

# Towards an "Open City" prospective for cross-border landscapes: From confined settlements to ambiguous edges - the case of Prespa Region.

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**Abstract -** *While government policies intended for cross-border landscapes across the Balkan countries aim at maintaining a national equilibrium, their individualistic over-determination has broadly nourished a self-centred model of development. In the case of Prespa Lakes Region, state-commissioned strategic plans regularly elaborate on the basis of promoting the countries' own interests but perpetually fail to comprehend the collective regional concerns. Collages of multinational design inventory unceasingly overlay the natural landscape producing innumerable solutions frequently incoherent and ephemeral. This article discusses the historical trajectory of the architectural presence in the region, its non-linear form of development and its ability to combine elements of chance mutation. As confined settlements separated by political decisions, Pustec and other Albanian villages have been enjoying the attributes of a closed system, but, however, the contemporary challenges put forward by the rapid globalization and the accession of Albania and North Macedonia to the EU are questioning these settlements' ability to adapt and economically sustain themselves. In order to reevaluate the region's possibility for international accessibility and exchange while acknowledging its dichotomy as a cultural archipelago spanning three different countries, the Richard Sennett thesis on ambiguous edges will be tested. Rather than entirely refusing the political borders in favour of creating a borderless society a speculative answer for the region as a whole will develop on the Niklas Luhmann hypothesis of autopoiesis, suggesting an open-ended form of coexistence which maintains itself by promoting its own parts.*

**Keywords -** Richard Sennett, Ambiguous Edges, cross-border landscapes, Open City

## Introduction

Albania, Greece and North Macedonia share the diverse transboundary landscape of the Prespa Region which is distinguished by the two interconnected lakes, Great Prespa (259,4 km<sup>2</sup>) and Small Prespa (47,4km<sup>2</sup>) and the three National Parks of Galicia, Pelister and Prespa. As a restricted geographical area, the Prespa National Park hosts an ecosystem of global significance and one of Europe's major transboundary ecological sites. In 2000, a Joint Prime Ministerial Declaration between Greece, Northern Macedonia and Albania, declared the area a Transnational Park, and in 2013, the Lake Prespa was eventually listed as a Ramsar site. The Transboundary Prespa Park is the first transboundary protected area in the Balkans and its cultural values are recognized and documented by several archaeological sites that span from the Neolithic Age to the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine period. Also, a significant presence of domestic

vernacular architecture enriches the cultural heritage of the whole region.

Following the fall of the Iron Curtain, the political events of the 90s completely transformed the distribution of power in the Balkans. While in 1992 communism in Albania was eventually routed, Yugoslavia dissolved into six successor states which in their first decade went through different paths of regime change. Nowadays, the European Union (EU) accession is the foremost aspiration in the region pushing all the constituent countries towards consecutive reformation. However, since only Greece is a full member of the EU, its borders with non-EU states adjacent to the union constitute the actual EU political borders with these states. Under these circumstances, the obligations deriving from this membership to a large degree impede the free movement of people and exchange of capital. According to EU's border crossing policies, "the

abolition of border controls cannot come at the expense of security" (Migration and Home Affairs, 2022) , and until all the countries comprising the Transboundary Prespa Park become full members of the union this territory is compelled to remain a restricted cross-border landscape. While the notion of the neighbourhood as a peculiar urban condition gets to be preserved, there is a plea for an implicit act of socio-geographic unification that would support economic development and at the same time allow the region's population to continue living in its own dispersed way. While peripherality and isolation remain the prime reason behind its closed-system model of development, there are precisely the solitude and remoteness the foundations behind its monastic character. A large number of hermitages and clear evidences of anchorites such as the Hermitage of the Metamorphosis (dated to the 13 th c.) on the eastern shore of The Great Prespa Lake and the Hermitage of Panagia Eleousa (date to the 15 th c.) on its south shore reinforce this identity. As a cross-border landscape the diverse nature of Prespa National Park has been under a constant pressure for order and control, especially during the second half of the 20 th century. On the Albanian side, the over-determination imposed during the communism period has made far-reaching marks on the region's visual form. As George Soros notes on his foreword to Karl Popper's "The Open Society and Its Enemies" (Soros, 2020) , universal ideas can also lead to a closed society if they are adopted by a one-party state, and that was the case of Albania during the second half of the 20 th century. Not only did communism apply a strong hand of authority over the local planning but Albanian cities also suffered the long-lasting consequences of the isolation even after the changing of the regime. A rapid rate and exceptional intensity of growth of the existing administrative centres followed, which in response challenged the normative planning methods, and as Eve Blau (Project Zagreb, 2007) stresses it, "even a literature of transitology emerged sensationalizing the post-communist phenomena". The internal

