

Kulla: A Traditional Albanian House Type in Kosovo

Sahar Rassam, Architect
Former Housing Coordinator and Municipal Housing Committee Chair,
United Nations Mission In Kosovo (UNMIK).

SUMMERY

The kulla is a traditional house of the Kosovar Albanian family. Its design, which is unique to this part of the region, is influenced by the social and cultural needs of the people, climate and locally available building materials. The paper discusses the kulla as a house type and describes its design and characteristics. Field assessment showed that a high percentage of them were mostly damaged by the Kosovo conflict and partly by neglect. The need for restoration and reconstruction of kullas is crucial in preserving architectural cultural heritage and authenticity.

INTRODUCTION

The Kosovo conflict rendered a heavy toll on the housing stock; more than one third of the houses were damaged and destroyed. In the western part of Kosovo the damage was more intense and amounted to around 80% of the total, due to concentrated militia resistance. Neglect and lack of maintenance in about ten years of instability also played a role. International organizations came to Kosovo in the summer of 1999 and started the reconstruction campaign. Traditional houses received their share of the destruction, but they were overlooked in the reconstruction process.

The two main types of Kosovar-Albanian traditional houses that prevail in Kosovo are: the stone house (kulla) and the Ottoman type town house (cardak).

KULLA

The kulla, which means tower in Albanian, is mainly seen in the western part of Kosovo. It is a distinctive traditional style of the Dukagjini plain that borders Montenegro, west of Kosovo. Kullas were mostly constructed between the end of the 18th century and the first decades of the 20th century, and inhabited by generations of families. Their design is influenced by the social and cultural needs of the people. The Institute for the Protection of Monuments of Kosovo states that kullas were the only architectural type which were built by all Albanian social classes [1]. During my field work in that region, however, I was told by the locals that the kullas were the traditional houses of the rich Kosovar-Albanian families. The style and method of construction of the majority of kullas endorses this opinion.



Figure 1: kulla of M. Gega, Gjurrakoc, Istog, as it used to be with the attached annex. Constructed of stone and brick. Taken from an old picture [2].

The kulla has either two or three floors and is mostly square in plan. They were usually utilized by the men of the family, while women and children lived in an attached annex having the same number of floors or less (Fig.1). Animals were kept in the ground floor and the upper floor was used by the men of the house and their guests. There are usually two entrances and staircases. One for the guests, from the main entrance, leading directly to the upper floor and the guest room without passing through the family private quarters. Another for the

women, from the side entrance, leading to the middle floor if the kulla has three floors, or to the main floor in case of two floors.

The exterior walls are about one meter thick at the ground level and decrease upwards. They are constructed of stone (Fig.2), brick (Fig.3) or both (Fig.1) having the ground floor constructed of stone and the other floors of brick, with various patterns. The stones were excavated locally. The bricks are usually Harasan bricks, which were made of sand, chalk, water and a little cement, hand made and baked in kilns, or occasionally mud bricks. Interior walls are constructed of mud bricks with mud as the binding material and occasionally constructed of wood. The front door is through an arch opening in the wall. Small arched windows pierce the rather massive elevations. Many kullas have cantilevered parts and windows in the upper floor, constructed of the same material as the kulla, i.e. stone or brick with various decorative patterns, or of wood in the style of cardak with wooden arches and decorations (fig.4). There are also very small openings called (fringji) used for firing artillery and defense purposes. In fact, the architecture of the kulla, is as defensive as a fortress and must have provided excellent security during its history.



Figure 2 : Kulla of K. Fazlia, Lubozhda, Istog, constructed of stone [2].



Figure 3 : Kulla of C. Ahmetaj, Zabllac, Istog, constructed of brick [2].



Figure 4: Kulla of S. Mata, Doberdol, Klina, with cardak style cantilever [2].

The floors were constructed of tree trunks and the upper floor ceiling was covered from the inside with decorated wooden planks. The roof was topped with stone sheets which have later been mostly replaced with roofing tiles (Fig.6). Many details were incorporated in the design. Some kullas have the Qibla, a vertical niche in the wall pointing in the direction of Mekka and used for prayer. Certain rooms have fireplaces which were gradually blocked with birds' nests and later were built and closed. There are also wooden hangers attached to the ceiling above the fireplaces for drying clothes (Fig.7), built in wooden ornamented cupboards for storing coffee in the guests room (Fig 8), stone built-in boxes in front of windows and fringjis, stone sinks with an opening to the outside for drainage (Fig 9), and traditional eastern type toilets which were either built originally with the house or added at a later time (Fig.10).



