

## Buildings' façades as catalysts for urban regeneration: mitigating the "touristic bypass effect" in Finiq's Small Towns.

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**Abstract-** *The municipality of Finiq, located in the Vlorë region, is an administrative division that encompasses multiple small towns and provides local government services such as public works, education, and health services. It is well known for its scenic landscapes and natural beauty, including forests, hills, and rivers which have the potential to drive economic growth through tourism. In addition, the proximity to Saranda and Greek regions could help to perceive tourism as a catalyst for economic regeneration. However, the lack of adequate infrastructure and appropriate services for both tourists and local communities does not facilitate this growth process in many villages of the municipality. Despite the various administrative and governmental efforts, orientated at aligning their intentions and actions with the goals of supranational European projects, they often require very long timelines to be realized. Furthermore, within the Finiq municipality, the most important cultural and archaeological attractions, often related to ancient times, are located in natural areas outside the existing urban center. This geographical location may cause a "bypass" effect where tourists do not visit the city center and negatively impact its economic growth. This phenomenon suggests that, on one hand, tourists will not be able to comprehend the authentic identity of local cultures, and on the other hand, small towns within the Finiq municipality may not realize optimal economic advantages from tourism. This process is also encouraged by the qualitative conditions of the towns, which are characterized by numerous buildings with a high degree of degradation and a constant presence of urban voids. Urban voids refer to abandoned or underutilized urban areas that do not meet the needs of local communities and represent a loss of economic, social, and environmental potential. These areas can be the result of factors such as economic recession, deindustrialization, or population migration to more prosperous areas. A key role in the regeneration of such areas does not only involve the design of adequate open urban spaces but also the redevelopment of buildings that face them and, in particular, their façades, which assume a public connotation in that context regardless of the building's use. The redevelopment of buildings' façades that face these urban voids can play a crucial role in urban regeneration by increasing urban quality, identity, and tourist flows. These façades represent architectural backdrops that, if adequately redeveloped, contribute to triggering regenerative processes by increasing urban quality, and on the other hand, enhance the towns' identity, strengthening, at the same time, the tourist flows. This contribution aims to investigate the role played by the façades in the urban regeneration process, showcasing international examples that emphasize it. The study explores how the implementation of successful international strategies in redeveloping existing facades on urban voids can help to overcome the challenges facing the Finiq municipality and drive economic growth through urban regeneration. The findings of this study will provide valuable insights into the role of buildings' façades redevelopment that faces existing urban voids in promoting sustainable urban regeneration.*

### Keywords:

Municipality of Finiq, Small Villages, Cultural Tourism, Urban Regeneration, Building's Façades.

**Introduction -** The Municipality of Finiq is located within the Vlore, southern Albania. Thanks to the natural beauty of its unspoiled landscapes, its proximity to some of the most frequented tourist destinations like Saranda and Greece, and the abundance of discovered archaeological sites, the Municipality of Finiq appears to be a territory with strong development potential. However, due to the socio-political events that have unfolded over the centuries, the Municipality of Finiq, along with other municipalities in southern Albania consisting of numerous small villages, faces numerous issues related to the current living conditions of its inhabitants, territorial isolation, and the slow and increasing loss of their identity values. According to the Fribourg Declaration on Cultural Rights, cultural identity is "the sum of all cultural references through which a person, alone or in community with others, defines or constitutes oneself, communicates and wishes to be recognized in one's dignity" (UNESCO and Fribourg Group, 2007, art. 2 paragraph b.). This concept assumes strategic importance for small villages in Albania, as they are elements that distinguish the landscape image of most areas of the Country, and they are integrated into the rural context of agricultural plots and limited land use, representing the cohesive energy of cultural identity (Lauria, 2022). Nevertheless, because of the migration of the younger and more dynamic residents and the ongoing global urbanization trend (UN-DESA, 2013) villages in the inner areas often fall into a state of gradual

marginalization (Duncan H. & Popp I., 2017). The causes of depopulation are consistently associated with economic downturns. Frequently, they are driven by the residents' aspirations to enhance their quality of life and seek better educational and employment prospects. Alternatively, devastating events such as earthquakes, floods, landslides, and others can severely disrupt family connections and isolate locations, prompting people to migrate (Teti, 2014).

