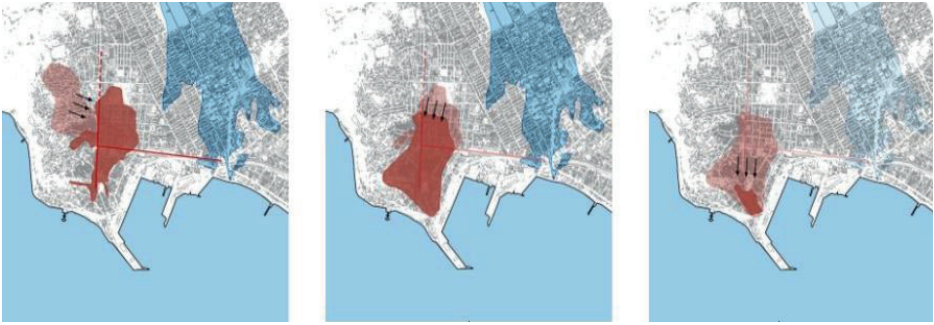


Fig. 2/ Diagrams showing the tendency of settlement gravitational zones based on archaeological findings (from left to right (1) showing the transition from Hellenistic to Roman settlement, (2) showing the Roman-Byzantine gravitational zones, (3) showing shrinking of the city during Ottoman period. Data source from the ARS Progetti S.P.A (2022), and Kacani 2023, interpretation and graphic representation from Buka I, 2024

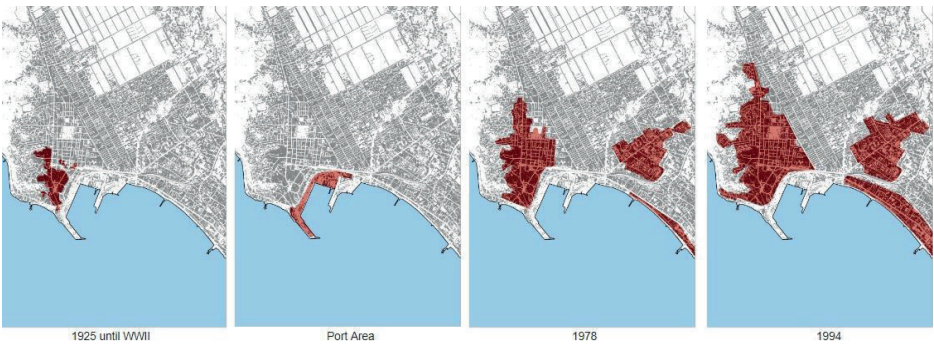


Fig. 3/ Diagrams showing the urban sprawl during 1925 - 1994. Data source from the ARS Progetti S.P.A (2022), and Kacani 2023, graphic representation from Buka I, 2024

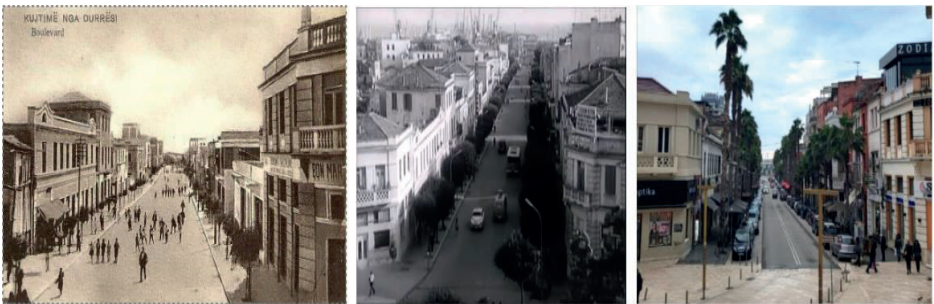


Fig. 4/ Epidamn boulevard during 1926, 1980 and today¹⁶

¹⁵ Monument: an instrument of memory. See: 2023, Jorge Otero-Pailos, *Historic Preservation Theory, An Anthology*. Reading: Françoise Choay, *Seven Propositions on the concept of authenticity and its use in historical practices*. (proposition 4, pg. 481)

¹⁶ (source Buka I, Plyku Demaj M., 2024)

¹⁷ Decision of Council of Ministers No.172, dt. 02.06.1961 "On the Proclamation of Museum Cities"

¹⁸ The regulation was developed only in 1989.