Fig. 5: inner ceiling [2].
Kulla of H. Maxharraj, Gramnik, Klina



Fig. 6: stone sheet roofing [2].
Kulla of H.Maxharraj Gramnik, Klina



Fig. 7: closed fireplace with hanger [2]
Kulla of H. Maxharraj, Gramnik, Klina



Fig. 8: built-in cupboard [2]
Kulla of U.Ukaj, Kaliqan, Istog



Fig.9: Stone basin [2]
Kulla of J.Jaku, Ranoc, Klina



Fig.10: Added eastern toilet [2]
Kulla of C. Ahmetaj, Zabllac, Istog

Influence of Islamic culture is obvious in the design of the kulla and clearly manifested in the segregation of men and women social spaces and entrances. The small windows having a double function of privacy and defense. Examples of similar plans exist in the middle-east, like the Yemeni tower houses for instance, where the ground floor is used for animals and the upper-most floor has the “Mafraj” reserved for the men and their guests [3].

Climatically, kullas are better suited to the local weather than the presently prevalent modern houses. Kosovo weather is cold and harsh during the winter, but could also be hot during the summer. The thick walls, which could be one meter wide and constructed of solid stones or bricks, have high thermal capacity and appreciable time lag. The roofs have also good thermal insulating properties, being constructed of wood and stone. This regulates the interior heat and eliminates the temperature differences between the days and nights. They are also warmer in winter and cooler in the summer due to their high thermal resistance. When this is coupled with good orientation it could result in great energy savings.

The modern houses need considerable energy for heating in the winter. The Kosovars became dependent on electricity and wood burning in stoves for heating. With the present situation of unstable and low electricity supply, the wood burning stoves are being used extensively. Large amount of trees are being chopped every year to provide for heating in winter, that would lead eventually to the depletion of the forests.

FIELD ASSESSMENT

A survey was conducted in the municipalities of Klina and Istog, of Peja region, which is known as the Dukagjini plain in Kosovo. The survey consisted of 59 kullas, being the total traditional housing stock in the two municipalities. An

analytical and visual description has been prepared for publication with an assessment of their condition [2].

The kullas surveyed were mostly constructed in the 18th and 19th century, with the exception of three more recent ones built in the first half of the 20th century.

Almost all the kullas suffered from neglect. Interviews with locals and local officials show that around 44 were damaged by the war, burned or shelled. Most kullas were abandoned and people were still living in only nine of them. It is possible to categorize kullas according to the state of damage into the following five categories:

- 1- Badly destroyed or reduced to part walls or rubble (Fig.11).
- 2- Outer walls in various rates of damage but nothing was left of the interiors and the roof (Fig.2).
- 3- Outer walls in good or repairable condition and need some restoration of the interiors and roof.
- 4- In a fairly good condition and are inhabited.
- 5- Altered and rebuilt and their facades had undergone significant changes (Fig.12).



Fig.11: Badly destroyed kulla [2]
Kulla of F.Meta, Shushice e Ulet, Istog



Fig.12: Altered and rebuilt kulla [2]
Kulla of N.Shatri, Tomoc, Istog

In time, the social and cultural needs of the community changed, and shelter priorities differed. Annexes started disappearing and the whole family lived in the main kulla. One kulla was used as a small village school and had its windows enlarged. Others were abandoned in favor of more modern houses. In fact, people complained of windows being too small and the interiors being dim. Families of thirteen of the kullas have taken the initiative to enlarge some or all windows, thus changing the appearances of the facades. Few kullas were also altered from the inside by, for example, changing the partitioning, plastering the walls, adding toilets and constructing concrete slabs between floors.

International agencies, that started a reconstruction campaign in 1999, were not interested in restoring kullas, but rather in building houses of standard building materials next to the kulla, if the area of the site permitted, or in demolishing the

kulla completely and building on the same spot if the area of the site was small. The locals were also more interested in getting new houses than restoring their kullas. Only four kullas were maintained by their owners.

The physical maintenance of kullas and the reconstruction of damaged ones is urgently needed and needs special attention. The fact that most binding material is made of mud, especially in the interior walls, exposes the kullas to further damage under rain and snow, since the mud binding material will be washed away.

CONCLUSION

Restoration of kullas is important for the following reasons:

?? They have two or three floors which if reconditioned can accommodate two to three families, helping in solving the present housing crisis. In fact, some families have already done that.

?? They are environmentally sustainable in terms of suitability to climatic conditions, energy consumption and use of local building materials.

?? To preserve authenticity. During the conflict, cultural and heritage buildings, i.e. churches, monasteries, mosques and traditional houses, were targeted by warring parties possibly due to their symbolic value, or to weaken the sense of attachment.

?? Without urgent intervention, kullas are in danger of extinction and consequently the loss of a traditional house type exclusive to this region.

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