

Landscape in Fragments: A Study of an Albanian Landscape Corridor from Shkodër to the Adriatic Sea

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The Albanian landscape is fractured into paradoxical parts. These fragments are palatable to the eye during the drive from the city of Shkodër to the Adriatic coast along Rruga Shkodër - Velipojë. As one leaves the dense urban environment of Shkodër and crosses the confluence of the Drin and Bojana River the landscape opens up to a vast horizontal plain of agriculture. Behind is the city of Shkodër - a place rapidly developing through what local scholars and architects refer to as *turbo urbanism*. Ahead, the plain lies the agricultural ruins of the failed communist government.

Albania's history is one of conflict, occupation, and isolated communist dictatorships. Enver Hoxha was the authoritarian leader of communist Albania for decades, and following his death in 1985, Albania's government collapsed only five years later in 1990. Albania's transition to a parliamentary democracy has been difficult, and ultimately lead to an Albanian diaspora in Italy, Western Europe and North America. The many political upheavals have left broken or nonexistent public infrastructure - a circumstance fostering a strong distrust of public development by the populous. Today, after a decade of relative stability and new monetary investments, architects and designers are facing conflicting and paradoxical choices.

This paper seeks to understand the context of Albania through a case study of a *landscape of fragments* between the northern city of Shkodër and the Adriatic Sea. The study was carried out by an international cohort of architects and urban planners from Albania, Italy and the United States.

The research sought to interrogate the social and political factors that shaped the landscape, and to clarify what contributions can be made by architects in a context that is geographically proximate but culturally remote.

Highlighted will be the forces that shaped the landscape as we find it today. With pressure coming from uncontrolled urbanization and a constant threat of flooding, Shkodër serves as an example of how ecosystems react when exceeding their ability to regenerate. When viewed from above, the land is subdivided in large plots by mechanized irrigation ditches.

The order provided by the former communist government does not seem to rule this land today. Greenhouses scaled to service large areas of land not only stand broken, altered, or abandoned, but also adjacent to poorly engineered and ineffective levees. The land does not adhere to polyculture agriculture, nor does it operate as an efficient mechanized farming system. Settlements are no longer planned - rather informally developed - and often located in areas that are both ecologically damaging and unsafe.

The research and analysis conclude with modest design propositions that are intended to tease out the context's potential. The two landscape fragments profiled from the larger study do not pretend to *fix* or *rebuild* the landscape, rather they instigate small but meaningful interventions. Most significantly, new insights are provided on the landscape of Albania, where the limit between proximate and remote is regulated by a fragile edge of ever changing fragments (Figure 01).



Figure 01: View of study area from Shkoer Castle.

THE URBAN CHALLENGE OF ALBANIA

The system employed by the dictatorial regime was rendered ineffective by the transition to a democracy. During this regime, Albania was one of the most centralized planned economies in Europe and the government owned and controlled practically everything¹. Following the dictatorial system's fall, the government was unable to cope with population demands of rapid urbanization². Thus, the country went from one extreme (excessive control, even of everyday life of the people) to the other extreme (total freedom of movement, development and economy). The *shock therapy*, commonly applied in most *Eastern Block* countries³, combined with the weak and unexperienced governmental structures in the early democratic years, resulted in a complex and sophisticated informal system. This produced over 400,000 informal buildings at national scale⁴, impacting the economic development, social development and many other aspects of life⁵.

Albania's urban development after the 1990s has been associated with a very strong link to informality and absence of planning. Thus, the self-organizing role of individuals has been a key in structuring development in the main cities, especially in the periphery. The freedom of mobilization, inspired many people to move from remote peripheral and isolated areas towards the main cities in the western plain. Thus, the growth of cities such as Tirana, the capital, has been dynamic and very fast, creating a typical mono-centric country, where almost half of the population is settled in the central region. Other major cities of the western plain like Durrës, Vlora and the subject city of Shkodër experienced a similar growth. Migration to the cities also created a brain drain that produced inequality between the *center* and the *periphery* exaggerating what constitutes the proximate and the remote in the Albanian landscape.

The informal and rapid urban development, apart from transforming a great deal of agricultural land into urbanized land, has also had devastating impacts on the natural environment. It can be stated that although reforms have been continuous, the situation on the ground remains problematic⁶. Additionally, deforestation and coastal erosion are quite problematic because they induce a sensitive environmental issue that induces flooding in Shkodër. Global climate

change extends the threat, especially for the western plain, where rising sea levels and the intake of land by sea is an eminent threat⁷.

