

Intersecting Landscapes: Finding New Spatial Visions for the Cross-Border Region of Prespa Lakes and the case of Pustec Municipality, Albania.

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Introduction

This Workshop is a research activity organized under the framework of the International "Double Degree" PhD by POLIS University (Tirana Albania) & Ferrara University (Italy), in the fields of Architecture and Urban Planning. This interdisciplinary workshop builds on the previous and ongoing research work undertaken under the Department of the Scientific Research within the Faculty of Research and Development, and the Observatory of the Mediterranean Basin (OMB) research unit), at POLIS University. The workshop focuses on the rehabilitation, preservation, transformation, and reinvention of the built environment on a regional, urban, and architectural scale. This workshop of the 39th PhD cycle, will focus on the Cross-Border Region of the Prespa Lakes and Pustec Municipality framing the latter as the intersection of infrastructural, environmental, cultural and habitation landscapes. Each year the research activity promoted by the workshop is aimed at a specific topic, which is articulated critically and speculatively by the PhD students individually, in order to develop their capacity for operating within a given planning context by developing theoretical tools, and by generating design processes and new research paths. The research initiative is organized in 3 moments throughout the first academic year.

A. *The 2 weeks annual Workshop in Tirana-Albania/Polis, after 2 preparatory weeks in Unife Ferrar Italy, which concludes with strategic drawings and concepts with regard to the selected site.*

B. *The annual research project after the workshop, where PhD researchers work independently on individual articles.*

C. *The summary of work via an annual publication/journal: OMB Journal of Polis/Unife.*

In the times we live ourselves, scientific research in the disciplines of architecture and urban planning has been shifting more and more towards the intersection of many other disciplines which are directly affected in the inhabited space and built environment. In fact, after the decline of the great "metanarratives" (Lyotard 1979), where the "great architectures of thought" that structured the state of knowledge were disintegrated, we are in the presence of a fragmentation and mixing of different "languages" and disciplines.

The interdisciplinary character on which the organization of this workshop is based seeks to address the problem of space by interweaving a series of interventions that are influenced by the different "languages" on which knowledge is raised in the postmodern period.

Pustec Municipality: local condition, problematics and potentials: The municipality of Pustec is part of the district of Korça and is located at the north-eastern end of the district. The municipality shares borders to the west with the municipalities of Po-gradec and Maliq, while on the northwest and east with the Republic of Northen Macedonia and on the south and southeast by Greece. The center of the municipality is the town of Pustec, which is located 25 km from the city of Korça.

The municipal administration is organized with 9 villages, which are: Pustec itself, Shulin, Leska, Zarashka, Cerje, Goricë e Madhe, Goricë e Vogël, Diellas, Gollomboc, which extend over a length of 45 km.

The territory of the municipality covers an area of 1363.8 ha. The population density is 94 inhabitants/km². The largest village in terms of area is the center of the municipality, Pustec; as well as the village of Gorica e Madhe. These villages together, represent 35% of the territory of the municipality.

Pustec Municipality:

Is the case study of this annual workshop, - and one of the newest municipalities of Albania dominated by the Northern Macedonian minority in Albania, and established in the 2015-th by the latest territorial-administrative reform. It has a strong rural and natural character and is not a much-known region, due to its geographic location. However, in the last years there has been an ever-growing interest in the region, thanks to the growing tourism from within and outside the national borders. Tourism is slowly but surely becoming the main local economy in addition to that of agriculture.

Pustec has very distinct characteristics and a high potential of development, due to the rich natural and cultural resources, the mix of ethnical population; and its strategic geographic location. Despite these potentials, there also exist several territorial, social, and environmental problems, related to isolation, shrinking, migration and emigration, and natural erosion.

The theme of the workshop is captured in two keywords:

- **Landscape** - which is probably the first thing that comes to mind, due to its beautiful nature and picturesque views, and
- **Intersection** - which derives from the position at the edge of Albania's border with Northern Macedonia and Greece (EU). In the spirit of intersection, we would like to expose in a transversal way the potentials and problematics of the study area.

In this workshop, we identify four landscapes:

1. Infrastructure: The accessibility of the whole region (from the Albanian side), happens through a singular access point that connects it via Korca Municipality (the regional center), which is the most important city of the region. The connection between the settlements also presents serious issues, such

as the amortization of the infrastructure as a whole and lack of potable water service. This results from a lack of decisive infrastructural interventions and upgrades over the years.

