

Landscape architecture education in Albania – the challenge of having a studio and research-based program

ZYDI TEQJA

ARLIND DERVISHAJ

Agricultural University of Tirana, Albania

Abstract

Clear traces of urban gardening design and landscape architecture can be found during the second half of the 19th century in some of Albania's major cities but the very need for urban planning related to the landscape became evident only in the '20 and '30s of the 20th century when the Albanian state was consolidated and cities began to grow. During communism the landscape was organized according to the ideology of the time, state-owned, and according to urban general plans of the time. The period saw the creation of some of the major public squares and parks for cities. After the transition, starting from the 1990s, for over a decade, Albania saw a boom in construction and rise of informal settlements in urban, suburban and rural areas. Actually Albanian citizens are more than ever conscious of the recent past developments and there is a wide consensus on building cities and territories which are healthier and greener. The very dynamic development of Albanian landscape needs qualified landscape architects. The history of Landscape Architecture programs has shown that its roots go back to horticulture. In developing landscape architecture programs, Albania should follow the best examples of other countries and, as a candidate country; it should try to be in line with European Union developments. In this paper we present our efforts to overcome the obstacles presented by the educational system in Albania through curricula that promotes creative, critical and systems thinking and where studio classes, research and practice have a special place.

Key words: Bachelor degree, Landscape architecture, education, history, studio based

INTRODUCTION

Albania, a small country on the shores of the Adriatic and Ionian seas, is famous for its magnificent landscapes and their diversity. At a relatively short distance one could pass from landscapes of attractive beaches to the tops of snowy mountains. Over 3250 plant species are grown in this area, making it one of Europe's richest countries for the great variety and quantity of plants. Plant hardiness zones range from 6a to 10a but most of the country is under plant hardiness zones 8 and 9 (Teqja et al 2017; 2019). The great variations of climate, terrain, and composition of the soils have produced rich and varied vegetation, ranging from herbaceous to high forest trees. The Mediterranean vegetation predominates to the west of the Koplik-Leskovic line, while to the east of this line the Central European vegetation is dominant. This great vegetativ and relief wealth has made people very attached to nature.

The tradition of living in green places is very much consolidated and has also influenced the way Albanian villages and cities are built and organized. Clear traces of urban gardening design and landscape architecture can be found during the second half of the 19th century in some of Albania's major cities (Figure 1) but the very need for urban planning related to the landscape became evident only in the '20 and '30s of the 20th century when the Albanian state was consolidated and cities began to grow.



Figure 1 Milet Bahce park in Shkodra City, photographed by Pietro Marubi in 1875 (Source: Marubi Archive, Shkoder, Albania)

This is the period when small urban parks were designed in the centers of major cities. This is particularly evident in Tirana after it became the country's capital in 1920. From 1923 to 1929 four city-planning plans were prepared under the direction of Austrian and Italian architects (Menghini et al, 2012, Mauro, 2012). These plans accurately outlined the axis of the main boulevard and the administrative center. Broad bands of greenery were designed on both sides of this axis. Italian architects in the 1930s and early 1940s envisioned Tirana in their regulatory plan as a growing and developing city. The city would develop creating a satellite area that would connect to the city. This villa town would have a lot of greenery and would be called the garden city (Menghini et al, 2012).

In the 1930s, Pietro Porcinai, one of the most famous 20th-century landscape architect was involved in landscape design projects of Tirana. Pietro Porcinai is perhaps the first professionally qualified landscape architect in Albania. This is the time when he launched his lifelong struggle for the recognition in Italy of landscape design as a modern profession. (Source: <http://pietroporcinai.it/biography>). His project is the park for the King's Villa (Figure 2). The Royal villa is located on the South of Tirana and covers an area of 37 hectares. According to Maria Adriana Giusti the landscape design of the villa of Tirana becomes an experimental territory of great interest to reinterpret in a modern way the central nodes of the "Italian style", not only in architecture and in the garden, but in the very conception of unity between external interior, between macro and micro design. (Guisti, 2012).