THE FRAGMENT PARADOX

The Albanian landscape is a paradox of fragments and informal unity. The beauty of this territory is constituted by a variety of urban and non-urban land where the proximate and remote find their common understanding. Investigating this type of landscape requires the architect to ignore the synthesis of parts, and to instead accept the fragmentation of a territory in which the informal and the formal can be reciprocal tools of design exploration. Therefore, the value of the fragment in this study resides not in what each fragment provides, but in the interruptions of formality that arise upon fragment reassembly.

It is important to define *fragment* through its common dictionary definition. In most cases it is defined as: a part broken off, detached, incomplete or unfinished or isolated. Our interest in the word *fragment* is due to our observation that cities contain many fragments stitched together by informal disjunctions in the urban environment. Therefore, to consider the Albanian landscape one must observe and select the smallest elements, natural or artificial, with a capacity to be autonomous. From these elements they must understand the informal forces that stitch them together to form a whole. The study area includes a portion of land in-between the historic city of Shkodër and the coastline along the Adriatic Sea. The potential of this territory resides in the complex texture developed by interrupted process⁸, and its ability to project new possible research paths and landscape scenarios in the future.

To study the landscape in fragments, precedents were selected that guided our understanding of interrupted processes, many of which were made before the invention of scientific topographic representations. The first examples studied were the engravings by Fabio Calvo's "Antiquae Urbis Romae" 1527 and Pirro Ligorio "Antiquae Urbis Imago" 1561 (Figure 02). Both engravings depict the city of Rome during the Roman Empire. These depictions demonstrate how representation can describe the hierarchy of component parts and the informal connection made between them to create an unplanned whole.