When compared to the broader European context, living conditions in Albanian villages are frequently harsher than anywhere else. One significant factor contributing to this is the pervasive phenomenon of migration, which reemerged with vigorous intensity following the downfall of the Communist regime (GËDESHI & King, 2019). The emigration has significantly undermined the socio-economic fabric of the country, leading to a substantial weakening. Based on data from the World Bank, between 1990 and 2010, a staggering 1,438,300 individuals departed from Albania, accounting for approximately 45.4% of the resident population (World Bank, 2011). Other contributing factors that worsen the situation include the fragility of the social, entrepreneurial, and economic framework, the limited education levels among residents in rural areas, inadequate infrastructure and public services, the absence of organized forms of cooperation and solidarity, subordinate role of women, insufficient appreciation of the importance of preserving cultural heritage, and the challenge faced by inhabitants in taking

an "active" role in safeguarding their land from external threats (Lauria, 2022).

### Research question

Based on the geo-morphological and socio-economic context of the small villages located within the Municipality of Finiq and the current drivers of territorial revitalization, this study aims to clarify if the role of the requalification of existing façades, within an integrated urban regeneration process, is significant. The term requalification refers to the redeveloping of existing façade's components giving a new aesthetic and prestigious appearance to the building.

This approach is finalized not only for the enhancement of existing infrastructures and services but also for the well-being of the local inhabitants.

To understand the reason for this questioning, it could be important to observe the meaning of the term "façade". According to the Treccani dictionary, historically, the term "façade" has always referred to the closely interconnected or entirely indifferent relationship between the elevation of a building and its internal distribution system<sup>1</sup>. The facade, therefore, as a filtering element between the interior and exterior, has a dual role that translates into essential functionality aimed at protecting buildings from weather elements and equal importance in expressing architectural quality, linguistically contributing either positively or negatively to the urban decorum. Building on this definition of the facade, this contribution aims to provide an alternative perspective that highlights the crucial role of the facade in enhancing the sense of identity and belonging as a defining aspect of urban regeneration in small villages, such as those within the Municipality of Finiq. In fact, most of these villages are in a state of decay, semi-abandonment, or abandonment. To avoid losing their identity value, "it is necessary to prevent old buildings from being left abandoned, preserved and rendered sterile, stripped of their meaning and soul, emptied through a well-intentioned but superficial respect for the past, often resulting in a 'façade-oriented' attitude that leaves architectural 'carcasses' to ease one's conscience" (Maciocco, 2008).

### Methodology used

To provide an answer to the research question, the methodology applied is articulated in four phases:

1) The literature review process, is geared towards identifying the main drivers of economic and cultural development of Albanian small villages, particularly those belonging to the Municipality of Finiq;

2) Analysis of the "as is" situation of two small villages belonging to the Municipality of Finiq is carried out to illustrate, as examples, the main limitations hindering their development potential. Additionally, this study aims to highlight the tourist effect defined in this article as the "by-pass effect", caused by the geographical distance between the main cultural attraction and the urban center;

3) Identification of potential synergies that can trigger the process of urban regeneration.

4) Clarification of the role of facade requalification in urban revitalization processes through reference to international examples.

In particular, the first phase is based on a significant work of data collection, mainly through literature review processes, orientated to defining the current socio-economic and cultural development policies of the country and the small villages located within the Municipality of Finiq. The analysis of documents and literature is conducted through the search on the main reliable databases (such as Scopus, Researchgate, Google Scholar, etc.) as well as on official websites of the main international organizations involved in CH and small villages (UNESCO, etc.). Peculiar attention has been given to the in-depth analysis of the role of tourism and cultural tourism as drivers of the economic regeneration of the territory.

The second phase was developed to explicate the phenomenon, referred to in this article as the "touristic by-pass" effect, whereby the cultural tourism flow follows predetermined routes that lead from one archaeological site to another, passing quickly through - or only tangentially observing - the small villages of southern Albania due to their degradation. By way of example, two villages within the Municipality of Finiq, namely Finiq and Mesopotamia, were selected as reference points. The choice to analyze these realities was motivated not only by their representative characteristics of the "by-pass" effect but also by the author's firsthand observation experience during their participation in the 8th International Workshop, organized

by the Polis University of Tirana and held from January 9 to 21, 2023.

The third and fourth phases were developed based on the considerations elaborated in the previous two phases and respectively focus on the synergy existing among the main drivers of development in small urban villages, and delve into the role of facades within this regenerative process. To support the hypotheses presented in these phases, several international examples were provided. The selection of international reference projects was not made with the claim of direct applicability to the small villages of the Municipality of Finiq but rather focused on those international interventions that, while belonging to different socio-cultural and economic contexts, highlight the typical elements of an urban regeneration project aimed at enhancing the identity value of the places to be revitalized.

