

Changing gaze. Vision-making processes for cross-border nature-based regions in EU candidate countries.

Cambiare lo sguardo. Processi di creazione di visioni per le regioni naturali transfrontaliere nei Paesi candidati all'adesione all'UE.

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The paper aims to provide a methodological insight into the emerging dimensions of vision-making processes for cross-border areas dominated by naturalistic assets. Based on an international doctoral research experience - IDAUP - carried out in Albania in the framework of the collaboration between the University of Ferrara, Polis University of Tirana and Co-PLAN - Institute for Habitat Development.

The article describes the transition from the Plan as a snapshot of a desired future (the French *Dessein*) to the emerging relevance of the Vision-Making processes. In these innovative processes, the opportunity is taken to give space to democratic dynamics in the definition of territorial aspirations and to mobilize the different living intelligence that contribute to the definition of a unified and cross-border knowledge landscape.

Il contributo, si propone di offrire un approfondimento metodologico originale circa le dimensioni emergenti del disegno di Piano nei processi di *vision-making* per aree trans-frontaliere dominate da asset naturalistici, a partire da un'esperienza di ricerca dottorale internazionale - IDAUP, condotta in Albania nel quadro della collaborazione tra l'Università di Ferrara, la Polis University di Tirana e l'agenzia Co-PLAN - Institute for Habitat Development (terza missione). In particolare, viene descritta la transizione dal progetto come istantanea di un futuro desiderato (il *Dessein* Francese), alla crescente rilevanza del processo di produzione di Visione. Nei processi innovativi di *vision-making* si coglie l'occasione per dare spazio a dinamiche democratiche nella definizione delle aspirazioni territoriali e per mobilitare, anche ricorrendo a nuovi strumenti digitali, le diverse intelligenze che concorrono alla definizione di un Paesaggio della Conoscenza unitario e transfrontaliero.

This contribution is based on a research experience carried out in Albania within the framework of the collaboration between the University of Ferrara, the Polis University of Tirana and the Co-PLAN Agency - Institute for Habitat Development. The initiative is at the interface between research, planning and third mission, as the agency Co-PLAN is involved in several Interreg programmes that invest in the study area. The aim of the research was to define a cognitive framework and perspectives for the future development of the natural areas of the Ohrid Lakes. Thinking in terms of sustainability, beyond the dictates of economic policies focused on incremental growth and the distribution of programme specialisations across the area, requires new interpretive lenses. The purpose of this article is to explore the shift from the notion of the plan - the French *Dessein* - that is, the snapshot of a desired future, to the emerging relevance of the visioning process, and to define some of the systemic research features it will need to activate when confronted with non-urbanised areas dominated by natural heritage.

THE FIELD OF STUDY

The Ohrid Lakes lie at the crossroads of three countries. Albania, North Macedonia and Greece. These countries share a past of contrasts and isolation which, paradoxically, has partly preserved the pristine nature of the area. Today, each country is at a different stage in the process of European integration and economic development. The Ohrid Lakes region is proving to be a perfect testing ground for thinking outside the box of the extractive urbanisation strategies that have dominated the last 50 years (N. Brenner, 2013). These transboundary natural areas, located not far from the major centres of three different countries, have been preserved in an exceptionally natural state precisely because of the conflicts and geopolitical tensions that characterised the Cold War in the Balkans. Today, these areas are immense reservoirs of biodiversity, unique in the world in terms of the age of the watersheds (at around 1 million years old, they are among the oldest in the world) and the richness of the lake fauna and flora they host - an estimated 1200 species are present, of which around 200 are endemic (C. Albrecht, & T. Wilke, 2008). These areas are therefore an ideal place to think about the future with the environment at its centre.

