

Oct 28th, 9:00 AM - Oct 30th, 5:00 PM

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Recommended Citation

Herbig, Ulrike, "Cultural Spaces Research on Architecture and Identity" (2016). *UBT International Conference*. 75.
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Cultural Spaces Research on Architecture and Identity

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Abstract. Architecture is the result of a multilayered process influenced by numerous factors. Thus, comprehensive architectural research can only be achieved through a holistic approach and in collaboration with experts from different disciplines. Although interdisciplinary research is a common framework for architectural studies and should be an integral part of the education for future architects, yet, this is not usually the case. With its module entitled “Cultural Spaces – Research on Architecture and Identity” at the TU Wien, a set of courses has been developed to arouse the interest of students of architecture in setting up their own research project. This paper will describe the research approach that is taught in the framework of the module, using the example of the class of 2016, which was focused on the architecture of the world heritage sites of Historic Centres of Berat and Gjirokastra in Albania.

Keywords: traditional architecture, identity in architecture, world heritage, research in architecture, building archaeology, city analysis

1. Introduction

The idea was to create a curriculum that introduces students to research in architecture and to provide them with a skillset so that enables them to get a deeper insight into the background that is influencing what is designed and built. To approach the historic built environment requires more than just an understanding of architecture. The buildings themselves are the reflection of numerous processes that influenced their appearance, their meaning and their use. As planning and design within existing structures becomes more and more important, future architects have to learn how to deal with and to understand what already exists. Even if many projects won't have room for in-depth research of the surroundings, a general, sympathetic consideration should be a part of every planning and design that will change the face of an urban structure. For this reason a set of courses, defined as a module has been set up at the Department for History of Architecture and Building Archaeology at TU Wien, combining theoretical and practical elements, with the latter being a core focus at this institute. The aim of the module is to provide an insight into the requirements and background of research in architecture, with particular consideration of culture and identity of spaces as direct influences on architecture and architectural concepts.

The methodology of the module will be outlined, followed by examples of results from the class of 2016 in which students worked on topics in the world heritage sites of Historic Centres of Berat and Gjirokastra, Albania.

2. Methodology used in the courses

One of the module's main objectives is to raise awareness that culture and identity are general factors that influence architecture. Since the research should be on a region that has not been intensely researched, so that it provides the necessary distance for students to look at the topic in an unbiased way as possible, the topics for the courses will be chosen from countries other than Austria.

In one of the theory courses, a series of lectures will provide an introduction to the history and the architecture of the place to be visited and investigated. Lectures will be divided into general topics and examples of previous research projects in the region.

In the practical follow-up course, the students will do their own in-depth literature research on the architecture of the region and define topics that can be used as a basis for an in-depth study later on. The interdisciplinary aspect is part of the preparations, and is an integral part of courses. The field of research of architectural documentation is far more than just a survey of the building and drawing of plans. In a modern scientific approach, buildings should be interpreted as the product of many influences, where historical, social, cultural, economical and ecological factors all have an effect on the design, structure and function of architecture. In the preparation phase for the fieldwork, topics will be outlined and discussed regarding the additional disciplines needed in order to work on a comprehensive study. Furthermore, the setup for the interdisciplinary fieldwork will be outlined in discussions and examples.

The practical course is focused on the analysis and study of cultural spaces on site. Topics include architectonic and spatial uses in urban and rural areas against the background of different cultural identities. Students will carry out surveys and documentations on objects and urban environments on site, according to their chosen topic. In collaboration with local partners, the future architects will also have the possibility to discuss their research questions with experts from other disciplines and to explore how further study could be accomplished. The aim of the practical part is to motivate students to do research independently and to summarise their findings in an article, which would be fit for presentation at an international scientific conference. Another expected outcome is the compilation of data for further use.

