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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
/ Druge gore / The other mountains



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3. MEMORIA





The first elements of contemporary architecture in the Albanian Alps

The Albanian Alps, with an elevation ranging from 285 m to 2694 m above sea level, like all the high mountain areas, have experienced isolation until recently and consequently, time has stood still there, maintaining a slow development. Until the 1990s, settlements in the mountainous areas were in complete harmony with a cultural landscape and architecture entirely traditional for the time. After the fall of totalitarianism, these areas underwent massive migration due to the difficulties in lifestyle and the lack of services and roads. It was precisely the 50-year totalitarian isolation and the abandonment during the 25-year transition that caused a “pause” in the development of the region, which is also reflected in the architecture of the area. With the exception of 4-5 buildings that try to bring a more contemporary architectural style, the rest remains a continuation of ‘Vernacular Mountain Architecture’. Stone *kullas*, Albanian term for dwelling in mountainous areas, with their typical vernacular Alpine style, minimalist in form and in perfect harmony with nature, vastly dominate the cultural landscapes of the settlements in the Alps. Sometimes they are found in ruins and degraded by time and sometimes they are grouped together in hamlets or neighborhoods.

Eltjana Shkreli

She is an urban planner and co-founder of GO2 Sustainable Urban Planning Organization, an innovative entrepreneurship in the Shkoder region. Her challenge is to value assets like human resources (youth), natural and cultural heritages in the local community economy. Therefore, she has focused not only on urban planning issues, but also on the tourism sector, developing sustainable creative projects and offering tourism services.

Keywords

Architecture and landscape, vernacular architecture, Albanian Alps, tourism.

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Opening picture
Columbus Villas,
Vermosh.

Fig. 1
Kisha e Shna
Prendes, Lepushe.

Albania has experienced a tourism boom over the last 10 years. The Alps region remains the most sought-after and attractive destination, thanks to the fabulous natural resources that comprise mountains, valleys, lakes, rivers, waterfalls among others, and the socio-cultural ones like the Albanian “Songs of the Frontier Warriors”, legends and myths. The rapid development also prompted the approval of the Intersectoral Plan of the Albanian Alps in December 2017, which forecast a peak of 300,000 visitors by 2030 and clearly defines the limits of accommodation capacities for the 22 resorts in this region (Minister of Tourism and Environment, 2017). The Albanian Alps are entering a new development cycle based on a new, more balanced territorial approach aimed at

protecting the environment, promoting the local economy and integrating it into the tourism industry. All these factors are an incentive to push new investments towards a Contemporary Mountain Architecture approach that will be based on the strict principles of balance between nature and people, architecture and landscape, by referring to terms of shapes, materials, size, color and morphology in order for the building to merge with the landscape.

Slow modernization

In the “Albanian Alps” National Park there are approximately 100 settlements (draft of Management Plan for the “Albanian Alps” National Park, 2015), mainly distributed in 3 large mountain val-





leys: Cem Valley in the West, Shala Valley in the centre and Valbona Valley in the East. In addition, the Alps are crossed by other smaller rivers, whose valleys are also inhabited, such as Nikaj-Mertur, Përroi i Thatë (Dry Stream), etc.

The first stage of development began at the end of the 19th century. In addition to the extremely rugged terrain, the distance between settlements and houses was determined by centuries of conquests by the Romans, the Slavs, and later the Ottomans. For this reason, the deep isolation and lack of self-government deprived the inhabitants of the Albanian Alps of exposure to the rhythms of economic, social and cultural development until the first half of the 20th century. The first car road in the Albanian Alps – the one to-

wards the Shala Valley (Theth) – was opened in 1937, while in the valleys of Valbona and Cem, the first cars started circulating decades after the Second World War – and electricity connection came even later.

The typical dwelling of the highlanders in the Albanian Alps is the *kulla*, a 2,3 or 4-storey stone building clad with stone tiles or pine boards and with very small windows. In reality, their number was small compared to the low ground floor dwellings, which accommodated people and livestock under the same roof. Multi-storey *kullas* were indicators of the numerical, economic or even political power of the families. Therefore, today's appearance of towers and other stone dwellings in this space is the result of a long and slow evolution of economy, lifestyle and art of construction.