VISION MAKING: AN OPPORTUNITY TO CHANGE OUR GAZE

Resuming and expanding on the reflections of P-C. Palermo on the subject, we can say that today vision-making plays different roles in planning processes, depending on the operational context in which it is mobilised, in order to: integrate ongoing processes, produce critical revisions, compare alternative potential futures or organise rhetorical spatial translations of economic agendas (P.C. Palermo 2022). A planning process always embodies an anticipatory vision of a possible future. The way in which this vision is generated and defined is not neutral. It can be more or less participatory and open, it can appeal to a wide and interdisciplinary range of skills and intelligences or narrow and focused on specific technical aspects, it can follow a logic of generating economic surplus or favour the protection and socio-environmental sustainability of transformations (R. Poli, 2018). The process of vision production can thus be identified as a fundamental ontological step for any planning process. Natural areas are often thought of as "other than growth", frozen within "absolute protection" measures and not protagonists of an evolutionary approach over time (A. Magniaghi 2020). However, this perspective is based on an illusion since these areas, although protected by law, are affected by global climatic phenomena generated outside the protection perimeters; they are, therefore, subject to change despite the intentions of planning systems. For this reason, they should be considered as dynamic systems and framed within an evolutionary vision. Moreover, cross-border territories are, by definition, lacking in vision, as they are located on



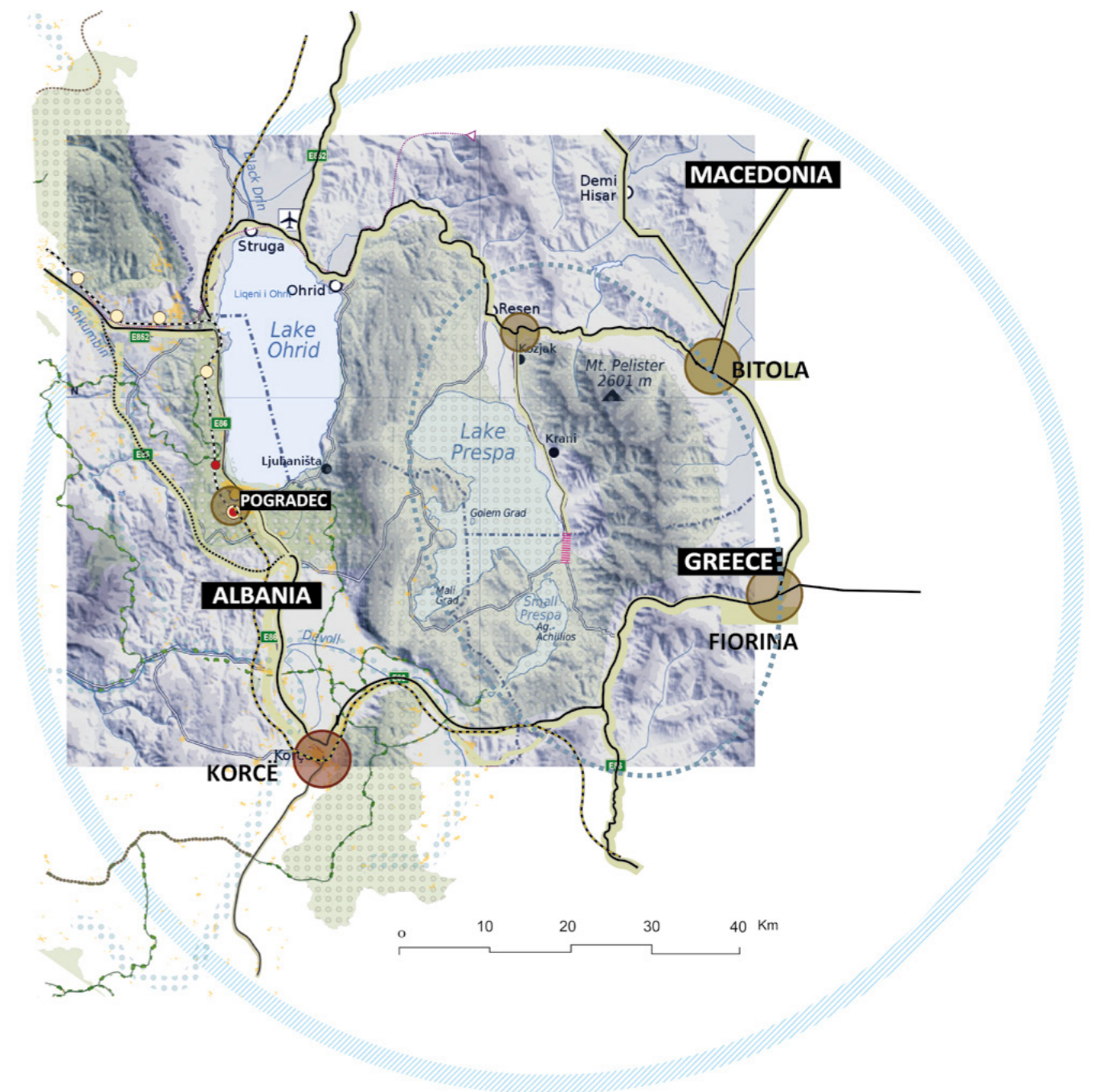
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Photo of the integrate system of Lakes Ohrid and Prespa – free copyright.

