

ADAPTATION OF THE RHODOPE HOUSE FOR MODERN USAGE

Whatever the type of architecture or the country, the problems connected with the adaptation of old buildings to suit present-day living conditions with a view to their active and vital involvement in the life of the new communities are everywhere similar. At the same time, there is a degree of variation from one to another, since each separate building requires an individual approach on the part of the designers.

I shall deal here briefly with the characteristic features of the houses of the Rhodope Mountains and the condition in which we found them when we started our research and re-designing work. Most often these houses are rightly clustered on small and steeply sloping plots of land, where there is not always enough room for separate farm buildings.

The ground floor and first floor, which are built of plastered stone masonry, mainly house the bread-winning activities of the family. The ground floor is usually one large single unit, an unpartitioned covered courtyard with a fireplace in it. Because of the lack of independent farm buildings an area was set aside indoors — usually with a raised floor — for the farm animals. An enclosed wooden indoor staircase led to the second floor, which accommodated, around a large central hall, the kitchen with its oven, the built-in cupboards and the larders, and a workshop. The second floor was entirely devoted to living quarters — drawing-room, bedrooms, closets and loggias — arranged, here again, around a large central hall.

The outside of the houses are imposing. They are built mainly of stone masonry with narrow and small windows; the second floor, on the contrary, is of light lath-and-plaster construction, which enables windows to be larger and rooms to project in the form of an overhang beyond the masonry walls.

The old Rhodope house is, in the full sense of the word, a one-family home. There exist, however, in some places, what are known as “brothers’ houses”, which are the product of a very interesting social phenomenon — a tendency to separate the various family units within the framework of a common property.

A slight inconvenience from a present-day point

of view is the height of the rooms, which is only 2, 1.9 or even 1.8 m. (6 ft. 7”, 6 ft. 4”, or 6 ft).

The interior decoration of the houses is done sparingly but with great taste. Great care is given to each interior detail — ceilings, columns, railings, cupboards, even the hoods over the fireplaces. The simplicity and authenticity of the media adopted by the skilled craftsmen of the past, their in-born sense of the natural advantages to be exploited, their deftness in determining the relative importance of the different features, and, above all, their craving after beauty and their struggle to achieve it in every nook and corner of the house, are for us an inexhaustible source of admiration and inspiration.

All of this sounds beautiful enough when we approach the old settlements only as experts, tourists or holidaymakers. But we shall soon find out that romanticism and tradition alone are not enough for its regular inhabitants.

What, in actual fact, do we find in these old buildings? Very often the small windows have been replaced by new and larger ones, and the wooden lattice windows have disappeared completely. The oriel windows have been either abolished or else replaced by a balcony. The built-in cupboards have been dismantled, the stone walls and wooden ceilings plastered over, the fireplaces walled up, and their hoods removed. The imposing closed-in appearance of the stone walls is spoilt by the big new windows. The reason for this is that today people do not live with their cattle under the same roof or bake their bread in their homes, but use their houses solely for living in. The houses had no heating system. In view of the change in the population’s way of life and the rise in its cultural standards it is essential for the designers to bear all contemporary requirements in mind and to abstain from turning the houses which have survived from the National Revival period into museum exhibits. A correct and accurate assessment must be made of each house, as regards both its architecture and its historical value. There must also be exploration of the possibilities of resurrecting its original appearance, while at the same time the most suitable choice must be made as regards its future use, as far as possible taking into consideration the wishes of



Smolian. Pangalov's house.

its owners. If we can successfully combine retention of the features of the original house with a rational approach to its adaptation to suit contemporary requirements, we can feel satisfied that we have brought these two requirements into a logical and harmonious correlation.

I shall now describe a few examples of adaptation of old buildings to suit modern residential or public utility requirements.

The Parashinkov House in Zlatograd is an example of a symmetrical "brothers' house", each individual unit of which forms a typical small one-family dwelling. Its three storeys had not been much altered, but various new windows had been added, greatly changing the appearance of its facades. Thanks to the complete symmetry of its plan and the way the facades had been treated at the outset, we were able to restore the original outside appearance of the house with the aid of such original features as had remained intact. The house is now being adapted to accommodate two three-storey single-family dwellings as originally intended. We have preser-

ved the general arrangement of each, proposing that the two rooms on the second floor be used as bedrooms those on the first floor as kitchen and living-rooms and those on the ground floor as cellars, with the exception of a portion of one of them which will house toilet facilities. This is a typical case of adaptation in which the toilet and bathroom could be located nowhere but on the ground floor. In view of the fact that the external changes made by the owners did not merely fail to enhance the architectural value of the building but actually spoiled its appearance, we advocated complete restoration of the facades.

