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Indice dei contenuti

Contents

Editoriale / Editorial 8



1. Rigenerazione

Contestualismi appenninici, tra Mediterraneo ed Europa, per riabitare i piccoli paesi / Apennine contextualisms, between the Mediterranean and Europe to re-inhabit small villages 13
Adelina Picone

La Casa della Cultura di Aquilonia (AV): usi specialistici e appropriatezza funzionale / The House of Culture in Aquilonia (AV): specialised uses and functional appropriateness 35
Vincenzo Tenore, Katia Fabbicatti

Generare paesaggi, generare comunità. Progettisti e architetture del welfare urbano contemporaneo nei territori interni della Sicilia / Generating landscapes, generating communities. Designers and architectures of contemporary urban welfare in inland Sicily 41
Daniele Ronsivalle

Indizi. Nuove ecologie del progetto nelle aree interne della Sardegna / Traces. New project ecologies in the inland areas of Sardinia 51
Antonello Sanna, Stefano Cadoni, Francesco Marras

Contemporary architectures in inland Corsica: the projects of Amelia Tavella and Orma Architettura 61
Edited by Matteo Tempestini and Cristian Dallere



2. Paesaggi

Fjäll, o le altre Alpi: costruire nelle montagne del Nord / Fjäll, or the other Alps: building in the Nordic Mountains 73
Sofia Nannini

Architecture in Japan's mountainous areas: shapes determined by external factors, the natural environment 83
Yujin Hirase

Chilean mountain architecture <i>Nicolas del Rio</i>	93
Representations of a vast territory and complex history: diverse faces of contemporary mountain architecture in North America <i>Skye Sturm</i>	103
<hr/>	
3. Memoria	
Bits and pieces on the “phenomenology” of Balkan highland architecture <i>Aleksander Saša Ostan</i>	115
An uphill battle <i>Dario Kristić</i>	119
Contemporary mountain architecture in Serbia <i>Andrej Strehovec, Maja Momirov</i>	131
Bauen in den kroatischen Bergen / Building in Croatian mountains <i>Robert Jonathan Loher</i>	139
The first elements of contemporary architecture in the Albanian Alps <i>Eltjana Shkreli</i>	145
Tatras Phoenix. Restoration Architecture in the alpine environment of the High Tatras <i>Mária Novotná</i>	151

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3. MEMORIĀ





Contemporary mountain architecture in Serbia

Although Serbia does not have significantly high mountains, it does have vast mountainous areas south of the Danube River. Since most rural mountain houses in Serbia have disappeared over the last three decades, traditional mountain building is reduced to sporadic reconstructions, mostly for open-air museums and ethnic parks.

Contemporary mountain architecture in Serbia is developing under the same overall influences of the rest of the country. These influences, among others, are the primacy of market demands, non-systematic planning, and lack of investment in raising the level of spatial culture among the general public.

Fortunately, some examples illustrate the willingness of architects to push the contemporary Serbian architectural practice forward and the willingness of investors to consider a wide range of influences and aspects that generate a comprehensive response to contemporary demands and concerns. The selected projects presented in this article show different responses in relation to the context, environment, heritage, and ideas of contemporary life in rural and natural areas.

Most of these examples follow a more experimental approach. This usually stems from links to regionalism and modernism. Despite expectations, Serbia cannot join the most progressive European currents or fully adopt the vision of individual high-quality national architectural agents overnight. However, the Serbian architecture scene will be increasingly present in the media, also as a result of international connections and circumstances that had somehow 'matured'.

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Keywords

Contemporary Serbian architecture, environment, heritage, rural areas.

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Introduction

Serbia is not a high-mountain country, but is one with two geographic-tectonic poles: an isolated, large Pannonian plain in the north, and mountainous areas south of the Danube River. These areas differ from East to West since they belong to different mountain ranges, and also present certain divergences in their architectural heritage. The most common type of traditional mountain house in Serbia is the log cabin, a simple single-volume structure with a high steep roof, low eaves, and a central chimney. From these basic elements, dating back to the early 18th century, the log cabin type developed into more complex forms through both horizontal and vertical expansion, and its variations are present in all areas south of the Danube River.

Numerous examples of rural mountain houses in Serbia have disappeared over the last three decades since migrations to cities have increased. Today, traditional mountain building is reduced to sporadic reconstructions, mostly for open-air museums and 'ethnic parks' where objects are moved to a designated location or protected in situ. There are also reproductions, copies intended as tourist attractions. In recent times, however, modern mountain architecture has appeared through an experimental project that reconsiders heritage elements in a contemporary building context, arising from the desire for a more comfortable and even luxurious leisure time in nature. In addition, the geographical position of Serbia represents an immensely popular route for travellers and digital nomads who are moving through Europe on their way to the Mediterranean, exploiting the country as a cheap stop-over. These trends have triggered the development of small and modular house projects.

