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CULTURAL CENTRE "VUK KARADŽIĆ", LOZNICA

# **THE BALKAN PENINSULA OF JOVAN CVIJIĆ:**

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND  
CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

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## VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE IN MACEDONIA AND SERBIA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

*Petar Namičev<sup>1</sup>, Zlata Vuksanović-Macura<sup>2</sup>, Biljana Petrevska<sup>3</sup>*

**Abstract:** Vernacular architecture is an important segment of a cultural identity of the Balkan Peninsula. This study enables understanding of common types of vernacular architecture by comparing construction, function, and forms in rural areas in Macedonia and Serbia. The main aim is to identify similarities in vernacular rural dwellings dated from the XIX and beginning of the XX century. The research employs a mixed-method approach, particularly the exploratory sequential design in terms of gathering data, analysing and generalizing qualitative findings. Moreover, it applies comparative, historic and morphology methods over the evolution of various forms of housing in the Balkan Peninsula. The study was conducted in the rural areas dispersed over Macedonia and the southern part of Serbia. The concluding remarks point to a presence of similar constructive, spatial and typological forms of vernacular architecture, generally being related to the local natural environment, ethnic characteristics and traditional understanding of construction. This paper contributes to the limited academic work on this issue, along with its practical significance for posing findings, suggestions, and recommendations for preserving the Balkans architectural heritage and embedding it in the contemporary forms of rural tourism.

**Keywords:** Vernacular architecture; comparative analysis; Macedonia; Serbia; rural tourism

### Introduction

Vernacular architecture is part of the cultural complex of the Balkan Peninsula having its own autochthonous features. The significance of local residential construction forms creates possibilities for identification of habitat typology, space, application of building materials, decoration and shapes which generally derive from the level of cultural and ethnographic discourse. Jovan Cvijić studied the structural and ethnological characteristics of vernacular residential architectural heritage in the Balkans and his research provided the basis for further study of diverse characteristics of dwellings dating from the XIX and the early XX century (Vuksanović-Macura, 2017).

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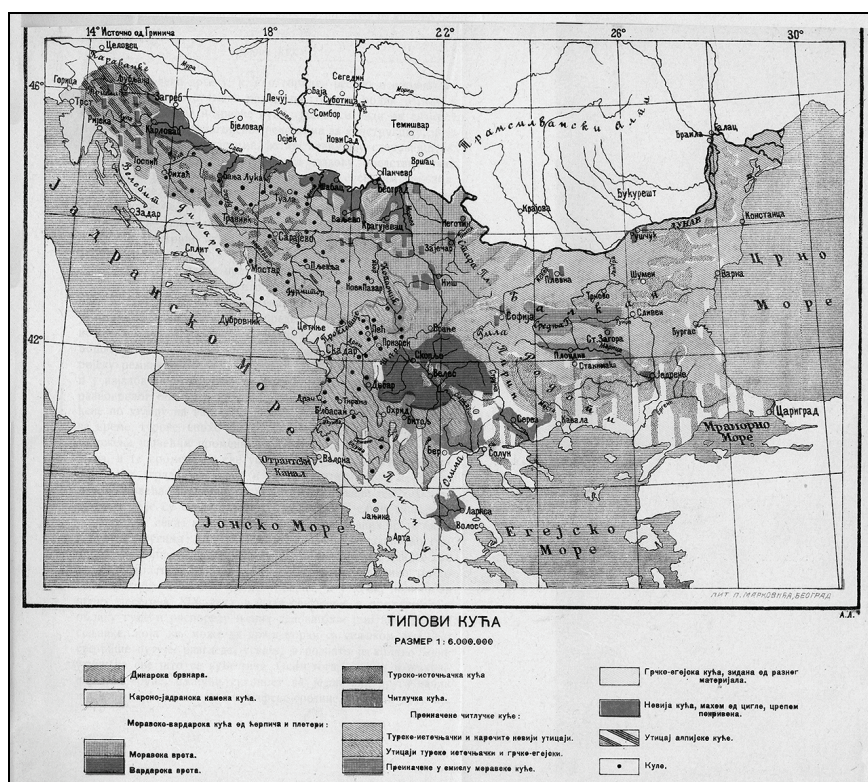


Figure 1. Distribution of 13 main types of houses identified by Cvijić, in the Balkan Peninsula (Source: Cvijić, 1922)

In his important and influential book on the Balkan Peninsula, Cvijić (1922) defined various types of houses by associating their structural characteristics and building materials (stone, timber, earth) with their natural landscape and environment (Figure 1). Although Cvijić highlighted a great variety of houses as a distinctive feature of the central and eastern regions of the Balkans, he considered it possible to identify some shared characteristics and distinct dwelling types. The architectural (structural, aesthetic and functional) elements of houses in this part of the Balkans, which also encompasses Macedonia and southern parts of Serbia, have been discussed by other authors, as well (Petrović, 1955; Deroko, 1964; Kojić, 1973).