the periphery of different national systems. However, in the context of European integration, these areas have the potential to become the connective tissue of territorial realities that span the EU and candidate countries; they are geopolitical bridges where change will have a visible impact. The status of these areas will change from that of disconnected peripheries to connectors between neighbouring centralities. Guiding this transition through an informed vision is essential to prevent them from becoming new territories of indiscriminate speculation. Too often, planning processes take the presence of a vision for granted and do not necessarily provide for the specific timing and manner of its elaboration, which vary from context to context (L. Montedoro and M. Russo, 2022), when visions are taken for granted, it is the dynamics of economic power and influence that dictate the line (A. Alietti and R. Farinella, 2024). The presence of a guiding Visions is, by definition, postulated in any planning process, but too often, their origins are obscure. Using visioning processes from the earliest stages of strategic thinking can open up this moment of knowledge production and ambition to the contribution of civil society and local actors. For this reason, it is important to define the epistemic specificity of visions as opposed to the final output of traditional planning processes. In contrast to the General Plan, visioning does not result in an unambiguous design for a plausible future, but rather is a compass that helps to define and guide collective action over time, keeping the path open to alternative timelines (AIGP, 2014). Vision-making is a learning process influenced by the frameworks through which we interpret reality and defined by the intelligence mobilized in an attempt to predict possible futures and act on these assumptions. Changing the framework and the involved intelligences impacts the result. As Davoudi et al. (2018) summarise, spatial visions are collective understandings of socio-spatial relations that enable and transform collective socio-spatial practices. They are produced through political struggles over conceptions, perceptions, and lived experiences of place. Expanding the range of intelligence that contribute to visioning can make our systemic understanding of territories more robust and resilient while relegating visioning to a purely communicative role in the planning process results in a deaf endorsement of hegemonic frameworks for understanding reality, reproducing the colonizing effects of existing planning regimes and biases. Vision-making is a cultural process that can be understood through the interaction of three basic human impulses: imagination, anticipation, and aspiration (Appadurai 2013). However, to capture this potential, visioning should be solicited throughout the planning process, starting from the early stages of reflection, and being open to the diverse intelligences that inhabit the territory.

VISION MAKING IN CROSS-BORDER CONTEXTS DOMINATED BY NATURAL ASSETS - THE OHRID CASE

In the operational context of Lake Ohrid, as in many cross-border situations, borders have separated and isolated communities and slowed down normal development phenomena. This has created a situation where to different territorial sequences correspond different levels of development and complexity of socio-economic conditions. In these contexts, however, the low critical mass of infrastructure and urbanization has left space and relevance for conserving high environmental value natural systems. This contextual condition renders traditional methods of economic planning ineffective or even dangerous. Infrastructural and expansive development policies aimed at creating an exponential circle of accessibility-growth-investment, often promoted with the contribution of international bodies, risk increasing the phenomena of polarisation and territorial contraction, encouraging the migration of entire social clusters rather than creating new ones. Moreover, infrastructure policies embedded in contexts of structural laxity also risk undermining local environmental values and encouraging speculative and uncontrolled developments with significant damage to large-scale environmental systems. In the specific context of the analysis, there is a risk of