Figure 2. The plan of Albanian King' Villa Park designed by Pietro Porcinai (Source: Pietro Porcinai archive, Florence, Italy)



Figure 3 Overview of Former King's Palace park today (Source: Asig geoportal AL)

During communism period the landscape was organized according to the ideology of the time, state-owned, and according to urban general plans of the time. The period saw the creation of some of the major public squares and parks for cities. According to Rugg (1994), there are four communist legacies in the Albanian natural and cultural landscapes transformation:

1. Reclamation of Myzeqe Plain;
2. New urban centers;
3. Use of the Drin River as a source of hydroelectricity;
4. The creation of socialist Tirana.

A final type of cultural landscapes emerging during the socialist period is of military character such as; bunkers, tunnels, and other army facilities (Prato 2017). There are 173,371 bunkers documented to have been built till 1983, being still present as unique elements of Albanian cultural landscapes testimony (Stefa and Mydyti, 2012).



Figure 4 Remains of communist time bunkers **(Photo: F. Plaku)**

Albania has experienced enormous changes since the collapse of communism in the beginning of the 1990s to the transition in a democratic society and market economy (Teqja Z et al 2000). After the transition, starting from the 1990s, for over a decade, Albania saw a boom in construction and rise of informal settlements in urban, suburban and rural areas. The big urban pressure of the population moving from rural to urban areas, new building permits without having updated development strategies and City Plans, rise of private car transport and congestion led to the consummation of vast parts of the territory for housing, poorly planned spaces and degradation of the landscape in the process. The landscape was seen as land which could be built upon or used for an economic activity, consumed or it resulted as an accessory of the building.

The need for Landscape architects in Albania

During the last two decades major changes have occurred in the urban areas of the country: in 2007, for the first time in the history of Albania, in urban areas lives the majority of the population; there is a national program aimed at normalizing the chaotic situation created by the uncontrolled movement of people in urban areas; the first serious public investments aimed at improving the situation of urban parks and green areas have begun; in suburban areas there are serious investments for the construction of residential centers with

private gardens. These changes have been associated with an increased awareness of the population about the role and importance of greenery; of urban gardens and parks.

Based on the market demand and trying to use their own professional recourses in the best way, the Agricultural University of Tirana (AUT) in 2013 invited the Polytechnic University to join efforts for a Professional Master in Landscape Architecture, for students coming mainly from horticultural studies or related fields. The Professional Master course in Landscape Architecture aims to offer students a complete training program that provides them with the necessary tools to develop the profession of landscape architect, integrating knowledge and competence in the field of landscape design and management with the ability to collaborate with other professions in the field of architecture, engineering and the natural and agronomic sciences. The program pays special attention to the sustainable development of the environment, always keeping in mind the fact that the landscape is an essential cultural expression of the historical identity of each country (Teqja and Dennis, 2016a).

The main objectives of this program are as follows:

- To meet the growing demands of the labor market for specialists in the field of planning, designing, building and maintaining residential green areas and public parks.
- To re-dimension concepts of horticulture as the science of integrating basic theoretical sciences with the purpose of using garden plants not only for consumption purposes, but also for their use in creating recreational and entertaining environments.
- To approximate the academic curriculum of the Department of Horticulture with that of the analogous departments of the best universities in the world and with the current development trends of these departments in general.
- Increase the competitiveness of the Department of Horticulture and the Agricultural University in general, in attracting quality students from other public and private departments and universities.
- Implement the recommendations of the European Landscape Convention (Firenze, 2000) regarding the training of specialists in the field of landscape recognition and intervention as well as the activation of undergraduate

studies dealing with landscape-related values and those dealing with conservation, management, planning and designing them in order to increase the awareness of landscapes.

One year after starting this program, the department of Horticulture was named the Department of Horticulture and Landscape architecture. The graduated students of this program gave a significant contribution in promoting the profession of landscape architecture in Albania.

In September 2016, the Albanian Parliament adopted the law on Albania's adherence to the European Landscape Convention. By adapting this law Albania is committed, among others, to training for specialists in landscape appraisal and operations; school and university courses which address the values attached to landscapes... (European Landscape Convention, Florence, October 2000). Meanwhile, Albania was one of the few European countries that does not yet have a full degree program in landscape architecture.