migration which was harshly prevented during that time later became the main reason for the region's population shrinking. During the 90s, an unprecedented scale of construction marked the post-socialist transition, and even though Albanian authorities continued the drafting of local and national strategic plans, very few of these plans did actively consider the Prespa Region as a transboundary natural landscape. Physically distant from the administrative centres, the urbanity of the region has grown spontaneously creating fragmented communities but extensively diverse. As Jane Jacobs (Jacobs, 1961) observes, it is precisely the unplanned spontaneous growth that is the main ingredient towards having liveable communities. Today, the region appears as an urban habitat cut up into segregated parts underlying the necessity to develop an immediate interface with the landscape.

## Methodology

Given the scope and complexity of this research, the methodology applied includes superimposition and speculation, and consider the Prespa Region as a unified territory also freed from administrative restrictions. By acknowledging the boundaries of region's cultural diversity, the theory of Open City is overlaid to its political landscape aiming at inflicting a debate if an open city prospective for cross-borders landscapes is with relevance to Balkan's transboundary territories. This superimposition of contemporary Western theories of town-planning and politically divided territories of South Eastern Europe constitutes the paper's main thesis. According to Jane Jacobs (Jacobs, 1961) , the community is spontaneous and only happen when you are at the local scale. However, beyond the debate between locals and design, one must look at the notion if the applied urbanism can also maintain spontaneity by allowing the emergence of new and undefined forms of development. By recognizing the genetic ability of cities to complete themselves by intentionally leaving sufficient

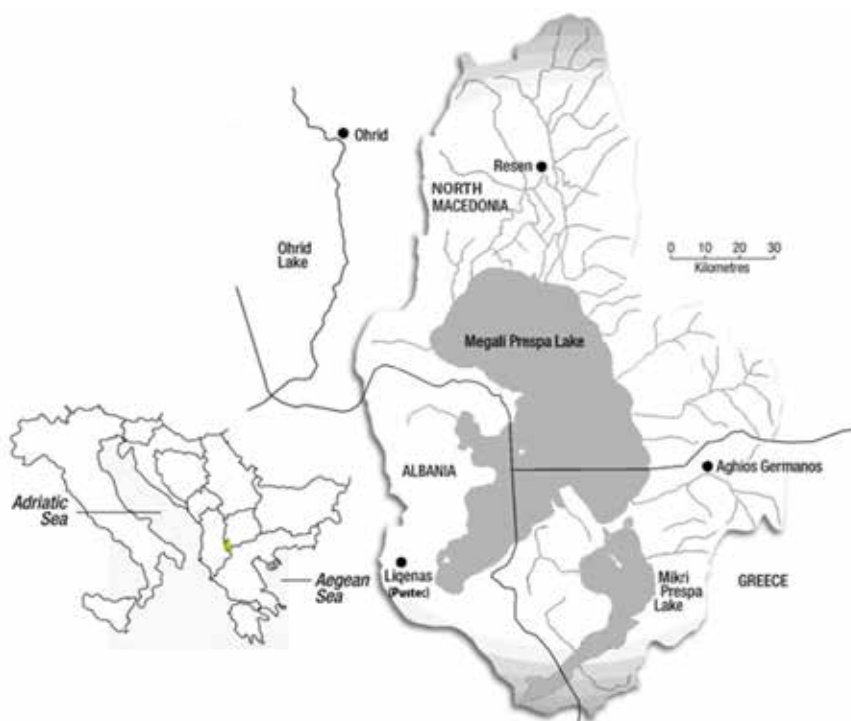


Fig. 1/ Prespa Lakes Basin.

