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HERITAGE UNDER PRESURE URBAN DEVELOPMENTS IN GJIROKASTRA, World Heritage Site, ALBANIA

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Abstract. This paper will present the case of the planned project of the Bypass in Gjirokastra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The case argument is a technical account shown in 5 main group arguments against the planned and approved project for the construction of the new road known as the “Bypass”, standing at the heart of the Historic Center of Gjirokastra. The construction of the road, aims the diversion of automobile traffic from the Bazaar, turning it into a pedestrian zone. However a few procedural problems were noted with the project and after further control, it became clear that the project was not fulfilling its aim, and furthermore posed a threat to the historical center. A detailed report was then drafted by the “Forum for the Protection of the Values of Gjirokastra”, introducing the problems, that this infrastructural intervention will bring to the historic city of Gjirokastra.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, World Heritage Site, New infrastructure development, Heritage under pressure

Introduction

The following article is an account presenting a professional movement opposing a planned and approved project for the construction of a new road known as the “Bypass”, which endangered the Historic Center of Gjirokastra. The project, consisted in the construction of a new road, with the initial aim of diverting automobile traffic from the Bazaar, turning it into a pedestrian zone. However after a few procedural problems were noticed, it became clear that the project itself was not fulfilling its original aim, and furthermore posed a threat to the historical center. During the only public consultation session held for the project, these shortcomings were mentioned however they were not considered further by the responsible authorities. At this stage a detailed technical report was drafted by the “Forum for the Protection of the Values of Gjirokastra”, in collaboration with a wide participation of different professionals who studied the multi level effects of this project. Five main group arguments are introduced below with enough supporting evidence to demonstrate the jeopardizing effects that this project will have on the entire cultural heritage ensemble of Gjirokastra, if implemented. The following list of the identified technical and legal arguments, show the perceived damages of this project to the structural integrity as well as the Outstanding Universal Values of the city of Gjirokastra.

Procedural and administrative problems

The project is in breach of the initial Terms of Reference, which specifically request a solution in the surroundings of the Historic Center and Buffer zone. However, the approved project footprint stands on a protected green zone inside the Historic Center and in a potential Archeological Zone. The winning project announced by the competition, and the approved version, significantly differ in the fact that the latter doubles the estimated cost, and has a different footprint (almost 100m reduction). Also two Cultural Monuments (traditional houses), have been removed from the List of Monuments due to the fact that they stand on the footprint of this project. However, the Administrative Court of the First Level of Gjirokastra has repealed the administrative order which removes the traditional houses from the cultural monuments list due to procedural violations.

Legal problems

The project goes against (i) the Law on “Cultural Heritage” No.9048, date 7.4.2003 (amended), specifically Article 29 that prohibits interventions and new constructions in Historic Centers and Protected Zones, (ii) the Albanian Charter on Restoration (D.C.M No.426, Date 13.7.2007) criteria and principals that request any solutions for transport to be designed outside of the Historic Centers and the Bazaar Zone, (iii) the Regulation on the “Protection, Integrated Conservation and Management of the Historic Center and Protected Areas of the City of Gjirokastra” (D.C.M No. 619, date 7.7.2015), more specifically Article 5, 8 and 9 that prohibit any new and permanent constructions within the Historic Center and their green areas.

Technical and professional problems

There are at least eleven studies starting from the 1980's, showing the planned project area as geologically vulnerable and in need of immediate intervention. These studies also depict a deep geological tectonic fault passing underneath the castle, making this a problem area in terms of geology and seismicity. Additionally, this project has a very high impact on the landscape, transforming one of the views which currently serves as the Emblem of Gjirokastra Municipality, the Gjirokastra Regional Council and several other organizations in the city. The bearing walls of the new planned road also visually compete with the Castle violating thus its esthetics and that of the surrounding monuments (image below). The project is not in accordance with the UNESCO recommendations, which suggest that a thorough transportation infrastructure study of the Historic Center of Gjirokastra be prepared prior to any decision for the “bypass”. This recommendation is expressed in the decision adopted by the World Heritage Council on the 39th session in Bonn, Germany (28 June - 8 July 2015). The project is not based and does not contain a detailed study of the infrastructural or mobility situation in the Historic Center and Protected Zone of Gjirokastra. Further potential negative impacts on the environment are also not taken into consideration by the project documents.