The buildings found in the rural areas of Macedonia and southern parts of Serbia share some similarities, generally due to the common characteristics of the local environment, building tradition and cultural influences. In the studied regions, we have identified three dominant common types of houses: (i) *Ground-floor*

*house* — modest single-story dwelling, constructed in *bondruk*, timber-framed system with an earth infill, commonly built in lowlands; (ii) *Tower house* — structure with three or four stories and a small ground-floor area, usually built of stone in mountainous areas; (iii) *Chardak house*, with two or three stories and a conspicuous balcony or a loggia (*čardak*, *chardak*) at the highest story; they are usually built in a combination of stone and timber-framing, within a large group of houses in a village. These types confirm that various approaches to building and construction methods have largely overlapped, as a result of the same housing tradition and the application of the same construction techniques throughout the period when the studied regions were exposed to common influences (Pavlović, Angelova, Micopulos, Stojka, & Haluk 1987).

The primary objective of this study is to identify similarities between houses in rural areas in Macedonia and the southern part of Serbia dated from the XIX and beginning of the XX century. Moreover, the research provides evidence on comparing rural housing forms in terms of applied materials, constructive typology and spatial development. Additionally, to our best knowledge, no recent academic studies have dealt with this topic. Hence, this is the first attempt to understand common types of vernacular architecture by comparing applied building materials, construction techniques, function and forms of houses in rural areas in these two countries. The practical contribution of the paper lies in posing findings, suggestions, and recommendations for preserving the Balkan architectural heritage and embedding it in the contemporary forms of rural tourism.

After the introduction, section two of the paper is the comparative analysis with detailed interpretation on the application of building materials, construction of the habitats, spatial development of the houses, variations of the typical model, and the interior. The discussion and main findings are presented in section three, while the conclusion and recommendations are provided at the end of the paper.

### **Comparative analysis**

The location and the natural environment are the basic factors for selection of building materials for construction of dwellings, which form is a result of the ethnographic characteristics. A large number of craftsmen used a local folk craft tradition and organized themselves in groups (known as *tajfi*) to create certain variations of the characteristic model of the house. These groups in both countries, Macedonia and Serbia, have used similar building materials mainly being focused on available local materials as stone, wood and earth. When analysing the applied structural materials, huge similarities are noticeable.

Table 1. Applied materials for construction of dwellings in Macedonia and South Serbia

	Macedonia	South Serbia
Material for construction	Stone	Stone
	Wood (Timber frame)	Wood (Timber frame)
Interior Interior decoration	Earth	Earth
	Wood, earthen floor and plaster	Wood, earthen floor and plaster
	Wood (woodcut), painted earthen plaster	Wood (woodcut), painted earthen plaster
Coverage	Straw, ceramide, stone slabs	Straw, ceramide

Source: Authors' research.

Table 1 presents the applied materials for construction of dwellings, whereas the construction groups in both countries applied local materials (stone, wood and earth), being additionally encountered with different structure and processing. The stone was applied in unprocessed or processed form, with a stone processing technique developed by very skilled construction workers. The stone was most commonly used to the ground-floor house and the masonry base of upper floor(s) of the chardak house, or to the entire height at all levels of the tower-house. The wood, as a material, was used for *bondruk* construction (timber-framed system with different infill materials) of the upper floor(s) (chardak house), part of the highest level (tower-house) or on the ground floor, that is, the entire construction in a horizontal level (ground-floor house). Finally, the earth was used as mixed structure, mostly clay or other local material, which was additionally mixed with straw. This material was used as an infill for timber frame structures (*bondruk*), and was put on the walls, ceilings and floor surfaces of the house. This was a case to a smaller extent for the tower-house, to a moderate extent for the chardak house, and being dominant for the ground-floor house.

