

Digital Diffusion of Research: Ongoing Studies & Potentials

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ABSTRACT: In the study of vernacular architecture, verification of physical space and understanding social, cultural, and economic contexts are of central importance. Today the challenge is to create new ways to share findings and invite dialogue. Our studies of early wooden structures in the Balkans have yielded publications and exhibitions on regions and buildings as well as our drawings and photographs.

Today the Internet includes an increasing number of sites with images of vernacular buildings that survive or are being restored. A number of preservation institutes and other organizations are developing websites to reveal these cultural treasures. Within this context, we are working to produce an open access site with a flexible format to provide information that crosses national and cultural borders, that in some cases are more rigid as countries in the Balkans reinterpret their cultural heritage and their artifacts. This shift in presentation media and transformation in historical interpretations demand that we revisit our research and the way it is disseminated.

This paper focuses on two aspects. First, it will present examples of misinformation created as national entities begin to redefine their identities. These include situations where historians, scholars, politicians and journalists have created views that are more fantasy than actual. Second, we will show strategies that we are implementing in our website to allow others to view a database with bibliographic notes of Balkan vernacular architectural artifacts that cover the period from the 17th through the last part of the 20th century. The website describes visited and studied buildings, locates these geographically, and will include an interactive database to allow access to images and information about similar building types across the Balkan peninsula, and will allow others to contribute.

KEYWORDS: Vernacular architecture, digital dissemination, Balkan

INTRODUCTION

The original focus of our studies began with a goal to explore the early wooden structures of Yugoslavia in an effort to reveal the variety of structural, formal, spatial and detail expressions generated by the craftsmen in the highly charged cross-cultural setting. In 1987, little had been published or shared beyond the borders of Yugoslavia. The exploration involved the study of archived information as well as direct observation of dwellings, farm buildings, religious sanctuaries or other economic structures that remained functional and part of the occupants' everyday lives. The information collected was catalogued and entered into a simple database, and shared over the last two decades, through the generation and display of photographs, and drawings, and through presentation of academic papers (e.g. Fig.1).

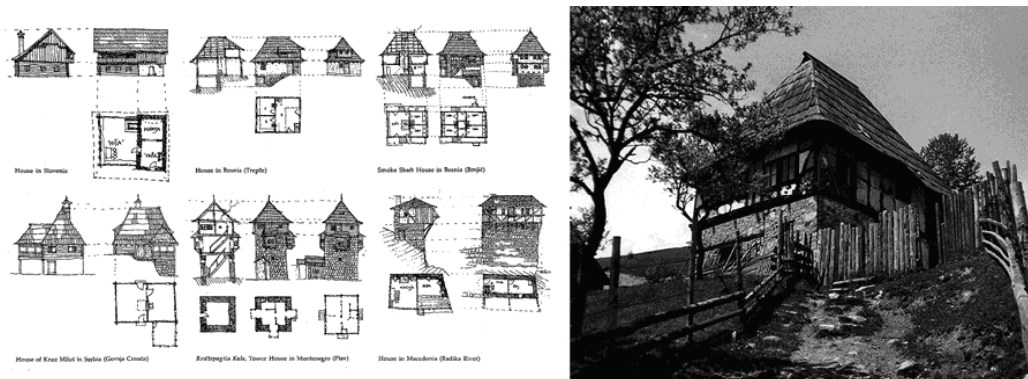


Figure 1: Sketches and photograph. Source: (Authors 1993)

These studies expanded to other countries on the Balkan Peninsula and beyond as we sought to find additional roots of the architecture of the South Slavs. We included investigations of the architecture of adjacent countries, as well as previous politically dominant centers that brought both immigrants and cultural influences to the Balkans. The study has extended historically to the earliest evidences of Hittite, Persian, Greek and Roman incursions.

1.0 Rewriting History, Shifting Interpretations

The conflicts among the countries of former Yugoslavia and the desire of their peoples to build a different future have had deleterious effects upon many of these historical buildings and settings. Numerous architectural artifacts were destroyed or allowed to decay because of new priorities. Our studies include records from on-site observations and interviews with those who occupied these sites during the years of 1987-91. In the case of sites in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria and Turkey the time frame extended into the period from 1996-2004. Our most recent visit to selected sites (in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia) occurred in the summer of 2008.