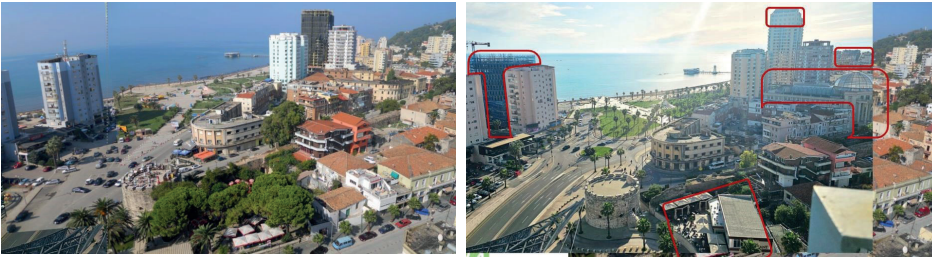


Fig. 5/ Vista of the city looking towards the venetian tower from one of the fortification towers highlighting in red the negative impacts of new high-rise buildings development (Angevin tower) photos dating back in 2010 (source Marsela Plyku Demaj) and in 2024 (source Iden Buka)

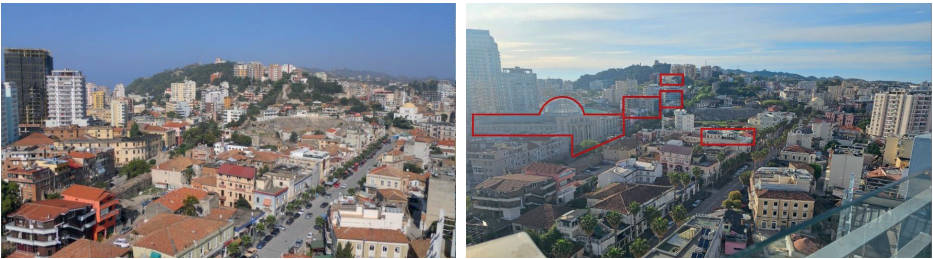


Fig. 6/ Vista of the city looking towards the Epidamn boulevard from one of the fortification towers highlighting in red the negative impacts of new high-rise buildings development (Angevin tower) photos dating back in 2010 (source Marsela Plyku Demaj) and in 2024 (source Iden Buka)

According to ancient sources Dyrrachium suffered serious damage in the earthquake of 346, known as the “Durrës earthquake”. That date marks a turning point and profound moment for the urban transformation of the city: its role strategic became increasingly accentuated in the framework of relations between East and West, forcing a its reconstruction with a notable change of urban structure, compared to what one can imagine of the previous urban form. This change does not appear to affect the road network or the fortification system, or the hydraulic and sewage system, which are substantially kept active or repurposed, but the hierarchy of spaces within the city¹². In 1926, due to a devastating earthquake. a large number of houses, mostly built in adobe, within the Castle district were damaged. This disastrous event paved the way for the ambitious and modern project for the construction of the city’s new boulevard¹³ and to several regeneration interventions. It was during this pre-war period that the boulevard displayed its strongest character, when planning mechanisms, architectural projects activity and the functional aspect acted together towards the forming of the “Commercial street” as an urban unit. Buka et al (2024) stress that the boulevard is one of the permanent urban elements in the city. It can be said that the current character of the boulevard derives from the atmosphere of the early 20th century.¹⁴

The peculiar case of Durrës as a cross road of many civilizations and also as a site experiencing numerous disasters made possible the creation of different layers of the city juxtaposed one over the other. Santoro (2004) notes that the Roman city today is located below the current center of today’s city, at a depth of about 3-5 m. Below the roman layer the earlier illyrian and hellenistic cultural layers are found and above it the byzantine, venetian and ottoman cultural layers are found.

¹⁹Regulation dt.17.04.1989 “On the protection, restoration and administration of the underground of the city of Durrës”On the approval of the regulation for the administration of archaeological zones A and B of the city of Durrës.