2. Nature: More than 97% of the territory of Pustec consists of uncontaminated nature. It unfolds like a Greek or Roman natural theatre where the base is the "National Park of Prespa" and the stage is Prespa Lake. Most of the settlements are positioned on the lakeside. The National Park hosts a large variety of flora and fauna, and so does the lake. The area is prone to natural erosion, being in a highly rainy region.

3. Culture: Pustec Municipality is home to the largest Northern Macedonian community in Albania, providing therefore a particular cultural mix through the centuries. Aside from the natural attractions, from the cultural heritage standpoint, we can mention the buildings of the old Pustec town hall on the shores of Lake Prespa, from the 13th and 14th centuries, as well as the island of Maligrad (natural monument); or Saint Mary's Church (cultural monument), etc. A peculiar characteristic of the area consists of several isolated churches carved in stone, positioned around the Prespa Lake, in Albania, Northern Macedonia and Greece. Several adjacent municipalities also host some of oldest archaeological sites and monuments in the region.

4. Dwelling: The municipality is sparsely populated in the 9 settlements that constitute it. There is aggressive emigration of the residents during the last 3 decades after 4-5 decades of self-isolation. The settlements are rural, and the population relies mainly on agriculture, fishing and farming. The agricultural territory, adjacent to the settlements results as fragmented, as the settlements themselves. These historical settlements provide an opportunity for the future development of the municipality.

As we can see, the issues and opportunities are vast, and of different kinds and scales. We would like to imagine Pustec municipality not as a confined territory, but as a point where different landscapes intersect, and which, in turn, potentially re-connect Pustec with the territorial tissue of Albania, Northern Macedonia and Greece. This issue will become more critical after the EU joining of the first two countries. We see Pustec as a point of convergence and territorial reference, capable of valorizing the potentials and mitigating the problematics. Starting from the issues of accessibility, infrastructure and fragmentation and the potentials of Pustec's nature, culture and dwelling, the aim is to propose a vision for the future development of the area: a contemporary and all-encompassing vision of development capable of putting Pustec on the map.

In order to achieve such a vision, the areas of inquiry of this workshop are sustainability, heritage, agriculture, and tourism. The convergence of all political-socio-economic factors will actualize itself in the modification of the territory through the development of strategies (via Territorial Planning), the integration of settlements (via Urban Planning), and spatial modifications and ad-hoc interventions (via Architecture and other disciplines).

Objectives:

The main objective of this international PhD workshop, since 2014, is to collect and frame multi-and inter-disciplinary know-hows in an architectural and urban/planning epistemological framework, to consolidate a group of researchers and professionals with a capacity to accept new complexities and challenges of resilience and future urban crises. In relation to the above transformations, potentials, and problematics, outlined in the introduction above, this research workshop aims to find and propose settlements that respond to these specific transformations/problematics and valorize the potentials for the envisioning of future sustainable development in the Albanian context. The aim of this workshop is to propose solutions and conceptual frameworks for the problems listed in the introduction. The main objective is to find strategic and spatial solutions that enable urban regeneration and future sustainable development. This objective encompasses three different proposals:

I) Proposals for regenerative strategies at the level of urban planning – where infrastructure, services and natural systems can be included;

II) Proposals at the urban level - for the Municipality of Pustec and for the settlements that surround it;

III) Proposals and specific projects - for each settlement/village taken in particular. Each of the groups will address its respective categories – those of Infrastructure, Nature, Culture and Dwelling in the three scales above: the territorial, urban and architectural scale.

Questions:

Given the lack of perspective visioning for an area with great potentials like Pustec, and the general direction of the global and local trends of develop-



*Fig 1 / Pustec View
source / author*



ments towards sustainability, heritage and tourism, the purpose of this project is to provide a vision for the future sustainable development, at the strategic and spatial level.

The workshop encourages to develop soft strategies of expansion and transformation of the settlements and acupunctural interventions. The main questions that this workshop tackles can be summarized as such:

Which is the urban and territorial character of Pustec, and which are its issues and problematics that need to be addressed?

In which way can we operate to develop new sustainable strategies for the transformation of the settlements and the future modification of the region, in respect to the rich environmental assets?

In what ways do these transformations and problematics intertwine with city-making in the Pustec municipality context and neighboring municipalities/countries?

In what ways will the society operate within urban/living environments in the future? What about houses, leisure activities, public space, mobility, and work environments?

What lessons will architects, planners and city experts draw on their role for city making, landscaping and generative local economic activities?

What about the impact for education and research in these professions? What about the new models of cities space and life?

