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ARCHALP

Rivista internazionale di architettura e paesaggio alpino / Revue internationale d'architecture et de paysage dans les Alpes / Internationale Zeitschrift für Alpine Architektur und Landschaft / Revija za alpsko arhitekturo in pokrajino / International journal of alpine architecture and landscape

Le altre montagne

Les autres montagnes / Die anderen Berge
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o **kristić**/andrej **strehovec**/
nan **loher**/eltjana **shkreli**/

3. MEMORIĀ





Bits and pieces on the “phenomenology” of Balkan highland architecture

Discussing the phenomenon of the Balkans is always a delicate task. The term is elusive and can be understood in different ways, from the geographical and cultural to the political context.

The Balkans is an area of great strategic importance, which has historically been a bridge of cultures between East and West and between South and North.

Its original name comes from a mountain range in Bulgaria called the Balkan (Old Mountains), but the central Balkan peninsula is covered by the long Dinarides. Even though modern geographers do not agree about the term and its borders (they rather speak about “South-Eastern Europe”), one of the definitions of the Balkan peninsula includes the territories south of the Kolpa, Sava and Danube rivers, surrounded by the Adriatic, Ionian, Aegean and Black Seas.

Today this heterogeneous area is home to a number of countries, the central ones being Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania, Northern Macedonia and Bulgaria. Sometimes part of Romania, the continental part of Greece and a small European piece of Turkey are also comprised, as well as Slovenia the far north.

The following text is intended to introduce the diverse context for the subsequent essays by Dario Kristić (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Andrej Strehovec, Maja Momirov (Serbia) and Robert Jonathan Loher (Croatia).

Aleksander Saša Ostan

A free lance architect, he is active in a broad archi-cultural field: he designs, builds, conducts workshops, lectures, does research, photographs and writes. He is a lecturer at the Faculty for Architecture in Ljubljana. With Nataša Pavlin, he heads the Atelje Ostan Pavlin studio. Besides texts in slovenian language he is author of several bilingual publications (*Ethical insights in arts*, 2001; *The messages of space*, 2008; *Urgency for new urban policy*, 2008; *Architectural history*, 2013; *Building culture in slovenian Alps through space and time*, 2018) and has received many (inter) national awards for his projects.

Keywords

Balkan, architecture, transition, tradition, rural areas, culture.

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The Balkans, the border and the transition between North and South, East and West

The historical and geostrategic notion of the Balkans defines the area in light of its rich but explosive past, where different tribes and ethnic communities, religions and empires, later states and nations, have constantly met, coexisted and fought each other. On some levels, political, ethnic and religious tensions persist to this day.

The Balkans were home to interesting prehistoric cultures (Starčevo, Vinča, Lepenski vir, Vučedol, pile-dwelling cultures etc.). During the Roman period, the border between the Western and Eastern Roman Empires (between Rome and Constantinople), and later between the medieval Europe and Ottoman Empires, Christianity and Islam, Catholicism and Orthodoxy, etc., was drawn north of today's Bosnia. Last but not least, it was here, in Sarajevo, that the assassination of the Habsburg heir to the throne in 1914 lit the spark that would become the fire of the First World War.

Somewhere deep in the cultural genome of these areas one can still discover and experience the remains of this crack (that has left traces in people's culture, actions and mentality. But at the same time it is from these circumstances that some great personalities have emerged (Bošković, Tesla, Andrić, Meštrović, Njegoš, Mother Teresa...).

Over the past century, the northwestern Balkans have witnessed a number of political formations and systems. My grandparents experienced four of them within the 20th century: they were born under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, survived the two world wars in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia), and, after the Second World War, they woke up in the socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Finally they saw the independence processes of the separate republics in the early 1990s, including the last, tragic and absurd Balkan war.

Searching for the bridge between modernity and tradition in the Dinarides

Part of the interesting architecture legacy of the Yugoslav period has been mostly overlooked in the West until recently, but in 2018, MOMA in New

York dedicated a major exhibition to it, titled "Toward a Concrete Utopia; architecture in Yugoslavia 1948-1980". The architects of the time developed a specific artistic language, particularly evident in the design of WW2 monuments, which was a kind of fusion between architecture and sculpture and between modernism and tradition.

