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Professor Milica Topalović

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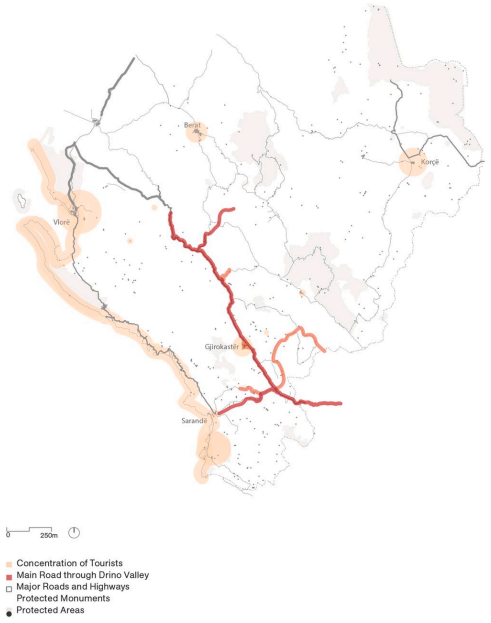
Countryside and Heritage—Fshat i Trashëgimisë

Hidden Heritage: Empowering the Highlands

Emily Malek, Lina von Waldkirch, and Greta Parroj



Heritage is embedded in the territory. It archives the story of a place: how the land has formed and how it has shifted, about the structures and villages, the vegetation, cuisine, crafts and of course, the people. Heritage is the people who interpret these layers and mysteries of the spaces around them and transform them into a narrative. In Southern Albania, there is a rich architectural and intangible heritage. However, the delicate relationship between heritage and its people might come out of balance by a new actor: the tourist, who comes to the area for a few hours on his or her way to the coast and causes cities reshaped and roads constructed to accommodate him or her.



Major tourist spots and routes in Southern Albania. Source: Ministria e Turizmit dhe Mjedisit, Tiranë.



A carpet shop inside Gjirokastër Bazaar. Photograph: Wander-Lush [https://wander-lush.org/things-to-do-in-gjirokaster/].



Road leading to the Gjirokastër Castle UNESCO World Heritage Site. Photograph: Aga Khan Award for Architecture/GCDO [https://www.akdn.org/architecture/project/conservation-gjirokastra].

The UNESCO city of Gjirokastër is the major centre of the southern region, and it is being transformed into a commodity for fast tourism. The pressure of Gjirokastër's tourist economy has a huge impact on surrounding rural communities and is beginning to absorb and dominate the rich heritage embedded in the mountainous countryside.



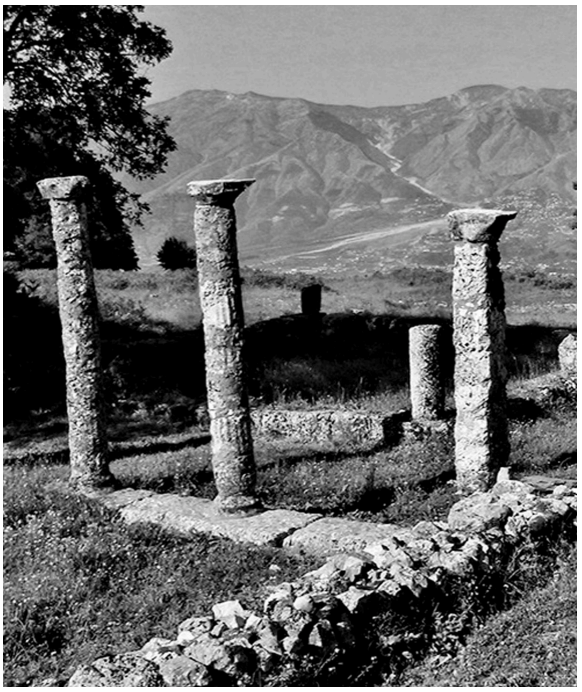
Main Bazaar street in central Gjirokastër. Photograph: Wander-Lush [https://wander-lush.org/things-to-do-in-gjirokaster/].



View of the Black Drin river, Shkodra, 2015. Photograph: Nick St.Oegger [http://www.stoeggerphotography.com/].

