

Antonio Laurià, Francesco Alberti,  
Pietro Matracchi, Gabriele Paolinelli

# Enhancing cultural and natural heritage as a lever for the regeneration of rural areas

The village of Bënjë, Southern Albania, as a case study

PEOPLE\_PLACES\_ARCHITECTURE

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The *People\_Places\_Architecture* book series aims to provide a dialogue space for scholars mindful of social and environmental responsibility in the process of creating *spaces for interaction*.

Spaces for interaction are incubators of community, as well as ethical and human values and the places where social and everyday life happens. They are privileged scenarios where a community represents itself in cultural, economic, social, technological and ecological terms and manifests its contradictions. For those who use them, the meaning of these places goes far beyond the physical space with which they are identified.

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| Rebecca Milner         | Translator of the manuscript into English.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

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*Antonio Lauria, Francesco Alberti,  
Pietro Matracchi and Gabriele Paolinelli,  
Firenze, September 2024.*

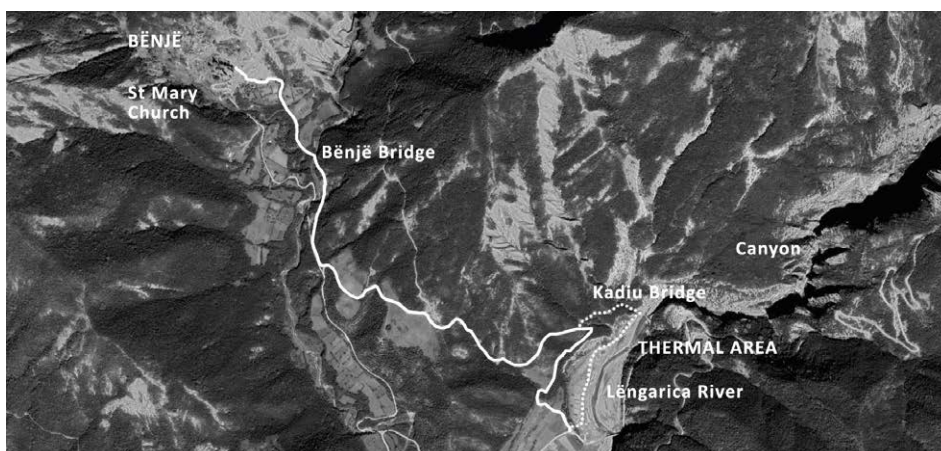


Figure 3.1 –  
The path from the  
thermal area to  
Bënjë.



Figure 3.2 –  
Some scenes along  
the path.

### 3.2 The landscape

*Gabriele Paolinelli, Flavia Veronesi*

#### 3.2.1 General characteristics of the landscape

There are clear and noticeable variations in the landscape between the *Ura e Kadiut* and the village of Bënjë. The valley floor of the lower course of the Lëngarica River leads, by climbing up the right-hand slope, to a watershed plateau that separates the main valley from the tributary valley of the Bënjë Stream (see the relief profile in Fig. 3.3). The village is located further up in an elevated and sunny position. The morphology of the geographical features therefore includes areas of terrain with slight slopes and very steep surfaces.

The slopes of the right-hand side of the Lëngarica Valley are mostly covered with scrub vegetation with shrubs and small trees in fine soils, and frequent rocky outcrops, the latter showing widespread natural degradation due to the lithological type.

«The soil is composed of very heterogeneous facies of flysch, with a prevailing presence of argillite, siltstone and sandstone, with layers of calcareous olistoliths [...]. Given their geomorphological composition, the slopes that develop in a N-E direction are also subject to landslides, due to the intense surface erosion [...].» (Bashkia Përmet, 2020, cit. in Lauria *et al.*, 2020: 67).