Finally, in a course combining lectures and discussions, the framework for the architectural research projects will be provided. Talks on actual project research questions, setup, management, and funding possibilities and the outline of research proposals will be given by researchers working in this field. With this basic skillset, students will be expected to write a one-page summary of a concept for a research project that can be distributed to potential partners/stakeholders/authorities for a concrete start of a study. This outline must also be presented in the form of a three-minute pitch to train the skill of comprehensive, compact description of even complex research ideas

3. Cultural Spaces at Berat and Gjirokastra

The historic centres of these two cities in Albania are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list as outstanding examples of architecture developed in the Ottoman period. Both cities have been home to diverse communities with different religious and cultural backgrounds. Gjirokastra was predominantly built by landowners and still provides the image of a stronghold with its significant citadel towering over the town and the omnipresent tower houses (*Kullë* in Albanian). Up to four storeys high, this massive building type was developed at the time of the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the 17th century as a result of continuous fighting in the region. Until the beginning of the 20th century, the *Kullas* have been built throughout the Balkans to provide home and protection to an extended family.

By contrast, Berat, although also fortified, appears more open. It was the home of merchants and craftsmen for centuries and is situated along the river Osum. Underneath a hill with a Byzantine

citadel that was the core of the settlement until the 13th century, the stream divides the historic part of the town into the two quarters of Mangalem and Gorica. Whereas Mangalem nestles along the steep slopes of the hill and the space for the buildings is limited, the area of Gorica allowed stretches on the flat part of the river bank and allowed the construction of bigger houses for the wealthier inhabitants of Berat. In 2005, both cities were inscribed on the World Heritage list in a serial inscription as one site under criteria III and IV of the World Heritage Convention. In the nomination, the outstanding universal value is stated as:

“Criterion (iii): Berat and Gjirokastra bear outstanding testimony to the diversity of urban societies in the Balkans, and to longstanding ways of life which have today almost vanished. The town planning and housing of Gjirokastra are those of a citadel town built by notable landowners whose interests were directly linked to those of the central power. Berat bears the imprint of a more independent life style, linked to its handicraft and merchant functions.

Criterion (iv): Together, the two towns of Gjirokastra and Berat bear outstanding testimony to various types of monument and vernacular urban housing during the Classical Ottoman period, in continuity with the various Medieval cultures which preceded it, and in a state of peaceful coexistence with a large Christian minority, particularly at Berat.” [1]

Although the listing and the accompanying management plan should provide a sound basis for the safeguarding of the architectural heritage, actual implementation seems more and more difficult. Maintaining the integrity and authenticity of the places while at the same time providing a framework that allows for sustainable development so as to provide an environment suitable for a modern way of life is the most crucial topic for all stakeholders involved.

Thus, Gjirokastra and Berat offer manifold topics for architectural research, ranging from fundamental research about principles in the Albanian interpretation of the Ottoman architecture to more in-depth applied topics such as working on suitable restoration approaches and integrative planning and design.

Below is a selection of the research ideas that students of the class of 2016 came up with:

3.1. Bazaar Blended

A fundamental research approach was chosen by one student to work on a comprehensive analysis of the bazaar in Gjirokastra embedded in a broader comparison of bazaars in the Orient and Occident to find out where the bazaar in the historic center of Gjirokastra fits in in terms of its key characteristics and how much it represents the special cultural merging in this place.

The preliminary conclusion states that Gjirokastra is based on a typical plan for an Ottoman city and therefore affected by its corresponding Islamic culture and traditions. It presents almost all features representative of the type of bazaar being reshaped during that time. However, a closer look at the Bazaar and comparing it with the Eastern type and the Western-style bazaar type reveals a whole new situation: it is neither simply Eastern-Islamic nor Western-Catholic/-Orthodox. This situation arises from the multi-cultural wealth of Albania which has seen the peaceful co-existence and merging of different beliefs, religions and cultures for decades.

With an in-depth comparative analysis the different aspects of the various influences could be assessed and could, in addition to the basic findings, provide the basis for a sustainable refurbishment and planning for the historic bazaars. [2]



Fig. 8. The main road of the bazaar in *Gjirokastra* two to three storey buildings and modernized shop fronts.