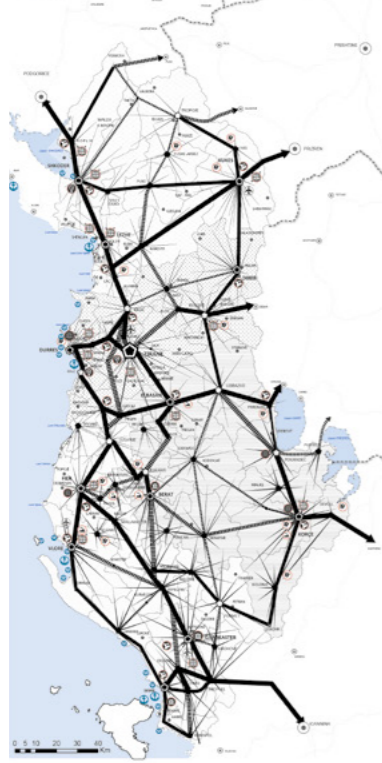
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The bio-region of Lakes Ohrid and Prespa. Strategic Scheme by A. delli Ponti for the research team A. Bejko, A. delli Ponti, F.A. Romio, Kejt Dhrami (tutor).

A critical interpretation of Albania National Strategy 2030

From
Polycentric Albania

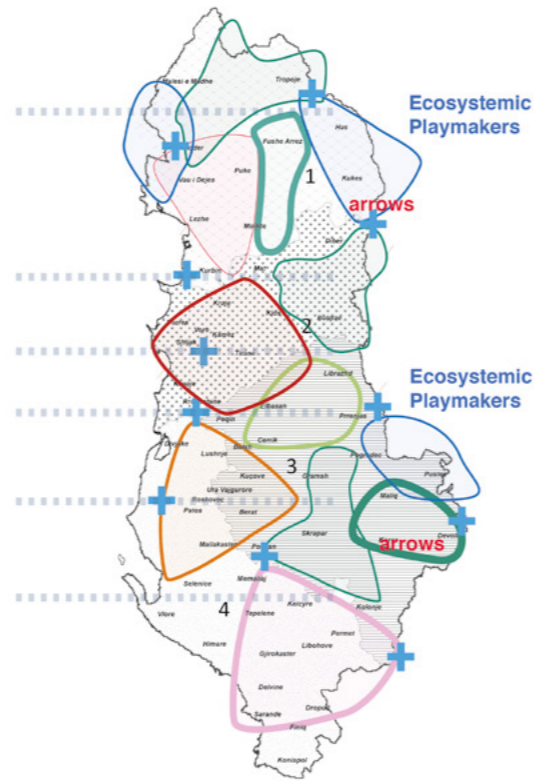
today



...to landscape making structure
ecologic corridors



Towards
Regional dynamism and diversity



03.

Critical Interpretation of the National Plan Albania 2030. Strategic Schemes by A. delli Ponti, based on the schemes of the Albania 2030 Plan, for the research team: A. Bejko, A. delli Ponti, F.A. Romio, Kejt Dhrami (tutor).

transforming a complex reality in which traditions of agricultural self-sufficiency (Albanian front) coexist with initiatives of cultural protection and enhancement (Greek front) in favor of a reductionist reading characterized by mass tourism.

The key to an alternative vision for the Ohrid Lakes may then be to "reverse the view" on the context, and change our gaze. In the study area, nature does not stand as a "tabula rasa" to support a future project but should be recognized as a project in itself, already completed.

The "project of nature" (MCHarg 1969), built over thousands of years and identifiable today in the organization of the ecosystems present in the area, is a key actor in the planning process - it can become a acknowledged as "legal subject" (J. Mazzuca, 2023) - establishing a constraint and a guide to our actions (M-C. Maffei), prompting us to imagine the voluntary extension of the current state of selective exclusion of human presence, reduced to the state of visitor. In the Ohrid Lakes Region, the creation of visions requires tuning into a long-term chain of causes and consequences, establishing systemic relationships between different living communities, and representing a form of "contextual intelligence" based on the long-term memory of natural systems.

Visions should therefore emerge from an understanding of the territorial co-evolution of

people and contexts, understanding transformation as an enhancement of the robustness and complexity of these systems of relationships (C. Magnaghi). What used to be identified as a project - the French Dessein, aimed at bringing about a transformation in the future - becomes a process of "care" or "territorial curatorship", focused on the careful observation of the past, the selection, the preservation of what is "already there" and the enhancement of existing assets as a condition for the habitability of the territory. Reading vision-making as a process of care enacts what the philosopher Hans Jonas called the "principle of responsibility", not just an ethical principle to be followed or not, but a practical guide to preparing a territory more resilient to future risks.