The formation of new countries in the Balkans, over the last two decades, has in some instances resulted in removal of architectural artifacts as well as the displacement of people. The changes, in some cases, brought genocide to both people and their cultural expressions. An important goal of the dissemination of these materials is to expose examples of buildings and settings that were important parts of social and physical landscapes that no longer exist, and in many cases are being denied as having existed by current populations or politicians. Three examples are worth noting: the first is an important mosque in the city of Foča, the second a Han in Počitelj, and the third a Roman Catholic Church in Petrinja.

The central mosque (Aladža Džamija, erected in 1550¹) in Foča, Bosnia and Herzegovina, was completely destroyed during the 1992-95 war for independence. In a discussion with Dr. Michael Sells of Haverford College in Pennsylvania in 1994, I was informed that the mayor of Foča told Professor Sells that there was no such mosque in Foča, nor had there been one in recent history. I was able to inform him about the Aladža mosque, that I had seen and taken photographs of it in 1987, and possessed Preservation Institute publications presenting information on the mosque and its decorative elements.

During the 1991-95 Croatian War for Independence from Yugoslavia a number of Catholic churches were destroyed and totally razed in the town of Petrinja. During our visit to Petrinja in 1996, we visited one of these sites with a Croatian colleague, Davor Salopek², who explained that the masonry walls of the church were reduced to rubble and moved to a fortification where the stones were used as a barrier to protect Yugoslav army fighters from the attacks of local fighters. We stood on the site of the church and could barely make out the foundation perimeter; the land had been bulldozed over to cover any hint of a building. In this case the Croatian inhabitants subsequently built a new church to serve the surviving congregation.

In Počitelj, Bosnia and Herzegovina, a small crescent shaped village nestled in a rock formation, the local Han was appropriated in 1997 to become a Catholic religious center for the Croatian Bosnian population that took over this area. The term Han describes a building complex used to house travelers and merchants who were traveling to major trade centers with their goods. The Šišman Ibrahim Pašin Han in Počitelj dates back to the sixteenth century, an important building in this historic village complex. Prior to the war the village population had been decreasing and a number of its dwellings had been deserted. The town had become an artists' colony and a number of the old dwellings turned into a hotel. In 1988 and in 1991 we stayed in restored dwelling units within the revitalized town. In those pre-war years the Han served as a café and restoration work was in progress. In 1996 we drove from the Croatian coast through Počitelj on our way to Mostar and briefly saw the level of destruction in the town. In 1997 the new town officials working on the conversion of the Han complex into a new religious center, denied the Han's historical function or importance.

Historians often differ regarding the importance of physical settings and social positions but it was saddening to see such rapid rewriting of history in the face of physical evidence or historic records. Unfortunately the few examples above are not unique in our experience and moved us forward in seeking a way to present our own records for a large audience. The erasure of architectural artifacts in the heat of wars can serve many purposes, the voids can memorialize that which is lost or they can deny what has existed. It is not our goal to proselytize the importance of what was, rather to document what we saw.

2.0 Basic Resources and Initial Methodology

Our initial research was funded through a Fulbright grant that allowed us to spend a year in Yugoslavia. We were assigned a contact colleague, Dr. Zoran Petrović, a scholar of vernacular architecture and professor at

the University of Belgrade. We spent our first five months studying the available resources noting buildings of special interest, their construction types, location, age (when given), and creating small sketches of each building, indexing its book or article source. We began to form itineraries to visit the best examples. In the fall and winter months, we also traveled to visit promising sites, universities and preservation institutes in the each of the former Yugoslav republics. This allowed us to expand our collection of publications as well as to form relationships with other scholars and gain access to preservation institute materials.

At the end our first five months, we set off to visit the six republics of Yugoslavia for one month each, to visit the most promising sites, to gather information from local institutes, and to observe the buildings in their current context. We also visited Vienna, Venice, Budapest, Plovdiv, and Istanbul to gather information that focused upon vernacular architecture of the larger region.

In our travels during that first year we traveled over thirty thousand kilometers by auto to visit sites, took over four thousand photographs (slides and black & white), and collected over one hundred books and articles. Each photograph was entered into a daily log that recorded the place (one gridded map book was used), the name of the structure, and date if possible. Each roll of film was numbered for future cataloguing. The sketches generated during the initial archive studies served us well to illustrate to local villagers and towns people buildings we wished to find when our language skills failed us. In the formation of our studies we considered a number of approaches but decided to use the methods put forth by Ronald W. Brunskill as a beginning point and modified our methods to respond to those found in the preservation institutes in Yugoslavia and in keeping with the types of information that available across the region.

