Bosnian Dwelling Tradition: Continuity and Transformation in the Reconstruction of Sarajevo

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This article discusses the characteristics of and potential for preserving the dwelling tradition of the city of Sarajevo in the context of changing historical conditions in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the housing shortage caused by recent war devastation. Originally developed according to Ottoman vernacular design principles, many of the traditional neighborhoods of Sarajevo have been transformed or devastated over time. However, a few surviving traditional dwellings maintain their character and integrity as educationally significant examples capable of informing contemporary architectural responses to the current challenge of urban and neighborhood rehabilitation.

The city of Sarajevo has evolved over many centuries into a major multicultural center in the Balkan region of southeastern Europe. Growing from ancient origins, it developed the vibrancy of a Middle Eastern city but was also enriched by an ongoing process of intercultural dialogue between old-world civilizations and neighboring European cultures. Over half a millennium, while involved in this process of transformation and identity struggle, the city has also experienced recurring episodes of devastation and rebirth.

Archeological findings reveal that the area of today’s Sarajevo was first settled in the Neolithic era. Later, a Roman settlement evolved, which was gradually replaced by a medieval parish. After 1462, as a town called Bosna-saraj, the city began to develop its present-day urban form as the westernmost center of the Ottoman Empire, gradually incorporating the medieval Vrhbosna parish and several other settlements in the valley of the Miljacka River. Its location was favorably positioned near the source of the Bosna River, at the foot of Mt. Trebevic, and at...
the crossing of major roads linking the city with the Middle East, the Orient, and other regions of the Balkans and Europe. With the main road extending east-west along the Miljacka River, the new business center, or charshiya, developed in the core of the emerging town (FIG.1). The valley slopes that surrounded this core were gradually occupied by residential neighborhoods developed according to Ottoman town-building traditions.

The characteristic qualities of Sarajevo, including its spiritual life and cultural diversity, subsequently evolved through a symbiotic mingling of different forms of heritage, brought about by the juxtaposition of four dominant confessional communities: Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox and Jewish. In particular, a harmonious ambiance formed over time according to the Ottoman state policy of fostering the assimilation of native cultures by avoiding the use of force. Each confessional community was allowed to maintain its religious and national particularities, including the continuous use of native script and language.1

Under Ottoman rule large numbers of local Christians gradually withdrew into nearby mountainous regions. Fragments of their rural settlements are still recognizable today in a few remote localities in the Dinaric Mountains. An authentic dwelling form, called the Dinaric house, developed in such communities, built of logs, covered with a pitched shingle roof, and enclosing a single interior space with a hearth at its center. However, in the lower regions along the rivers, suitable straight timber was scarce, and houses were predominantly built from wooden frames, filled in with wicker work, and then sheathed or plastered. Dwellings such as these, which typified residential construction in market towns such as Sarajevo, followed imported Ottoman dwelling and neighborhood traditions which provided for a variety of experiences within a series of multifunctional interior and exterior spaces. Individual houses were generally built as two-story, walled-in family dwellings. And, always considering a family’s right to private, unobstructed vistas, individual dwellings faced toward the charshiya, the city market district and focal point of daily activity. Such “human scale” houses, located amid private gardens and courts, lined a dynamic public realm of meandering streets that led to the town business center. According to Dusan Grabrijan: “As soon as some 40 or 50 houses and a mosque were erected along the road, the settlement became a mahala where-upon a fountain, school, coffeehouse, bakery, and green grocery were built around a square or market-place” (FIG.2).2

By the 1600s there were more than 90 Muslim mahala neighborhoods in Sarajevo, in addition to two Christian dis-

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**FIGURE 1.** View of the marketplace (charshiya).

**FIGURE 2.** The street from traditional mahala neighborhood.
districts (Orthodox “Varos” and Catholic “Latinluk”) and one Sephardic Jewish religious community. In most of these neighborhoods, Muslim and non-Muslim, dwellings were generally alike, consisting of two-story courtyard houses. Overall, they represented a variation of an Ottoman dwelling type also commonly found in the mountain towns of northern Greece, Macedonia, and Bulgaria.