Table 2. Construction systems in Macedonia and South Serbia


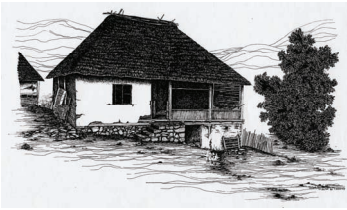


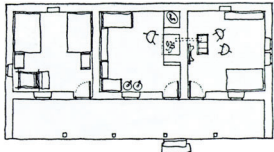



Construction system	Macedonia	South Serbia
Ground-floor house	<i>Bondruk</i> construction	<i>Bondruk</i> construction (timber-frame infilled with wattle and daub or mud brick)
Tower house	Stonewall 15% <i>bondruk</i>	Stonewall 5% <i>bondruk</i>
<i>Chardak</i> house	Ground floor: stone wall Floor: <i>bondruk</i> with 30% stone wall	Ground floor: stone wall Floor: <i>bondruk</i> with 30% stone wall

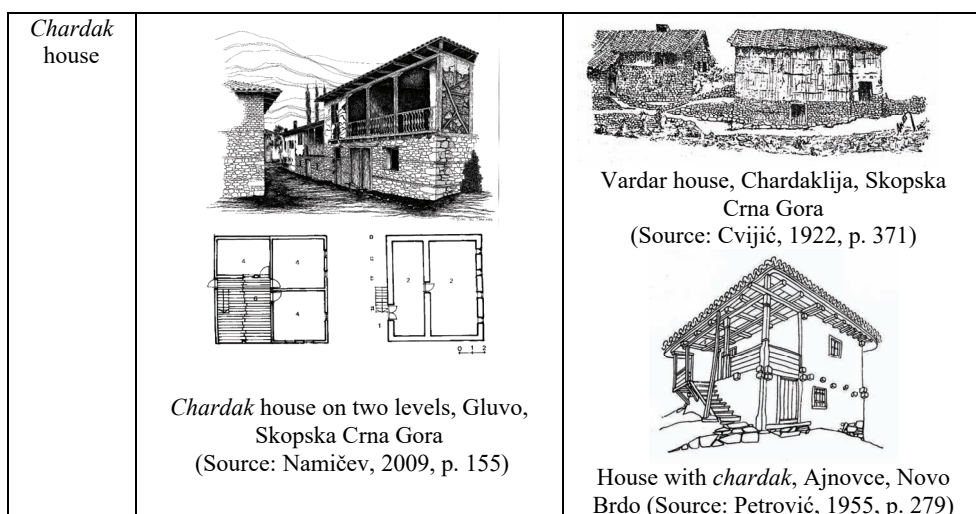
Source: Authors' research

According to the applied material, a certain construction system was used as part of the local tradition and a way of creating a model of traditional habitat for the particular region (Table 2).



Table 3. Spatial development of houses in Macedonia and South Serbia

House model	Macedonia	South Serbia
Ground-floor house	 <p>Zdunje, Makedonski Brod (Source: Namičev, 2009, p. 156)</p>  <p>Zdunje, Makedonski Brod (Source: Namičev, 2009, p. 107)</p>	 <p>Chivchiska house, Vranje, South Serbia (Source: Cvijić, 1922, p. 385)</p>   <p>Kosovska prizemljaša (Souce: Kojić, 1973, p. 65)</p>
Tower house	 <p>Galičnik, Reka area (Source: Namičev, 2009, p. 203)</p>  <p>Galičnik, Reka area (Source: Namičev, 2009, p. 195)</p>	 <p>Metohija tower (Source: Kojić, 1973, p. 69)</p>



The development of the morphological structure of the houses allows perceiving the influence of the environmental factors on the final form and recognition of certain variations of the basic model. The basic house models according to the spatial development in Macedonia and South Serbia are presented in Table 3. The model of the ground-floor house (Pomoravlje, Kosovo, Metohija, Eastern Macedonia) has many similarities with the model called *chivchiska* (Cvijić, 1922) *chardak* house (Kosovo, Skopska Crna Gora) or *Upper Vardar house* (Cvijić, 1922), and a tower house (Metohija, Reka) (Deroko, 1964; Findrik, 1994).

With regards to the terminology used for particular house model, it originates from the ethnicity as well as the construction concept. Nevertheless, the use of local terms derived from the perception of the most common appearance of the dwellings (Table 4).

Table 4. The terminology of the houses in Macedonia and south Serbia

House model	Macedonia	South Serbia
Ground-floor house	Pozemka Prizemka Prizemljuša Slamenica Pletenica	Prizemljuša Bondručara Pločara Pletara Prutara
Tower house	Pločena	Kula
<i>Chardak</i> house	Čardaklija	Čardak Kuća sa čardakom Doksatlja

Source: Authors' research

The concept of the interior was formed in relatively similar conditions for both countries, as in the case of the concept of dwellings, whereas the construction structure has influenced the selection of materials. Further on, it was incorporated in the morphologically-functional approach of the complete house conception. This reflected the primary adjustment to the body part dimensions derived from traditional measures like palm, elbow, and so on (Petrović, 1973).