3.2. Artisanal Culture in Albania

Another student worked on an applied research approach with a research question that is focused on possible strategies to save artisanal culture in a UNESCO site, using the example of Gjirokastra and Berat as a basis. The fieldwork researched the current state of Albanian artisans, including how they are able to sustain their profession and earn their livelihood, as well as social and political issues. This was the basis for outlining a study on suitable solutions for preserving this intangible heritage for future generations, focusing on urban and architectural design and planning strategies for the refurbishment of the bazaar of Gjirokastra. As a major problem a lack of funds to afford high taxes and the high rents on the shops at the bazaar had been identified. It is mainly a result of the underestimated, beneficial impact of the artisans especially on tourism. Visitors appreciate handmade products that are bought in shops where the production of the articles can be observed, and talking with the craftspeople opens up new insights into traditional techniques. Gjirokastra, where the urban fabric of the old bazaar still exists, as an example of the old Ottoman architecture, provides a strong potential for setting up a unique tourist programme that would attract many more people from all over the world. At Berat, the old bazaar ceased to exist after 1942, and artisans have no specific, single place in which to produce or sell their products in an easy-to-find environment.

The outlined research will focus on the bazaar in Gjirokastra and will take into consideration existing initiatives e.g. for the revival of the traditional craftsmanship or traffic concepts. Furthermore in-depth interdisciplinary research in collaboration with stakeholders and representatives of official authorities will be carried out to create the basis for a sustainable architectural solution.

The project which was finally outlined will focus on an integrated approach to improve the situation of the artisans. The main objective is to develop a plan for workshops, galleries and studies where craftspeople can not only manufacture and sell their products, but also share their knowledge through training sessions with the public. [3]



Fig. 9. The workshop of Gjiro Art is an initiative by a local NGO to provide room to produce and sell local artisan products.

3.3. The Kokalaris - Stories of a Family

A very different approach was chosen to document the history of the building owned by the family of the first published female Albanian writer, Musine Kokalari. The research started with a survey of the ruins of the building, an example of the typical architecture of Gjirokastra. The research into the history of the building revealed the story of its former inhabitants and provided a glimpse into a dark part of Albania's recent past. Musine Kokalari was the founder of a democratic party which stood up against the socialist regime under Enver Hoxhas. As a result, Kokalari and 19 members of her family were imprisoned because of their political engagement, and Musine Kokalari spent nearly 40 years of her life in prison. Her story is inextricably connected to Gjirokastra and to her family's house, which had its own eventful history. After a careful renovation of the building, the Kokalari house burnt down because of a technical malfunction. Today the site is visited by people who know about its past, and the family is determined to continue with its aim to create a museum to honour Musine Kokalari and those who fought against a brutal regime.

As a preliminary result of the study, a short film was produced as an introduction to this story and as a basis for a rebuilding concept for the Kokalari house. The research outlined has two major objectives: one is to conduct an in-depth study of the inhabitants of the building to provide a comprehensive basis for a museum; and the second is the design of a museum based on an in-depth archaeological building survey of the house.

The project outlined summarizes the different aspects which have to be tackled to design a site that fits into the existing historic structure, while still meeting the requirements of modern museum technology and providing content that is inextricably linked to the town, the history of its inhabitants and to Albanian history.[4]



Fig. 10. Film gets more important as dissemination tool for research results. Screenshot of the introduction to the documentary described.

Conclusions

As the different research approaches of the students show, an integrated view of architecture broadens the perspective on the various influences on the built environment. Urban structures are cultural spaces with architecture as the most evident reflection of their cultural identity. Design and planning within these existing structures require a comprehensive understanding of the cultural spaces and the cultural identity they represent. Encouraging future architects to deal with the different influences on architecture and to research the development of buildings and urban structures, sensitizes their perception and awareness of their importance. In this paper, the results of the students' projects prove that they had developed an understanding of the need for integrated methods to gain a comprehensive view of architecture. The sample results described in this paper show that this approach leads to research ideas which range from basic to applied research as a basis for city planning or for architectural design based on an increased sensibility for cultural spaces and the impact that architecture has on the cultural identity.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank my colleague Irene Doubrawa for developing this set of courses and my colleagues Caroline Jaeger-Klein, Gudrun Styhler-Aydin and Renate Bornberg for collaborating in the supervision of the class of 2016.

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