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ON BALKAN VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE – SIMILARITY OF DIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the authors attempt to raise the issue of willingness of the practicing architects of this area to analyze the genesis and architectonic context of vernacular architecture of the Balkan Peninsula and give their opinion about it. Observing the fact that there is a large number of countries geographically belonging to the Balkan region, the authors decided to present the potential of this “simple architecture” created in the “central area” of the Balkans by using only the examples of Bulgaria and Serbia. The relationship towards past in general, and thus towards the architecture of the past of these countries is specific in many respects. The paper presents the relationship of the authors towards this peculiar Balkan architectonic style, viewing it primarily as a premise of architectonic communication. The discussion on the topic of vernacular architecture of the Balkans is based by the authors of this text on *indigenous knowledge embedded in the aboriginal architectonic traditions of this region.*

1. Introduction

Globalization permeates the world of architecture in the same way it permeates all the aspects of life. In its focus is the new philosophy of functional-esthetic formation of space and a need for creation of a new urbarchitectonic culture reflected in the design of a “new space“, space of the future, articulated by non-stereotypical architectonic-sculptural forms. It is the authors' opinion, supported by the experience so far, that being different at all costs, unless

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clearly documented, threatens to evolve into a degradation of knowledge acquired on the basis of understanding all the civilizational heritage, which by no means excludes the acquired knowledge about architecture of a space. The architecture of the Balkan area, viewed not only in the historical context, bases its past on the similar-different and different-similar foundations. It is generated by the same needs, same thinking and same desires. It is inspired by the “same nature”, built by the “same hand”, certified with the same “architectonic signature”, in different areas of the Balkans, by different builders but with fascinating similarity. Such architectonic-building similarity questions all potential differences.

Descriptive acceptable and very clear message on the topic is given by Thomas Waldruff head of GTZ Coordination Office Director, in the introductory part of the publication *Architectural Atlas of Montenegro – Recommendations for Construction*:

„Considering the fact that the idea of formulation of professional guidelines is based on elements of architecture as regional typological characteristics, these guidelines are not aspiring to suggest any typical or unified project solutions, as administrative instruments limiting creativity in architecture.

When designing new projects, as well as when reconstructing the existing ones, long-standing neglecting of legal regulation is noticed. The result of badly thought-out new construction and bad reconstruction of traditional architecture is devastation and erosion of areas and cultural heritage.

Actual treatment of construction heritage and landscape in total, both natural and cultural, supports reaffirmation of local identities and particularities. Modern needs and new technologies impose application of local construction patterns as based principle in relation to tradition, which implies reinterpretation not imitation, with preservation of ambient qualities.

Old houses, examples of traditional construction, individual or in groups, create pictorially and historically valuable ambient. New owners buy old objects mainly because of their location. New functions are given to objects, and then their adjustments are started.

The objects are being overbuilt, extended. Instead of selecting the function in accordance with the limitations of the objects, the contrary procedure happens which leads from given function and capacities towards reconstruction and renewal, which results in aggressive interventions on objects and in space“ [1].

Bulgaria and Serbia are perhaps the definitive in every meaning Balkan countries. The Balkan mountain range (partly in Serbia like the Old Mountain) that gave the peninsula its name runs through the „heart“ of Bulgaria. Definitely there are many definitions of what exactly constitutes „the Balkans“, but every one of those definitions includes Bulgaria and Serbia.

With no bias, basing on the fact that the regional ties of these two areas and historical causality are sole motives of the presented rhetorical discourse, we express our immense respect for all the (un)known Balkan builders who knew how to interpret history in creative terms, and to find in it what is constant and precious, what does not disrupt the necessary originality of any architecture in its own time, and in its culture, with its authentic time and geography [2].

2. Balkan Vernacular Architecture – Principles of Primary Articulation

By analyzing the architecture and the typological characteristics of the Balkan vernacular architecture, a conclusion can be drawn that the basic principle of local construction patterns is based on the model “nature knows better”. By using the coloration range and shades already present in their natural environment, the builders-creators confirm the previous

assumption. Natural macro-geographic and micro-location characteristics are analyzed, leaving a strong coloration mark to the latter house architecture.

„We must observe geography and our position on this planet as an inevitability and start the construction with this in mind. By this, we sustain continuity. Preservation of continuity is not an ‘ism’, nor anyone’s patriotism but a logical, necessary and conditioned behavior if we care about reason, and not about fancy and cheap exhibitionism. The marriage of contemporary and inherited and their fusion is the most difficult but the most valuable thing in the culture of a people“ [3].

The authors advocate the thesis that, hypothetically, the vernacular architecture of the Balkan region is probably articulated based on the following principles: **materialisation principle** (material availability principle), **coloration principle** (availability of color choice) and **mimicry-mimezis principle** (relationship to the surroundings principle – ”spirit of place”).

The first principle – the **materialisation principle** (Fig. 1).