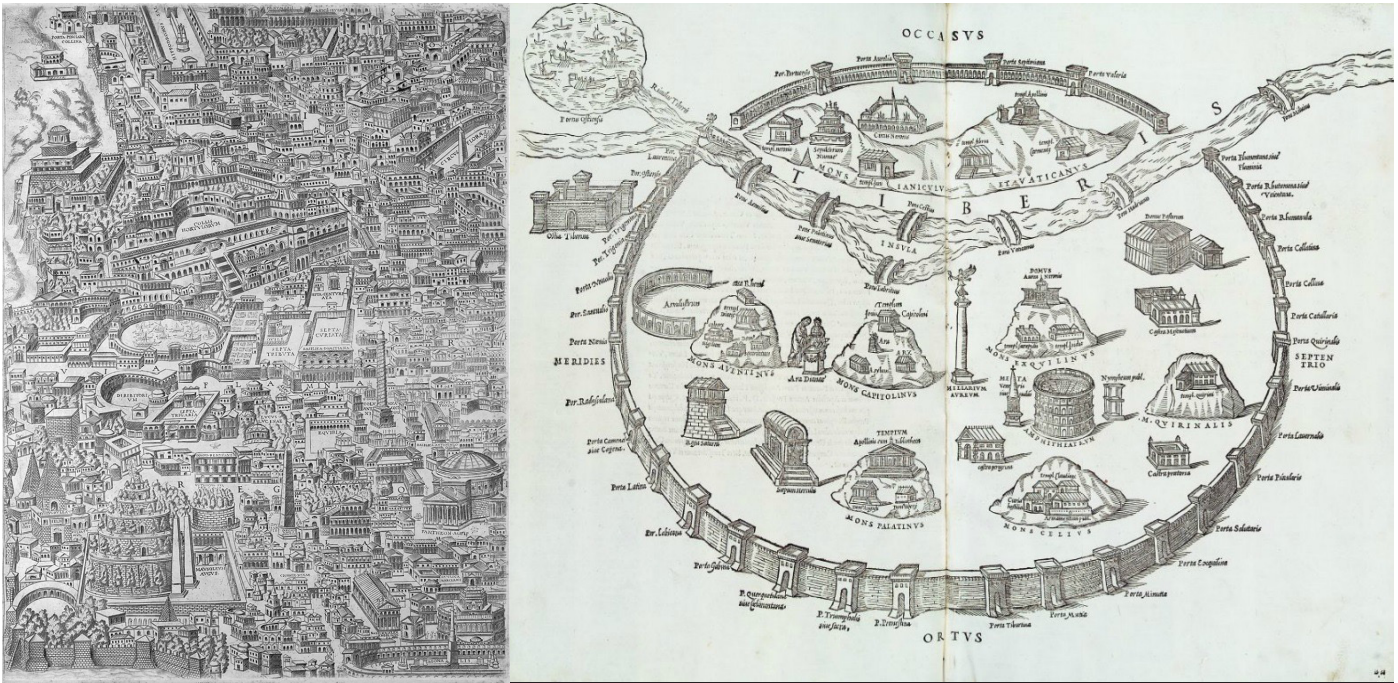


Figure 02: Pirro Ligorio “Antiquae Urbis Imago” 1561 and Fabio Calvo’s “Antiquae Urbis Romae” 1527.

Observing the engraving of Pirro Ligorio, the composition shows a vast quantity of architectural landmarks that give shape to the entire city. The urban condition is dictated (in this representation) by the collection of fragments, each represented by an important architectural structure. The paradox of this composition is in its capacity to highlight a city almost without roads or infrastructure - a city made only by its architecture⁹. Fabio Calvo’s representation furthers the idea of fragmentation by showing a city operating like an archipelago, where the informal urban disjunction is described as a sea surrounding islands of architecture. It describes Rome as fragments with emphasis on the voids or disjunction between parts. These representations, and the city of Rome today, give substance to our hypothesis, allowing us to view the Albanian landscape as a series of uncontrollable fragments. When studied in isolation, each fragment creates proposals that encourage productive disjunction. Therefore, an urban disjunction can also define an operative tool in which the architecture can be connected to the urban scale and embrace the unavoidable informality of Albania.

Therefore, the design strategy was to first view the form of the Albanian landscape as the result of an accumulation of fragments rather than a sensitized whole. Additionally, it was to amplify the potential value created by the disjunction between fragmented parts. The paradox of the fragmentation stands out as a typical phenomenon of Albania, in which the level of vagueness of a single element generates a potential link between something remote and something proximate.

WORKING WITH OPERATIVE FRAGMENTS

The municipality of Shkodër has been studied at length by POLIS University in Tirana, Albania. The university’s research produced the new Regulatory Plan for the city and region. The plan exposed many of the paradoxes facing designers hoping to implement projects that align with varied complex site conditions. As an important historical city, the entire municipality of Shkodër is located in a unique geographic location, where the main morphologic character is defined by the river, the lake and the sea.

In order to follow up on the planning proposal by POLIS University, the next step narrowed focus on the hidden potentials already present in Shkodër’s urban and landscape patterns. The research team divided into groups to elaborate a critical thought on a specific fragmented quadrant of the Shkodër municipality. To this end, the operative fragments were divided by: the historic city center, the lake waterfront and river, and the sea waterfront. Dividing further, the entire site was subdivided into 8 quadrants, each of which were assigned to a research team member for study (Figure 03).

TENDING TO SHKODËR

The operative fragment is a formal strategy of design but it does not address the complex social conditions faced by the design team. As a diverse group of researchers made up of locals and foreigners alike, the team stood in contrast to the citizens impacted by our intellectual ambitions. As architects and designers, we have been trained to *fix* problems or dilemmas we are given in the built environment. Our education and our profession encourages this with all good intentions. We rarely question if what we are doing is appropriate if the overall intentions are to improve a community. This tendency leads to a neo-colonialist approach to design, where the designer knows better, and the peasantry will benefit from our intellect. The current occupants of the study area do not appear