source/ Aleksandar Ristevski, (2017)

room within them in order that other forms of coexistence can emerge, a transformation of borders into edges of physical exchange can also happen. Speculating that a closed system of development denies complexity and consequently cause a denial of diversity, too, the application of Open City planning and design principles would change and overturn the status quo of peripheral systems as fixed, organised, hegemonic and internally closed. This research develops around the hypothesis of Prespa Region as a group of three closed systems (Albania, Greece and North Macedonia) characterized by similar linear paths of growth. According to Richard Sennett (GSD, 2013), "mathematically a closed system possess additivity which means that the parts always add up to a clear sum, and homogeneity which means that the parts are directly interchangeable". Therefore, aiming for a common and non-linear pattern of resolution, and by considering the natural landscape as a strong catalyst the Open City theory is argued that can overlay the staticity of these comprising systems. This superimposition of the current situation with elements of Open City theory like incompleteness, dynamism and complexity is expected to highlight the region's unbalanced trajectory of development. As an alternative to traditional regional planning the Open City approach is argued that can facilitate the transnational cooperation, ease the process of ecology restoration and inflict adjustments onto an agriculture landscape already divided on three countries.

## Literature Review

### The politics of the neighbour

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire prepared the grounds for a rise of nationalism in the region which served as the main ideology for the formation of an independent Greece in 1830, Bulgaria in 1908 and Serbia in 1878. However, even after World War I, the wars and political upheavals in the Balkan Peninsula continued leaving the Prespa Region extensively

fragmented. The end of World War II introduced a different kind of division and the establishment of socialist regimes abruptly interrupted the flow of people and capital. While in 1974 democracy in Greece was restored, in countries like Yugoslavia and Albania these changes did not happen until the early 90s. The harsh political situation did affect the relationship between countries adding pressure on the idea of the neighbour and its etymological significance. The re-institutionalized cooperation between politically opposing regimes was not to be seen until after 1991, and as part of a closed-systems that provides security and equilibrium, the region's cultural landscape continued to remain intact and extensively unpromoted. While communist Albania applied the five-years plans model of development borrowed from the Soviet Union, according to James Simmie (Simmie, 1989), "Yugoslavia was the first socialist country to change the system of governance from a typical centralized to a decentralized one". On the other side of the Iron Curtain, the Greek part of the Prespa Lakes Region continued to remain underpopulated until the 1970s when it began to emerge as a tourist destination. In cross-borders landscapes stretched on culturally different countries, the fragility in neighbourly relations comes also due to the pressing need to favour the natural resources over natural cooperation. As a consequence, the urgency to worship the benefits coming from an ever-growing global economy leaves no room for the Biblical injunction to "love thy neighbour". The understanding of this metaphorical rendition by Martin Buber (Buber, 2012) of the commandment to love one's neighbour requires one's involvement in political theology, however, the idea here is to shed light on the understanding of this relationship as aligned with the idea of transnationality and access to shared natural resources. The ethical and political obligation behind the region's fragmented identity calls for a re-evaluation of the concept of the neighbour as a resource. As Dana Hollander (Hollander, 2009) stresses it, both Hermann

Cohen and Emmanuel Levinas look at the Biblical concept of it and reject the love of the neighbour as an ethically productive concept. However, in the case of Prespa Region one must look beyond the intergovernmental relations and seek for substantial forms that would drive people to work for the common good. Considering the region as an amalgam of diverse cultural landscapes, the polity of the form would have to be constituted from the same towns and villages which do not necessarily oblige to each other.

### On the necessity of borders

While most European countries have already removed their border controls in favour of a free movement of people, culture and capital, “the Western Balkan region lags behind other central and eastern European countries” (Dabrowski & Myachenkova, 2018). Even though citizens of Albania and North Macedonia can travel visa free to the Schengen area which includes Greece as a full member of the EU, the general thought of borders as obstacles remains. However, to what degree are state borders counter-productive and to what extent do these political territories determine the communities to which people feel attached remains still questionable. In the case of the Prespa Lakes Region, borders as mechanisms of control still remain preeminent thus making little room for other spatial logics to emerge. As the EU enlargement programme is expected to maintain its admission criteria, an alternative approach of cooperation between neighbouring countries is needed. Parallel to the facilitation of the free movement of people and capital this approach must also address the important issues of unknowability and dialogicality in the region.