The second stage of housing construction in the Albanian Alps occurred in the second half of the 20th century. During this period, the first real transformation of the mountain landscape from medieval to modern settlement took place. A national campaign was launched to enlarge windows, remove cattle from houses and create stables (Shkreli, 2018). The government invested extensively in infrastructure and in the building of educational, cultural, healthcare, commercial, etc. facilities. In this way, the lives of the inhabitants of the Alps began to improve, but free movement, even within the country, was prohibited. Until 1990, approximately 36.1% of the population lived in cities and the main direction of the economy was agriculture and breeding (INSTAT, 1991). However, economic bankruptcy and the subsequent collapse of the socialist system, as in the entire Eastern Bloc, left the inhabitants of the Alps in extreme poverty. During the social chaos in the period of political systems change, the state stopped providing social services and without the necessary maintenance, the infrastructure was completely destroyed. Unable to cope with this situation, the inhabitants of the Alps started mass migration to the big cities, mainly in the western region of the Albanian lowland, but also abroad. The mountain settlements that counted thousands of inhabitants since the 1980s, such as Theth, Kelmend and Valbona, were reduced to few dozen inhabitants. This wave of abandonment of the Alps, which is still ongoing, temporarily slowed down at the end of the 2000s. At the national level, the natural increase of the population fell from 63,932 in 1990 to 470 in 2020 and even to a negative of -3,296 in 2021 (INSTAT).

Beside the public buildings, private dwellings also began to degrade, while nature started to regain its power over the landscape. The only buildings that were restored or even built from scratch were

Figs. 2-3
Traditional
architecture of the
area.



churches and mosques, which had been closed during the 27-year ban on worship in Albania. Some of them, such as Theth Church built in 1892, had revolutionized traditional constructions of the time – the end of the 19th century – while highly respecting the original configuration, without any modern architectural elements.

The third stage of construction followed the increase in visitor demand, mainly after 2010. Despite their isolation and the lack of the most basic living conditions, the Alps continued to be frequented by foreign visitors. And it was precisely foreigners who, around 2010, offered modest financial support for the improvement of basic hygiene services, as an attempt to stimulate tourism in the area by changing the buildings' function from residential to tourist accommodation. In addition to these investments in Theth (Shala Valley) and Valbona (Valbona Valley), a campaign was launched to promote these two valleys, which led to a steady increase in the number of visitors. The high demand for accommodation prompted the few residents to undertake repairs, reconstruction or even new construction in the area, and as the news of the increase in the number of visitors spread, residents who had left the country began to return to the area. However, conditioned by the lack of infrastructure, and especially by the lack of land ownership certificates, the buildings were hastily restored or built, in most cases with-

out permission from the relevant authorities and clearly without any creditable standards. This process, which continues to this day, is characterized by traditional building with very few modern architecture elements.

There are several attempts at glass façades, mainly on one side of the building, but also ugly grafts between vernacular and modern elements. Another reason for this situation is the fact that new buildings are being constructed without professional architects and designs and certainly on a limited time and budget. All this due to property problems, which have not been resolved yet. Residents continue to be fined for new construction, while the region has no design code; the one for Theth “Trashëgimia Ndërtimore në Theth” has not yet been approved by the Shkodër Municipal Council and the Institute of Cultural Monuments. As we speak, the government is intervening in the Alps, mainly with infrastructures. The roads to the valley of Valbona and Cemi (in Kelmend) are being paved, and the first official document for the Albanian Alps is being drawn up: the National Strategic Tourism Plan 2017-2030. However, the only projects of this plan that have started to be implemented in some areas of the Alps still pertain to road infrastructure, while the electricity supply continues to be unsafe and unstable.

Moving from one valley to another in the Albanian Alps, one finds the first attempts at Contemporary

Fig. 4
Bujtna Tradicionale
Tome Dragu,
Lepushë.

Fig. 5
Columbus Villas,
Vermosh.



Mountain Architecture in this region to move from the level of hostels to that of hotels, this being the main goal. However, the increase in accommodation capacities for tourism remains an issue. This effort has been achieved through two intervention processes: the restoration and adaptation of the *kullas* into accommodation units – guesthouses, and the construction of larger accommodation facilities in hotels or mountain resorts.

A separate category to be considered are the public buildings, places of worship and various services, such as churches, health centers, schools, tourist information centers, etc. In their vast majority, these are traditional buildings and lack any particular architectural approaches, solutions or elements. Exceptions are the Holy Mother Church in Qafë Predelec (Cemi Valley) and the Visitor Center in Theth village (Shala Valley). ■