Table 5. Common features of interior elements in the two regions

House model	Ground-floor house	Tower house	<i>Chardak</i> house
Materials	Wood, stone, earthen floor and plaster	Wood, stone	Wood, earthen floor and plaster
Space	Room-house	Room-house Room-odaja	Room-house Room-odaja Loggia or balcony ( <i>chardak</i> )
Decoration	Minimal	Moderate	Noticeable
Interior element	House items Built-in cupboards Fire place	Built-in cupboards Musandra Minder	Built-in cupboards Musandra Minder Ceiling Column

Source: Authors' research

As per the interior design, there is an identical approach in Macedonia and south Serbia when applying embedded elements, construction materials, household items. Generally, in all three types of houses noted in Table 5, the organization of interior has common elements that are standard for a certain region, with slight variations mostly in terms of the size of the space that occupies the interior in relation to the total area of the house. However, some certain differences appear in the treatment of space and objects generally due to the ethnic influence and respect for traditional elements. The guest room is a place where the interior arrangement is mostly expressed, for the type of tower house (Metohija, Reka) and the *chardak* house of Metohija (Deroko, 1964; Findrik 1994).

### Discussion and findings

The study has revealed many similarities in the vernacular architecture of the XIX and the early XX century in Macedonia and south Serbia. They are mainly apparent in the construction, spatial arrangement, forms and plans of the identified types of houses. This is due to similar local conditions in terms of climate, cultural customs, housing traditions, ethnological characteristics, understandings of the buildings, as well as economic factors. Further on, the availability of building materials affected the identification and application of the house construction system.

The spatial morphological structure of the location additionally influenced the shape of the useful space that is related to certain elements of the tradition, in the first line understandings of the local population of the way of building, along with the shape and size of the dwellings. According to several centuries-old habitat development structures, due to the influence of all the above-mentioned factors, certain models were established, later modified in numerous variations through different regions. Furthermore, the common values and understandings in the construction domain were respected in both countries, where the cost-effectiveness of a building, the functionality of the space, the adaptation of local understandings, and the ecological approach were the primary ones.

On the other hand, the comparative analysis of the cases in Macedonia and south Serbia revealed certain differences in housing types. Namely, some dwellings were constructed on locations with a certain slope on the terrain, which required placement of a spatial structure and access from several sides. The spatial organization occurred due to the needs of the family, that is, the number of rooms, separate units, resulting in dwellings with a large useful area. Their complexity is related to the morphology of the development of the useful surface that has gradually developed according to the experience of several generations, directly related to the needs. On the other hand, the flexibility is expressed through the possibility of a constant change of the internal spatial structure, which could easily be transformed by partitioning. Finally, the particular concept of construction and the applied materials were matched along with the interior and its decoration.

### **Conclusion and recommendation**

Based on the field work and findings, along with the insights from earlier works, the study identified similarities in the vernacular architecture built in the rural areas of Macedonia and the southern part of Serbia. It was found that the basic elements on which a particular house model was formed influenced the selection of materials, which was additionally adjusted to the local conditions. Towards the construction process, the comparative analysis found the presence of exchange of experiences from two local construction skills, which contributed to the development of quality buildings. Furthermore, the study confirmed that the spatial structure of a house was developed after certain basic models originated from an old construction experience and following the needs of the family and economic constraints (Obradović, 2016). The study concluded that having houses with similar characteristics in both countries, justified the high criteria for respecting the construction tradition and the culture of living. These circumstances may also serve as the basis for devising strategies for the

preservation, revitalization and contemporary use of this architectural heritage, drawing on the same challenges and sharing the acquired experience and lessons learned.

In addition, by developing and giving an additional value to the Balkans vernacular residential buildings, it is necessary to raise the issue of their preservation and integration into the modern forms of rural tourism. The current forms of protection mainly through the direct renovation of buildings, construction of complexes with ethnographic contents or establishing open air museums to exhibit vernacular architecture, gives a glance for an intensified care for the cultural heritage. Of particular importance are the constant efforts to address the challenges of contemporary tourism trends based on cultural heritage and vernacular architecture. The presence of autochthonous house models with similar characteristics identified in this study in both countries urges the need for making efforts to initiate rural tourism development.

In this line, the focus should be on promotion, mainly through the creation and introduction of new innovative strategic approaches that may boost the development of rural tourism. The first strategic measure should tangle the current marketing strategy, thus making some rural areas rich with vernacular architecture, fully recognizable. The second strategic measure should improve tourism competitiveness by strengthening the coordination between central and local governments, in addition to other tourism players from the private sector. The objectives and aims delineated by the tourism development plans and programs should be fully implemented, regardless of the level of implementation. And last but not least, a professional support should be provided to different stakeholders about the adequate treatment of vernacular architecture. This may include the formulation of guidelines on preservation, improvement, and revitalization of existing traditionally built houses with a recommendation regarding the application of traditional building language for modern construction.

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