Methodology:

From a methodological standpoint, this workshop proposes landscape as an instrument of urban and territorial reading and transformation. Parallel to the five rigid and separated systems of planning (nature, agriculture, water, infrastructure, urban), a new reading is required, which intersects these systems in four qualitatively different and transversal categories: Infrastructure, nature, culture, and dwelling. The research questions of this workshop positioned above relate to finding innovative strategies and urban and architectural answers that provide spatial solutions to urban problems generated precisely by the transformations/problematics, and the potentials of the future development listed above (paragraph 1). Specifically, the main research question of the project, which synthesizes the questions posited above, is: *How should we plan and design to provide a future sustainable development in a multi-scalar way?*

To answer the above question, the workshop is organized into several steps that are not necessarily sequential but may overlap with each other.

The first step - is to gather information at a theoretical level that is directly related to theoretical studies and innovative and sustainable practices. In parallel with this step, detailed analyses will be made at a territorial and urban level in the case of the Pustec

Municipality/Region, emphasizing the risks and dangers to which this Municipality is exposed.

The second step – is to process the data extracted above within the workshop. Beyond the analyses made in the first step, this workshop is expected to give specific proposals at a theoretical and practical level to answer the research question posited at the beginning of the paragraph. There will be four groups of researchers with members with expertise from different fields. Participants will focus on three scales: i) planning strategies in a territorial scale; ii) urban strategies in a city scale; iii) urban projects in an architectonic scale.

The third step – of this research is related to the detailed research for each of the scales mentioned above where each participant in the workshop is expected to develop a theoretical and practical contribution for proposing new strategies or spatial models in favor of the sustainable/resilient future development of the region.

The workshop is structured in a way that promotes the merger of different expertise to address the diverse aspects related to Pustec as a town/center and its municipal territory in general. The following steps will be used as a pragmatic approach to combine theoretical knowledge, physical environment and existing data: 1) – Introduction to the Area; 2) – Theoretical Lecture + Case studies; 3) – Site Visit and fieldwork; 4) in class work + Project discussion.

Expected Results

Regarding the objectives, research activities, and methodology, it is expected that from this workshop will emerge a series of concrete proposals:

- 1) for the case of Pustec Municipality;
 - 2) for the national and regional/cross-border and international contexts, that have a similar character.
- Each of the four groups that will deal with one of the categories of Infrastructure, nature, culture, and dwelling will propose concrete/specific scientific and graphic proposals on the sustainable/resilient future development of Pustec and the larger cross-border region, in a territorial, urban and architectural scale.

The results of the project are expected to be announced by participating researchers in various conferences and other research activities. They are expected to be published in conferences, congresses or other national and international research activities. The final product of this project will be dedicated to the annual publication of OMB Journal. The findings are made in this project on new spatial instruments and models that are able to respond to the transformations and problematics mentioned above.

The Organization of the Workshop:

The workshop will take place in Tirana, Pustec Municipality, as well as in the Northern Macedonian and Greek part of Prespa lakes, between the 13th – 24th November 2023.

In total, 24 researchers are involved, 15 of them from the PhD Program, and other professors and assistants from POLIS University and UNIFE. Four research groups by 4-5 members with mixed backgrounds will be established. A group of academic

staff from Polis University will lead the workshop (coordination by Prof. Besnik Aliaj; Prof. As. Skender Luarasi; Dr. Genti Avdija; Dr. Malvina Istrefaj), while many others will assist daily or with selected interventions/presentations, including Prof. Pantelis Skyrianis, Prof. Roberto di Giulio, Prof. Theo Zafagnini, Prof. As. Sotir Dharmo, Prof. As. Lazar Kumaraku, Dr/ Ledian Bregasi, etc.

Participants will be paying special attention to three main dimensions: i) planning and territorial scale ii) urban scale iii) and architectonic scale in a multidisciplinary contact. The Teams/Groups are:

1. Group 1 – Topic | Infrastructure and facilities: *Doriana Musaj – Sadmira Malaj; Gregor Andoni; Caterina Rondina; Lisa Mensi.*

2. Group 2 – Topic | Environmental Systems: *Kejt Dhrami – Anila Gjika; Francesco Axel Pio; Karla Cavallari; Alessandro Delli Ponti.*

3. Group 3 – Topic | Culture and Heritage: *Marsela Plyku-Demaj – Kejsi Veselagu; Daniele Romagnoli; Maristella De Fabrizio.*

4. Group 4 – Topic | Settlements, Public Spaces and dwelling: *Malvina Istrefaj – Julian Beqiri; Dejvi Dauti; Andrea Sterpin; Christin Erdman Goldoni.*

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