Based on the success of the Professional Master and the increasing need for professionals in Landscape Architecture, the AUT has established for the first time in 2018 a bachelor's degree program in Landscape Architecture. In this process there has been an ongoing discussion where Landscape Education is best placed: in Faculty of Architecture and Urban planning of the Polytechnic University or Faculty of Agriculture and Environment of the Agricultural University. If we decide for Agricultural University, what Department should it be? Being so late in developing such a program gives the opportunity to better learn from the experiences of others. So, what is the experience in USA and Europe?

Nowadays landscape architecture is a profession known throughout the world; world-wide represented by the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA) and recognized as a profession registered by the International Labor Organization (ILO). However landscape architecture is a new discipline. It achieved a significant extension to Western Europe's education programs only after World War II. A new wave of undergraduate programs occurred in the 1990s, in Eastern European countries and after 2000 with the adoption of the European Landscape Convention (Teqja and Dennis 2016a; Williams 2013) (Table 1).

Table 1 Ownership and time of establishment of universities that provide a degree in Landscape architecture

World area	No. of Universities	Private	Public	Established		
				Before WWII	After WWII	After 1990
North America	80	13	67	75	5	0
Europe	83	7	76	37	46	19
Asia & Australia	81	27	54	37	44	6
Total	244	47	197	149	95	25

Source: Teqja and Dennis (2016a)

The history of Landscape Architecture programs has shown that its roots go back to horticulture, whereas in other countries it has grown out of environmental sciences or architecture and planning. In Europe landscape architecture education has started from a broad range of higher education institutions such as fine arts, agriculture and forestry and technical universities. In developing landscape architecture programs Albania should follow the best examples of other countries and, as a candidate country; it should try to be in line with European Union developments (Teqja and Dennis, 2016; Williams 2013).

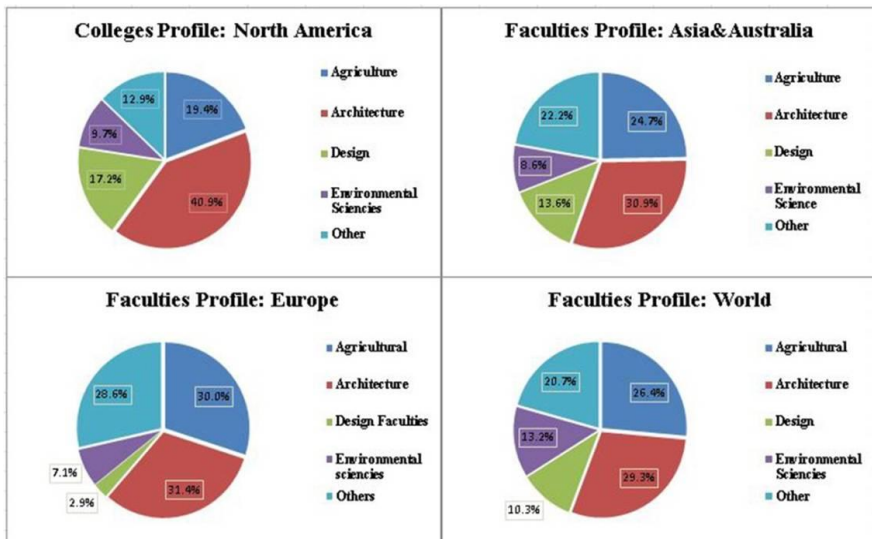


Figure 5 The structure of college and faculty profile in Landscape architecture (Source: Teqja and Dennis 2016a).

A general overview shows that the profile of the faculties offering a degree in landscape architecture is related to two areas: Agriculture and Architecture (Figure 5). When we go down to the department level, then the departments that have in their designation "landscape architecture" have a clear advantage. In most public universities, landscape architecture has begun in agricultural colleges. In the 20th century the profession of landscape architect grew at a speed that few other professions may have had. Landscape architecture education in Europe is more diversified than in the US. To address this situation and to support the Bologna process, in an effort to encourage understanding and collaboration between different schools of landscape architecture, the EU has funded various projects. Among them are: LE: NOTRE, EU-teach, EU-Land21 etc (ASLA 2008, 2016; De Vries and Bruns 2006; ECLAS 2010, 2011; EFLA/IFLA 2008, 2009; EU-Teach, 2011).