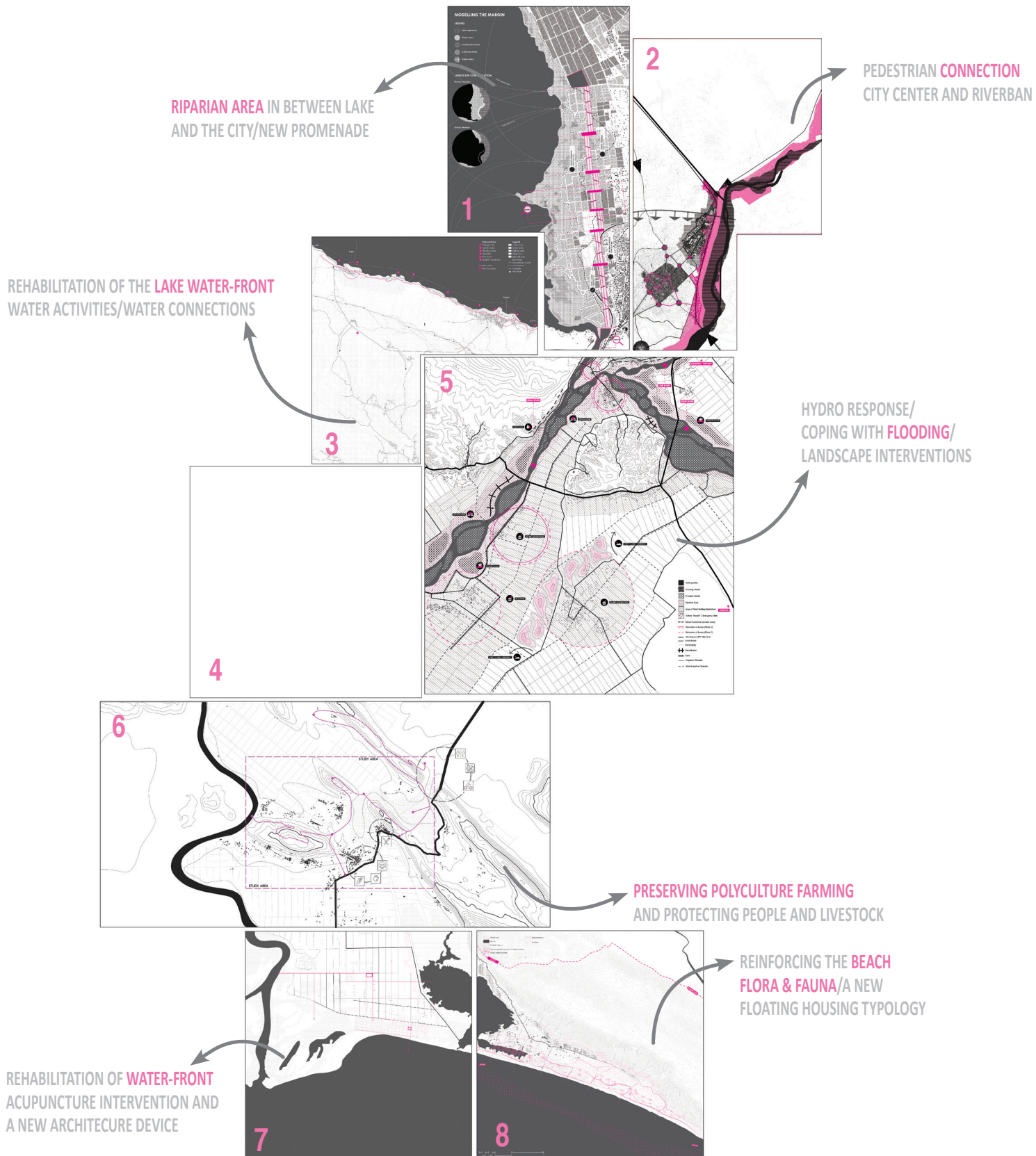


Figure 03: Fragment map:1. Riparian Area 2. Connection 3. Lake Water-Front 4. - 5. Flooding 6. Preserving Polyculture Farming 7. Water-Front 8. Beach Flora & Fauna (Sara Codarin, Kejt Dhrami, Saimir Shtylla , Valentina Frighi, Eranda Janku, Giuseppe Resta, Gerdi Papa, Gianandrea Giacobone, James Stevens)