CENTRAL EUROPEAN INFLUENCES

Following the Austro-Hungarian victory in Bosnia in 1878 over the Ottoman Empire, the city of Sarajevo underwent a period of rapid transformation and growth, becoming “a part of Central European civilization circle.” In the next several decades the influence of Secession, Art Deco, and early Modern Movement design left a strong mark on the architecture of both public buildings and housing forms at a variety of scales. A so-called Pseudo-Moorish style was also officially encouraged, which was mainly evident in the application of decorative motifs. Then later, at the turn of the century, an original Bosnian style evolved, as local designers tried to draw from the traditional building heritage. These latter efforts, in particular, clearly manifested an emerging desire to promote a national identity by maintaining continuity in the development of a regional architecture. However, the early 1930s were marked by a return to predominantly Central European influences. In addition to the influence of Le Corbusier’s design ideas, this was most obvious in the application of the design philosophy of the Bauhaus and the School of Architecture in Prague, where several generations of local architects were educated (fig.3).

With the emergence of the Yugoslavian federation in 1945 a new socialist approach to planning and design was introduced, and extensive new housing construction was initiated in Sarajevo. This effort ultimately led to the rapid expansion of the city to the west, giving it its present longitudinal spatial structure. Under the socialist government, professional guidance was sought for the design of apartment buildings and large-scale social-housing developments, as well as the revitalization of public and commercial buildings within older districts of the town. But single-family dwellings continued to be renovated and built during this period without professional input as unplanned, substandard suburban settlements through uncontrolled illegal construction.4

The decades leading up to the recent Bosnian War saw a further burst of construction activity, as local designers attempted to participate in progressive design movements at the international level. Mainly following developments elsewhere in Central and Western Europe during the 1980s, Bosnian architects were determined to achieve a competitive, quality architectural production, based upon concerns for siting, the structuring of architectural form and volume, external finishes, and contemporary architectural design expression which was responsive to the existing urban fabric and cultural patterns (fig.4).5

CURRENT CITY RECONSTRUCTION CHALLENGES

Catastrophic events such as natural disasters or political conflicts may have profound impacts on physical environments, as well as on the psychological well-being and social cohesion of a community. In the wake of the recent Bosnian war, and the physical destruction and massive population displacement that accompanied it, homelessness and post-traumatic stress syndrome are major problems today in Sarajevo. The experiences of war and displacement have affected both residents of the city, who have witnessed its destruction, and refugees from other more rural areas of Bosnia (and now Kosovo) who have been forced to move to the city. Many others who fled the city during the war are also now returning to find that it is impossible to recover their former lives.

As serious as these effects of the war may be, they are by no means unprecedented. And worldwide, in response to such physical and humanitarian crises, a standard package of post-
disaster/postwar reconstruction services has emerged. This consists of an externally funded and directed process of short-term aid, including international emergency care and maintenance projects. Such relief strategies, however, often lead to the development of a sense of dependency and disempowerment on the part of local people. Recently, however, in an exploratory paper focusing on the process of reconstruction in post-Yugoslavia, Roger Zetter proposed that the new concepts of “disaster as development” and “refugees as resources” become the basis for a new approach to planning and reconstruction in the region. Among other things, Zetter challenged the conventional humanitarian-response model, and instead advocated the direction of relief programs to long-term developmental objectives. This would include “deploying housing/shelter and refugees as key resources in a developmental framework which links macro-economic opportunities to micro-level enablements and the management and planning of physical environment.”

In order to examine the relevance and potential of this long-term development approach to planning and reconstruction after a disaster, I will here focus on the possibilities for creating such conditions in Sarajevo while at the same time attempting to preserve the continuity of the city’s dwelling traditions. In particular, I examine the potential to rediscover the cultural and qualitative aspects of traditional house designs in Sarajevo as a way to generate integrative postdisaster housing-design methodologies. The investigation is based on interpretation of the key design parameters of this authentic local dwelling form in its urban context. Such an effort may provide a framework for developing contemporary design guidelines for neighborhood rehabilitation and future transformation by means of sensitive infill, responsive expansion, and the creation of a variety of quality new housing opportunities.

