



21st Century Landscape Sustainability, Development and Transformations: Geographical Perceptions

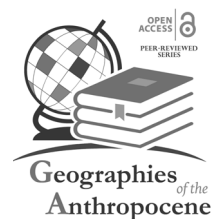
Giovanni Messina, Bresena Kopliku (Eds.)

Preface by Elena dell'Agnese

21st Century Landscape Sustainability, Development and Transformations: Geographical Perceptions

Giovanni Messina, Bresena Kopliku

Editors



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*21st Century Landscape Sustainability, Development and Transformations:
Geographical Perceptions*

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9. Interactions between Cultural Landscape and Gig Economy Reading New Transformations

*Bresena Kopliku, Brikene Dionizi, Elvisa Drishti*¹

Abstract

The increasing reach of digital technologies in social spaces and practices of our daily lives has changed how we perceive and use the landscape. Traditional economic sectors of services, such as transport, tourist accommodation, or personal services have been revolutionized by the emergence of digital service platforms in people's everyday lives. This new and dynamic gig economy labor market is characterized by the prevalence of short-term contracts, freelance work, and independent work arrangements interchangeably affecting the way people work, consume, finance, learn, and interact within the social space. This paper analyses how platforms are affecting the way we live in general and especially how this new lifestyle is reflected in the landscape. Based on a qualitative methodology, the paper argues that the emergence of the gig economy in Albania, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, has had a significant impact on the cultural landscape. 46 semi-structured interviews were conducted with geographically tethered and cloudwork workers to understand and address the geographic dimensions of these changes. This analysis was also complemented by other data about digital platform use and the sharing economy in Albania. The paper explores some of the main intersections between the gig economy and cultural landscape such as the spatial distribution of Gig workers, transportation and mobility, and the urban and rural implications. While the gig economy may be considered as a way out of the brain drain phenomenon in Western Balkans, especially for cloud work, the economic instability of the geographically tethered workers has been identified and recognized as well.

Keywords: *Albania; gig economy; social space; cultural landscape.*

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1. Introduction

The increasing reach of digital technologies in the social spaces and practices of our daily lives has changed the landscape and the way we perceive and use it. Landscapes are continuously changing over time because of the dynamic interaction between natural and cultural forces in the environment. The ways in which driving forces like accessibility, urbanization, globalization, and the impact of natural disasters have combined affect the nature and pace of these changes, as well as people's perceptions of the landscape. As a result, values are transformed and so is the way in which people use and shape the landscape (Antrop, 2005). A landscape has its own history, but it can only be understood as a fragment of a larger history of economy and society. It also has its own set of presumptions and consequences, but these presumptions and consequences have origins and implications that go well beyond how land is used and perceived (Cosgrove, 1998). The role of nature has been marginalized as human and economic forces increasingly interact to shape landscapes (Greffé, 2009). The digital revolution has changed drastically in nowadays industry. Information technology is significantly influencing the transformation of spatial structures (Meşhur, 2013). The era of digitalization has additionally heightened the interest of geographers, among others, in examining the numerous implications of geography on technological advancements (Ash *et. al* 20016; Ash *et. al* 2019; Castells 1996). In the words of Ash et al. (2016) geography has undergone a 'digital turn'. The digital economy has created a novelty and a variety of new professions influencing the employment traditional landscape and the labor market features. The perception of the traditional division between home, work, and leisure has also changed, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic. Digital technologies are challenging the notions of place-based identity as defined by a shared location, and geographers study how people reorganize socio-spatial relations between different activities, such as work, rest, and mobility, as well as between different family members, such as adults and children. In each case, pre-existing social relations are not eliminated but rather changed by the shifting geographies of the digital age (Ash *et al.*, 2016). Within the expansive domain of digitization and economic geography, this paper specifically delves into the correlation between the physical landscape and the gig economy. The rise of digital labor platforms, which comprise both web-based platforms—where work is outsourced through an open call to a geographically dispersed crowd, or “crowd work”—and location-based applications (apps), which assign work to individuals in a specific