In the ensuing years (fall 1988 - spring 1991) we created more detailed databases of collected materials. The photographs were entered into a database that identified the town or village, republic, building type (dwelling, church, chapel, mosque, stable, shade structure, granary, etc.), construction (masonry, wood, thresh, straw, half-timber, combinations), notes on age, location of town in our gridded index map book, and number of the photograph (roll and frame number). In a similar way all of our collected publications and drawings were entered into a database. In the spring of 1991, with a preliminary manuscript in hand, we again traveled to Yugoslavia and revisited numerous sites and colleagues. This research trip was cut short by the beginning of the war when Slovenia seceded from Yugoslavia.

3.0 Initial Dissemination Approaches

The original intention for the project was to create a book about early wooden architecture in Yugoslavia that would illustrate and describe selected buildings and their details, within the context of the cultures in which they were created. That intention evolved since we began to find that the great volume of information and goals established made it impossible to disseminate findings quickly, and we recognized that all of the materials gathered should be housed in one archive. Along with drafting a manuscript, we decided to present papers at conferences that focused on selected building themes. This was followed by creation of an exhibition that included approximately fifty buildings that demonstrated important aspects of the vernacular architecture in the regions of our interest. Our exhibitions (e.g. Fig.2) were accompanied by gallery lectures and at subsequent venues grew to include more examples (approximately one hundred panels). The majority of the goals of the study remained only schematically addressed since true analysis was unattainable given the pressures of everyday university teaching obligations.



Figure 2: Exhibited sketches of Kuća Svrzina (Source: Author 1993)

4.0 The Condition of the Research Archive

As one would expect, elements of such research materials are vulnerable to deterioration. Our large archive of photographic slides, (diapositives), are now over twenty years old and some are showing signs of organic matter attachment, while the black & white negatives are in good condition. Photocopied materials are on standard paper of the time, diazo blueprints of preservation drawings and have been kept away from light, but the images need to be transferred to a more stable medium, and the books and journals are aging. These are normal concerns that all archival materials face. The exhibition materials were prepared on acid-free papers and stored in acid-free archival boxes; approximately half of these were exhibited most recently in 2012.

5.0 Current Dissemination Goals

With the changes in political ideologies and boundaries in the Balkans, the proper place for our findings is in the public realm, with access to the greatest audience. Our goal is the dissemination of materials more appropriately through the photographic images, drawings of the building configurations (plans, sections, elevations) and site or situation plans, and accompanied with a brief description and a bibliography of sources used and acquired to date.

When one defines goals, it is important to know what items, activities, and issues are not included as goals. One aspect that has not been pursued, originally or today, is to assign authorship to any particular individuals or ethnic groups for the design or details of buildings. Vernacular architectural studies sometimes attempt this task but the complex overlay of cultures in the Balkans makes this impossible and has led to much speculation and controversy.

6.0 Selection of a medium for dissemination

Our decision was to create a website to allow the greatest dissemination of our archives and findings. With the growth of the Internet it is increasingly easy to disseminate information to a wide range of people. Accuracy and honesty, however, are more difficult to guarantee in this medium. In the academic setting one expects that the words and images presented have been thoroughly researched using scholarly protocols and methods. This is not always the case with information found on the Internet. Yet it is unjustified to presume that information is any more accurate, honest, or scholarly because a more conventional medium or approach has been used. One can find many conventional documents and images that contain erroneous, deceptive, or misleading presentations.

At first our efforts were directed toward a search for primary sources and development of academic (scholarly) papers. Our ability to work towards a comparative study now seems more distant. Instead the rapid rate of disappearing vernacular artifacts and the inaccessibility of our collected works forced us to re-evaluate our goals and approaches to the research. The medium selected was not defined by the process of submission, review and production but by our ability to reach those with an interest in the content. The Internet allows the ability to share information and to expand and adjust the materials available in a way that other more conventional modes of dissemination do not allow (e.g. Fig.3).



Figure 3. Website entry page with key (Source: Authors 2012)

7.0 Positioning of Research Content

Vernacular architecture in the area of the Balkans is becoming more prevalent in travel books and on the Internet for those interested in cultural tourism. A number of websites provide isolated images of the wooden buildings that are representative of rural and village life from the end of the eighteenth century to recent times. Each selected building is typically shown only in a single view, without accompanying plans, sections and site information. It is the study of these buildings in the context of one another that can bring a richer knowledge of the variety of forms, textures and spatial orders.