ROLE OF TRADITION IN BOSNIAN CONTEMPORARY HOUSING

The recurring desire among planners to recreate traditional small-town neighborhoods while re-establishing a sense of community may constitute an almost universal human pursuit. As such, it may be based on the perception that improved dwelling conditions may emerge from a reinterpreting the models of the past in search of “timeless” building principles. Such a desire seems stronger than the equally legitimate concern of not living up to the challenge of new communities, and potentially repeating “old mistakes.

According to the traditionalist view, common underlying planning and design principles that have evolved over a long period of time have created a variety of successful traditional housing examples. In Sarajevo these may still hold potential for infusing contemporary housing-design efforts with a culturally responsive structure. However, the issues, principles, and evaluation criteria used to define such a culturally responsive design and planning program ought also to reflect contemporary international trends and approaches. Current local rebuilding efforts — their particularities, values, advantages, and potential difficulty in maintaining continuity with the city’s identity — should also be taken into consideration.

Throughout the second half of this millennium, housing traditions in Sarajevo have maintained a continuing identity and provided a continuous underlying spatial and cultural structure. The unique character of this dwelling form, introduced into the wider Balkan region during the rule of the Ottoman Empire by native Bosnian hurdjer and highly skilled builders from northern Greece, has attracted various local and international research efforts, resulting in speculative discussions and interpretive studies. The key issues proposed in these works include consideration of origins; design and building process; scale and layout; dwelling experience; articulation of central qualities; and potential for their application in contemporary housing design.

In order to understand the design principles that influenced the sense of continuity and dwelling experience within a traditional mahala neighborhood and house form, I will next discuss the characteristic features found in the few remaining unaltered family houses from the Ottoman historic period (fig. 3). In particular, I will observe how these characteristics relate to the “eight central qualities” of the Greek Ottoman house introduced by Walkey. In addition, I will discuss the relevance of these principles to the modern and contemporary dwelling culture by assessing the potential for their reintegration in housing design. In conclusion, I will relate these design issues, in the context of recent housing-design achievements in Sarajevo, to the theory of long-term postwar development proposed by Zetter.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TRADITIONAL DWELLING

The features found in traditional Sarajevo houses and neighborhoods represent a variation of the common-sense characteristics as well as particular qualities evident in the form of...
the Ottoman house from the mountainous region of northern Greece. As already mentioned, such vernacular houses are introverted dwellings, placed within a garden/courtyard surrounded by fortified walls, lining private streets of distinct residential neighborhoods. Public life in such neighborhoods was centered around a square with a church or a mosque. Together with the main market and shopping streets, such squares represented the main places of cultural interaction in the city.

In formal terms, both large and small houses exhibited similar qualities and construction, containing household and production facilities and communicating family social status and identity. According to Walkey, the evolution of such dwelling forms in the Balkan region also indicated a high level of construction quality and characteristic design and building methods that was typical of designer-builders descended from guild builders of medieval Byzantium. Such designer-builders based their ideas for the design of a new dwelling of any size on a nonverbal collective sense of an iconic house. In Walkey’s interpretation, the eight central qualities of this iconic design for a northern Greek Ottoman house were the following: 1) the seasonal house; 2) strong back-open front; 3) mass and fine detail; 4) ascending lightness; 5) the floating roof; 6) the balanced center; 7) the struggle to square; and 8) the special room.