According to Joel S. Migdal, in the period from the end of the Cold War to the present, “academics and laymen alike have moved away from a view of borders as fixed and hard features of international life” (Migdal, 2004). However, there have been extraordinarily limited periods of state-border stability, and the short history of human civilization shows that seeing states in the Cold War era as givens and the particular division of boundaries on map as a depiction of the permanent configuration of the social and political landscape speaks for naivety and short-seeing. Accordingly, for most of the European territory the creation of European Unions as a unified political assemblage has already eclipsed the permanence of

countries’ dividing lines. The successful flow of capital and communications across the borders has proved that borders are impermanent features strictly dependent on particular circumstances.

In order to prove the viability of borders one must envision a region cleared of any division lines other than lakes and mountains. Genuinely, people can remain apart and yet mutually aware of the ongoing interaction and even though the territory of Prespa Region consists of three sovereign states the development of its transboundary landscape should inevitably involve the establishment of an ongoing dialogicality on the level of international community. According to Irvin Goh (Goh, 2006), “the term ‘international community’ after all has been invoked most often times only as an alibi for the justification of the violent decimation of a state-entity by

another of global politico-economic-military leverage”, but, however, in this case a form of international collaboration is required precisely to address the plurality of the intertwined political and economic interests of the acting countries.

### Integration Revised

While for most of the Balkan’s countries, the European integration is primarily seen as equivalent to the embracing of European Union policies, it seems that the term has already surpassed its original meaning and is defining the common understanding of cultural progress in the region. Rather than setting up an environment where various cultures incorporate into a larger structure while maintaining their identity, integration in the Balkans has become a synonym of the universality of recognized, shared and enacted set of values. The society as a whole is quickly embracing the benefits of this imminence adding pressure on the possibility for a long-term dialogicality. On the other hand, the linear tradition of territorial planning and the urge to control any possible radical ambivalence has led to the unbothered continuation of the old and unrelated means of strategic planning, which even after all this time continues to be the main obstacle towards a comprehensive consideration of the region’s ecological heritage. Under these circumstances, the ambiguous edges of Prespa’s transboundary landscapes should by no means push for the creation of a “living center” which prioritizes certain aspects of the cultural landscape. According to Dan Avnon (Avnon, 1993), “Buber maintained that true community consists of men who have a common, immediate relation to a living center [die lebendige Mitte] and just by virtue of this common center have an immediate relation to one another”. As this return to religion addresses the tension between the ethical and the legal-political response it also unveils the biblical I-Thou relationship. Looking at Lewis Mumford (Mumford, 1962) interpretation of Martin Buber I-Thou relations “between visible people who are aware of their personal identity and their common interests even though they may not exchange a word”, we see that people are able to gradually manage their differences and strangers to remain strangers without implying that the local community is ultimately the ethical foundation of a city. By doing so, instead of thinking about integration, we could think about locating physical resources that oblige people to be in the same space with those that are different. This kind of amalgamation would prevent the creation of an inclusive local community as the first step towards preventing the solidification of the internally closed systems.

### From Transboundary to Synchronicity

The social aspect on transboundary landscapes is conceived as it already exists, assuming it works as an entity established by the joining of each country’s separate social construct. But, taking into consideration the cultural diversity characterizing the Prespa Lakes Region it seems that the sociality