In Bosnia, the mountainous heart of the Balkans, a specific search for architectural expression and language was pioneered by the Slovenian architect and educator Dušan Grabrijan and the Croatian architect and urban planner Juraj Neidhardt. Grabrijan came from the first generation of Jože Plečnik's students in Ljubljana, and then continued his studies at the Ecole de Beaux-arts in Paris. In the early 1930s, he moved to Sarajevo for work and became fascinated by oriental residential architecture as a source of modernist transformation. He invited Neidhardt, who had studied and worked with Behrens in Vienna and Berlin and became an assistant to Le Corbusier, to join him there. They were influenced by Le Corbusier and his travel studies (specially "Voyage d'Orient"), where he was inspired by vernacular oriental architecture and saw it as a source of modernity. Grabrijan and Neidhardt developed a true friendship, researching the region's architectural traditions, teaching architecture and publishing some groundbreaking books that are still of great value today. In 1951 Grabrijan published *Bosnian Oriental Architecture in Sarajevo, with special reference to the contemporary one*, followed in 1952 by *The Macedonian House; the transition from the old Oriental to the modern European house* with excellent study drawings and photos, and finally, in 1957, *The Architecture of Bosnia, the road to modernity*, a joint book connecting the sources of tradition with the ideas of modernism. While Grabrijan, who passed away much too early, was mainly engaged in research, theory and writing, Neidhardt designed some interesting modernist buildings in Sarajevo and Bosnia. But only the house on Mt. Trebević can be read as a small built manifesto of their search for authentic, modernist regional expression.

Later Zlatko Ugljen (born in Mostar in 1929), Neidhardt's student, succeeded in creating a true, organic, comprehensive synthesis between tradition

Opening picture
Traditional mountain hut in the landscape, Delida Polje, Bjelašnica (photo Dario Kristić, 2022).

and modernity. Influenced also by Aalto's regional modernism, he created a balanced, personal reinterpretation of tradition, most clearly reflected in his works in the Bosnian highlands. In the 1970s, he designed the original White Mosque in Visoko, which later won the prestigious Aga Khan Prize for Architecture, and in the early 1980s, before the Sarajevo Olympics, he realized some of his most convincing works, which respond with maturity and passion to the context of both the local highland identity and the universal language of modernity (the Bregava and Vučko hotels, the Mikulić house, the residences at Tjentište and at Bugojno and the guest house at Stojčevac). Unfortunately, most of them were barbarically destroyed during the last war.

As a professor in Sarajevo, the crossroads of multiple cultural influences in the Balkans, Ugljen has nurtured the young generation of Bosnian architects, some of whom are trying to carry on his precious legacy in spite of the difficult social, cultural and economic conditions.

Three contributions from three countries: Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

This issue of *Archalp* presents contributions from three successor countries of the former Yugoslav republics. While the writers were given a framework of content, they were also free to personally interpret the subject matter. The articles therefore do not represent a unified discourse on architecture in their countries' highlands, but rather a personal view of the subject, which nonetheless reflects the countries' architectural culture ("Baukultur").

Croatia has a regionally very diverse territory (belonging to central Europe, to the Panonian plains and to the Mediterranean coast), which mostly has been oriented towards west. Therefore a somewhat systemic approach to important issues in architecture still exists there. In his article, the architect Lohr presents trails and mountain outposts in their specific highland context, which is scarcely inhabited and often overlooked in favor of (over) populated tourist coast, where a lot of contemporary architectural production happens (in good and bad). The described approach owes its history to individuals who paved the way for today's successors, now mostly working on small renovations of existing chalets and other sustainable interventions in this delicate context. It is an indicator of a new architectural paradigm towards sensible principles of adaptive reuse, which seem to be emerging first precisely in the neglected mountain region.

Given its recent history of conflicts, the situation in multi-ethnic and religiously divided Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose territory covers mostly the Dinaric highlands, is critical, as architect Kristić convincingly describes. Unfortunately, there is no consistent institutional approach to spatial planning, no major public projects, and usually no democratic mechanisms to select the best solutions through public competitions. Quality architecture is therefore left to few committed, ethical architects. They boldly face private clients, some from wealthy Muslim countries, others of Bosnian, Serbian ("Republika srpska") and Croatian origin, depending on the region, to convince them that valuable architecture pays off. In the article we can see, on one hand, an audacious hotel under Mt. Bjelašnica comparable to contemporary architectural trends in the Alps, and on the other, a small, original mosque in a rural environment, emerging from tradition and building on it.

The situation in Serbia is rather chaotic in its own way. North of the Danube is Vojvodina, the flat granary that has always been considered the more developed, multicultural and "western" part of the country. The capital of Belgrade, an attraction for global developers in recent years, finds itself torn between the desire to join Europe and the traditional resistance to the West, including sympathy for "their big brother Russia". Many intellectuals and creatives fled Serbia during the Milošević regime that initiated last war in the 1990s, causing a great loss to the country's cultural and scientific potential. Some of them, including architects, are returning to help their colleagues to fight for better conditions in their profession. In the southern part of Serbia with its hilly landscape, that has always been less developed, traces of vernacular architecture are quickly disappearing, and buildings born out of speculative investments are dominating. Contemporary solutions that reflect the regional context are haphazardly created by ambitious professionals as architects Strehovec and Momirov illustrate in their article.

There are other mountainous Balkan countries worth presenting, with their own traditions and tales of modernity (Montenegro, Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, Albania, Bulgaria...), which could not be included in this small assortment of articles. It is crucial that we study and present their heritage to help preserve the remaining qualities of their diverse highlands culture and provide them with meaningful guidelines for their future sustainable development. ■