By focusing on consistencies among Walkey’s eight central qualities, and by analyzing how Sarajevo traditional neighborhoods focused on “human scale” and “the right to unobstructed views,” as described in Grabrijan and Vogt, I have identified six design themes that are characteristic of dwelling form and use, spatial and visual experience, and the urban and neighborhood context in Sarajevo:

1. House spaces, forms, and elements are composed in accordance to “human scale.”
2. Protected ground-floor areas contain winter living quarters, an entry courtyard, and work spaces.
3. Lightweight, projecting second-story spaces contain main living and sleeping quarters.
4. Screened-in elevated porches and verandahs are used as summer-time living quarters.
5. Elevated windows and porches provide “unobstructed views” to the street and community.
6. Transitional spaces create a layered spatial extension from the interior dwelling space to the outside.

By describing and illustrating these themes using the example of the traditional mahala dwelling, it is possible to articulate the key characteristics and relationships that could provide a direction for the development of design guidelines for contemporary and future housing in Sarajevo.

In the mahala traditional house, interior spaces were composed as a sequence of linked, alternating transitional and stationary spaces. Thus, a streetfront gate acted as a threshold, first leading into a large entry court (avliya) with a walled-in garden containing running water. The rest of the ground-floor level accommodated the winter living quarters with the kitchen, pantry, and dining space (halvat).

In traditional Muslim family houses dwelling areas were then further separated into male and female living quarters, consisting of a series of rooms that could be altered to accommodate a variety of daily activities. Each of these intimate rooms contained a private shower bath, which was integrated into a characteristic built-in linen storage cabinet, developed into a rather sophisticated wooden partition system (musandera). This convenient lightweight partition evolved from the requirement, related to the Islamic religion, of providing a private space for ritual ablution before prayer, which took place several times a day. Common hygiene habits, as well as the attitude toward nature in general, were thus integrated into the spatial structure of the dwelling as a manifestation of family spiritual life. However, non-Muslim family houses often utilized this feature also (fig.6).

In addition to sleeping quarters for family members, the upstair of the traditional mahala dwelling also contained a large formal reception room (cardak) and a series of open-air porches. These upper-story porches and verandahs were used as major living spaces during warmer months. They contained elevated seating areas (dolsat), often including a built-in bench (sechiya) similar to the interior built-in variation. These open-air seating areas were roofed and screened in by thin wooden bars (mushekak). Since they projected over the ground-level courtyards and entry facade, they allowed inhabitants to be physically removed, and yet able to observe and hear, and thus participate in the neighborhood and street life. The long windows of rooms placed along the outer walls were complemented by the built-in interior seating (divhana), and represented a design strategy that integrated interior space with surrounding exterior space. These features, in their close relation to the adjacent upper-level outdoor spaces, allowed for unobstructed views to the outside, as well as for the prolonged presence of natural light inside. Both these features had a substantial impact on the experience of reciprocity between interior and exterior space (fig.7).
The six design themes I have identified may be traced to and identified in the so-called Bosnian-style house of the turn of the century. They may also be found in examples of residential developments designed in recent decades. The characteristic design elements found in these examples include mostly formal and functional elements, and not necessarily interior spatial features. These elements include the use of deeper roof eaves and projected upper-story windows and porches (fig. 8).

HOUSING DESIGN AND NEIGHBORHOOD REDEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Evidence that design principles and features characteristic to traditional Sarajevo neighborhoods have been periodically reintegrated by city architects and city planners indicates a sustained level of interest in preserving the continuity of this particular urban housing tradition. Such principles ought to be once again considered as part of the process of fostering local professional and public input into the planning, design and construction of new housing, and the devising of long-term development strategies and official housing policies to solve the city’s current housing shortage.

As mentioned above, Zetter’s challenge to the conventional humanitarian-response model of postdisaster planning and reconstruction identifies a need to develop strategies for redirecting relief programs to long-term developmental objectives. This suggests establishing a process that would utilize input from local professionals and the public (including war refugees newly arrived in the city) as a key resource. In other words, by being afforded appropriate venues for communication and participation, the actual population in need of shelter should be able to contribute to the process of creating their own future housing. Such a strategy of incorporating group and individual citizens’ input would potentially facilitate the process of enabling these people, through the development of their skills and competencies, to become the future managers and planners of their shared physical environment.