THE SYSTEMIC PREMISE - THE INTELLIGENCES THAT MAKE VISION

Within the epistemic perspective outlined above, we suggest that territorial evolution can be oriented by the joint action of three dimensions: socio-cultural systems, inter-scalar eco-systemic relations, and institutional relations for design and governance. These dimensions respond to different but related knowledge foundations and operative intelligence. They should feed into the visioning process, using data-driven and community-driven inquiry and dialogue, combining digital and analog tools to define the overall and evolutive cognitive framework. The three dimensions help to define the territorial unit as a coherent 'whole', i.e. an area not bounded by a narrow perimeter but by shared commons: a common inhabited cultural space, belonging to the same ecosystem and sharing the same political and economic arena.

DIMENSION 1 - BUILDING A KNOWLEDGE LANDSCAPE - SOCIOCULTURAL INTELLIGENCES

In defining a strategic vision for a cross-border territory, it is crucial to uncover and reconstruct its intangible history. By systematically collecting multidimensional knowledge related to cross-border contexts, we gain insights into the co-evolution and interdependence of local communities and local geographies. The combination of anthropological fieldwork and digital cataloguing of architectural and geological heritage enables this process. In the case of the Ohrid Lakes, the analysis of building traditions and materials reveals the commonalities between cross-border societies, a shared geological resource basin, resulting in the use of the same building materials and techniques in distinct architectural traditions. Similarly, traditions of holistic field cultivation and management by local communities can be analysed. This approach allows us to define the tangible and intangible commons that represent the memory of local social presence. This dimension delves into the depths of inherited memory and social intelligence and uses it as a platform to produce collective visions of the future.

DIMENSION 2 - ECOSYSTEMIC INTELLIGENCES

In order to imagine future developments of local systems, it is essential to study and understand - within the limits of our "limited rationality" (H. Simon in S. Conti, 1996) - the circular interdependence between local actions and systemic impacts on wider times and spaces. The relationality of natural systems becomes an essential tool for reading these relationships in being and in their possible developments. The water cycle is a perfect illustration of these relationships. In our case study, the Ohrid Lakes are connected to the main water lines of Albania and Macedonia (Black Drin and White Drin) and are sources of fresh water for urban areas. Checking the quality of the water after it has been used in neighbouring agricultural areas before it is discharged into the lakes is critical. In recent years, there is

evidence that industrial agriculture on the Macedonian front has had a significant impact on the water quality of the lakes, with potential downstream effects on the national system (J. Lorenschat et al, 2014).

Similarly, in order to protect the diverse ecosystems present at the Crown of the Lakes, landscape-based transformation methods can be considered that place the enhancement of buffer areas (biodiversity corridors and niches) as the first step in any spatial evolution programme. It is essential to strengthen existing ecosystems to increase the robustness and habitability of the local environment. This second dimension expands the scale of local space to its vast ramifications, making invisible communities of living species visible actors in future strategies.

DIMENSION 3 – INSTITUTIONAL INTERMEDIARIES – MOBILIZATION OF ACTOR-RELATIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Vision-making has often been used in contexts lacking a defined administrative status and in search of proper governance boundaries (e.g., Greater Paris in France, Lausitz Post-Coal Region in Germany). It is a tool suited to fostering dialogue between actors and scaling up project-oriented governance in cross-border contexts. The vision-making process shall be seen as a political agora. Physical meeting points and digital agendas can be mobilized to create targeted arenas for gathering technical knowledge from different levels of expertise and channeling strategic policy inputs from different levels of responsibility and governance (KH STUDIO et al. 2020). In the case of the Ohrid Lakes, in particular, within the framework of EU integration programs (Interreg), visioning can enable to move into the future by preparing a policy dimension that harmonizes bottom-up and top-down initiatives. The definition of a common "event horizon" allows countries with different backgrounds to focus on a common territory and to develop a project-based governance.

CONCLUSION

Vision making in itself does not guarantee sustainable outcomes. The way a process is structured, designed, is critical in defining its ability to empower social bodies and nonhuman living communities, which are often overlooked in strategic plans based on merely economic ambitions. If designed as an open arena in which socio-cultural, environmental, and political intelligences can meet and cooperate, the vision-making process has the potential to shape a different future and bring a truly just and sustainable integration process to the EU.

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