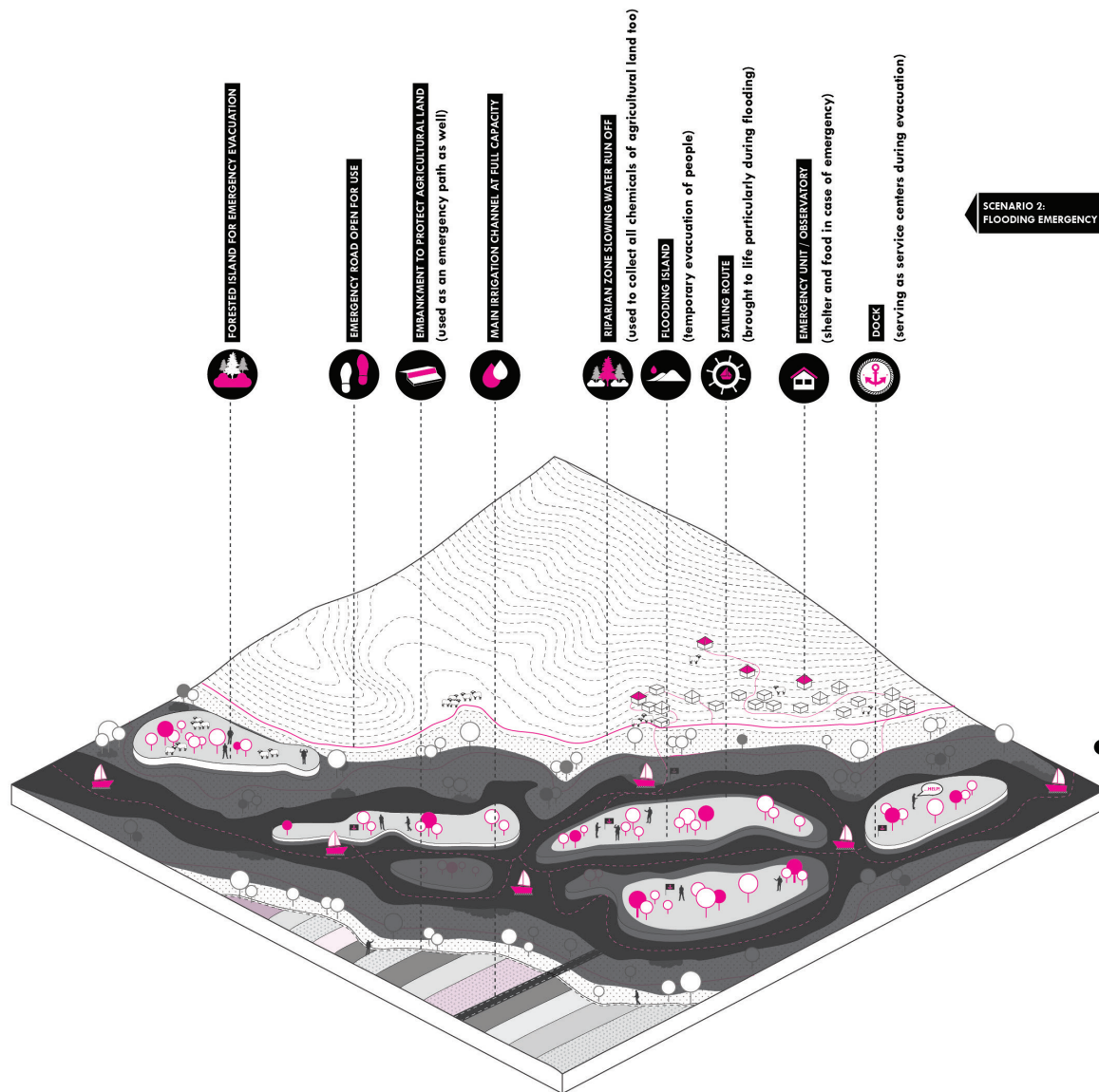


Figure 04: Upland proposition.

to have benefited from top-down solutions, nor have they been encouraged to prosper independently. Why, as architects, do we feel we should, or can, change this area independently? Therefore, the research team sought not to *fix* Shkodër, but rather *tend* to the issues through thoughtful interventions that attempt to align with the complex on-the-ground issues.¹⁰

FRAGMENT #5 - THE CONFLUENCE OF SHKODER

Fragment #5 is located at the urban boundary of Shkodër and contains the confluence of the bounding rivers. To the northwest is the border of Montenegro, marked by Shkodër Lake, a valuable natural resource with a sensitive ecosystem under threat to a growing tourism industry. The fragment follows closely to the southern boundary of urban Shkodër at the confluence of three

main rivers: Kir, Drin and Buna. This convergence creates not only a great and rich habitat with varied landscape formation, but also poses the frequent threat of flooding. To the North of Fragment #5 is home to the Albanian Alps and the National Parks of Theth and Valbona.