This principle is a logical consequence of the natural sites (natural location of the region). Namely, implementation of the material is directly related to “existence” of the material in the immediate environment. Therefore, morphological-geological heritage and natural materials which were on hand determine materialisation of the Balkan vernacular architecture (Fig. 1). Materials which can be characterized as archetype or original model dominate the architecture of these buildings. The space characterized by four primordial elements, stone, wood, earth and water more than axiomatically determine the articulation of the then buildings and of other architectonic structures. As an exception that proves the rule, occurrence of white facades is a result of evolution and usage of limestone for architectonic-construction purposes. The first use of lime was probably whitewashing of houses, which was used to send a clear message of bonhomie, sincerity, pureness and proverbial hospitality of their dwellers. White houses sent a color-coded message of good intentions and of a wish to live in harmony with the nature [4].



Figure 1. Material availability principle

The second principle – the **coloration principle** (Fig. 2).

This principle is a logical consequence of the previous one. Such permanent or temporary similarity in materialisation and other external features with the surrounding clearly determines the coloration of the „outer skin“ of the Balkan vernacular architecture (Fig. 2). The color palette definitely determines the earth color and it can be [5]:

- Earth color (includes shades of brown colors).
- Wood color (includes shades of brown-green colors).
- Stone color (includes shades of brown-gray color).
- Water color (includes shades of light-blue-white color).

Description of earthtone colors come from natural things around us: green-brown wood, brown soil, green leaf, cloudy-blue sky, as well as yellow-red sun. These palettes can create a warm, nature-friendly atmosphere.

- Meanings: Warm, safe, protective, sturdy, durable, rough.
- Implications: Earthy, environmental, welcoming, bold.
- Associations: Soil, forest, wood, countryside.



Figure 2. Coloration principle

The third principle – the **mimicry-mimezis principle** (Fig. 3).

Mimicry (Greek mimikos - mimicking) represents a permanent or temporary similarity of elements in shape, color or other external properties with their surrounding, making it difficult to distinguish between them, although there is no other connection, except for these external similarities. The terms mimicry and mimesis are often equated; although apart from their similarity, in meaning they are essentially different. The term mimicry is used when talking about mimicking in nature, i.e. species that are mimicking visual or other characteristics of each other, while the term mimesis is related more to art terminology and represents mimicking in a wider sense.

Therefore, this principle reflected in the very successful „imitation“ that is, in adapting of houses to their surroundings, creating in this way an effect of „mimicry“ blending with the

environment (Fig. 3). This principle allows for the primary architectonic articulation of „house“ in shelter from natural and other influences. The roofs of these houses covered by stone plates and the walls plastered with mud probably almost „perfectly conceal“ a house, allowing it in this way to be a safe refuge for its dwellers.

In the paper *VISUAL EXPRESSION AND ARCHITECTURE*, Djordje Alfirevic gives his observation on Mimesis in architecture, with which the authors fully agree:

„True architecture is always a reflection of space. Regardless of when it was created, it is as if it had always been there (Aleš Vodopivec). Considering the fact that in architecture compared to other arts, the degree of limitation, which is conditioned by factors of time and place is greater, the question arises as to whether it is at all possible to depart from mimesis, because the structure must be adjusted to the needs of the beneficiaries in order to be called architecture in the first place. Therefore, it can be concluded that mimesis (understood in its widest sense) is in the essence of each architectural creation; it is only a question of how widely it is interpreted. Only when a structure is positioned in a certain place, and when the regulations are met together with the other location conditions (mimesis in its wider sense), there is a possibility of applying mimesis in its narrower sense, as well as associativity and expression, which are reflected in the layout and elevation (”plastics” and materialization). Compared to art in general, the notion of mimesis in architecture is widely interpreted. Three main categories of mimetism can be singled out as follows: 1. Mimicry of structures means copying elements of a certain style or complete architectural shapes from immediate surroundings or a wider surrounding area. 2. Mimicry of surroundings implies a visual unity with or the ”disappearance” in the natural or artificial surroundings – principle of dematerialization (Čarapić, 2008). 3. Development in the ”spirit of the place” (genius loci) is the main principle of contextualism, as the highest level of mimesis“ [6].



Figure 3. The mimicry (mimesis) principle

3. Balkan Vernacular Architecture – Examples (selective display)

Analysis of discourse of similarity or diversity in Balkan architecture, based on equalization with the particularities resulting from the „language“ (in all directions) characteristics of a spatial-geographical entity, through analogy possibly defines the initial hypothesis which describes the concept of the vernacular architecture of this region. Without pretensions to conceptually redefine vernacular architecture, we find that, at least in part, it coincides with the definition of language as a spatial definition, i.e. as a spatial definition – chronotope of a region in the widest and narrowest possible terms.

The architect Slobodan Maldini, in the text “Vocabulary of architectonic designing” defines the concept of vernacular architecture as: *„The term for architecture created on the foundations of a separate tradition inside a region which is separate in geographical or cultural-civilizational terms. Vernacular architecture is traditional architecture, but also architecture of a specific style which is characteristic for a certain area. Vernacular architecture is not pretentious, it is simple, homely, innate, those are traditional structures made of local materials constructed following the well-known forms and types. Contemporary architecture did not reject commercial vernacular expression, as much as it attempted to conquer it by creating and strengthening its own autochthonic expression, improved and universal. It rejected the possibility of combining fine and unrefined“* [7].