There is also a noticeable influence of something that we may call 'modern classicism'. It represents a maximum submission to the market logic with a modest use of modernist expressiveness and functionality, which is trivially endowed artistically with materialization and a range of neo-classical influences. These problematic cases, which in recent years have devastated the architectural and natural landscape of mountain regions in many

places, possibly irreversibly, will not be presented in this article.

It is important to emphasize that, over last two decades, architecture in Serbia has represented a sign of awakening after the economic and political destabilization of the 1990s. This is particularly evident if we look deeper and more broadly into the field of new projects and constructions, which is dominated by the image of degraded landscapes or ad-hoc commercial solutions. We can't even talk about the revival currents that young Croatian architects experienced in the 2000s (in the sense of transitory openness and the resulting experiment). The rarest and most valuable examples that we deal with in this article, often of a certain experimental level, are the result of individual initiatives of younger architectural firms and harmonious cooperation between investors and architects. Even though these projects represent a local phenomenon, they are by no means without regional and even global interest.

Projects

Family House on Kosmaj

Authors: Nooto - Dejan Todorović

Location: Kosmaj, Serbia

Chronology: 2020

Project category: residential

Photos: Relja Ivanić

This family house on Kosmaj, a mountain south of Belgrade, achieves a specific connection with the context through the use of the same form of the architectural structure that used to occupy the same plot. The geometry of the volume was shaped by multiplying and shearing the triangular prism of the archetypal gabled roof, resulting in angled planes that in their disposition more adequately respond to the conditions of the site. The position and shape of the façade openings are integrated into the geometry of single-volume form, constructed with steel frames clad on both sides with a pine wood veneer. Carefully balancing between dynamic geometry and grounded volume, the structure of Kosmaj Family House refers to an ever-changing yet lasting natural environment. (Information provided by the architects).

Opening picture

Villa Pavlović,
Zlatibor, NEO
Arhitekti Belgrade,
2018.

Fig. 1

Family house,
Kosmaj, Nooto -
Dejan Todorović,
2020.



Villa Pavlović

Authors: NEO_ArHITEKTI Belgrade - Snežana Vesnić, Vladimir Milenković, Tatjana Stratimirović

Location: Zlatibor, Serbia

Chronology: 2018

Project category: residential

Photos: Relja Ivanić

Villa Pavlović represents the outcome of the two decades-long collaboration between the authors and the Pavlović family. Located on the edge of a semi-urban settlement on one of Serbia's most popular mountains, the house achieves direct contact with the natural environment. This project offers a unique vision of contemporary living in a rural setting. Strongly distancing itself from the mountain cabin archetype, the unusual geometry of the house is reflected and reinforced by the parallel water surface. With their linear form, both structures are effortlessly connected to the lines of the slope, and through a monolithic impression of materialization in natural stone, the precise aspiration of the house to become an integral part of the landscape is realized. (Information provided by the architects).

Kopaonik Mountain Home

Authors: 4of7 Architecture - Vladimir Popović, Đorđe Stojanović

Location: Kopaonik, Serbia

Chronology: 2012

Project category: residential

Photos: Ana Kostić

Kopaonik mountain home is located at the rim of a national park, within the largest ski resort in Serbia. Erected on a small plot in-between two existing structures, the house is entirely oriented toward vast and empty space on the western edge of the plot. The traditional mountain houses of the Kopaonik region are distinguished by their roof geometry, intended to provide a usable attic space. Referring to this tradition, the shape of the house is defined by the roof which becomes the sole element of the structure's envelope. Leaving aside the external walls, a massive wall is positioned centrally in the interior, providing lateral stability and dividing the building into two mirrored halves. In the well-designed spatial relations, the roof simultaneously provides privacy from neighbors and frames a view of the mountain slopes. (Information provided by the architects).

2



3



Branković Mountain Resort

Authors: Alterno Inc - Đorđe Kitić, Dušan Nikolić,

Ivana Veličković, Mirjana Nikolić, Dejan Knežić

Location: Vrelo, Stara planina, Serbia

Chronology: 2017

Project category: receptive structure

Photos: Mladen Jovanović

The complex is located in the dense forest area of Stara Planina near many hiking and cycling trails and fishing spots. The investor intended to build accommodation and socialization facilities for the employees of his family bakery. The complex comprises five apartment-bungalow buildings, cascading on a sloped terrain. All four dif-



ferent functional types of housing units contain an internal courtyard as well as access to the common areas. The disposition of the façade openings was carefully determined to ensure both privacy and views in all three dimensions, through large glass portals and vertical slits that extend to a skylight. The design is based on traditional local materials and a simple, yet carefully developed form, to create a space well-grounded in the natural environment. (Information provided by the architects).

