

## **Conservation and Rehabilitation of Urban Heritage and Tourism: Shkoder Case Study**

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### **Abstract**

In the transition period, Albania has assisted a crisis of heritage identity. That was evident in degraded inner city heritage. The paper tries to deal with the problems of preservation and rehabilitation of Shkoder urban heritage and tourism development. It opens with defining cultural and heritage tourism, preservation and rehabilitation of urban heritage. In the next section, it focuses on describing the main relevant contextual factors, the historical context of urban development and national strategy for the tourism development, which are necessary for understanding the evolution of the cultural tourism market over the course of the economic transformation in Albania. The third part of the paper focuses on describing the urban development of the old town of Shkoder; the situation of the older building stock in the historic centre; the condition of monuments in the city and the risks to which cultural heritage exposes. In the closing section, we gave some recommendations to protect urban heritage through tourism development.

**KEYWORDS:** conservation, rehabilitation, heritage tourism, inner city development

### **INTRODUCTION**

Shkoder urban development has passed through different constructive stages from antiquity to the present. Its heritage is of significant historical importance. There are many medieval cultural institutions, Byzantine and Ottoman buildings that provide architectural value.

The old city consisted of a few quarters surrounding the 'Rozafat' castle. Shkoder's urban area got its unique expression when the city extended to the south in the 18th century. Shkoder is as well-known for its narrow streets lined with high stone walls, its greenness, its fruit-trees, pergola vines and flowers.

The buildings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were different from the buildings of the medieval times because they had elements of modern architecture of Mediterranean countries. The trade bourgeoisie of the city built new houses, public institutions, hotel-restaurants, parks, boulevards, mosques and churches with a new architectural aspect. The buildings that are constructed after the Second World War, with the rationalist style, did not correlate with the old ones. Nevertheless, the visitors will find the typical narrow streets that still retain the architectural and suburban heritage of the various historical periods in the old city quarters.

In the transition period, the urban development of Shkoder has assisted a crisis of identity that was evident in three different situations like as:

1. 'Brownfield's': produced by deindustrialization and the crisis of the socialist productive structures.
2. 'Degraded areas': characteristic of the urban heritage in the inner city areas.
3. 'Informal and under-exploited areas' originating from the expansion device at the low-density product of transition, now fully incorporated in the urban area.

The favorable geographical position of the region of Shkoder is without doubt the most significant assumption for the development of tourism. In addition, the human, cultural and historical values and traditions of Shkoder city get more importance in such development.

One of the most prominent types of tourism could be Cultural and Heritage Tourism, based on the attractions offered by Shkoder itself, with the historical center and its cultural monuments like as: religious buildings, castles, fortresses, traditional houses, etc.

### **DEFINING HERITAGE AND CULTURAL TOURISM**

The concepts of heritage and cultural tourism are reflected by the broad range of references in the literature such as the historical tourism (Ashworth & Larkham, 1994; Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1990), heritage tourism (Herbert, 1995; Light & Prentice, 1994) and the cultural tourism (Davies, 1993; Squire, 1994; Silberberg, 1995). A number of explanations are done for this purpose.

Based on this review, and for purposes of this paper, cultural and heritage tourism is conceived as the 'visits by persons from outside the host community motivated wholly or in part by an interest in the historical, artistic, scientific or lifestyle/heritage offerings of a community, region, group or institution' (Silberberg, 1995).

### **CONSERVATION AND REHABILITATION OF URBAN HERITAGE**

Historic urban areas refer to cities, towns, and historic centers or quarters, including their natural and man-made environment (ICOMOS, 1987). These areas are usually protected and specially managed sites, acting as 'dispensers of cultural identity' (Bianca, 2010), for the modern urban areas around them. Historic urban areas have shaped the society and are an extraordinarily valuable resource if we need to understand the today's live. At the same time, they are constantly changing in order to satisfy society's evolving needs. Historic centers are remarkable urban areas in which preservation and tourism are often crucial activities.