geographic area, has been one of the most notable changes in the world of work over the past ten years (Berg *et al.*, 2018). There was a significant shift in people's desire and aspirations from blue-collar to white-collar jobs, along with related changes to their means of subsistence, standard of living, and lifestyles (Mukherjee & Narang, 2022). This new employment structure takes two main forms: (i) Remote service platforms – the digital labor platforms where services are provided remotely and transmitted electronically as various freelance marketplaces where tasks are completed online and (ii) On-location service platforms – the actual service delivery occurring in person, but the connection between consumers and service providers, as well as administrative tasks, facilitated through digital means. The gig economy refers to a labor market characterized by the prevalence of short-term contracts, freelance work, and independent, often digital, work arrangements. “People use apps [also commonly known as platforms] to sell their labor” and to earn income from short-term, on-demand assignments (Department for Business and Trade, 2018; Bryson *et al.*, 2018). Gig workers are hired through platforms for tasks that are typically completed offline, such as food delivery, house repairs, ride-hailing, and caregiving. This kind of work, which also includes odd jobs and day labor, is in high demand. The gig worker gets autonomy and schedule flexibility, which the companies frequently promote (Vallas & Schor, 2020). Although sharing economy activities have created challenges to labor and economic practices, it is important to recognize that they are also having increasingly significant effects on planning policy and urban governance. These economic activities are having profound impacts on urban environments as they disrupt traditional forms of hospitality, transport, service industry, and housing (Ferrerri & Sanyal, 2018; Bryson *et al.*, 2018). This article investigates key intersections among digitalization, the gig economy, and the cultural landscape. Drawing from qualitative research, through in-depth interviews with various types of gig workers, it is argued how the organization of gig economy work is mirrored in the cultural landscape.

2. Methodology

The article is based on empirical data which comprise 30 semi-structured interviews with platform workers working for six platforms in Albania operating in ride-hailing, food delivery, and e-commerce. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. In addition, 16 in-depth interviews were conducted with cloudwork professionals. All the interviews were recorded

after securing interviewees' permission. The interviews were then transcribed to enable further analysis. Notes were also taken during the interviews to use in the data analysis. After this first phase, the interviews were coded and analyzed manually by using some main key terms, such as- work – life balance, physical challenges, organization of work, and intensity of work. Two focus groups were also part of the data collection. Focus groups were organized with 12 stakeholders of the gigeconomy sectors working in the management, academics, workers' human rights activists, and public institutions representatives. The interviews and the focus groups were conducted during six months of fieldwork, November 2022 to April 2023, mainly in Tirana as the capital city, and also in Shkodra and were realized in the framework of the research projects "Fairwork"² and "Open Western Balkan Collaboratory on Online Platform Work: Serbia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina PN5- 0523".

3. The digitalization of economy in Albania

With the widespread use of mobile technology and internet access in the early 2010s, Albania's online platform economy began to take shape and expand exponentially. This expansion accelerated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, reshaping the economy and labor market development (Kasimati, 2022). Eurostat reports that 98.4% of residential buildings in Albania possess at least one internet-connected device, indicating a widespread communication network across the nation's territory (Latifi,

² Fairwork is a project run out of the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford and the WZB Berlin Social Science Center, and draws on the expertise and experience of staff at Access to Knowledge for Development Center (A2K4D) at the American University in Cairo's School of Business, Audencia Business School, Center for Development Evaluation and Social Science Research (CREDI), Center for Health Consultation and Community Development (CHD), Centre for Labour Research, CIPG Innovation Policy Governance, CREDI, De La Salle University, FLACSO Ecuador, Institute for a Fair Economy, International Institute of Information Technology Bangalore (IIITB), International University of Rabat, iSocial, KU Leuven, Lagos Business School, Luigj Gurakuqi University of Shkodër, Observatorio de Plataformas Perú, Phenix Center for Economics & Informatics Studies, Pollicy, Public Policy Research Center (CENTAR), Qhala, REPOA, Sapienza University of Rome, TEDIC, The Policy Initiative, TU Wien, Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, Universidad Católica del Uruguay, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Universidad del Rosario, University of California College of the Law, San Francisco, University of Manchester, and University of São Paulo.