### Results

#### Development's drivers

The revitalization actions of a territory, including those of small villages within the Municipality of Finiq, are often interconnected with the policies related to the economic and cultural context in which they are situated. Considering the economic aspect, Albania's strategic location with two ports on the Adriatic and Ionian seas renders the country appealing for Foreign Direct Investment (Breitung, 2008). While the Western Balkan countries stand out as distinctive among developing and transitioning nations regarding investment, the main drivers of economic growth in the present time are the construction and service sectors (Brahimi, 2022). Nevertheless, the regeneration process in villages in the inner areas is not easy. Indeed, regeneration processes cannot solely rely on public investments, although they play a crucial role as catalysts. The active involvement and participation of inhabitants is a vital component. Many instances of community cooperatives and social enterprises in Italy and Europe exemplify this approach (Mori & Sforzi, 2018). Furthermore, the engagement of the inhabitants should encompass both the long-term residents and newcomers, as well as those who have emigrated.

In addition to economic and participatory aspects, thanks to the numerous archeological sites discovered in Albania, both Cultural Heritage and Cultural Tourism play a crucial role in this regeneration process. During the ESIA study conducted for TAP (Trans Adriatic Pipeline), more

than 150 cultural heritage sites and areas with considerable archaeological potential were discovered, along with significant intangible heritage sites (Trans Adriatic Pipeline, 2016).

Archaeological and heritage preservation practices in Albania are undergoing transformative and pioneering methods. The establishment of the communist government after World War II initiated the development of an archaeology and heritage system that received substantial funding and support until the late 1980s. This support aimed to provide scholarly evidence to support the nationalistic goals of the newly-formed state (Bejko, 2020). Legislative measures and protocols for research and heritage management were implemented and continuously enhanced, laying the groundwork for a novel experience within the heritage community (Papa, 1973). However, heritage is mainly material, monumental, and highly aesthetic; it is the backbone of national identity and is the almost intellectual property of academics and professionals such as archaeologists, historians, ethnologists, and conservation architects; and can be offered as a product to the general public and the tourism sector. Heritage occupies a special place in public debates in Albania, and the public's interest in heritage issues has grown in recent years (Bejko, 2020).

Closely linked to Cultural Heritage policies is the concept of Cultural Tourism. To understand this connection, it is important to describe how Tourism, through the various definitions received over the years, became a developer driver for the Country. For a considerable period, tourism in Albania thrived primarily due to enthusiasm. However, besides enthusiasm, the role of governance is pivotal in transforming tourism into a sustainable sector, warranting thorough research. Centralized policies, demographic movements, and limited income contributed to keeping domestic tourism at minimal levels, mostly limited to honeymoons or summer vacations. As a result of this isolation, between 1960 and 1990, Albania only attracted approximately 1.6% of all foreign tourists visiting the Balkan Peninsula (Humolli & Vishi, 2016).

Along with the downfall of the communist regime and the transition to a free market economy, Albania began to attract foreign tourists. Simultaneously, rising incomes and improved modes of transportation led to an expansion of domestic tourism, contributing to approximately 76% of the total number of tourists in 1993 (Humolli

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/facciata#:~:text=Il%20prospetto%20esterno%20di%20un,dei%20lati%20del%20suo%20perimetro.>

& Vishi, 2016).

In June 2019, after a sequence of unsuccessful or partially implemented draft strategies, the Albanian Government endorsed the "Strategy of Sustainable Tourism Development in Albania 2019-2023" (GoA, 2019). This marks the initial phase in sector management. The advancement of one of the key priority sectors is essential for the country's economic growth. The strategy sets forth a broad and ambitious vision, categorizing tourism into three types: coastal, natural, and thematic tourism. The primary objectives include establishing new centers of development, enhancing added value and impact, and improving the country's image while promoting local products (Ciro, 2019). Various definitions have been proposed for sustainable tourism, encompassing aspects of planning, environment, man-made heritage, ecology, social equity, participation, economic and social sustainability, and long-term perspectives (McCool, 2015). All these definitions highlight the multifaceted nature of sustainable tourism and its consideration of various dimensions such as planning, environmental preservation, cultural heritage, ecological balance, social justice, community engagement, economic viability, and long-term sustainability (Ciro, 2019). The advancement of tourism presents an opportunity to overcome barriers and obstacles while fostering cooperation among people. Albania, having been secluded for an extended period, utilizes tourism as a means to introduce foreigners to its culture and history, allowing them to gain knowledge and appreciation.