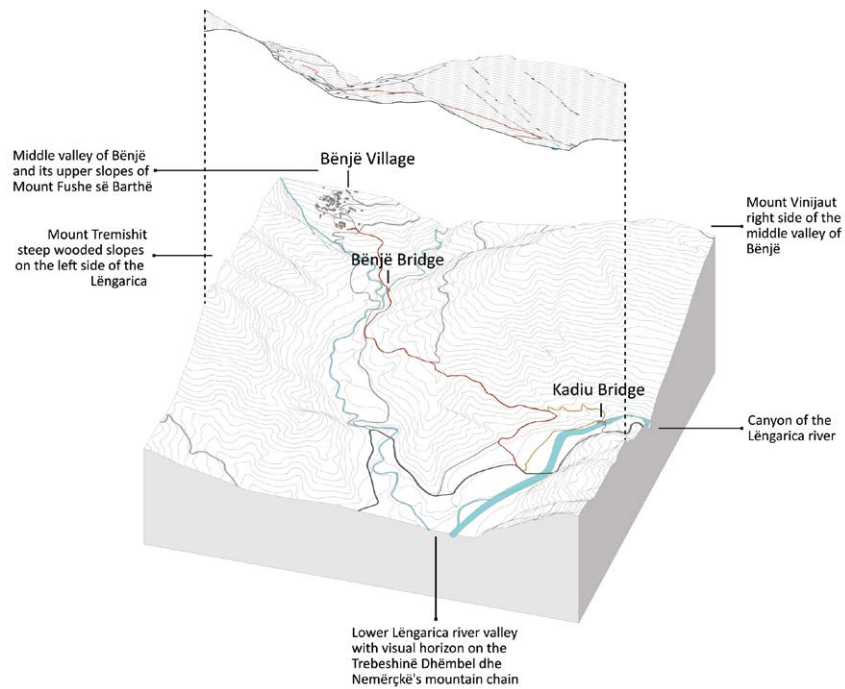


Figure 3.3 –  
General  
contextualisation of  
the path in relation  
to the morphology  
of the landscape.

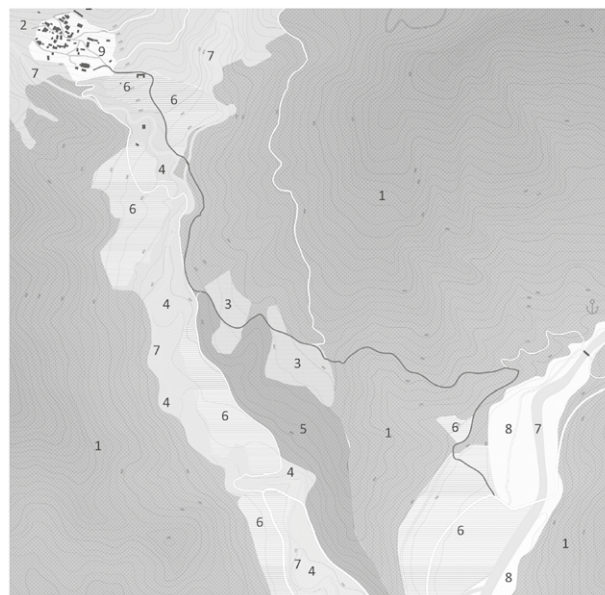


Figure 3.4 –  
Diversification  
of the landscape  
mosaic according  
to the main types  
of vegetation  
formations and  
land uses  
(expeditious  
processing  
on photo-  
interpretation).

#### LEGEND

1. Broad-leaved forests
2. Shrub and tree formations in evolution
3. Small bushes
4. Areas with agricultural crops and semi-natural plant formations
5. Olive groves
6. Arable land
7. Rivers and streams
8. Areas adjacent to the river
9. Settlements.



Field observations and an analysis of the main types of topsoil conducted with the available data show a significant extension of forest formations dominated by broad-leaved trees [Fig. 3.4], both in the Lëngarica Valley and in the tributary valley of the Bënjë Stream. However, coniferous reforestations created in the 20th century are also widespread in the Përmet area (Lauria *et al.*, 2020).

The left side of the main valley has low steep slopes, which when climbed lead to areas of gentler morphology at the top of the Lëngarica Canyon. The scenery is remarkable even from such positions, due to the unique proximity of the two sides owing to the small cross-section of the valley. However, the canyon is at its most dramatic from below, already some tens of metres upstream of the Ottoman bridge, due to the unique geological features that justified its recognition as a Natural Monument in 2002.<sup>5</sup> [see Figs. 1.58 and 2.3]

Agricultural crops characterise the landscape with important historical depth, although they are subordinate to forests in their extent. Despite the orographic conditions of low mountains and river valley bottoms, the climatic characteristics resulting from the latitude have also allowed for the cultivation of olive trees, in addition to vines, diversifying the landscape mosaic, along with fields growing other crops that have been intercropped over time.