The meaning of 'urban heritage' usually is related to monuments, i.e. all sorts of religious buildings, palaces, castles, fortresses, historic city walls, gates and other types of formal and social buildings. This assumption often excludes historic inner city centres that equally represent the urban heritage.

The global cultural organisations such as the UNESCO, ICCROM, and ICOMOS and the Albanian institutions such as the Albanian Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Institute of Cultural Monuments (ICM) and interest groups seem to generate some success in their efforts to achieve greater interest for the conservation and protection of inner-city historic value.

The built environment and old city centres in Albania as part of the national culture, deserve to be protected. The urban heritage of old inner city should acquire the

status of a conserved asset that can improve the present and the future of cities. These could become an economic advantage with good prospects for economic exploitation, for example, through tourism, for culturally-based image establishment of local economic development, or, the promotion of small enterprises.

Based on people's valuation, heritage has different meanings for different people and different groups in society (Orbaşlı & Woodward, 2009). Heritage is a concept that includes the natural and the cultural environment. Although within this general division of heritage centres are considered as the cultural heritage, the importance of the natural environment in shaping and influencing the built environment needs to be taken into consideration.

UNESCO's 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (UNESCO, 2010) considers monuments, groups of buildings and sites as cultural heritage. An area is identified as a historic center if the works of man or the combined works of nature and people (including archaeological sites) within its footprint are recognized as having outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view. The meaning of heritage tourism is broad and sometimes it is considered to be a subset of cultural tourism (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). It is necessary to say that even when cultural heritage is not the main purpose of a journey it adds value to the tourists' experience (Orbaşlı & Woodward, 2009).

According to the World Tourism Organization, heritage tourism is 'an immersion in the natural history, human heritage, arts, philosophy and institutions of another region or country' (Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

Heritage tourism is probably the most popular and conspicuous in historic centres, where the main attraction is the same heritage we are trying to preserve.

#### **NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT**

Albania offers the potential for various tourism activities in different destinations. The exact combination of activities and destinations presents the best opportunities for building a thriving tourism sector. What makes Albania unique is the variety of large and attractive sides of the relative proximity of these attractions in a remarkable cultural context?

The importance of tourism in economic development and the social structure in Albania are known mostly in urban areas, and this sector is included in the National Strategy for Development and Integration (NSDI) 2007-2013 (The Council of Ministers, 2008). National Strategy for Tourism (Ministry of Tourism, 2007) reflects the strategic vision of the development direction expressed in the NSDI. Under this strategy, the purpose of Albanian tourism development is to increase the quality of life for Albanians, emphasizing the development of cultural tourism and ecotourism, focusing on the benefits of local communities, who currently face limited economic opportunities. Some of the strategic priorities (The Council of Ministers, 2008) of this sector are:

- Product development and diversification of tourism will focus on the discovery of Albania through nature and culture. This will be accomplished by depending, in the capacity of local areas to manage effectively, to alter their natural values and cultural viable tourism product. Complete with recommended sites and activities, information and explanation, lodging, meals, guide services and a

variety of other characteristics that determine the value of a destination. Develop new routes tourism in rural areas that are in reasonable rich with natural and cultural resources will expand the product offering.

- Investment areas and culture could be achieved particularly through the creation of long-term financial mechanisms and the development and validation of tourism plans, which encourage investors by giving the principal directions of development and implementing an incentive policy for future investments in tourism.
- The territorial organization will support the development of tourism through plans adjustment, urban studies, as well as infrastructure investment.

Tourism can be a tool that helps or moves regeneration and economic growth while simultaneously increasing the living standards of local communities and visitors. Making tourism more sustainable will change for good in the sustainability of the Albanian society itself. Creating a balance between the welfare of tourists, host communities and the environment, reducing conflict and recognition of mutual dependence, requires destination management approach (Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2006).