comprising it still remains as something that needs to be forged. According to Bruno Latour (Latour, 2005) , "the social happens via networks or how people and objects come together to create the social, which consists of things like culture and knowledge", and as we aim at creating a single entity which will see the region as one, a synchronizing of a wide unrelated activities is required. In Politics, Aristotle (Ellis, 1895) claims that the city cannot come into being by people who are the same, but precisely by people who are different. Therefore, the promotion of diversity remains the main ethical framework involved and an essential ingredient towards forging a transnational cultural landscape. As such spaces of productive coexistence require synchronization, the confrontation with the rigidity of states appears unavoidable. So, rather than a critique of nationalism or globalism alike, the necessity for a re-evaluation of the conditions set by political borders appears also decisive. The transboundary landscape involves an area beyond one's boundary and the set of laws on one side of a

state borders traditionally enforce this separation. According to Migdal (Migdal, 2004) , "boundaries signify the point at which 'we' and 'they' begin and certain rules for behaviour no longer obtain and others take hold". And as the site where different ways of doing things meet, they are likely to be filled with tension and conflict. As Richard Sennett stresses it (Sennett, 2020) , "the one spatial distinction which helps us engage actively with the changing context of time lies in the difference between borders and boundaries"; therefore the more open and borderless the city becomes, the more it tends to escape the nation states desire to create order. Due to the prevailing national interests, the formal coherence in the Prespa Lakes Region has given shape to villages whose structures are hegemonic and internally-closed. The perpetual wish for equilibrium and the engagement to maintain a balance and staticity between the national strategic plans and nature itself has fostered the status quo of the culturally divided landscape. However, among other measures



intended to support synchronization in the region, a decisive act toward an open city prospective for cross-border landscape would be the documentation of what Richard Sennett (GSD, 2013) calls “the unresolved narratives of development”. This would be the first step towards mapping the incompleteness, non-linearity and the morphological conflicts that give shape to the region’s urban form. As planning is quite often seen as an attempt to fuse adaptivity, one of the pioneering projects is the 1961’s Masterplan IJsselmeerpolders in the Netherlands where ambition to work with an ‘open plan’ acknowledged the fact that the world had changed too quickly to plan rigidly. A comprehensive analysis of Prespa Region’s underlying motives behind its distinctive character of a closed system shows that the urge of the former communist regime for order and control has been the main influence behind the region’s clinical closure and segregation. On the Greek side, as a cause and effect relationship, a state of equilibrium surfaced during that time. This gave shape to urbanized areas which are balanced and static, adding effort to constructing new buildings with an historical look as an attempt to reinforce internal security. There is very little evidence of modernist architecture in the region, and even less of postmodern one. With the exception of Bitola, where the Yugoslavia modernist approach spanned equally across the federation, the rest of the Prespa Region territory relied on additivity and repetition in architecture as typical features of controlled, linear and internally-closed systems.

## Conclusions

The presence of the EU as a binding political entity prevents a three-sided opening of borders in the Prespa Region and unavoidably links its permeability with the EU accession of the remaining countries. This adds to the fragility of the area comprised by a mixture of local cultures which under the influence of political upheavals quite often have chosen to favour the natural resources over natural cooperation. Regions like Prespa Lakes appear as closed in time, consequently providing security and a sense of local identity, therefore when addressing fundamental issues of regional planning synchronicity between local cultures must be addressed and promoted. In an ever-globalizing world, enclosed regions showcase significant problems of values as well as of political economy. Under the influence of an ongoing domestic introspection they fail to embrace the benefits coming from the cross-border flow of people and capital. On the other hand, a fully globalized economy shows little empathy towards the cultural heritage and a permanent state of openness can easily dismantle the fragile sociality characterizing isolated regions. As a consequence, any borrowed ideology or applicable theory as a planning instrument constructed through a series of

propositions can exacerbate the problem, rather than making it better. In order to avoid the denouement of the Open City theory to a conglomeration of informality regardless of peoples’ particular recognisability a hybrid version of Open City should prevail. In this respect, the Ambiguous Edges could avoid an explicit implementation of the Open City doctrine while manufacturing a coherent involvement of unresolved narratives of development. As a hybrid version of Open City, the Ambiguous Edges would maintain the habitat already confined by borders, natural and political alike, but porous enough so the exchange and communication between countries happen naturally. A region neither totally sealed nor totally exposed would contribute to the re-evaluation of the meaning of borders and boundaries alike on a whole international level.

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