³ More information on the report on

<https://repeople.rs/unpacking-the-potentials-of-the-platform-economy-in-albania/>

2024). The digitalisation of the economy in Albania has led to the establishment of different digital platforms, especially after 2010 which enjoyed a significant popularity increase in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Online shopping, in particular, has revolutionized the predominantly bricks and mortar high street retail environment dominant in the Albanian context; simultaneously expanding the range and segmentation of customers – and thus creating new jobs for platform workers – whilst also undermining the high street (Fairwork, 2023). This expansion has occurred through platform capitalism's disruption of traditional business models and the emergence of new ways of doing business such as food delivery, ride-hailing, cleaning, cargo transport, online shopping delivery, and e-commerce. The digitalization of work in Albania has increased rapidly with the emergence of so-called “cloud work” (online work that can be done from anywhere around the globe) and location-based (geographically tethered) platform work that must be done in place, like ride-hailing or logistics. The platform economy's development in Albania can be attributed to various factors, such as technological advancements, globalization, governmental policies, and a growing demand for flexible work arrangements. The use of the Internet, as the basic necessary part for the functioning of this sector, is now part of the work landscape and it has changed the way work is organized. According to INSTAT (2023), enterprises with ten or more employees who have used computers with internet access for work purposes during 2023, represent 99.1% of enterprises, from 98.7% that resulted in 2022. The highest percentage of employees who use a computer with Internet access is observed in the information and communication activity at 72.3%, followed by professional, scientific, and technical activities at 64.9% and administrative services and support at 56.3%. In 2023, 14.8% of enterprises sold products/services via websites, apps dedicated, e-commerce websites, and applications used by various enterprises for product trade. The largest share of e-commerce is occupied by companies operating in the field of information and communication with 31.7%, followed by accommodation and service activities food with 30.7%, and administrative and support services with 25.7% (INSTAT, 2023). Even within construction regulations, it is specified that every newly constructed building must allocate space for a high-speed internet network. This means that new buildings, or buildings for offices and businesses must be equipped with an internal infrastructure that allows the installation of optical fibers and various cables up to the user (Balkanweb, 2018). Urban landscapes are enriched today with small postal service shops for online sales that prefer to choose locations close to each other, taxi cars with different colors and various typologies,

and various bicycles and motorbikes with all kinds of ergonomic baskets.

Different resources reveal the dynamic and growing gig economy in Albania. According to the data from Gigmetar⁴, in October 2023 Albania reported growth in both platforms at 3.4 and 10.3 percent, respectively. Albania is the only country in the region to defy the regional decreasing trend, which saw a significant increase in the number of freelancers (10.3%) (Public Policy Research Center, 2024). These results also show that only Albania experienced growth, with its number of freelancers per 100,000 people rising by 30. Albania was the only exception, moving up from third to second place in the rankings with 297 freelancers per 100,000 people, owing to a sizable increase in the number of gig workers (Public Policy Research Center, 2024).

4. Cultural landscape and gig economy – toward new transformations

What does the digital economy increase mean for the Albanian cultural landscape and what changes are identified in the landscape? People are affected by digital transformation in different ways, but one thing that is certain is that human society is in the midst of a fundamental process of change that is affecting the economy, politics, science, society, and individuals, and that goes far beyond the technological developments initially perceived. The developments are fast, diverse, complex, and frequently contradictory (Thomas, 2020). These developments are numerous and so interconnected with each other that it is difficult to determine the weight of the digital economy in these changes per se. The distinct main effects are noted in the relationship between transportation and mobility, the spatial distribution of the gig workers, and the urban dominance of the phenomenon.