Vernacular architecture of a region, on a more scholarly level, is typically studied as a complex of inter-related social, cultural and economic issues that are present at a particular time or over a particular period. Most of the studies that we have found were produced during a time when a particular building or site was important as the site of an historical event or individual's home. Furthermore the documentation and publication of most examples were produced in the local languages and in very small quantities so that the information was not available to a wide audience. The formal and spatial aspects were normally expressed as resultant conclusions to these influences and little weight or value was given to the craft and creative expressions present in the building as an individual work of art.

We are working to provide a set of more contemporary illustrations of a large number of the vernacular buildings of the Balkan peninsula that have survived over the last two centuries (e.g. Fig.4). The notion is not to provide historical context of the buildings and settings but rather to include bibliographic references for access to the content that others have developed. This approach is taken for two reasons; first there are a number of recognized scholars who have already put forth historical frameworks and contextual theories; and second many of the structures are defined in nationalistic ways that can neither be totally confirmed nor refuted. In whatever historical framework the selected buildings sit, it is our belief that the buildings and settings themselves are of notable value as worthwhile examples of the sensibility of their authors and builders. There are many scholars who wish to assign building authorship to specific nationalities, ethnic groups, or local families; this is contrary to our goals and works against the development of the materials that we wish to disseminate. We prefer to allow the audience to view the materials in ways to promote comparisons of individual settings, buildings, structural or spatial orders, and detail expressions.

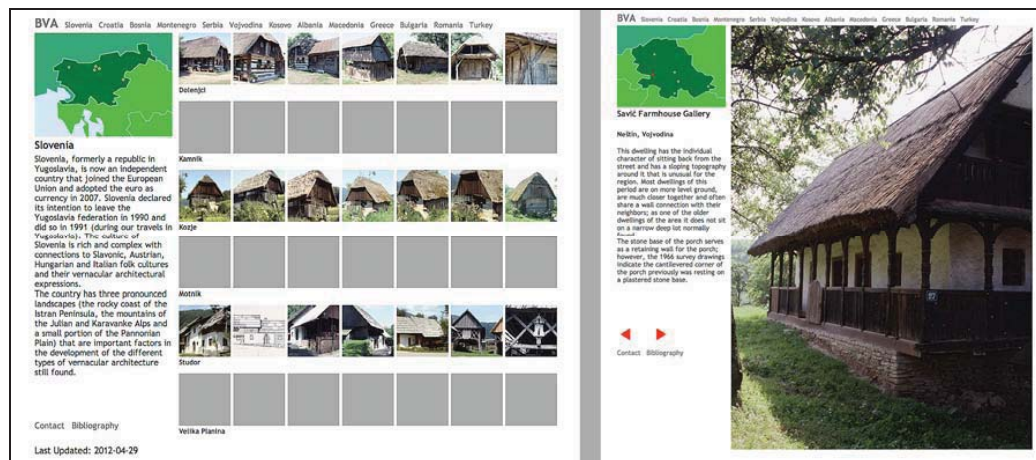


Figure 4: Two web pages in current state under construction (Source: Authors 2012)

8.0 Website Implementation

Although creating an Internet archive appears to be an inexpensive and efficient way to disseminate our research results, it is highly labor intensive in its design and implementation. The ultimate goal is the dissemination of our findings and materials to the widest audience possible, and we believe that the Internet allows this. The design of the website is developed to recognize and function for a wide variety of web browsers currently available and constructed to allow those with the most economical and rudimentary software and power to have access. Although Internet programs and applications offer many effects and capabilities, many people with the greatest interest and cultural investment in the study of these buildings may not have the applications that we take for granted. For this reason the size of graphic files and choices

for usable applications have led us to building the website for the simplest applications possible. In line with this goal, the portal for the website has been developed to provide access to pages and images that contain information about the places and buildings that we have studied directly. This first phase presents the site as interactive in the simplest terms since it only allows visitors to make self-guided tours of the site.

A future iteration of the site will allow connections through the portal to a community, blog and fully developed and detailed bibliography. The website design will have an administrative side that will control metrics, to observe who is visiting the site and how they are observing it (currently this occurs through our hosting service). This function is helpful to understand who is visiting, what browsers are being used and where members of the audience are geographically located.