²⁰ Decision of Council of Ministers No.6, dt 7.1.2005 “On the approval of the archaeological zones within the urban settlements Shkodër, Lezhë, Krujë, Durrës, Elbasan, Berat, Vlorë, Sarandë”

²¹Decision of Council of Ministers No. 237, dt. 23.033. 2011 “On

Date and Legal document	Zoning / Authority / Allowed interventions
1961 ¹⁷	Museum-City - «The Old Part and the Underground of Durrës» University of Tirana is in charge for developing the regulation within 1962 ¹⁸ , noting that until the specific regulation is developed, the regulation to be followed is that of Berat and specific dispositions of Tirana University
1989 ¹⁹	Zone A – not dense 1-2 stories buildings. Higher buildings allowed in rare cases if no archaeological assets are priorly verified Zone B - Buffer zone - New constructions allowed after archaeological testing Zone C - in observation for possible findings in the underground / New construction allowed
2005 ²⁰	Same as the zoning of 1989
2011 ²¹	The Ministry of Culture with its subordinate institutions is the main authority / The National Council for Tangible Cultural Heritage has a key role / The local government is responsible for building permissions in Zone B Zone A - Integrated maintenance, restoration and conservation / road reconstruction and all works in the engineering network reconstruction/rebuilding of existing buildings without changes to the footprint / Light constructions – max. height of one story, for public information Zone B - More flexible, New construction is authorized after validation by the National Council for Tangible Cultural Heritage
2018 ²²	Zone A - integrated maintenance, restoration and conservation / road reconstruction and all works in the engineering network / reconstruction/rebuilding of existing buildings without changes to the footprint / Light constructions – max. height of one story, for public information Zone B - more flexible thus New construction is authorized after validation by the National Council for Tangible Cultural Heritage

Table 1 / Chronology of the designations of the historic and cultural values of the city

The preservation of this historic layering is often put in risk or even jeopardized in today's situation when the city is experiencing a rapid and uncontrolled development in terms of continuous constructions. Often the construction of new high-rise buildings has destroyed ancient underlying structures underground often equipped with floor mosaics.

Literature Review

While researching on the potential values as historic urban ensemble in Durrës, it is necessary to draw on the concepts of historic monument and authenticity. Choay 2023 argues against the generic use of the term 'heritage,' which can dilute the specific attributes that define a historic monument. Believing in an holistic approach, she considers that authenticity is crucial for maintaining the cultural significance of historic structures and areas, as it reflects their historical and artistic value. Also, she emphasizes the importance of recognizing the unique characteristics of cultural heritage. She posits that authentic monuments serve as vital markers of identity, contributing to the collective memory of societies.¹⁵

²²Decision of Council of Ministers No. 786, dt. 26.12.2018 on the approval of archaeological zones "A" and "B," of the city Durres and the plan for their preservation, protection, and administration.

²³ Decision of Council of Ministers No.831, dt 28.12.2023 "On the approval of the management plan for the archaeological zones A and B of the city of Durrës, 2023–2030"

²⁴The course is part of the program Executive Master on Restoration, Conservation and Valorization of Cultural Heritage, 3rd level program provided in a Joint program between Polis University and University of Ferrara.

Looking at the history of preservation Koolhaas 2004, reflects that the history of preservation in terms of what was being preserved, has gradually expanded from its start with ancient monuments, then religious buildings, etc. towards including more and more sociological substance considering that now everything we inhabit is potentially susceptible to preservation escalating to include entire landscapes. This reflection is particularly important to understand that preservation is not about quantity of preserved areas and buildings. It should be a qualitative assessment of values and authenticity to drive the preservation assessments.

Methodology

The methodology for this study on the historic layers of the city employs a dual-scale approach, focusing on both urban and architectural dimensions to delineate the city's historic core. At the urban scale, the analysis utilizes a comparative method by comparing urban vistas based on aerial photographs from 2007 with today's situation, allowing for an examination of changes in city layout and building volumes over time. Additionally, historical city plans from various periods are layered to identify spatial transformations, providing insights into the evolution of urban layout. At the architectural scale, the research draws on prior studies conducted by the authors, which document the characteristics of 20th-century architecture within the city. This framework not only highlights the architectural features that define the era but also situates them within the broader context of the city's historical narrative. By integrating these methodologies, the study aims to foster a holistic understanding of the heritage urban layers and their significance, contributing to a more nuanced appreciation of the city's morphological evolution.