Disagreements with the priorities of the Protected Historic Center of Gjirokastra

The project is approved notwithstanding the lack of a management plan for the Historic Centre (a repeated request from UNESCO) and the Protected Area. Furthermore the project is not in accordance with the priorities and urgent needs for preservation and conservation of the Historic Centre of Gjirokastra. The latest 2015 study prepared by an international NGO in collaboration with the local office of the Regional Directory of National Culture and Epoka University, shows that in the Historic Center of Gjirokastra there are 169 monuments of the I and II Category in a state of high risk for total collapse.

The negative Impact of the Outstanding Universal Values

Gjirokastra was declared as a World Heritage Site in 2005, once it met criteria (iii) and (iv) set by UNESCO. This project directly affects both of these criteria by introducing an aggressive intervention that is unharmonious to the urban and natural environment, degrading the cultural values that are an integral part of the urban planning of the Historic Center of Gjirokastra, but also by demolishing two vernacular houses, Monuments of II Category, while transforming the urban typology of the historic zone.

The severity of this project is intensified due also to further developments concerning this project. On the 8th of February, 2017 the National Council of Territory, with a board of Ministers chaired by the Prime Minister, have approved the General Local Plan of Gjirokastra, which includes the footprint of this Bypass, giving this project thus the highest level of approval,

Gjirokastra has been a World Heritage Site since 2005, and the Forum for the Protection of the Values of Gjirokastra have worked extensively with the aim of raising awareness for the inclusion of Gjirokastra in the UNESCO List. Now, almost 12 years later, following in the footsteps of the Forum, a new professional movement formed as a direct response to this damaging project, and is now asking for the repeal of the "Bypass" which is putting the heritage values of Gjirokastra under critical pressure. As a result, responsible national and international authorities have been called into action by means of public forums, technical meetings and official requests, in order to abolish the project. This measure was promised in the last meeting held on the 30th of March, in the presence of the national and local authorities, however, we remain pending on the follow-up with the appropriate legal acts.

The two figures below show the differences in form and solutions between the two projects, the initial competition and the NCR approved project:



Figure 1: Original proposal of the competition **Figure 2:** Current and approved proposal by the National Council of Restoration.

Conclusions

The historic town of Gjirokastra for a long time has been regarded as an icon of the Albanian heritage ensemble, as its rich material shows part of a story deep and complex, with archaeological evidence dating back from the early medieval period within the city, all the way to the Bronze Age in the hinterlands. There are many distinguished intellectual figures who have written about this extraordinary city, like Lord Byron, Edward Lear, Musine Kokolari, and in particular the outstanding writer Ismail Kadare. The well-known Historian of the Ottoman Architecture, Machiel Kiel, wrote that Gjirokastra is the best-preserved and most picturesque city of the Balkan Ottoman Period.

Moreover, the city of Gjirokastra has inspired a pioneer movement in heritage conservation in Albania, dating back to 1961, three years before the adoption of the Charter of Venice (in 1964). This movement consisted in the restoration and preservation of vernacular architecture on a large scale. Gjirokastra is really an exemplary historic city, not only for the historical and architectural value, but also as a center that embodies the culture of different religions and minorities. Because of its properties in tangible and intangible heritage, Gjirokastra has long been hosting the National Folk Festival, which takes place inside the Castle. (This raises the issue of the impact of the "bypass" operation at the time of the Festival, which will surely create significant influx of vehicles during this period.)

What we aim to achieve by this movement is a more effective use of public money, to be put in service of the preservation of the unique and unrepeatable cultural heritage ensemble of Gjirokastra. The so called "bypass", can be planned to not only fulfill the original aim of diverting traffic from the Bazaar, but also to aid public services such as - waste collection and management, improvement of emergency and risk response, as well as the renewal of the urban transportation of Gjirokastra. A better allocation of this investment can be envisioned for the improvement of the infrastructural network, offering alternative solutions for mobility, but only following the two prerequisite studies; (1.) the management plan for the Historical Center and the Protected Area of Gjirokastra, and the (2.) the mobility/infrastructural study.

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Appendix: Extracts from laws and regulations on Heritage, and map of historical center of Gjirokastra

Law No.9048, date 7.4.2003 “On Cultural Heritage” (amended)

Article 27

Cultural Monuments of the II Category are objects with particular values, mainly on their exterior facade. The minister responsible for culture declares these objects as Cultural Monuments of the II Category.

Article 29

1. Museum areas, museum ensembles, historical centers, archeological parks are categories of objects considered as sets, to be conserved in their entirety as historical-archeological, environmental complexes.