### 3.2.2 Landscape characterisation of the path

An analysis of the path between the bridge and the village marked out six landscape identities specific to as many parts of the route. They include one or more sections, in continuity or variants, as identified in the diagram in Fig. 3.5. Some sections (1, 2, 3, 4, 4a, 4b, 5) are included in the design study illustrated in Chapter 4. The sections further downstream (0a and 0b) are not included in the study as they are part of the area that includes the Bënjë Thermal Baths, which are the focus of an enhancement project commissioned by the Albanian Development Fund to an Albanian design studio in 2019.<sup>6</sup> [Fig. 1.47]



Figure 3.5 – Identification of the distinctive sections of the path.

<sup>5</sup> Republic of Albania, Council of Ministers Decree No. 676/2002.

<sup>6</sup> “Site Management, Interpretive, and Visitor Experience for the Bënjë Thermal Waters Touristic Area” under the PIUTD Project. JV Abkons shpk and Metropolis shpk., 2019.



### 3.2.2.1 Section 0a

This portion of the route runs along the flat, from approximately 325 to 326 metres a.s.l., along the right bank of the Lëngarica River.

Downstream, the relationship with the ordinary road network is currently established with a mini roundabout which brings the site into line with urban and peri-urban road standards, although for the time being it is neither paved nor signposted. [Fig. 3.6] A similar consideration should be made with regard to the planting done in the area used as a parking site for campers and motor vehicles. In this case too, the adoption of a monospecific plant composition of oriental plane trees (*Platanus orientalis* L.) with regular alignments refers to urban standards, despite the species being local. The surfaces, lacking a suitable organisation for the frequent, albeit slow, transit of vehicles and their parking, had deteriorated only a few years after the project was carried out. The area, as mentioned, is due to be further transformed to enhance it for tourist-recreational activities. This project envisages its closure with regulated access, the provision of services in small architectural structures and the open spaces organised with parking spaces for cars and motor caravans paved in conglomerate.

Further up, past the Visitors Centre kiosks, [see Fig. 1.47] the section runs along the Lëngarica to the Kadiu Bridge, across which the thermal baths can be reached.



Figure 3.6 –  
The landscape  
in Section 0a of  
the path, near  
the roundabout  
providing access  
to the thermal area  
from the valley  
floor road.

### 3.2.2.2 Section 0b

Immediately after the bridge, the path climbs a very steep slope [Fig. 3.7] crossing the scrub vegetation from an altitude of around 325 m up to around 356 m a.s.l. offering impressive views of the bridge itself and over the Lëngarica Canyon.

The section is now almost impassable due to ongoing erosion and instability. Its direct relationship with the Ottoman bridge, however, gives it pre-eminent historical importance as part of the most likely connection between the villages on the left bank of the Lëngarica and the village of Bënjë.

As mentioned, Sections 0a and 0b are not part of the project proposal developed by the research team on behalf of the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation. They do however play an essential role as a direct connection between the path, the thermal area and the Visitors Centre of the Bredhi i Hotovës - Dangëlli National Park.



Figure 3.7 –  
The landscape in  
Section 0b, where  
the path adapts  
to the marked  
steepness of the  
slope.

### 3.2.2.3 Section 1

Section 1 runs from the intersection with the valley floor road, at an elevation of approximately 326 m a.s.l., to the junction with Sections 0b and 2, at an elevation of approximately 356 m a.s.l.

The large section of the lower Lëngarica Valley offers expansive panoramic views, [Fig. 3.8] which also create appreciable scenic interest by closing the field of vision with the mountain range on the left side of the Vjosa Valley. The landscape is marked by meadows and crops on terraces and plateaus and forests on the higher and steeper slopes.

The under-utilisation of the meadows and the partial abandonment of cultivation and, in general, the low anthropic pressure, foster the growth of evolving spontaneous vegetation. Although it does not show stages of particular biological richness, it does offer striking diversification among the spaces visible from the path.



Figure 3.8 –  
In Section 1,  
shortly after the  
intersection with  
the valley floor  
road and a slight  
and short climb,  
the landscape  
morphology is  
gentle, with forest  
formations on  
the higher and  
steeper slopes and  
meadows and crops  
on the lower and  
less steep ones.



The path crosses scrub vegetation formations, which alter the visual fields, so the spatiality of the path is marked by alterations, from the vegetation margins of the highest formations to points with broad panoramic openings. The downward views generally feature plant formations in the foreground.