On this diverse variation of landscape, vast plains of agricultural activity and dense urbanized land operate mainly in the central part of the municipality. In a total of 763.77 km², where the natural and water systems constitute 53.2% and 20.44% of the total surface, the remaining is the urban system at 3.28%, the infrastructural system at 1.06% and the agricultural system at 22.02%¹¹. The urbanized land is mainly concentrated around the city of Shkodër (35.1% of the total of urban land) in the west-central part of the municipality, and the remaining is spread among the rest of the rural territory in the form of small villages. In close vicinity to the biggest area of

agricultural value, the concentration of urban development also happens to be on an area which is directly affected by flooding. It is this part of the territory in which the Lake of Shkodër is nearest, and where the three rivers converge. Although dams have been built and other forestation measures have been taken, floods still frequent the area, resulting in devastating consequences in Shkodër. Informal urbanization of agricultural land has also occurred in this area, adding risk to the citizens and infrastructure. These informal (sometimes referred to as illegal) buildings built near streams, or in low-lying areas have adversely transformed the drainage system and made more land vulnerable to flooding.

Located on one of the biggest river basins, with plenty of underground and surface water resources, flooding remains the main crisis for Shkodër. Given the different eco-systems, the land is constantly under different pressures, which have transformed the land throughout time and pushed the landscape into crisis. The Kiri and Gjader Rivers are a constant threat to the plains of Zadrima and the surrounding villages because of the sediment buildup. The Drini River on the other hand floods the area of Lezha when reaching 2.2m above flood level. This contributes to flooding in the area of Blinisht, Bachel and about 200 ha of agricultural land. The more this critical quota rises, the more dangerous the situation becomes. Buna River is also a major source of flooding. Apart from the contribution of rainfall and the melting snow from the surrounding mountains, it also accumulates water from Kir and Drin Rivers, and intakes the surplus accumulation of Shkodër Lake. All this overwhelms the capacity of Buna River for intake-and-flow, leading to further flooding. Natural phenomena like the combination of rainfall and snow also pose a serious threat simply by the sheer volume of precipitation. When the rain season starts, there can be periods of 10-15 days of non-stop rainfall, which overflow the surrounding land, leading to the flooding of both agricultural and urbanized land. Urbanization, on the other hand, which in most cases is in the vicinity of the water surfaces and flooded areas, has increased the non-permeable surface, increasing the impact of the flooded area. The coastal zone of the study area is also constantly exposed to flooding due to the strong winds of Shkodër. The wind causes waves, which wash over the coastline and into inhabited villages, allowing saltwater to penetrate the inland, and flow into the agricultural land. The agricultural drainage system is not designed to cope with this amount of water and has not been updated due to the lack of government investment in the area.

FRAGMENT #5 - UPLAND PROPOSITION

The vulnerability of Shkodër seems unmanageable and daunting. However, the land and its people persist. The villagers cope with the natural forces and continue to farm the land, finding ways to persevere. There is no easy solution that does not require large government investments. Even within the design team, it was hard to conceive of solutions that were obtainable with minimum investment and informal management.

The research determined that using the existing spoils to create uplands was the most realistic solution. This approach could be done with some government intervention, but not to the extent a newly engineered levee system would. The spoils can be moved, redirected, and reinforced to create new hills that allow the otherwise low-lying areas to have uplands to use. New hills are proposed in a series along the river banks and located adjacent to livestock and the most venerable villages. This system allows for farmers and shepherds to move to uplands when the water rises ensuring livestock will survive the flood.

If maintained correctly, the consolidation of spoils provides additional benefits that can return the river to the navigable waters it once was. The ability to navigate the river has the potential to provide new economic opportunities to the region by connecting the Adriatic Sea, the urban center of Shkodër and the border of Montenegro via Shkodër Lake. Further, this strategy also allows for incremental governmental involvement, allowing for future investment and modification that could eventually become a significant and sustainable levee system (Figure 04).

FRAGMENT #6 - SLOW VALLEY

The description and observations of Shkodër may seem dire, but it does position Albania and Fragment #6 - Slow Valley - in a unique position in Europe and the Western world. In Western culture today most food is produced through industrialized farming with polyculture farming only existing as a novelty. The produce is sold as a better product with all the trappings of an idealized past. The polyculture farms of the United States have all but been eliminated by large industrialized farms with livestock almost exclusively reared in mass feeding operations (MFOs). Interrupting and competing with this mega-industrialized agribusiness is very difficult, if not impossible. However, Albania has a choice in the direction of agriculture in the country and how the land is cared for and cultivated. Signs of the unique Albanian context can be seen on a plate of food in Albania. In Albania it is unlikely that the tomato in your salad was flown thousands of miles on a plane so that you would have it *fresh*; it is even less likely that the eggs you eat are produced on the other side of the continent in mass hen operations. This is however the reality of most of the developed Western world. Eating local is a novelty rather than a standard reality for most of the Western world and yet in Albania, primary local ingredients still persists in most places. Ironically, the opportunity to maintain a symbiotic agricultural system is real in Albania, and is partially happening today due to the failures of past government policy.