2. With regards to this category of objects any new construction is prohibited, with the exclusion of underground engineering infrastructure and reconstructions. In the case of reconstruction or restoration the project has to be approved by the National Council of Restoration.

3. Museum areas, museum ensembles, historical centers, are declared such with Decision of the Council of Ministers, after a proposal by the minister responsible for cultural heritage.

4. The regulation on the administration for the abovementioned category of objects and the protected area around those objects is approved by Decision of the Council of Ministers, after a proposal by the minister responsible for cultural heritage.

5. Partial or complete revocation of the degree of protection in this category of objects can be done only by decision of the same institution that decreed the protection.

6. Cultural Monuments of I and II Category in historical centers, museum cities, museum ensembles can be utilized for other functions, in as much as these functions do not compromise the object's values. They can be utilized as monument institutions, photo or art galleries and other such installations.

The Albanian Charter of Restauration (DCM No.426, Date 13.7.2007)

Article

²This study is included in the “State Party Report - State of Conservation of Historic Centres of Berat and Gjirokastra - 2015”, pg. 4 and 5, Ministry of Culture, Tirana november 2015. In this study quoted on pg. 24 chapter entitled “Challenges” with regards to Gjirokastra imediate measures should be taken for the rock below the Gjirokastra Castle. Cit.: Gjirokastra within the Gjerë mountains, both are susceptible to landslides and rock falls. Several of the comments regarding the various geological conditions noted above with respect to earthquakes are applicable here as well. In addition, there is one very large rock below the fort that needs assessment in the very near future in Gjirokastra.

Prohibited interventions

During operational works for conservation, protection and restoration of cultural heritage objects, referred to in Articles 1, 2 and 3, the following interventions are prohibited without exception:

1. Completions in style, or interventions of such sort, even when they (completions), seemingly indicate or guide and help the viewer understand how the monument (after completion of the intervention) was or it should have been.

Interventions or completions, that erase the footprint of the transition of an object from a period to another, or completions in style that counterfeit or adulterate the object.

Reconstruction or replacement interventions that displace the object from its original location. This can happen only if it is required by the major reasons due to the conservation process.

Annex D Regulations for the conservation of "Historical Centers"

In order to individualize historical centers what should be taken into consideration is not only "old" traditional urban centers, but in a broader sense, what should be treated as such, are all human settlements, the structures of which, be they assembled or fragmented, or even transformed by time, have been in the past, or subsequent periods locations of events with particular values of historical witness, or having particular urban and architectural value.

The historical character of so called settlements refers to the values that they represent as exemplaries of past civilizations as well as the documentation of urban culture, notwithstanding their formal artistic value or their environmental aspect, which in turn bestows them additional value, not only for their architecture but also their urban structure, that in itself carries significant meaning. Restoration interventions in historic centers aim at ensuring through common or special tools and instruments - the continuity in time of the values that characterize these complexes. This restoration is not confined to operations for the conservation of the formal character of architectures or special facilities, but is essentially distributed in the conservation of the common characteristics of all urban ensemble and all the elements that define these features.

In order to ensure that the urban ensembles in question will be protected, developed and survive in times throughout the continuity of civil and modern life, must, the historical centers must be organized in their broader urban and territorial context, in relation to future developments: Most importantly, this can be achieved by coordinating urban development so to ensure the protection and recovery of the historical center, starting from the peripheral city, through an appropriate programming of interventions in the territory. In this context a contemporary urban ensemble can be configured, through such instruments, and in such a way that may remove certain functions from the historic centers, referring mainly to those functions that prevent or do not fit with the recovery and maintenance of these centers, in terms of their most appropriate conservation. This configuration and coordination should be seen in relation to the need for protection of the overall territorial and environmental context, above all when the latter has a significant amount of significance related to the historic structures transmitted until today.

With regards to the specific elements by means of which the ensemble protection is implemented in its entirety, many construction elements as well as elements that fill outdoor spaces (streets, squares, etc.), interior spaces (gardens, parks, open spaces, etc.), other significant structures (walls, gates, etc.) should be taken into consideration, and even broadening the scope to other natural elements that accompany this ensemble (such as natural contours, water streams, geomorphologic particularities, etc.) The abovementioned construction elements should be conserved not only in the formal aspect that expresses their architectural or environmental characteristic, they should be further preserved for their typology, in order to emphasize the functionality that shows the use of these elements in time. Any restoration intervention to the urban, architectural, environmental, typology, construction values, has to be preceded by an undertaking of careful reading historical-critical, as in the entire complex, designated as an historic center, one must operate

according to the criteria homogeneous, for the individualization of different levels of intervention at the urban and construction level, deeming thus the intervention as a necessary "conservation improvement".