Since the study has been developed with the aid of many colleagues from numerous countries, one of the goals will be to establish an Internet community section that will allow linking together these scholars and eventually to other Internet sites and scholars. The Blog portion of the site (to be initiated in the second phase) will initially be established in a 'Push Content' format to disseminate content to the community and visitors; eventually this will be changed to a Social Media format to allow the interchange of information. The initial browsers that are being used as test vehicles are Safari, Mozilla, Internet Explorer, and Netscape, and more sophisticated webpage techniques are being avoided. In order to make the information available to a larger audience this list will be expanded to include Lynx, and OLPC (one Laptop per Child) Internet applications. Additionally a database of photographs and drawings will be created through MySQL to allow a crossover of information so that one will be able to call up specific building types with similar types of construction and architectural elements.

The community that will be created in the future will aid to grow the knowledge base and aid in the work of maintaining the site. One long-range goal is to reach out to social networks and others interested in the expansion of this knowledge base and relevant issues.

The most effective presentation of the bibliographic information and academic papers produced by the authors of the site is still under study. At this point a simple list of source materials is included in the entry webpage. This overall bibliography, when completed, will be used to create a separate bibliography for each of the geographic areas covered by the study.

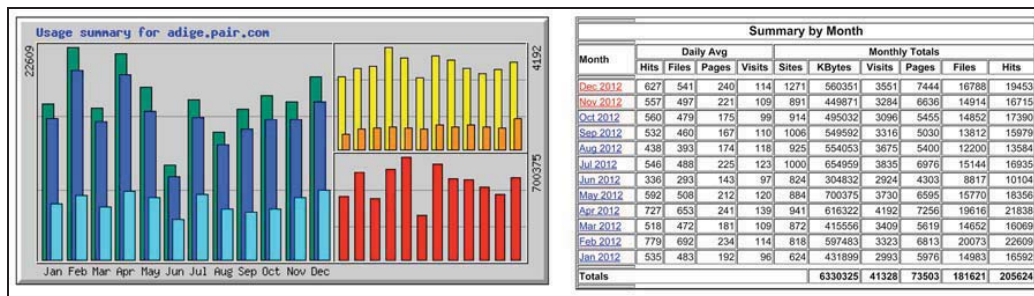


Figure 5: Summary of website visits over year (Source: hosting service 'webalizer_reports', Pair networks)

9.0 Ongoing observations & Potentials

The development of the portal and website described above has already yielded a series of questions and issues to be addressed. First, the portal itself is very simple, tame, and restrained (given the materials) relative to more advertisement-oriented presentations that are available on the Internet. This brings into question at what level one wants to engage visitors and whether the goal is to *grab* an audience, or is the content presented more as an academic or scholarly archive. The level of involvement on the Internet by preservation and conservation groups in the Balkans is ever increasing and provides additional information³. This also demands that anything currently on our website, or being uploaded, be reviewed and information cross-checked.

To insure that others can track information on our website we always date the entry of information and images. We also have found that a number of historic buildings have been modified for new uses and in a few cases destroyed by fires in very recent years. It is rewarding that our website has become a resource for others, even in its incompleteness. From the 'webalizer_reports' and the use of IP address location applications we find that approximately 900 separate sites visit our website each month (e.g. Fig.5) and by

checking the IP addresses have found that our visitors are from all around the globe. The 'webalizer_reports' demonstrate that the site is not only used to observe images but also to check our bibliography. As we continue the work on building the website we hope to find a home for our original archives that are too extensive to completely upload onto the Internet.

Our change to this form of dissemination of research, we believe, is valid. The potentials and opportunities of the Internet method allow great exposure, links to others, entry of fresh content, allows immediate expansion, and is economical for the audience. We also have to admit that there are certain limitations and concerns that remain these include a lack of permanence, a realization that software applications can transform to antiquate web-design formats, is labor-intensiveness to generate entries, and demands the management of communications.

ENDNOTES

¹ Pasic, Amir , Islamic Architecture in Bosnia and Hercegovina, IRCICA, Istanbul 1994, p58-59

² Davor Salopek is a noted Croatian author of several books on the early wooden buildings in the region near Zagreb

³ There are a number of preservation institutes that have documents providing information about architectural artifacts that were designated as culturally important. One such website is 'Bosna i Hercegovina Komisija/Povjerenstvo za Očuvanje Nacionalnih Spomenika' <<http://www.kons.gov.ba>>. There are also sites that tie together historic pathways across Eastern Europe; one such website is 'Cultural Corridors of South East Europe' <<http://seecorridors.eu>>.