Cultural tourism has been a lucrative endeavor in Albania for an extended period, leveraging cultural monuments and their functions for profitability (Xhaja & Xhaja, 2013). Several cultural attractions possess exceptional quality and would likely attract a large number of visitors if they were effectively promoted among the target populations (Marku, 2014). Archaeology, heritage, and culture are consistently identified as prominent features of Albania in various studies conducted with visitors and the travel industry from foreign markets. Archaeological sites and artifacts provide evidence of the ancient settlements and development of our country. These sites and objects hold a particular allure for both local and foreign tourists. Within historical settlements, one can find notable basilicas, including the significant basilicas

of Butrint, Arapaj, Bylis, Finiq, and Durres, which offer captivating experiences for visitors (Bejko, 2020).

Nevertheless, there are a lot of factors that harm the progress of the Tourism sector in Albania, such as the difficult conditions of infrastructure, uncertainties in the legal framework, the backwardness of the country, the continuous problems of property, improper management of tourist centers, welcoming areas with inappropriate conditions, the memorandum of speedboats despite the security of trafficking also affect the traditional Tourism "sun and sand", global crisis, the dependence of Tourism on foreign capital, lack in touristic competition within the country, strong competition with neighboring countries and further ones, political insecurity that often threatens the country and region, etc (Caca, Ap. Ladias, & Polo, 2015). All those negative sides are reflected in the small villages of Albania, further exacerbating their already limited services and infrastructure. Consequently, these villages miss out on the potential revitalizing benefits, both economically and socially, that could be derived from optimizing tourist flows.

#### *The touristic "By-pass" effect*

Another factor that limits the urban regeneration of the small villages is the geographical location of the main archaeological sites and tourist attractions concerning the local urban core. These archaeological sites are often situated at a considerable distance from the urban context to which they belong. Consequently, a potential future improvement in infrastructure connecting the main tourist attractions could result in increased isolation for the small villages, as they might become mere transit points for reaching the archaeological sites rather than destinations for visitors to stay and explore.

This touristic "by-pass effect" is notable in several small towns located in the municipality of Finiq.

Among these, as an illustrative and non-exhaustive example, we analyze the case of two small villages, Finiq and Mesopotam.

Finiq is a small village characterized by the presence of a large Archaeological Park, which includes remains of city walls, a main road, a theater, and a series of public and residential buildings. This archaeological attraction is located atop a hill promontory, with the current urban center situated at its base, approximately 2 km away. The urban settlement stretches along a main

state road, "SH83," that runs through the entire village, connecting it to surrounding urban areas. Currently, the park is not accessible by public transportation, with the only bus stop located on the state road in the village center. The village center lacks services - except for a few ones such as a bar and the municipality - and its architectural condition is in a state of significant decay. In light of this situation, it could be inferred that, although the village of Finiq possesses strong tourism and infrastructure potential, the deteriorated architectural quality of the buildings and the absence of services prevent the sustained presence of tourist flows, thereby impeding both economic and social enrichment.

In the case of Mesopotam, on the other hand, the main tourist-cultural attraction is represented by the Church of the Monastery of St. Nicholas, located approximately 1.5 km from the village center. Unlike Finiq, where the state road runs through the city, in Mesopotam, the road "SH99" is adjacent to the small village, further accentuating the division between the cultural attraction and the urban core. Although the small village of Mesopotamia seems to provide more services for tourists compared to Finiq - including two restaurants, a guest house, and a petrol station - in terms of urban quality, it does not appear to differ significantly. The entrance to the town is characterized by dilapidated buildings, many of which have metal bars in place, almost as if awaiting future renovation or expansion.

In light of these reflections, it can be observed that while cultural tourism and infrastructure enhancement are determining factors for the economic growth of small villages within the municipality of Finiq, they alone are not sufficient to trigger sustainable urban regeneration processes. For these measures to have a lasting impact in the context at hand, they need to be supported by policies that focus on improving urban quality. Such policies not only enhance the lives of the inhabitants but also make the small villages more appealing to tourists. In addition to visiting well-known archaeological sites, tourists may be intrigued by immersing themselves in the current culture of these places.