### **THE SITUATION OF THE OLD BUILDING STOCK IN THE HISTORIC CENTRE**

During the transition period, the attention of Albanian government and the local government focuses on the problems of new settlements, built through legal and informal processes. Quantitatively, these housing areas usually overwhelmed the pre-existing city. By the new millennium, the vast majority of the inner city housing stock in Shkoder, as in most large cities in Albania, was more than 25 years old. The urban heritage was, therefore, considered insignificant in terms of the scale of the housing problems (Figure 1a, b, c).



**Figure 1 a, b, c.** The existing housing stock in the inner city of Shkoder (before 1980).  
Source: Technical office Shkoder Municipality.

The desire for ‘modernisation’ by municipality staff in the Albanian big cities often led to believe that only new and ‘modern’ buildings were useful for the city development. Anything old or in a traditional style was considered of small value and was torn down, ignored or painted in different colours in modern styles as in Tirana case. Older buildings, normally concentrated in the inner parts of the city, were often in a state of physical deterioration, overcrowded and without basic services. Inner cities became beneficial for different types of services other than housing, and economic pressures led to further elimination or alteration of the older housing stock.

For all of these reasons, the local government in the main cities has paid very little attention to their older housing areas and historic centres. As a result, these areas continued to decline with their physical, social and financial functions disrupted. Their existing potential for cultural tourism and contribution to the city's economic development was neglected. The significant historical areas were more valuable for city development and tourism than is commonly realized.

Shkoder as all historic cities have an older historic inner city with housing stock belongs to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most prestigious older stock is well-defined in 'Piazza' ('Kol Idromeno' Street), the area of 'Gjuhadol' and 'Dugajt e Reja', with a large housing stock. The one, two or three storey older housing stock, with retail shops in the ground floor, constitutes a large percentage of the building units in the main streets of the inner core (Figure 2a, b).



**Figure 2 a, b.** The existing housing stock in 'Piazza' and the area of 'Gjuhadol'.  
Source: Technical office Shkoder Municipality.

Other historic areas built before Second World War are the old quarters of 'Baçallek', 'Tophana' and 'Rus' being predominantly of individual houses with garden, great fenced walls and traditional wooden doors.

The renewal experience started in the socialist time is going on and presently. The municipality is working to improve the infrastructure in all the city neighbourhoods. The work for the new ring road and the expansion and rehabilitation of the existing roads has created the promises for the urban renewal and modernization.

Conservation and rehabilitation of Schroder's urban heritage represents a remarkable historical relationship with the past, a physical manifestation of the social and cultural traditions which have developed giving to the city and society its value and identity. Although so far only on a modest extent this position is slowly being appreciated by the local government and the community.

The municipality of Shkoder, as in other historic cities, in the world, has realized that it is not rational way to remove the existing housing stock in the inner city and replace them with new modern buildings without identity. As an alternative it is beneficial to rehabilitate and reuse these housing areas, even if at present they are in poor condition.

However, even if there were such changes in attitude, it has not always clear what should be done and many questions could be raised. After so many years of transition, hostility or indifference, what should be the new approaches toward the historic inner city and the older housing areas? For the conservation and rehabilitation

of urban heritage in the inner city of Shkoder, what strategies should be adopted? What can be done for the development of heritage tourism?

### **THE SITUATION OF MONUMENTS IN THE CITY**

The city of Shkoder has many monuments, which represents the religious, cultural, political and economic powers of the past. The conditions of these monuments are determined primarily by their present location and usage. The monuments like 'Lead Mosque', 'Great Coffee', Historical Museum and the 'English Tower' which has no further utilization tends to deteriorate rapidly, while monuments, which are still in use, have a better chance to be maintained.

There is a wide variety of urban heritage monuments throughout the city of Shkoder and, hence, it is difficult to generalize concerning their conditions the possibilities for preservation and rehabilitation. For the provision of public owned monuments, there is a lack of funds. In the case of privately owned monuments, the situation is often not much different. A private owner considers the maintenance of a monument as a burden due to inability to afford the necessary care and rehabilitation costs. Sometimes they are unable to create other forms of usage or innovative mechanisms for the financing of the required conservation.