On the other hand, the document “Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage” ICOMOS- a (International Council on Monuments and Sites) defines the concept vernacular heritage, which through its meaning affirms culture of a certain people or community: *„The built vernacular heritage occupies a central place in the affection and pride of all peoples. It has been accepted as a characteristic and attractive product of society. It appears informal, but nevertheless orderly. It is utilitarian and at the same time possesses interest and beauty. It is a focus of contemporary life and at the same time a record of the history of society. Although it is the work of man it is also the creation of time. It would be unworthy of the heritage of man if care were not taken to conserve these traditional harmonies which constitute the core of man's own existence“*. In the same document it is emphasized that *“the built vernacular heritage is the fundamental expression of the culture of a community, of its relationship with its territory and, at the same time, the expression of the world's cultural diversity”* and stresses that *“it is a continuing process including necessary changes and continuous adaptation as a response to social and environmental constraints.*

All the mentioned definitions which were given for: village architecture; architecture of rural areas; popular building; master building; popular architecture; traditional building; traditional architecture; vernacular built heritage; vernacular architecture do not differ in what they signify or include, but in terms of focus on certain aspects of that kind of heritage and on what is considered its most valuable segment“ [8].

The aim of this discursive study is not towards a theoretical definition of the Bulgarian and Serbian vernacular architecture, but one kind of analysis of the dominant architectural strategies in the design of domestic structures, which determinate the Balkan vernacular architecture. After identifying the formal characteristics and principals of articulation of the Balkan vernacular architecture, the goal is to display the examples of continuity of those strategies. For this purpose, not only landmark-buildings will be presented but also little-known examples will be considered. This will serve to establish the idea of a continuous architectonic style as the common architecture of the Balkan region, with similarity of diversity much more than dissimilarity.

The displayed examples of traditional vernacular architecture (Fig. 4 and 7) date from the different time and different places. Starting from the late XVIII century to the second half of the XIX century. They are encountered in rural, small-town and urban environments. They

exhibit a remarkable degree of basic uniformity of design: simplicity of assemblage, lightness, cleanness of form and expressive monumentality, which essentially represents the most durable characteristics of the Bulgarian and Serbian vernacular architecture. On the other side, unlike the previous, examples of Bulgarian (Fig. 5 and 6) and Serbian (Fig. 8 and 9) contemporary vernacular architecture (NEOVERNACULAR) which are displayed in this article are with a distinctively personalised selection.

3.1. Bulgarian and Serbian Vernacular Architecture – Before and After



Figure 4. Bulgarian vernacular architecture – before
<http://www.balkanarchitecture.org/bulgaria/bulgaria.php>



Figure 5. Bulgarian vernacular architecture – after
<https://www.dezeen.com/2015/10/23/observation-house-io-architects-gabion-walls-viewing-deck-bulgaria/>



Figure 6. Bulgarian vernacular architecture – after
https://www.e-architect.co.uk/images/jpgs/bulgaria/stone_house_ioa110309_1.jpg
<http://www.4da.net/blog11.html>



Figure 7. Serbian vernacular architecture – before
<http://www.balkanarchitecture.org/serbia/serbia.php>



Figure 8. Serbian vernacular architecture – after
<https://www.ignant.com/2015/11/25/an-asymmetrical-mountainside-home-in-serbia-by-exe-studio/>
<http://miesarch.com/work/1878>



Figure 9. Serbian vernacular architecture – after
<http://www.kucastil.rs/kuce/eko-kuce-porodicni-biseri-iz-srbije-i-hrvatske>

4. Conclusion

The present-day hypertrophy of architectonic form and insisting on the amorphous and metabolic in architecture, toward the authors' personal views, have strong influence on the context and sustainability. With respect to the fact that the key phase of decision on „architectonic intervention“ in the space is realized in the sphere of design process and spatial invention, the thematic frame of this article is brought down on discursive discussion of architecture which makes the basic characteristic of the Balkan vernacular architecture. This

paper is a small contribution attempting to “mediation in discussion” about this architecture and her return from the state of “hibernation” and her influence on the contemporary vernacular (NEO-VERNACULAR). And in the end, instead of the conclusion, we will quote prof. Ranko Radovic, whose words reflect all what we think and feel: „No surprise, therefore, that the so-called NEO-VERNACULAR tendency is one of the five most important in today's TRANSMODERN architecture everywhere in the world. We do not have other sources and other resources apart from our soil, hills, climates, nature, house and village, perspective, plants and water, where they're hiding the true and safest sources of future developments, including the future of architecture and cities.“ To this we add our initial attitude, that the wealth of our architectural past (Balkan vernacular architecture) is based on countless similar diversity and different similarities.

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