Empowering the Highlands

There is an incredible wealth of protected physical monuments woven through the rural areas surrounding Gjirokastër—both natural and built—which span from the stone ages to the socialist period. By deviating from the main road of the Drino, throughout the highlands, one engages with a wide array of yet undiscovered intangible heritages.



Antigonea Archeological Park. Photograph: Archeopark Albania [http://archeoparks-albania.com/].

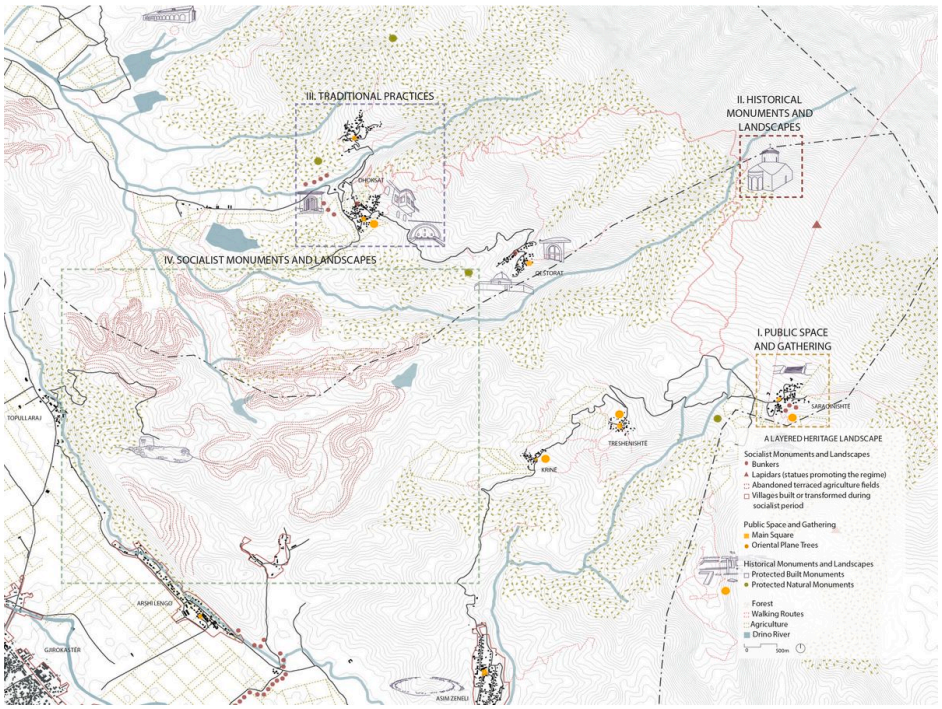


Pilgrims leaving offerings at the church of Saint Anthony, Laç, Northern Albania, 2015. Photograph: Norbert Enker [https://norbert-enker.de/projekte/albanien-1993-zwei-reisen/].



Wedding ceremony, somewhere between Koplik and Vukel, in October 1993. Photograph: Norbert Enker [https://norbert-enker.de/projekte/albanien-1993-zwei-reisen/].

Our project aims to define a new relationship between heritage, locals and visitors. We imagine Gjirokastër as just one small piece of the mosaic which makes up heritage in the Drino Valley. We thus see a huge amount of potential in the mountainous countryside as a space which possesses some of the richest heritage in the landscape. By empowering rural highland communities, we believe heritage can become a catalyst to encourage visitors, relatives, travellers, guests and friends to share and support local people.



A layered heritage landscapes with 4 sites of intervention: Public Space and Gathering (Saraqinisht), Historical Monuments and Landscapes (Saint Mary of Spile Church), Traditional Practices (Dhoksat), Socialist Monuments and Landscapes (agricultural terraces in the Drino Valley.

A SPACE TO GATHER

When looking at the recent square restorations taking place in Albania on behalf of the “Urban Renaissance,” one can find evidence, that almost no local worker were employed, that sensibility toward archaeological values was lacking, that a “copy-paste” method was applied across sites, and that projects at the scale of a city were applied to rural settlements. How to create a framework to deal with such spaces whilst keeping the heritage integrity of the site and the community?