Analysis and discussion

Based on the literature review and data on the archaeological findings from different historic periods an interpretation of the tendency of settlement gravitational zones is developed in Fig.2. Analysis shows that even though the findings from different periods are found in a larger territory, the area of the Ottoman citadel is the area where all urban layers can be found. Fig. 3 showing the urban sprawl of the city, is an evidence of the economic development but also an evidence of the development pressure felt in the archaeological areas and larger territory. The analysis developed above as well as previous research such as Buka et al (2024) and Çapeli et al (2016) show the existence of several permanent features in the urban layout and architectural characteristics featuring early 20th century interventions. Çapeli et al (2016) notes that the buildings built along the "Commercial Street" create a nice corridor street atmosphere. Some of these are in a Neo-Classical or Eclectic style (built before 1926), but others reflect a modern architecture clearly influenced by the principles of Italian rationalism (built after 1926). Figures 5 and 6 below show the negative impacts of continuous urban development on layers of history. Clearly the general vistas of the city reflect the introduction of high rise buildings in the city center and in the sea coast forming a wall between the sea and the historic urban neighborhoods. The chronology of the official designations of the archaeological and historic urban area of Durrës is presented in Table 1 below. It is clear that even though the protection of both the historic urban area and archaeological area were in focus of legal protections (see designations of 1961, 1989 up to 2005, in following 2011 and 2018 designations focus was given only to the archaeological zoning not mentioning the upper historic urban layer, which was limited only to occasional protection of buildings designating them as cultural monuments.

Results and recommendations

The most evident result shown by the research is that the layer of 20th-century architecture in Durrës including the layers before and after the World War II are understudied and underrated. Another important result, also previously noted by Buka et al. 2024, is that the vernacular, pre-modern and communist architecture somehow coexisted harmoniously together, still displaying their distinct character. In contrary, the post 90s and still continuing today did not succeed to define

a contemporary unifying character and in some cases has failed to understand and recognize the significance and relationships of elements from different periods in the historic neighborhoods.

The numerous written data and information on Durrës archaeological area being both scientific and informative mediatic, shows the high level of awareness that the professionals and citizens have with respect to the everyday loss of the rich archaeological heritage caused by the economic interest and speculations of investors in building high-rise buildings in archaeological designated zones. An overarching recommendation to this fact should be the transparency of decision making in issues related to urban development allowing the community engagement and empower which is crucial to protect and maintain their heritage.

Several recommendations can be drawn from this research that can inform decision making structures when dealing with projects at either urban or architectural level at historic urban areas.

Designation as historic urban ensemble and development of a Preservation Guide at urban and architectural level

A more holistic approach towards the preservation of cultural heritage values is recommended. The areas with a significant concentration of early 20th century (Epidamn Boulevard and the central piazza) buildings together with the single monuments dating from ancient, byzantine, venetian, ottoman etc. should be considered as potential areas to be designated as a historic urban ensemble. The early 20th century layer should be valued, studied and preserved. This proposal is also in line with the recommendations provided in the 2018 integrated management plan. The development of a preservation guide for this proposed ensemble is necessary in order to inform local government structures, professionals and local community on the understudied and under-rated layers of 20th-century architecture in Durrës, highlighting the importance of understanding and preserving these layers.

This guide should be an indicative and non-binding document aiming the preservation of the technical elements and architectural features of the buildings (roofing, facades geometry, etc.) and the urban identity of neighbourhoods. Its application must be made in accordance with the planning documents of higher importance, urban planning, and master plan.

The vistas / view points and historic visual relations should be taken into consideration prior to approval of further constructions that might further negatively impact on this visual corridors. As many researchers dealing with Durrës have stressed, a final recommendation that the authors of this research strongly support is that only careful urban planning, taking into account the existence of an “underground museum”, can contribute to the preservation of an incalculable and invaluable heritage.

Acknowledgements

This research was initiated by Iden Buka as an assignment on the historic overview of the urban settlement of Durrës in the framework of the course Theory of Restoration / on Archaeology class directed by Dr. Ols Lafa²⁴. Starting from this basis, the authors of this paper were inspired to further proceed on refining the research topic and developing and completing the analysis presented in this research.

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