

Conservation in a Developing Economy: Tower Houses in Albania

Jennifer O'Connell

Fellow, International Specialist Skills (ISS) Institute

1. Summary

Gjirokastra, the 'Stone City,' in southern Albania is a United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) listed town famous for its tower houses. The houses are unique examples of the combination of Ottoman and Albanian architecture and, at their pinnacle, served as homes to large extended families, as well as defensive structures. Unfortunately, many are in a state of disrepair. As the Albanian economy is still developing, there are limited resources available for the conservation of these monuments. The preservation is considered important because it contributes to the sustainable economy based on heritage tourism in Gjirokastra. In cases such as these, a volunteer team that brings financial and in-kind assistance, while working with the local community, can achieve important conservation work. The wall paintings on two tower houses in Gjirokastra have been documented through such a volunteer project. The first part of the project was undertaken at Skenduli House in September 2014 and the second part at Kikino House in May 2015. The projects were hosted by Adventures in Preservation, an American organisation, in conjunction with the Regional Directorate of Monuments of Gjirokastra and the Institute of Cultural Monuments in Tirana.

2. Project Aims

- Provide conservation documentation that can assist with applications for future restoration.
- Participate in the Adventures in Preservation model of volunteer preservation project and assess if it is suitable in the Australian context.
- Assess if the experience would work as additional education and training for conservators in Australia, as there is limited conservation training for graduates and early career painting conservators.

3. Context

The Skenduli and Kikino Houses were built in the eighteenth century during the Ottoman Empire's occupation of Albania. The tower houses in Gjirokastra create opportunities for tourism through use as guest houses, restaurants and museums. The tower houses were used by both Christian and Muslim families. Different styles are evident throughout Albania and Kosovo and the rest of the Balkans. The houses in Gjirokastra are stone structures, two or three stories high, with wooden roofs with stone tiles. The houses were homes as well as defensive structures and housed an entire extended family. The internal structure of the house gives evidence to the social customs of the time. There are strict guidelines surrounding the restoration of the houses as they are either Category 1 or 2 monuments of an UNESCO World Heritage Site, thus making documentation critical. The roofs of the tower houses are complicated wooden structures with stones weighted on top. Many of the tower houses have intricate decorative elements as well as wall paintings. The major areas of concern include plaster separating from the wall, whitewash overpaint and water damage via a leaking roof.

4. Method

The volunteers photographed the paintings, noted techniques of execution, recorded previous restorations, highlighted signs of degradation and compiled the findings into a report. The photography was undertaken by professional photographers. At Skenduli House a team from Italy, Storia Ambiente Monumento, also undertook a 3D survey. At Kikino House, Ilir Rizaj, a professional photographer, volunteered his services for the photographic documentation. Volunteers undertook additional research by interviewing the owners of the houses, sketching the paintings and looking into the costumes of the period to understand the wall paintings. Volunteers also looked at the building envelope as a whole, noting areas in need of improvement.

5. Conclusion

The experience in Gjirokastra reinforced the idea that student conservators or emerging professionals could develop skills and networks while assisting on community based projects. The participants also learned new skills while providing services that were otherwise economically unviable. The major outcomes were:

- Conservation documentation
- Recording of oral histories
- Recommendations for conservation



Skenduli House exterior

Skenduli House

Skenduli House is a three-storey Ottoman Tower house built in 1700 with renovations from the nineteenth century. The house is currently owned by Nesip Skenduli, but during communist times the house was taken by the state and used as the Ethnographic Museum. During this time most furnishings were removed and the house sustained some damage. In the past ten years, repairs have taken place, particularly on the roof and on the exterior walls.

The layout of the rooms reflects the use of the house as a defensive structure. For example there are twenty 'magic eyes' (spying holes); ten to look out and ten to look within the structure. The separation of the women's and men's areas reflect the social customs of the time. It is exceptional for its cistern, which holds 130 cubic litres and decorative wooden carvings in the ceilings, doors and cupboards. The ground floor was used for the animals and food storage, and there is a bakery across the courtyard. The first floor was used in winter and has a kitchen, bedrooms and bathrooms. The second floor is the summer floor and has a balcony looking out over the valley.



Jennifer O'Connell examining wall painting under raking light.



Fireplace in the Bridal Room, Skenduli House



Bridal Room, Skenduli House



Decorated ceiling on the summer floor in Skenduli House

Kikino House

The wall paintings were different in style to those at the Skenduli Houses. The wall paintings at Kikino featured a military procession, birds and flowers. They were located on an exterior wall of the balcony. Paintings on the interior, such as those in the bridal rooms of Skenduli, were not evident. These may have been overpainted or may not have existed initially. Furthermore, there were other architectural details that differed such as decorative elements around and above doorways. The house itself had undergone many changes overtime, particularly post-World War II when it had sustained damage following bombing. The current owner is writing a history of the house and has put several items onto the Interpol database of stolen objects in the hope of recovering lost and stolen objects. The house was looted of decorative elements during times of unrest in Albania.



A volunteer sketching the paintings at Kikino House



Kikino House



Paintings on the 'moon balcony' at Kikino House



Exterior paintings at Kikino House



Biography

Jennifer O'Connell is a painting conservator who graduated from the Master of Arts (Cultural Material Conservation) in 2011. Jennifer was the recipient of the ADFAS Student Conservator of the Year Award (University of Melbourne) in 2011. Her work experience includes conservation projects with the University of Melbourne, Artcare and David Stein & Co. Jennifer is Secretary on the AICCM National Council.

Acknowledgments

International Specialist Skilled (ISS) Institute
Judith Broeker, Adventures in Preservation
Storia Ambiente Monumento
Ilir Rizaj, Ilir Rizaj Photography
Nesip Skenduli, Edlira Kurti and the Skenduli Family
Albert Kasi, Director, Ministria e Kulturës

Sources

Mezini L & D Pojani 2014, 'Defence, identity, and urban form: the extreme case of Gjirokastra,' Planning Perspectives, Routledge, pp 1-32. Accessed September 2014, available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2014.943267>

Merxhani, K and Mamani, E 2012, Construction Materials in Historical And Monumental Buildings – Gjirokastra, International Students' Conference of Civil Engineering, ISCE 2012, 10-11 May 2012, Epoka University, Tirana, Albania.

O'Connell, J 2015, '3D Laser Scanning for Conservation Documentation,' ISS Institute Report.