New Saraqinisht village square with traditional tree of the village (*Rrapi*, Platanus Orientalis), native wild flowers (Primula Veris, Matricaria chamomile, Papaver somniferum, Polygonum Aviculare), simple objects for children (tree stumps, play circle with native plant imprints), local stone for the floor and free standing public seating.



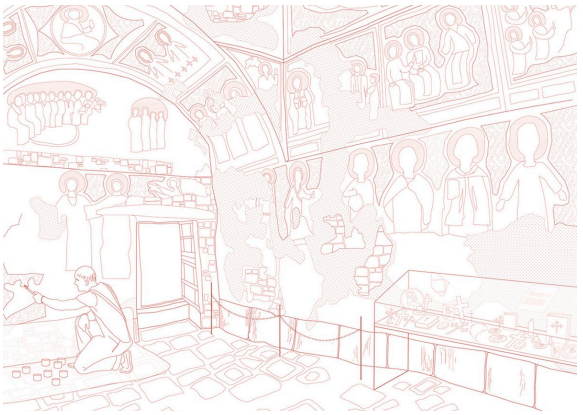
“They see a square and think it’s a parking lot, it’s not their fault, but we are not happy about it. We have always wanted change but it is as if it will never happen. We are worried about children, they have nowhere to play. We love our tourists, they keep the village alive, and we are happy to bring them closer to what we have.” Thanas Gega, Head of Saraqinisht Village, 2020. Village meeting at the main square of Saraqinisht. Photograph: Egisa Gjika.

RESTORING A FORGOTTEN MONUMENT

The structure of the Church and Monastery of Saint Mary of Spile, 4 kilometres from Saraqinisht, is on the verge of collapse due to the lack of use, maintenance, and protection. The ensemble is one of the most protected monuments in the Drino Valley with spectacular views across the landscape. It has the potential to become an important pinnacle in the landscape. By using a local workforce with funding from visitors, this restoration work can be a a prototype for similar projects.



External perspective of Saint Mary of Spile Church: new stone pathway, new signage, safety railing, all made by local craftspeople.



Interior perspective of Saint Mary of Spile Church.



“The church was not destroyed during the socialist regime because it is so remote, so isolated here in the mountains. Local people were afraid to keep icons in their houses because of the regime, so they used to sneak up to the church and keep their icons safe inside.” — Kico Zisi, last caretaker of the Church and Monastery, 2020. View of the Church of Saint Mary of Spile, 2020. Photograph: Giannis Katseas.

SHARING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Southern Albania is known for its unique artisanal products, music, language and food. These traditional practices are at risk of being lost through depopulation and a lack of education on cultural heritage. Dhoksat is located 14 kilometres from Gjirokastër and attracts a small number of tourists as it houses five protected monuments. However, it also has a unique tradition of grape growing, wine and *gliko* making, which reveal the potential of a site for agritourism.



Perspective of a bunker reused as wineries and watering of vines: “There are grapes everywhere in the village. Through the streets, in courtyards, growing over walls and in the fields. Villagers know how to make wine and gliko, and this knowledge is an untapped potential for Dhoksat.” — 100 Villages Project, 2019.



Abandoned guest house in Dhoksat which could be renovated by local craftsmen and re-used as a guest house. Photograph: Epaminoda Semis.

THE LOST TERRACES

The site of the agricultural terraces in the Drino Valley is roughly the size of Gjirokastër and is visible throughout the valley. The abandoned and eroded terraces are a continuous reminder of the socialist past. By planting native wildflowers and medicinal herbs found throughout the Drino highlands, a vibrant blanket of flowers will grow on top of this relic. Locals, guests and visitors can come to spread seeds across the terraces to give the space a second life.



Perspective of the new flower terraces in full bloom: the plants are native and need no water or maintenance to survive.



View of the flowering terraces from Gjirokastër Castle.

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Architecture of Territory
Professor Milica Topalović

TEACHING TEAM
Muriz Djurdjevic
Charlotte Malterre-Barthes
Metaxia Markaki
Gyler Mydyti
Milica Topalović
Nazlı Tümerdem
Jan Westerheide

Prof. Milica Topalović
ETH Zurich
ONA G41
Neunbrunnenstrasse 50
8093 Zurich
Switzerland
+41 (0)44 633 86 88
www.topalovic.arch.ethz.ch