Landscape architecture is concerned with the creation and preservation of outdoor space in order to improve and maintain a good and healthy quality of life, while ensuring the survival of the complex natural, physical and cultural systems that make up our planet. Landscape architecture is the art of planning proper land uses and designing built environments based on the knowledge of the natural and cultural characteristics of the place, human needs as well as sound artistic and technical competencies.

The field of landscape architecture includes site design, land use and urban planning at all scales. A landscape architect is normally responsible for organizing and deploying buildings, recreational facilities, roads, leveling and plant planting design. Contemporary landscape architecture programs focus on proper functional and ecological adaptation, using design methods and techniques that work in harmony with and protect the natural environment.

The public careers in landscape architecture include positions in regional planning commissions, counties and municipalities and in parks, recreation and transportation agencies. Private-sector engagement involves the preparation of recreational, residential, commercial, institutional and industrial projects, as well as overall plans for new communities. An important part of a landscape architect's role is environmental protection, historic restoration, and pollution recovery efforts. Places where landscape architects work are

public spaces; the green lungs of our cities, parks and squares, gardens and historic sites, cemeteries and playgrounds. Part of the work of landscape architects is to support national parks, wildlife parks and nature reserves, tackling major current issues and biodiversity challenges, protecting species and habitats, protecting wetlands and climate change.

Another question in this discussion is: Who had fulfilled the above mentioned responsibilities in Albania until now? To answer this question a data base of most influential people of public green spaces during second half of 20th century was prepared (Figure 6). Figure 6 shows clearly that the majority of specialist dealing with green spaces and landscape during last decades where graduated from Agricultural University (Agronomist and forest engineers compose almost half of specialist of this area). This is another argument to support the initiative of starting a bachelor program of landscape architecture at Agricultural University of Tirana. In fact it is an opportunity and a challenge for Agricultural University of Tirana to provide this missed opportunity to Albanian students. The successful realization of the professional master for horticulture students has created the basis for the transition to a full degree program and thus Albania will soon have its landscape architects who will undoubtedly make an important contribution to the improvement of public spaces, parks and gardens and living conditions and the renewal of nature throughout Albania.

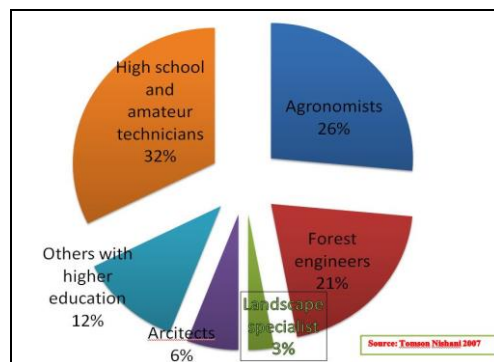


Figure 6 The structure of the most important public green spaces specialists in Albania during communist period.

The challenge of having a studio and research-based program

The effects of the past system, which was highly ideological and focused on transmitting knowledge and creating as much information as possible on the students' brains, are still clear in Albania (Teqja and Dennis 2016b). If we do a quick analysis of the learning environment, we can easily identify a number of problems, which are listing, regardless of their importance, as follows:

- There is a lack of inspiration for students to come up with ideas and information, which help build their recognition as well as the lack of a long lasting impact of the learning process on the way students think, act and feel.
- Learning objectives do not adequately represent the way of thinking and acting that is needed in life; there is a lack of a critical and natural learning environment, an environment where students learn by facing problems or tasks that challenge them in order to rethink their ideas, reassess their assumptions, and evaluate the mental model that they have for the reality.
- Teachers often blame students for the difficulties the teaching process has; they do not always reflect confidence at students; often students do not believe that their work will be judged fairly and honestly; students do not feel that they have secure control over their education etc.

In these circumstances, in order to improve the learning environment in universities, it is good to learn from the experience of advanced countries. The new program takes clues from the past, present and future developments in teaching and practice of Landscape Architecture in other countries. Our efforts to overcome the obstacles presented by the educational system in Albania through curricula that promotes creative, critical and systems-thinking and where studio classes, research and practice had a special place in process of preparing and adapting the new bachelor program of landscape architecture.