During the last years the Municipality of Shkoder, have initiated decisive campaigns and proposals for protection of neglected monuments and heritage areas in the inner city. Despite the considerable enthusiasm and some actual promising results of such campaigns, the government financial supports for heritage conservation has been restricted. The municipality budget was limited.

International agencies like Cancel of Europe and Albanian American Foundation are financing projects for the conservation and rehabilitation of valuable architectural and urban heritage in the inner city.

The private banking system was not interested in supporting the conservation and rehabilitation projects because they have found them economically and financially unfeasible. There are few successful initiatives for private-sector participation in urban heritage conservation and rehabilitation, through the establishment of an attractive and innovative strategy of heritage 'commercialization' and heritage tourism development.

### **THE NEW PROJECTS AND INVESTMENTS, THE TREND OF THE REHABILITATION PROCESS IN RELATION TO THE TOURISM**

The Municipality of Shkoder has prepared proposals for protection of neglected monuments and heritage areas in the inner city. The most promising results were realised in the rehabilitation project of the Street 'Kol Idromeno' or so called 'Piazza' (Figure 3 a, b), the promenade on the bank of river 'Buna', etc.



**Figure 3 a, b.** The Street 'Kol Idromeno', (Piazza) after rehabilitation. Source: Author.

Another urban heritage rehabilitation project, going on, is helping to preserve valuable historic street in the area of 'Gjuhadol' neighbourhood financed by the Commission of Cancel of Europe with the value of 1.2 million Euros (Figure 4 a, b, c).



**Figure 4 a, b, c.** Rehabilitation works of the historic street in the 'Gjuhadol' area. Source: Author.

New ideas for the urban heritage rehabilitation are given by Department of Architecture and Urbanism, Polytechnic University of Tirana in collaboration with Florence University in the framework of the project 'Feasibility studies as part of university research for the development of Lake Region and the city of Shkoder'.

In the main study projects of intervention within the old town of Shkoder, with the intention to preserve the architectural heritage in the direction of sustainable urban development that stimulates tourism is experimented with different cultural attitudes.

Some rehabilitation projects in the Inner City of Shkoder are focused on issues of new semantization (Figure 5 a, b), other than sticking to the compositional development of the site and character of the buildings without practicing the way of architectural mimicry.



**Figure 5 a, b.** Projects proposal for restoration of 'Great Coffee' and Historical Museum. Source: DAU archive & Tramonti at al. (2011).

We tried to improve the quality of places, especially in terms of space, creating better conditions in public spaces for socializing. With that experience, we have tried to improve the existing historic buildings, working on all functional elements inside of the building and adding elements of bioclimatic character with more complexity and articulating private and public spaces.

Other projects (Figure 6 a, b) have tried to recover and improve the quality aspects of urban heritage, intervening in the waterfront area bringing the new river port, administrative functions, and cultural, recreational, educational facilities in the inner city.



**Figure: 6 a, b.** Projects proposal for the waterfront and the inner city revitalisation. Source: DAU archive & Tramonti at al. (2011).

### **THE RISKS TO WHICH CULTURAL HERITAGE IS BEING EXPOSED**

The importance of inner city preservation in Shkoder is widely recognized, and efforts have been made in order to maintain the cultural significance of this heritage. On the other hand, tourism, following Albanian tendency, is primarily valued for its economic benefits, and it is highly encouraged, without recognizing its positive and negative impacts on the heritage and its preservations. Although tourism has started to generate funds to support conservation efforts in the historic centre, the availability of these financial resources requires Shkoder's community to share with tourism more than just the existing heritage, but to accept the impact of tourism has on preservation efforts in the city. Tourism generating awareness of a more mixed heritage is also an example of this influence. Although, the introduction of new activities and new uses to redundant

buildings, as well as tourism as a catalyst for development, support conservation efforts in the city need to be applied.