#### 3.2.2.4 Section 2

From the lower elevation of about 356 m a.s.l, the section reaches 448 m a.s.l, the elevation of the watershed plateau between the main valley and the village valley.

The lower segment of the path has gentle inclines despite continuing on a steep slope. The layout has clear morphological congruity due to the slight divergence from the contour lines. The narrow section and prominent relationships with the vegetation formations of the scrubland connote and delimit the prevailing spatiality. However, there are episodic panoramic openings over the lower Lëngarica Valley and the main mountain range that determine the visual horizon on the hydrographic left of the Vjosa Valley. [Fig. 3.9]

Widespread juniper shrubs (*Juniperus communis* L.) stand out among the plants of outstanding natural and cultural interest.

In the upper segment of the section, the path slope is steeper and the bottom has widespread outcrops of the sedimentary rock substrate arranged in obvious inclined planes. Here, the geo-pedological features and their micro-environmental consequences in terms of summer temperatures and drainage, affect the development of the scrubland, which is sparse with limited plant growth.

Overall, this segment of the path is highly scenic due to the thinning vegetation, and its material-chromatic identity is down to the contrast between the aggregates on the surface and the plants.

The valley floor of the Lëngarica River, which is broadly visible, is characterised by the semi-natural morphology of the watercourse, the width of which refers to the different flows prior to the dike and reservoir built upstream for hydroelectric production. [see Fig. 1.55] Some alluvial terraces on the hydrographic right, historically characterised by agricultural cultivation, have been transformed at the end of the valley floor road by the recent arrangements to support the tourist-recreational use of the thermal area.



Figure 3.9 –  
In the upper segment of Section 2, the path is highly scenic and the views are therefore vulnerable to transformations and uses that alter the specific characteristics of the landscape.

### 3.2.2.5 Section 3

From the summit altitude of 448 m a.s.l., the path reaches approximately 393 m a.s.l. in the village valley. The first segment of this section in the direction of the village of Bënjë coincides with a watershed plateau between the right side of the Lëngarica Valley and the left side of the valley of the Bënjë Stream. The site has an emerging scenic value within the scope of the visual opportunities offered by the path along its length. Views of considerable interest intercept three distinct landscape areas: (1) the lower Lëngarica Valley, (2) the main valley of the Vjosa River with the Nemërçka Mountain Range, and (3) the middle Bënjë Valley with the perched village and its upper slopes. Despite the moderate acclivity, the soil is subject to erosion but its herbaceous formations partially protect it and provide the secondary grassland character typical of the area. Looking at Fig. 3.10, a secondary grassland can be seen in the foreground. In the intermediate plane deciduous forest formations dominated by broad-leaved trees found extensively in the valley of the Bënjë Stream emerge, while in the background, further up from the village of the same name, rocky detritus outcrops of areas subject to widespread erosion stand out.

The path continues down into the Bënjë Valley on a rural road that appears to have no foundations or stabilisation in the plateau. It then continues along the left side of the valley of the Bënjë Stream, crossing the forest formations and cultivated fields. Here the road conditions are particularly comfortable in terms of gradient, surface and width, as it is currently a dirt road. [Fig. 3.11]

For a short distance, the road is flanked by a secondary but highly scenic path leading to the area known as Gypsy Square (*Sheshi i Arixinjve*) (see § 2.1.4).



Figure 3.10 – The landscape in the valley segment of Section 3, with the secondary grassland that characterises the watershed plateau between the Lëngarica River and Bënjë Stream valleys.



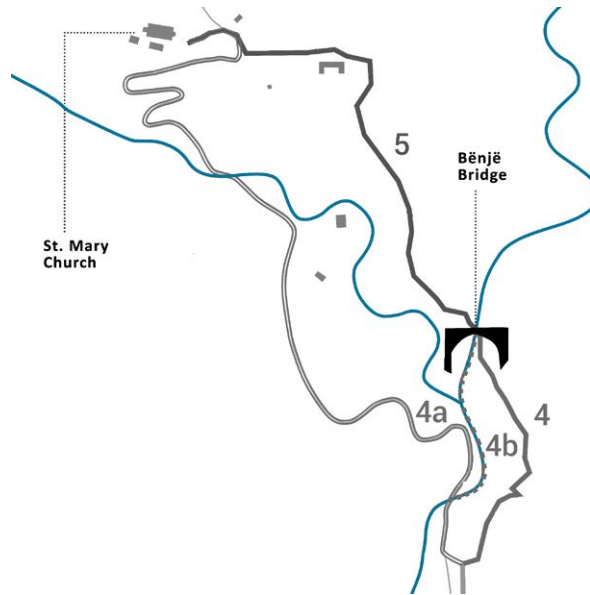
Figure 3.11 – The landscape in Section 3, with the dirt road connecting the village of Bënjë, visible in the background, to the main road in the Lëngarica valley floor.