In composing the curricula we followed what John Motloch (2001), identifies as four pillars of landscape design education:

1. **Art/aesthetic systems,**
2. **Technological systems,**
3. **Natural systems, and**
4. **Human systems**

The curriculum aims to have a fair balance of courses, design studios and research. The taught courses take the major part of first and second years of studies. While, the third year of studies include elective and design courses at an advanced level. This is the time when the basic skills and theory classes are combined in studio classes that require design solutions commonly addressed by landscape architects. This level is planned to be supported by technical classes related to plants, construction materials, irrigation and other mechanical systems.

The intention of design courses is to apply the newly acquired knowledge of taught courses in the previous semesters and increase students' critical thinking and design skills in the process. The possibility to have a coordinated approach in one semester of taught courses and design studios has been carefully evaluated.

This would result in applying the knowledge acquired directly in studios and results in more complex and developed ideas of students, which will be assisted in the process with the review of all professors involved in taught and design courses.

Table 2 The composition of four Motloch's pillars of landscape design education in the proposal for a bachelor degree of Landscape architecture in Albania

<p>Art/aesthetic systems Basics of drawing and LD by PC Fundamentals of LA; Design Studio; Urban Gardens and Parks Floriculture; Decorative Dendrology.</p>	<p>Human systems Sociology Fundamentals of LA The Basics of Marketing Business Administration Career Management</p>
<p>Natural systems Ecology Inorganic chemistry Physics and Meteorology General & Systematic Botany Biology and Microbiology Organic chemistry Design in Permaculture Landscape Restoration</p>	<p>Technological systems, Fundamentals of Plant & Animal Production Floriculture; Urban Horticulture and landscape Decorative Dendrology; Design Studio Propagation of Ornamental Plants Implemen.of Prjc. & Landscape Maintenance Fundamentals of LA; Turf Management Flowers and Shrubs in Landscape Land and management Pests and Diseases of Ornamental Plants Design in Permaculture ; Landscape Restoration Mechanization in Green Environment Geographic Information Systems Technologies</p>

Three elective modules, professional practice and a final thesis create the opportunities for students to continue studying subjects of their interest; have a practical work experience in the public or private sector and develop research skills.

OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS

The situation of Albania regarding university education in landscape architecture represents both opportunities and limitations. According to our analyses the opportunities are as follow:

- Increasing market demand
- Growing public awareness of the importance of preserving natural habitats and promoting healthy cities
- Qualified human resources for technological systems and natural systems,
- Cooperation with other universities
- Cooperation with the private sector
- Unexplored areas to work for professional opportunities in designs ranging from small to large scale public/private projects of L.A. in a very dynamic social and urban condition of cities and territory of the Albanian context.

At the same time we also face serious limitations. Some of major ones are listed below:

- Lack of tradition and human resources.
- Lack of a Professional Association of Landscape Architects and other supporting institutions.
- Legislative gap of not being yet a recognized profession regulated by Law and licensed by a Governmental Authority or a Professional Association.
- Dominance of other Professions which are regulated by legislation and have the right to apply for building permits to local/central government e.g. Architects, Engineers.

CONCLUSIONS

The short history of landscape planning, design and management; the general situation actually in Albania and the experience that already exists in Agricultural University of Albania provide a good framework

and a solid base for starting a complete and competitive Landscape architecture program.

The alternative of starting with a professional master for horticulture students resulted useful in meeting the growing demands of the labor market for specialists in the field of planning, designing, constructing and maintaining residential green areas and public parks; in evolving the concepts of horticulture as the science of integrating basic theoretical sciences with the purpose of using garden plants not only for consumption purposes, but also for their use in creating recreational and entertaining environments; in increasing the competitiveness of the Department of Horticulture and the Agricultural University in general by attracting students from other public and private departments and universities and helped Albania to Implement some of the recommendations of the European Landscape Convention.

These developments helped the Agricultural university of Tirana to create the potential of starting a complete program of Landscape architecture. The limitations in human resources can be overcome by employing qualified staff, through the good collaboration we already have established with the Polytechnic University of Tirana and through EU projects. Cooperation projects with EU and USA universities would give significant contribution in developing this program to an accredited program of Landscape architecture.

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