4.1 Transportation and mobility –

With the advent of the digital age, many aspects of our lives have undergone tremendous change, most notably the way we work. The traditional employment landscape has been fundamentally altered by the emergence of the so-called “gig economy.” Through gig work, employers can hire workers only when needed, at specific times when workers are available to

⁴ [Gigmetar](#)TM is the first instrument that describes the geography of digital work in Serbia and the region in terms of gender, income, and most common occupations. It is a result of the efforts made by [the Public Policy Research Centre](#) (CENTAR) to shed more light on the work on online platforms.

finish particular tasks. This reduces labor costs for the business but increases worker precarity, especially for low-skilled workers (Raekstad, 2022). The mobility intensified by the gig economy, especially in food delivery, ride-hailing and e-commerce is exerting pressure on today's urban landscape. European cities were developed before the era of the private automobile, meaning that nowadays they are denser, more crowded, and have more stores and eateries that are easily accessible on foot. Because of the increased traffic, complicated road networks, and sometimes very challenging parking, each "gig" takes longer to complete (and get paid for) (Sfez, 2021). In the urban landscape, especially of the capital city Tirana, the introduction of platform work can be distinguished in the increasing number of taxis, motorcycles, and bicycles placing strain on the city's infrastructure. This is particularly exacerbated in busy cosmopolitan areas with a high density of workplaces and restaurants. Urban mobility with increased traffic congestion, food delivery workers, and taxi drivers, peaking during lunchtime is evidence of the way the sharing economy is acting as an agent of transformation. This is particularly exacerbated in busy cosmopolitan areas with a high density of workplaces and restaurants. Urban mobility with increased traffic congestion, food delivery workers and taxi drivers, peaking during lunch time is an evidence of the way sharing economy is acting as an agent of transformation



Foto 1: Food delivery driver and motorcycles in the street of Tirana



Foto 2: Traffic in Tirana on an ordinary weekday

Alban (M, 33, food delivery) *From the moment you begin to drive the motorcycle, you only have challenges, especially physical security challenges. 7 hours of only stress. There are many difficulties, the rain, the sun, we are all the time on the road, the cars, we have to be very careful, everywhere.*

Serjon (M, 22, food delivery) *The main challenge? the traffic, of course, is a total mess and we have to keep our mind on car drivers, pedestrians, bicycles and whatnot. Meantime, I also have to greet people as I speed by as I need to keep a good relationship with people so that they can leave me good tips.*

One of the main distinct features of the platform economy is that tasks are delivered based on the work performance of the driver, which is the time from one delivery to the other. High degrees of flexibility, autonomy, task variety, and complexity are typically provided by algorithmic management techniques. Workers are rated after tasks are completed by their clients and

workers with the best ratings and the most experience tended to receive more work due to clients' preferences and the platforms' algorithmic ranking of workers within search results. In terms of job quality, this entails a lack of worker autonomy combined with high levels of work intensity (Wood *et. al* 2018). On the other hand, these control mechanisms may also lead to low pay, social isolation, working unsociable and irregular hours, overwork, sleep deprivation, and exhaustion (Wood et al., 2018; Popan 2023). This mode of control prompts drivers to go faster, to find the shortest routes, and therefore to be more resistant to accidents during work.

Jon (M, 38, food delivery) *“GPS is good, but you have to know Tirana, its roads, addresses and traffic because the performance depends on how quickly the orders are delivered. It's the algorithm, that is like a person looking at the system, that does the ranking automatically.”*

Marjan (M, 28, food delivery) *You are rated based on your performance, how quickly you place orders, and how correct you are with the customer, it's an algorithm that is like a person looking at the system, whether is it delaying orders or not, correctness with e-mail. A ranking is done automatically in the system based on performance, so depending on the ranking the orders are also distributed by the system.*