The risks to which cultural heritage can be exposed are:

- Tourism brings confrontation in urban spaces and buildings, overcrowding, as well as traffic and parking pressures. If not mitigated, all of these threats contribute to reaching the threshold beyond which the Historic Centre of Shkoder cannot continue to be attractive to either the community or tourists.
- Changes in ownership patterns and businesses are also dangerous threats. Their impacts are not felt immediately, and they are harder to manage and mitigate. When these occur, the community might experience the protection of the built environment, but at the expense of maintenance of other aspects that are essential to retaining the cultural significance of a place.

Heritage conservation and heritage tourism cannot be accomplished, in historic centres where tourism has been a crucial activity, separately and isolated from each other. Although preservation should guide the process, both activities need to be considered as impacting on each other and protection, and tourism goals should be integrated.

### **MECHANISMS TO CONSERVE URBAN HERITAGE THROUGH TOURIST DEVELOPMENT**

To achieve sustainable tourist development in Shkoder city, buildings and architectural heritage must be preserved and protected; that means we must work with all actors on the conservation of these treasures. Moreover, tourism can be an effective tool, contributing to heritage conservation through direct financial support as well as local and national income, as well as being an encouragement to local people to consider the value of heritage.

It is necessary to establish 'heritage conservation via tourist development' while at the same time taking the view 'conservation for development'.

Some mechanisms to protect and preserve urban and architectural heritage through tourism development could be:

- Indicating the importance of heritage tourism, by carefully studying the features of history, culture, religion and urban heritage.
- Analysing the visitor impacts on social culture and the environment, this is a significant issue for planning and development.
- Activities and planning for protection and conservation: the cultural essence of ancient and archeologically protection is divided into planning, integration, and renovation.
- Services for tourists: extending the services for the tourists by integrating the areas near heritage monuments into a tourist zone.
- Maps and signs for tourists: exit and entry, warning signs are important for tourists. Signs of indication and prohibition could be installed. Tourist guide booklets shall include the story and features of the city.
- Translation and explanation: explain any activities through cartoon characters or other methods to tourists.
- Monitoring: monitor and review the feedback, complaints and satisfaction of visitors.

- Art and Craft activities: we must show local decorations, sculptures, architectonic styles, which represent more attention to the urban heritage.
- Special cultural events.

## CONCLUSION

From the perspective of preserving urban heritage currently the overall result is quite positive, in particular if one looks at the inner city pre-war structures. However, concerning younger, socialist structures –sometimes a contested heritage – the processes more serious have to be evaluated slightly. Until yet, it has not been discussed well enough. In which way and how many socialist urban ‘remnants’ are valuable urban heritage: a heritage, which have to be seen as integral parts of life and the history of Shkoder’s people and which insofar contributes to an urban development which meets the needs of the citizens.

The management of change is essential to the long-term survival of urban heritage. Changes associated with historic buildings should include adaptive reuse and reconstruction in order to prevent both structural and functional obsolescence in accordance with changing social needs. This process of conservation and rehabilitation has two objectives. First, it protects a fundamental wealth of cultural assets for future generations, and second, it preserves the ‘genius loci’ and sense of place that gives historic areas their individuality.

The government financial supports for heritage conservation have been limited. The municipality budget is very limited. The banking system has found heritage conservation economically and financially unfeasible and, therefore, not convincing. Few international agencies are helping to preserve valuable architectural and urban heritage in the city.

In conclusion, tourism can have positive attributes for preservation and rehabilitation of urban heritage in Shkoder city. For the city planners, the main goal is to create a strategy for minimising the negative impacts and maximising gains from tourism. This would have to include the management of the heritage resources and the quality of new development, the uses and activities which built sustainable environment, and the integration of both these factors with the social-cultural needs of the local community.

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