The consolidation of farming that occurred in Albania is visible as you drive from Shkodër to the Adriatic coast. As you leave the dense urban environment of Shkodër (Fragment #5) and cross the confluence of the Drin and Bojana River, the landscape opens up to a vast horizontal plain of agriculture. When viewed from above, the land is subdivided in large plots by mechanized irrigation ditches where water is pumped from low reservoirs to the west of the farmlands. The order provided by the former government does not

seem to rule this land today. Greenhouses scaled to service large areas of land stand broken, altered or abandoned. Herds of sheep and their shepherds cross planted fields without consideration. The land today does not adhere to polyculture farming, nor does it operate as an efficient mechanized farming operation. An observer could easily assume that agriculture is one that has lost its way: that no longer is it independent and at harmony with nature and free of political obstruction. With the decline of the former government's control over agriculture, it is imperative that the Albanian farmers be supported in realigning their process with the natural order of the land: align with nature, treat the land as it requires - or perish. Now, the crumbling communist agricultural infrastructure is mixed with a peasantry trying to reestablish itself. Unfortunately, as a farmer, no matter your country, you can be abandoned by government and capitalism.

It is speed that shaped the Western world. Efficiency and mechanization was sought by all governments and corporations, and still persists as the primary factor of profitability and a measure of a nation's wealth. However, speed is linear, not circular, and is counter to the ideas of agricultural symbiosis. You cannot speed up a polyculture farm, it will mature when nature allows¹². When the speed of mechanization fails a government or a corporation, the governing body will move to new ventures, leaving people and landscape behind. This is the case in this small fragment of land in Albania. Gone is the former Communist State and the peasantry that remains lives in slow motion compared to the urban center to the east.

Slow is good for plants, animals, and this valley. Any design proposition that does not accept this will fail, as evidenced by the crumbling infrastructure. Slow Valley can remain slow, but the pace of development in Albania is fast and likely to push over anything in its way. Therefore, it is equally important that any design proposition for Slow Valley should recognize the speed and energy pushing in on it from the outside. To resist and remain sustainable for the peasantry, it must find value and relevance and outpace politicians and visitors.

FRAGMENT #6 - POLYCULTURE PROPOSITION

The unique conditions warrant an agricultural proposition of balance between polyculture farming and consolidated farming. This balance will provide both the volume necessary for Albania's farmers to be regionally competitive by maintaining a volume-to-yield ratio that is sustainable, and provide possible export surplus. The profits of this industrialized product should be used to subsidize polyculture farms dispersed in the same landscape. This will not only sustain the fertility of the land, but also preserve the epistemological knowledge of farming so that it remains in the domain of the people - not the government or corporations. This balance can and should be achieved through land division that not only maintains the percentage balance, but ensures proximity and intermixing of polyculture and industrialized farms.

The industrialized and polyculture farming balance suggested can be debated in their proportions, but the potential outcomes are clear: local produce continues to prosper and the peasantry's purpose remains. A designer's contribution is one that embraces the *slow* in Slow Valley and encourages visitors to shift their speed to accommodate that of the context. The design proposal for Slow Valley is not heavy-handed infrastructure, but a simple and slow trail. The trail meanders through the valley, and the features along the way serve to tease out the beauty and assets of this unique place while supporting both polyculture agriculture and the new tourism industry. The proposal is described through a series of vignettes consisting of trail and landscape condition, each facilitating a strength of the land's time and place by addressing the needs of the peasantry and the visitor equally (Figure 05).