### 3.2.2.6 Sections 4, 4a and 4b

The path continues up the slope, rising in altitude from around 393 metres a.s.l. to around 410 metres a.s.l. in the direction of the Ottoman bridge at Bënjë and the village of the same name on the left side of the stream, offering interesting views in this tributary valley. To reach the village, there are three route variants in which the path crosses the scree slope and the Ottoman bridge (Section 4), runs along the stream bed (Section 4a) and along the road (Section 4b). [Fig. 3.12]

Figure 3.12 – Layout of the path in the three variants considered, across the scree slope and the Bënjë Bridge (Section 4), along the stream bed (Section 4a), and along the road (Section 4b). The first two variants merge into an uphill route that reaches the foot of the village of Bënjë (Section 5).



The walkability of Section 4 is influenced by an extensive and very steep scree formation: the passage on the hydrographic left has a segment of approximately 70 metres in length that is difficult and unsafe to cross. [see Fig. 3.22] This section is interesting, however, as it offers a view from above of the small, heavily incised valley and for its cultural significance as part of the original system that connected the villages via the bridge. [Figs. 3.13 and 3.14]

Alternatively, from the intersection of the vehicle road and the Bënjë Stream, the Ottoman bridge can be reached in summer by walking along the riverbed (Section 4a). This route allows a closer look at the lithological stratification outcropping on the lower slopes and offers unique views of the bridge, which, although it is now in a precarious state of preservation (see § 3.3), is a significant historical-architectural expression of the cultural value of the landscape. From the base of the bridge, a short, steep escarpment leads to the upper level, rejoining Section 4a to Section 4.

There is an easier connection between the village and the main valley, however, during the long periods when it is possible to wade across the stream via the dirt road (Section 4b). Here, the route is marked by a mosaic of topsoils with a significant presence of plants made up of large shrubs and trees, from the valley floor up to the slopes above the village of Bënjë. Climbing towards the summit of the path, the scenic appearance of both the village and the Nemërçka Mountain Range is particularly noticeable. On the other hand, in addition to hydrogeological instability, the scattered scree formations in the vicinity of the village create a visual disturbance given their proximity to outdoor life, both in public and private spaces.



Figure 3.13 – The landscape in Section 4 of the path, which diverges from the current dirt road to connect to the Ottoman bridge by travelling along a slope with scree formations.



Figure 3.14 – An example of the views offered by Section 4 upstream of the bridge, over the heavily carved valley through which the Bënjë Stream flows.



### 3.2.2.7 Section 5

In continuation of Sections 4 and 4a, from an elevation of approximately 410 metres a.s.l., the route continues as far as the village at an elevation of approximately 497 metres a.s.l., with a section on the hydrographic right of the Bënjë Stream, characterised by semi-natural forest formations with a predominance of deciduous broad-leaved trees. Slightly further up they border extensive areas where plant life has disappeared due to widespread soil erosion and the consequent emergence of evolving scree formations. [Fig. 3.15] The path has a pronounced slope with stretches of traditional cobblestones (*kalldrëm*) which are still quite recognisable, albeit deteriorating (see § 3.3). The section is also characterised by the gradual appearance of elements that testify to the human presence in the area, such as dry stone walls, small buildings and rural tree formations (see § 3.3). Close to the village, the visual field of the path opens up higher up due to the absence of forest vegetation as a result of the aforementioned soil erosion and the emergence of eroding scree slopes. In this final section of the path, the anthropogenic plant presence of cypress trees in the cemetery of St Mary's Architectural Complex is a significant landscape landmark (see Chapter 2).



Figure 3.15 –  
The landscape in  
Section 5 of the  
path, in the vicinity  
of St Mary's  
Architectural  
Complex, on the  
side of the village  
most affected by  
the spread of rocky  
detritus outcrops  
and its degraded  
appearance.