An important problem arises when it is proposed to adapt an old building to serve a public purpose; are we in a position to provide for the new requirements arising out of such usage within the framework of the original design, or is the proposed function such that there will invariably be clashes between the miscellaneous requirements of a public building and the simpler facilities of a dwelling house? It is for this reason that it is most important to make a preliminary selection of suitable buildings at the town-planning stage; this will obviate our being confronted with difficult, if not insoluble, problems during the actual work of re-designing. A house must not be selected, merely because it is beautiful and unoccupied, for conversion into a restaurant fully equipped with all the requisite auxiliary premises when it could far more suitably be turned into a rest home, which would be much more in keeping with its residential character. Meanwhile large and capacious dwelling houses continue to be inadequately made use of when

2. Shiroka Laka — Sgourov's konak.





Shiroka Luka — Sgourov's kon

they could perfectly well serve as public buildings. I would like to illustrate this remark by two examples of successful adaptation for public use.

The Vladishka ("Bishop's") House in the village of Shiroka Luka is a building of national importance. It is a large composite building consisting of two houses built at different periods which have been made to communicate. The front portion was built in 1829, while the back dates from 1868. Minor alterations have been made both inside and outside. The purpose of the work undertaken, over and above its consolidation, was to convert the place into residential accommodation and premises for creative work for the architects and engineers from the Ministry of Building and Architecture. It is situated on a steep slope with its main entrance lying on the main village street: two other entrances at the rear were part of the original design. The innovation has consisted in dividing up the ground floor — which is windowless and a semi-

basement — in a manner suggested by the original design (the arrangement of the columns and the lengthwise floor-joists) so as to enable individual storage space and toilet facilities to be provided. The remaining rooms have been turned primarily into bedrooms and rooms for study, and the result is a series of separate dwellings, each with separate entrance-hall and WC, kitchen and dining-room, with a room for the porter at the main entrance. Outside work involved restoration of the original windows, the stripping of any superfluous plastering or masonry from the stone walls, and the putting-in of a few small windows for the toilets and bathrooms.

The Karastoyanov House in the village of Shiroka Luka is a building of local significance. It is a typical case in which tradition has favoured the use of a house for a public purpose despite the fact that its small size prevents the place from being fully suitable to serve as a public establishment,

in view of the functional, sanitary and hygienic requirements involved. The house has no courtyard and stands at one end of the noisy shopping street, two sides of it actually facing on to the street and square. Originally, when it was built in 1860, it was intended as a dwelling-house with a covered courtyard, the first floor serving as living quarters. It was altered later on, the first floor becoming a tavern with a separate entrance, while the ground-floor rooms were converted into shops opening on to the square.

According to data obtained when the history of the house was being investigated, this change was made at about the turn of the century. The house was later abandoned and we found it, technically, in a very poor condition, part of it actually being demolished. Because of its key position in a sector

which is most interesting from an architectural and ethnographical point of view, the local authorities proposed that it be adapted to serve as a folk-style tavern with floor-show. The design adopted retains the existent layout on the first floor and provides for the opening of a snack-bar serving alcoholic and soft drinks in the big hall. On the ground floor we had to leave the later design, which had involved serious damage to the original facade. Part of the "covered courtyard" was restored, and an oven for roasting whole lambs in the presence of the patrons of the restaurant has been installed. An open wooden staircase leads to the first floor. The remaining rooms and an extra cellar which has been specially dug provide a minimum of auxiliary premises to make up for the original lack of space. The place is now open to customers.

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RESUME

Dans la région montagneuse des Rhodopes, la construction est très dense, les maisons sont serrées les unes contre les autres sur des terrains, en pente abrupte.

Les deux premiers niveaux de la maison, qui servent aux activités professionnelles de la famille, sont en maçonnerie de pierre. Un escalier couvert mène au second étage où le séjour est entouré de la cuisine, de l'office et d'un atelier. Le troisième étage comprend un salon, les chambres à coucher et des débarras. La hauteur sous plafond est peu élevée, deux mètres environ.

Les petites maisons des Rhodopes sont très bien conservées tandis que les bâtiments plus importants ont subi de nombreux remaniements (percements, décoration, etc. . .). Aujourd'hui ces maisons servent toujours de logement et doivent être équipées selon les normes du confort moderne, ce qui impose des transformations. Mais, avant le début de ces travaux, il faut fixer les limites de l'intervention.

1. Smolian. Le konak de Pangalov.
2. Chiroka Laka. Le konak de Sgourov.
3. Idem.