4.2 *The spatial distribution of Gig workers and workplace*

The pervasiveness of digital technologies has meant that they have replaced the intermediaries in our day-to-day routines related to work, travel, consumption, production, and leisure. The modern information economy has also brought about changes in the spatial organization of businesses and employment patterns that were previously dependent on processes of concentration and dispersal (Mukherjee & Narang, 2022). One of the positive benefits of crowd work is the ability to set one's schedule and work from home or another location of their choice. Crowdwork can offer a high degree of flexibility for workers in terms of the selection of tasks, how much one works, the place of work, and the organization of one's work (Berg et al., 2018). In addition to remote work becoming more and more common in established businesses, an increasing number of professionals are becoming “internationalized”—that is, working from Albania for foreign-based companies (Kasimati, 2022). The owners of digital platforms may be located on a different continent than the employees, who may not always

be aware of their employer. Several companies offer a common workplace for gig workers, especially cloud workers, who are employed in different companies around the world. Their main goal is to create a social space where workers can interact and make the difference between work and leisure. Therefore, suitable structures have been built, in the form of business centers, where the employees pay only a part of the rent and in exchange use the relevant logistics and associate with other employees. Eri's day is organized between three workplaces, including a shared big work environment.

Eri (37, M, IT, Upwork) *I have three workplaces. One is a place where I work with other 24 people, each with his own specialty, design, webmaster, IT, etc.; at home of course; and an international organization which I worked for, but this is not remote work.* Such structures have also been built for platform employees where they gather in the morning and wait for orders in the app. The structures are equipped with parking spaces, rest facilities, a cafeteria, and places to charge phones.

Oni (28, M, food delivery) *I have my own schedule, we have the application that gives us online orders, we go online, we sit at our place of motorists and there we wait for the order to be sent to us by the app...*

Workers appreciate the ability to set their own schedules and work from home. According to the surveys carried out by ILO (2018), many crowd workers worked atypical hours: 36 percent regularly worked seven days per week; 43 percent reported working during the night, and 68 percent reported working during the evening (6 p.m. to 10 p.m.), either in response to task availability (and differences in time zones) or because of other commitments. Many women combined crowdwork with care responsibilities (Berg *et al.*, 2018). One in five of the female workers in the sample had small children (0 to 5 years old). Despite this, these women worked 20 hours a week on the platform, which was just five hours less than the sample as a whole; many of them worked at night and in the evenings (Berg *et al.*, 2018). However, there was a drawback to this independence in that working from home could also result in social isolation. As confirmed by other studies as well (Wood *et al.*, 2018), one of the main themes of the interviews with some employees was how lonely it can be to work without interacting with others. To avoid this dissatisfaction, many employees, mainly cloud workers, choose to work for several employers, on-site and online. Precarity, the gig economy, and the continuous growth of insecure temporary work will continue to influence the

nature of employment in the 2020s (Duke, 2023). The combination of several jobs at the same time is possible for the moment because of the gap in the legal regulations for the gig economy.

4.3 Urban and rural implications

With better access to technology and a larger customer base, gig workers are prevalent in dominant areas contributing further to urbanization. According to the ILO (2018) surveys four out of five workers live in an urban or suburban area, which shows that crowdworking is primarily an urban phenomenon (Berg *et al.*, 2018). The increasing digitalization in the urban area has already impacted the landscape through the call centers which have been poles of attraction for the youngsters since their emerging in 2010. The Call Center sector took off in Albania after 2010 when many companies, mainly Italian, moved their activity to our country due to low labor costs and many people had knowledge of the Italian language. The call center sector experienced rapid expansion where, from 382 companies operating in 2011, their number jumped to 848 in 2015, the highest number in the country. Along with the increase in numbers, the weight of the sector's employment in the economy also increased, becoming the savior of many young people, who were managing to secure salaries above the average labor market in Albania (Loga, 2019). This intensification also appeared in the landscape with the typical designations of companies, and buildings suitable for such a profession. Adapting to the age of the target group employed in this sector, 20-35 years old, the call center structures were surrounded by cafeterias and fast food services. In the following years, the employment rate in this sector dropped significantly because of the digitization which reduced the need for customer services. Companies are now creating less human and more technological products, where part of the work processes are being automated. The market for call center services is moving from product sales to digital marketing. The number of employees in call center companies, once an oasis for the employment of young people, has started to shrink. According to DPT data, by September 2022, 12,404 employees will be employed in call center companies, with a decrease of 18% compared to the end of 2021 (Azo, 2023). Another orientation of the economy in Albania that is attracting young people to Tirana is that of the platform economy. Five of the six platforms studied in this research had their headquarters in Tirana. In addition to other pull factors, platforms being concentrated in the capital city affect also internal migration toward Tirana, especially for youngsters