## 3.3 Necessary constructions as a landscape paradigm

*Pietro Matracchi*

### 3.3.1 Introduction

The depopulation of rural areas places the focus on certain macro-phenomena, such as the abandonment of built-up areas, villages and isolated houses, and once cultivated fields, once again engulfed by the spontaneous and uncontrolled growth of vegetation. The human actions that on a daily basis shaped, maintained and made this environment liveable were neglected. These were small actions that fostered the cultivation of fields often created in impervious contexts: retaining works, systems to control surface water run-off, and the skilful placement of plants that at the same time generated stability in the soil. In the network of road connections, whose destiny is linked to the

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### Chapter 3

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Fig. 3.35 From “The Diaspora as a Resource for the Knowledge, Preservation and Enhancement of the Lesser-Known Cultural Sites in Albania” research project.

Fig. 3.36 (*above*) From “The Diaspora as a Resource for the Knowledge, Preservation and Enhancement of the Lesser-Known Cultural Sites in Albania” research project. (*bottom*) From Lauria *et al.* 2020.

Figg. 3.37-38 From “The Diaspora as a Resource for the Knowledge, Preservation and Enhancement of the Lesser-Known Cultural Sites in Albania” research project.

Fig. 3.39 (*Above*) From [https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Golik\\_Bridge,\\_Albania\\_2018\\_01.jpg](https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Golik_Bridge,_Albania_2018_01.jpg) (*Bottom*) From [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ponte\\_di\\_Mes](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ponte_di_Mes).

### Chapter 5

Fig. 5.1 Reworked by Eni Nurihana from Flink & Searns, 1993.





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# The Florence Accessibility Lab



The Florence Accessibility Lab (FAL) is an Interdepartmental Research Unit created in 2013 following more than two decades of research into environmental accessibility and social inclusion (see <https://www.dida.unifi.it/vp-136-fal.html>).

The main goals of the Florence Accessibility Lab are to define, consolidate and promote a new design culture that considers environmental accessibility a great collective resource for human autonomy and well-being in order to make local communities more dynamic, safe and cohesive, exploiting architectural and landscape heritage, as well as for the development of advanced technologies for people. In short, for “Human Development”, as intended by the *United Nation Development Programme*.

The cultural framework of the Florence Accessibility Lab is based on the central role of the human being in habitat transformation processes and on the need for those processes to be guided by in-depth knowledge of socio-economic dynamics and a caring attitude to commons.

The Research Unit takes an interdisciplinary approach to its research and works in a wide range of applied fields: cultural heritage, regeneration of less favoured areas, sustainable tourism, urban security and quality, urban mobility, street furniture, playground, housing adaptation, public buildings. The Florence Accessibility Lab also promotes and organises several kinds of advanced education projects (training and refresher courses, workshops, seminars, summer schools, Master’s courses, etc.).

Since its creation, the Florence Accessibility Lab has hosted Italian and foreign scholars, Ph.D candidates and graduate students, all sharing a research interest in accessibility and disability. At present, the Research Unit is composed of about thirty professors from the University of Florence, belonging to the departments of Architecture (DIDA), Industrial Engineering (DIEF), Economics and Management (DISEI), Political and Social Sciences (DSPS), and Education, Languages, Interculture, Literatures and Psychology (FORLILPSI), and various other research fellows, contributors and consultants from both Italy and abroad.

The Florence Accessibility Lab was the defining model for other accessibility labs created in several Italian universities.



## PEOPLE\_PLACES\_ARCHITECTURE

Antonio Lauria, Luigi Vessella, *Small Forgotten Places in the Heart of Cities. On the residuality of public spaces in historical contexts: Florence as a case study*, 2021

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## OPERA PRIMA

Luigi Cappelli, *La fruizione inclusiva nel progetto di restauro: il caso degli anfiteatri romani. Percorsi di conoscenza e indirizzi metodologici*, Opera prima, 2023







This book presents the results of research carried out by a work team from the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence, promoted and funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation in the Western Balkans (Tiranë). It focuses on Bënjë, a rural village in the municipality of Përmet, southern Albania. Bënjë is studied and described in relation to the surrounding territory of the upper Vjosa Valley, of the highest landscape value. The research defines a strategy of small interventions aimed at enhancing, in the most respectful way, the natural, architectural and social resources of the area as a lever for a process of sustainable and socially inclusive development, proposing an approach to the revitalisation of rural areas that can be replicated in other similar contexts.

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