A "conservation improvement" first and foremost means the maintenance of building structures in general, as well as the preservation of the overall environmental characteristics, which brings about integral conservation of the most significant monumental and environmental ensembles and the adjustment of other elements or specific construction objects with the needs of modern life, deeming any replacements extraordinary, be they partial or entire elements, and even then the elements should adopt with the general character of the historical center.

RREGULATION "ON THE PROTECTION, INTEGRATED CONSERVATION AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE HISTORICAL CENTER AND THE PROTECTED ZONE IN THE CITY OF GJIROKASTRA" (DCM No. 619, Date 7.7.2015)

Article 5

Allowed interventions in the historical center

New construction is not allowed in the historical zone. In order to maintain the urban, architectural and landscape values within the Historical Center, only the following interventions are allowed:

1. Systematic conservation, restoration and maintenance interventions according to the principles of integrated conservation.
- 2. The protection and inclusion of environmental and cultural landscape values keeping in fact the configuration of the local trees and vegetation.**
3. The conservation of construction ruins with clear masonry contours, within the area of the Historical Center, to prevent their further degradation.

When the ruins are preserved to a height of over 3 m and significantly affect the unit's ensemble, while being part of that unit, a reconstruction of the same volumes can be undertaken, on the existing structure (perimeter walls) with the objective of preserving as much as possible the visible original characteristics, of the exterior and the interior, based on the documents, the typology, the architectural treatment and the vernacular technique of building.

4. In cases of natural disasters, of demolition or burning of objects of cultural heritage value, reconstruction can be performed on the ruins of the existing object, based on the compositional formulation and architectural style before demolition, with the objective of preserving as much as possible the visible original characteristics, of the exterior and the interior, based on the documents, the typology, the architectural treatment and the vernacular technique of building.

5. New construction in the Historical Center is prohibited, with the exclusion of improvements of road infrastructure, underground engineering infrastructure and the reconstructions mentioned above.

Article 8

Roads and squares in the Protected Historical Center Area

Roads and squares in the Protected Historical Center Area are preserved in their urban-architectural compositional formation, as an integral part of this area.

In the Historical Center:

Restoration interventions on the road network and squares must take care to preserve materials and traditional techniques. Interventions are allowed for the improvement or the implementation of new underground or above ground infrastructure, removing the original cobblestone street elements and then restoring the same elements in the same position, shape and orientation according to the traditional technique. Projects addressing these types of interventions can be approved by the National Council of Restoration.

In the Protected Area:

Restoration interventions on the road network and squares must take care to preserve materials and traditional techniques. Interventions are allowed for the improvement or the implementation of new underground or above ground infrastructure, using only traditional materials, forms and techniques. Projects, addressing these types of interventions, can be approved by the National Council of Restoration. Interventions are allowed for urban furnishing the placement of benches on streets, luminaries, baskets, or pots of flowers or other elements of urban furniture, with the condition that they are part of a requalification project, which provides for the use of elements in accordance with the typology and traditional values. Interventions are allowed for the modification of a road footprint, only when linked to operational needs and for the purpose of better utilization of the area within which the road is located. In cases where the road footprint needing intervention extends in more than one area, the intervention is subject to fulfill the criteria of the area with the highest protection.

Article 9

Green areas within the Historical Center and the Protected Area

The green areas are integral parts of the Historical Center and the Protected Area, they are designated public areas and are considered complementary elements that serve the panoramic views of the historic center. Existing green spaces are preserved as such.

In these areas the types of interventions allowed are those of rehabilitation of the existing green spaces by means of which a public park can be obtained. In these areas allowed activities are the planting of trees, resettlement works, adjustments and introduction of internal roads with the same characteristics as the original Historical Center cobble stone streets, which will be used only for pedestrians.

In these areas it is prohibited to construct anything other than the small structures with wooden elements that can be dismantled, and do not exceed 1 floor – 3.5 m, urban furnishings or service facilities. Projects for the rehabilitation of green spaces, are drafted by the Municipality of Gjirokastra or other subjects licensed for these types of works.

The trees and the traditional greening of roads and squares are preserved, and if degraded, must be reproduced by the same kind.

Map

The protected areas of Gjirokastra, part of the DCM No. 619, Date 7.7.2015. Historic Center (red line), Buffer Zone (yellow line) and the Protected Green Areas (green line) in Gjirokastra.