Divčibare Mountain Home

Authors: EXE STUDIO - Tijana Mitrović, Andreja Mitrović

Location: Divčibare, Maljen, Serbia

Chronology: 2015

Project category: residential

Photos: Relja Ivanić

The house is located near the popular tourist resort Divčibare, on the slope of Mount Maljen in western Serbia. Although the plot has been overgrown with small pine trees, it still retains the original character of an open field. To minimize disturbance to the site and as a reference to the surrounding hilly terrain, the house is built into the hillside.

It was designed by combining and connecting two main monolithic volumes, one light and one dark. These forms blend in with the natural environment characterized by low pine vegetation

and steep rocky terrain. On the south side, the white portion of the house connects to the outside through a large panoramic window, which guides the transition from the artificial to the natural element. The black half of the house draws inspiration from original mountain homes. The structure is emphasized with natural materials, such as traditional timber shingle cladding.

Through the duality of the house, with its two main volumes, the intent was to merge the traditional and the contemporary components to create a unique aesthetic and a structure in harmony with its surroundings. (Text description provided by the architects).

HempHouse

Authors: Ljubica Arsić & Bach Mühle Fuchs

Location: Bliznak, Homolje Mountains, Serbia

Chronology: 2021

Project category: residential

Photos: Marko Milovanović

Rather than imitating the landscape, the house is conceived as a human-made artifact, with the clear archetypal stipulation that the house is the result of a construction process and thus what is built can never be natural in this fundamental conceptual sense. On the other hand, this house is made of "nature", the materials and construction technique are adapted to the climate – the walls are made of hempcrete, the supporting structure is made of wood.

Fig. 2

Villa Pavlović,
Zlatibor, NEO
Arhitekti Belgrade,
2018.

Fig. 3

Mountain Home,
Kopaonik, 4of7
Architecture, 2012.

Fig. 4

Branković Mountain
Resort, Vrelo, Alterno
Inc, 2017.

5



6



The building was developed on two levels that follow the configuration of the terrain. The main function of the house is on a higher elevation, within a cohesive octagonal spatial scheme that favors fluid movement and visual communication – connected by a continuous terrace. The main access to the house is through the partially underground lower level, which also houses a sauna and a winter garden with a skylight. The result is a flexible spatial structure with continuous exterior and interior spaces. The com-

bination of ecological building materials, simple construction methods and partial self-construction makes this project a quest for sustainable architecture. (Text description provided by the architects).

Conclusion

Current Serbian architecture can be analyzed from three perspectives. The term current instead of contemporary is used deliberately because it is the only one of the three perspectives with the



character of modernity and high-quality artistic and social development potential.

First, there is the ‘investor architecture’, primarily seen as a market product, which is implemented for the needs of short-term earnings and to establish a position of power, also through the deregulation of norms with the power of capital.

Secondly, some architectures follow the legacy of historicism and modernist Yugoslav architecture. Unfortunately, the latter usually has a neglected development potential, because it is not taken into account that it also represents a global legacy of quality that is still ‘native’ and has not been built by some other cultures – such as e.g. Austro-Hungarian, Byzantine, Roman, etc.

The third perspective is the contemporary architectural practice of new constructions, as a more experimental approach. It usually comes from constraints related to regionalism, or from the ac-

ademic style related to modernism. Many architectural works are a combination of both.

In recent years, negative practices have also been transferred to constructions in the mountains and in nature, especially through the rapid urbanization of the most popular mountains among tourists, like Kopaonik and Zlatibor. These areas are enduring construction that is, to its extent, density, and lack of comprehensive planning, resulting in an irreparable impact on nature and the environment. The projects presented in this article are some of the few examples of good practices and represent signs of recovery and potential progress towards higher standards of overall spatial culture in Serbia. The question remains: when will society begin to demand more than just ad-hoc architectural solutions, and when will the profession of architecture regain its voice in the architect-investor dialogue, eventually leading to a more balanced global cooperation? ■

Figs. 5-6

Mountain Home,
Divčibare, EXE
Studio, 2015.

Fig. 7

HempHouse, Bliznak,
Ljubica Arsić & Bach
Mühle Fuchs, 2021.