from the secondary cities and rural areas. 80% of our interviewees come from the peripheral areas of Tirana or from other cities in Albania. According to Qiao *et. al* (2023), ride-hailing platforms do not liberate gig workers from the structural rural-urban disparities but rather form a continuation of the structural barriers and discrimination in the division of labor, even though the technological innovation discourse in the platform economy argues that the gig driving can attract the well-educated and other minorities. Gig drivers are more likely to come from neighborhoods with lower income and less regular job opportunities (Qiao *et al.*, 2023). In terms of geography, digital labor platforms are mainly concentrated in the capital city, Tirana, reflecting Tirana's dominance in Albania as the capital, but also where wealth, jobs, and cultural events are centralized, and as home to the largest population in the country. As such, the regional inequalities of accumulated economic wealth and resources in Tirana create the strongest consumer market, while peripheral regions experience a lack of investment and development. This is clearly evident in the food delivery sector (Fairwork, 2023). This also impacts workers, with people coming from secondary cities or rural areas to live in Tirana and enter the labor market, constituting a higher percentage of drivers and couriers.

Alban (M, 33, food delivery) I am from Librazhd. After finishing high school, I emigrated to Greece and then returned to Albania. I couldn't go back to Librazhd, there are no jobs there. So 9 years ago I came to Tirana, for work. I began working first in construction and then in food delivery. I don't think I can find any better job for myself, if I decide to change, I will emigrate again.

While the gig economy may be considered as a way out of the brain drain phenomenon in Western Balkans, especially for cloud work, the economic instability of the geographically tethered workers has been identified and recognized as well (Public Policy Research Center, 2024). The emergence of digital nomads in the labor market has also affected the way touristic social spaces are perceived, especially in smaller cities and rural areas.

Conclusions

Landscapes are dynamic, they change over time and economic factors are the main causes of this change. The gig economy is considered a transformative force in the modern working landscape and is a complex and

rapidly evolving phenomenon. The emergence of digital labor platforms, which comprise both web-based platforms where work is outsourced through an open call to a geographically dispersed crowd (“crowdwork”) and location-based applications (apps) that assign work to individuals in a specific geographical area, has been one of the most notable transformations in the world of work during the past ten years. In addition to the employment landscape, this emergence has had its impact on the cultural landscape as well. The main interactions between the gig economy and landscape are seen in the changes in transport and mobility in the urban areas, the spatial distribution of the gig workers, and the urban concentration of the phenomenon. The landscape of the capital city, Tirana, is dominated by ride-hailing or food delivery with many gig-workers that are involved in transportation services, especially in the city center and lively neighborhoods. Urban mobility with increased traffic congestion, food delivery workers, and taxi drivers, peaking during lunch time is evidence of the way the sharing economy is acting as an agent of transformation. The gig economy has changed where people work and how they work. The traditional relationship between workplace and home has also changed. In addition to other pull factors, platforms being concentrated in the capital city affect also internal migration toward Tirana, especially for youngsters from the secondary cities and rural areas.

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Territories continue to transform due to endogenous and exogenous development drives. The thickening of logistics and transport networks, large commercial hubs, energy supply options, agricultural and industrial policies, tourism and migrations constitute then, individually and in a systemic sense, some of the lenses available to read the transformative dynamics of territories in the crucial current geopolitical context. In addition, the increasing reach of digital technologies in the spaces and practices of our daily lives, has changed the way we perceive and use the landscape. These transformations find a reified outcome in landscape transitions, becoming a foothold for a trans-scale geographical reflection. We therefore want to insert this volume on this horizon. In fact, we have wanted to stimulate the geographical community to try their hand at landscape analysis to identify, through methodological and/or applied research contributions, problems, practices and trajectories inherent in the transformative dynamics of territories, compressed between the urgency of development and the need to change the energy and consumption paradigm.

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