CONCLUSION

The landscape of Albania provided a unique opportunity to study the land in fragments. At first impression, fragmenting may seem simple, much like dividing a landscape into plots. However, the complexity does not come from shape, size or position of each quadrant, but in isolation of the proximate. Each researcher operated in a vacuum of their own proximate conditions to create a new disjunction between the fragments. It was not our goal to create stand-alone innovations through isolated study of quadrants. However, we endeavored to find the rich possibilities created in the folds between quadrants - revealing an *exquisite corpse* in the landscape. Unfortunately for the impatient, the stitching of the fragmented parts cannot be preemptively designed, this response will only come in time. It is unknown what will become of these disjunctions between fragments. What is known is that the informal, yet strong forces of the Albanian landscape will undoubtedly be aligned into balance.

ENDNOTES

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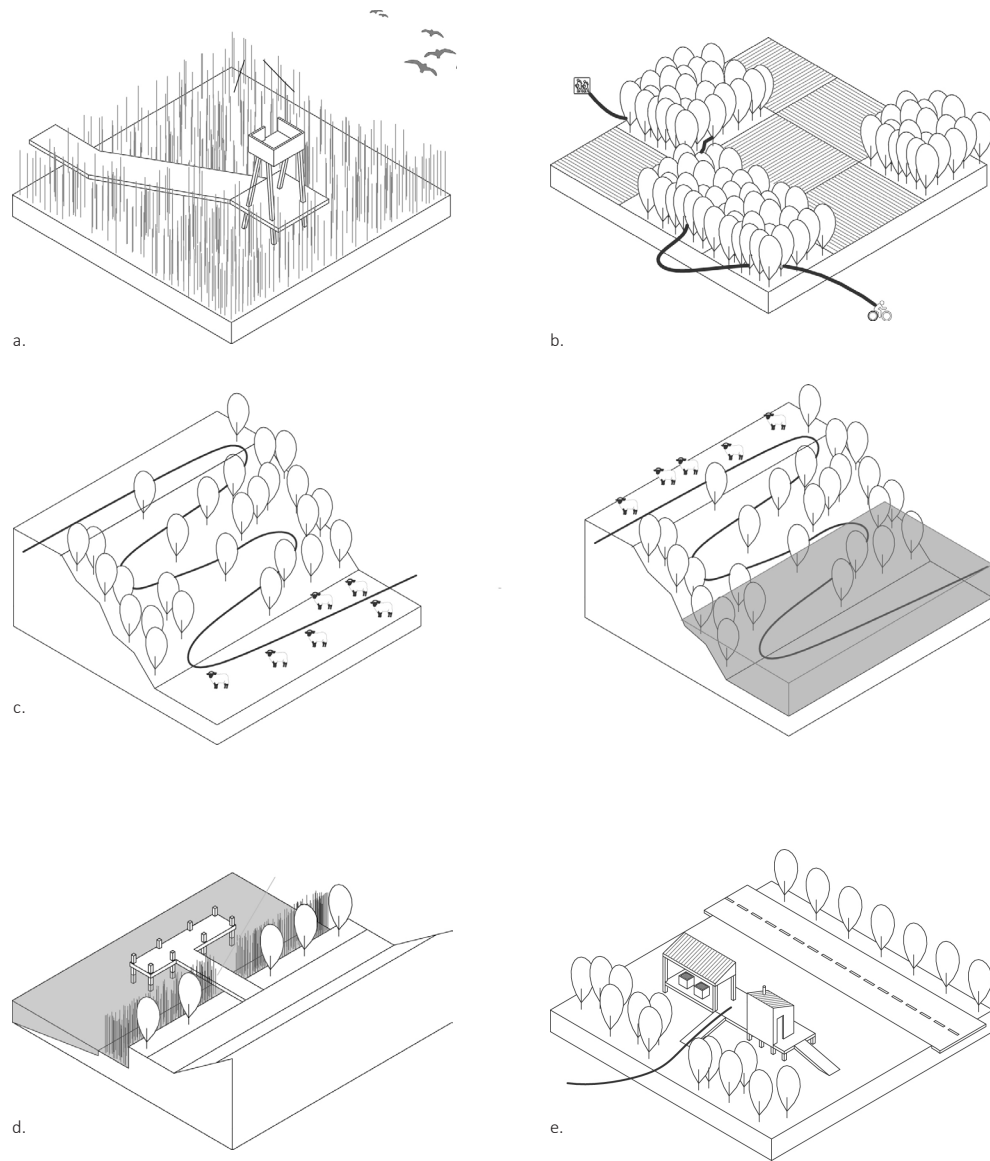


Figure 05: Polyculture proposition.

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