#### *Potential triggers for urban regeneration and the role of the buildings' facades*

Within this process of improving urban quality, the interdependent relationship between the infrastructure axis to be enhanced, the redevelopment of buildings

- both public and private - that are located along it, and the revitalization of strategic interstitial spaces, currently resembling urban voids, proves to be of particular relevance. A representative example of such interplay in an international context is exemplified by the completion of the "High Line" in New York, designed by architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro. The entire elevated park, functioning as a green infrastructure, has become a catalyst for private investments and a transformative axis driving urban revitalization processes within a few years. The completion of the High Line was accompanied by an extensive real estate development plan in what was once a vast and partially abandoned railway complex—a unique opportunity for a large free area spanning over 10 hectares in the heart of Manhattan. This area is now rapidly transforming into a forest of skyscrapers and will house the new subway station on Line 7. Historically significant industrial structures, renovated and repurposed for new uses, now coexist with residential and office towers designed by renowned architects (Battigelli, 2016). In this regenerative equation of "infrastructure - building - urban void," the facades of buildings - whether new or redeveloped - play a subtle yet strategic role, becoming the sole constant in the relationship between infrastructure and building, and building and urban void. The facade, therefore, should not be understood solely as a boundary between interior and exterior or as a fundamental and superficially more representative component of the building envelope with its various energy performance capabilities.

The facade element, indeed, due to its compositional, typological, and contextual identity value, can create viewpoints from the interior to the exterior, to be the object of observation from specific infrastructural axes, or delimit open spaces such as squares and/or characterize those of lesser identity value. An international example that highlights this concept is represented by the urban regeneration project of the Bjørvika district in Oslo, designed by MVRDV from Rotterdam and the Norwegian firms DARK Architects and A-lab. The masterplan is located in an exceptional city setting, nestled between the vastness of the fjord and a prominent transportation hub, including the Central station and highways. The area slated for regeneration was composed of a former port and industrial land in the center of Oslo. The main goal of the project was to enhance both urban and architectural

diversity while ensuring spatial adaptability, leading to the development of a pedestrian-friendly zone at the core of Oslo. The site is partitioned into slender sections, creating what is famously referred to as the "Barcode." Each building has one facade facing the fjord and another facing the transport hub. The role of facades in this urban regeneration process has been crucial in reshaping the skyline of Oslo to the extent that their observation in elevation has given the name to the entire project, as it resembles the barcode commonly found on retail items.

Although the aforementioned international examples pertain to urban contexts significantly different from the small villages in the Municipality of Finiq, they underscore the importance of building facades in a regeneration process specific to urban settings, becoming a means to enhance their identity value.

In the case of existing buildings located in small villages, the role of facades in revitalizing local identity would be further emphasized through their renovation using traditional local construction techniques. A significant example of this can be found in the historic center of Gjirokastër, Albania, where an exceptionally high-quality architectural heritage, structures, and urban fabric are recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site (Carta & Lucchesi, 2019).

Furthermore, it can be observed that in line with the statements made in the first "Tourism Strategy 1993-2010" issued by the Minister of Tourism, which identified buildings in line with vernacular architecture as a potential tool for tourism development, renovated facades using ancient construction techniques could not only enhance the sense of belonging of small villages to their own culture and preservation of their construction values but also be regarded as an attractive element in increasing tourist flows. Therefore, they can be seen as a significant factor in the revitalization of the small villages in the municipality of Finiq.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The urban regeneration of small villages in southern Albania is undoubtedly a process that, in addition to requiring good temporal planning, necessitates intervention strategies that are not only focused on increasing the country's economic revenues but also act with respect to the cultural and identity values of the small villages.

To achieve this goal, it is crucial to develop intervention policies that do not merely

transform the abandoned small villages into mere tourist destinations but instead provide added value in improving the quality of life for the few remaining residents. In this regard, the construction sector plays a crucial role and represents the vital core of the small village inhabitants. However, to prevent the redevelopment of existing buildings from becoming a sterile and self-contained act, it needs to be interconnected with other elements of urban regeneration. This includes strengthening existing services and infrastructure, implementing policies for community engagement, and creating spaces where such activities can take place. Improving the quality of open urban spaces and those between key public buildings is also essential in this regard.

In this context, the role of redeveloping existing facades, although not resolving all the issues affecting the small villages within the Municipality of Finiq, assumes a nevertheless crucial role when contextualized and synergistically linked with other urban regeneration strategies. The renovation of existing facades, in fact, not only contributes positively to the building envelope in terms of energy performance - thus improving the internal comfort and quality of life for the remaining inhabitants in the small villages - but it could also restore their identity, provide quality scenic backdrops to open spaces, and become a magnet for tourist flow directed towards the most coveted archaeological destinations, encouraging them to delve into the history and culture of the small urban communities.

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