According to Zetter, the transition from emergency aid to developmental planning needs to be facilitated by the implementation of a coordinated spatial planning framework. This might reinforce the long-term perspective, integrating both refugee assistance and the host country’s (in this case the host city’s) development objectives:

- To maximize the long-term benefits of a “developmental strategy.”
- To coordinate and deliver a shelter program.
- To ensure that due weight is given to environmental considerations and sustainability.
- To provide efficient patterns of land use and settlement distribution.
- To achieve productive coordination between development investment and project design.
- To help achieve social integration and economic revitalization policy objectives.

Crucial steps in this process include using existing local planning capacities, engaging local professional capabilities and institutional structures, and accommodating a reorientation toward innovative planning methodologies and interventions at the local and regional levels. Such a postwar rebuilding and housing rehabilitation process should also include support for self-help shelter mechanisms which might build on the capacities and skills of war refugees themselves and so bring cultural and social benefits. In Zetter’s words, “Fuller participation in physical rebuilding or new construction may facilitate community rebuilding process and, by encouraging coping mechanisms, may enhance the potential for self-sufficiency and refugee empowerment.”

Implementation of such a process of participatory self-help and shelter production and enablement will require the use of locally manufactured building materials and components as well as the provision of sufficient building tools, machinery and equipment. To apply and further expand the

**FIGURE 7.** Main room (halvat), with built-in seating and storage partitions.

**FIGURE 8.** Elevated open-air porch (doksat), with mushebak screens.
ideas proposed by Zetter, I suggest that housing design and planning guidance in Sarajevo be provided jointly by the government housing department and local architectural design professionals — with potential assistance from the faculty and students of design programs of Sarajevo University. Such a participatory process would also benefit from professional assistance in establishing construction procedures, in recommending a variety of finish materials and architectural details, and in ensuring the production of a reasonable variety of plan sizes and layouts.

The development and design approach to the postwar rebuilding introduced above, including the interpretation of the traditional urban context as a means of establishing key design parameters, may provide a framework for developing design guidelines for neighborhood rehabilitation and future transformation of devastated neighborhoods through sensitive infill, responsive expansion of existing buildings, and the creation of a variety of new contemporary dwellings.

At this time the leading issues in the process of selection/creation of an optimal planning approach, appropriate design and building strategies, and a reasonable postwar rebuilding timeline have yet to be discussed by all groups potentially effected by these changes. According to the diverse views of the participants in the process, the proposed strategies may be perceived as attractive and desirable by some, and inadequate or inappropriate by others.

This situation, in the context of extreme complexity of the socioeconomic and cultura-political issues involved, will no doubt demand careful and gradual consideration and the substantial support of the Bosnian national government, the Sarajevo city government, and citizens. Only then will the quality professional guidance and the assistance currently provided by the local and international community be capable of providing the meaningful, sustainable, and timely response to the growing housing needs in Sarajevo of both displaced local people and incoming refugees.

REFERENCE NOTES
An earlier version of this text was presented by the author at the XXVII IAHS World Housing Congress in San Francisco, June 1-7, 1999, as a research paper entitled “The Role of Culture and Tradition in the Development of Contemporary Housing: The Bosnian Oriental House in Sarajevo.”


9. In a way similar to the origins of the eight central qualities articulated by Walkey, Le Corbusier’s “five points” were also derived from the design principles found in traditional Turkish house examples, which he encountered during his trips to the Orient after 1911. These principles represent five pairs of contrasts between the common European masonry house and this type of lightweight dwelling from the Balkans: 1) the “house on piloris,” lifted above ground; 2) the “roof garden,” an outdoor space above the dwelling’s interior; 3) the “free ground plan,” liberated due to the absence of solid load-bearing walls; 4) the “long window,” providing unobstructed, wide views to the outside; and 5) the “curtain wall,” allowing for an extension of the interior space to the outside. For a detailed discussion of these issues, see A.M. Vogt, Le Corbusier, the Noble Savage: Toward an Archaeology of Modernism (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p.31.


(All photos by author.)