

Self-Made Men – Architects of the Self.

The New Houses and New Landscapes of the Western Balkans

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Abstract

As a consequence of economic globalisation, the Western Balkans has been experiencing massive boom in the building of houses. In rural and mountain parts of the former Yugoslavia, in some of the least expected locations, often in areas inhabited by ethnic minorities, many imposing houses have been constructed. These are often bigger and more extravagant than their models in western European suburbs and have been built largely on the basis of remittances from migrants in the EU or USA. It is not just “remittance houses” but whole new “remittance landscapes” that have come into being. This article explores the elemental spontaneity of this building boom. Many of the houses concerned have been built without project plans, architects or building permission and the new suburbs are developing without urban planning or infrastructure. I try to show some of the predictable but, above all, unexpected connections and results of the absence of rationalist planning and budgeting, and attempt to identify what is behind this phenomenon.

Key words

remittance houses, migration, globalisation, former Yugoslavia, the social life of things

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Introduction

In the last few decades, rural parts of the Western Balkans, and specifically the rural and mountain areas in the south-western part of the former Yugoslavia, have experienced a great transformation from a local agrarian economy of villages and local towns to an economy of the modern globalised world. In communist Yugoslavia, the origins of this process were, even at that time, highly contradictory, creating major differences between the centre and the periphery: between the major towns and rural areas, the mountains and the lowlands, the central and marginal regions, the richer north of the Yugoslav federation and the poorer south. Authors such as Simić (1973), Spangler (1983), Ramet (1996), Van de Port (1998), and Bougarel (1999) have shown how from the 1960s to the 1980s these differences generated tensions that had an impact on politics and took the form of increasing social and subsequently, above all, national-ethnic resentments.

This article examines the boom in the building of houses in what until recently were poor regions of the south-western part of the former Yugoslavia, those areas inhabited by Albanian, Turkish and the Slavic Speaking Muslim minorities. These are regions that have become notable in recent decades for the mass construction of detached family houses and for the spontaneous development of entire residential landscapes and suburbs. These houses are not only larger and more imposing than older local housing, but also larger than their counterparts on the peripheries of western European and American towns. There is a widespread belief that the size and ostentatiousness of the houses in these regions is related to the fact that most of the population is Muslim, with its corresponding cultural emphasis on (extended) family and family solidarity, the institution of hospitality, and the (patriarchal) self-presentation not only of the host, but the whole family and sometimes the local community (see Markov 2019). Although this is somewhat persuasive, we need to consider the other – political – side of the story (especially to study the problematic aspects of the current mass construction activity).

The communist regime in the former Yugoslavia was aware of the growing regional disparities in the progress of its much vaunted modernisation of the country and attempted to react to the problem. It launched initiatives such as the special Federal Fund for the Crediting of the Development of the Less Developed Regions, to which, as richer regions, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia and Vojvodina contributed, and from which Bosnia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Kosovo received grants and long term, low interest loans (Kraft 1992: 13–15). On the other hand, the greatest discrepancies in the rate of modernisation clearly arose from the very basis of the redistribution of

power and resources through the nationally/ethnically defined states of the federation. For instance, the historian Xavier Bougarel (1999: 163–164) has pointed out that much of the population, particularly of the poor south-western part of the country in the region of the Dinaric Alps, full of ethnic minority populations living outside their own national federal state (or without one),¹ felt excluded from state-directed communist development and modernisation. These populations decided to take their development into their own hands and pursue it in their own way. Since the 1970s they have been tackling their marginalisation in access to resources and political power by means of strong local-clientelism networks and ties, an emphasis on the grey economy, and, above all, the economic migration mainly to Western Europe and the USA, which is a typical feature for this part of the former Yugoslavia.

The people who found themselves most marginalised in the process of modernisation directed by the communist state were the Albanian Muslims and Catholics of Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and southern Serbia; the Slavic Speaking Muslims in the Serbian-Montenegrin Sandžak region, Macedonia (Torbeshi) and Western Kosovo (Gorani); and the Turks in these regions. This article is focused on the flourishing construction of houses in the areas they inhabit.

The geographical marginality of the mountain and rural areas in these regions during communist modernisation was exacerbated by the open and hidden marginalisation of their populations in terms of access to their own political representation, secondary and higher education, positions in the administration and industrial concerns, apartments and facilities in the towns and a sense of safety and security. In the 1980s, ethnic tensions increased, sometimes to the point of open violent conflict, in an atmosphere of injustice and minority distrust of a state dominated by an ethnic majority. This occurred in Kosovo, southern Serbia and Macedonia. This caused more political instability, a further weakening of the role of the state and state administration, as well as more economic problems and increased unemployment.

From the 1980s, one response to the political and above all economic situation was an increasing number of people seeking work abroad, which already had a historical tradition in these regions with regard to the seasonal male migration for work known as *kurbet/gurbet* or *pečalba*. In recent

1 To the examples given by Bougarel (1999: 163–164) – like the Krajina's Serbs, Herzegovinian Croats, and Sandžak Muslims – we can easily add Albanian, Slavic Speaking Muslim and Turkish populations in Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro.

decades, this migration has taken various forms, from seasonal male migration to the migration of entire families who live abroad for almost the whole year (Bielenin-Lenczowska 2010). The money earned abroad is not always sent back as remittances, since from the 1980s, but primarily the 1990s, increasing numbers of men have been taking their families with them to host countries and using their earnings to provide for the nuclear family abroad, rather than sending money back to their villages of origin (Markov 2015). The causes of migration were also various – from the purely economic to the purely political, relating to inter-ethnic tensions and open ethnic conflicts.

There is no precise statistical data on the numbers that made up these huge waves of migration, because during the first two post-communist decades the EU classified migrants from Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia as Yugoslavs, and later as nationals of Serbia-Montenegro or Macedonia. Statistics differ with regard to the definition of “Albanian”, for example, according to ancestral citizenship, self-declaration, external categorisation, etc. (Dahinden 2013: 3). As regards the ethnic groups of Slavic-Speaking Muslims the categorisation is even vaguer. Nonetheless, we can get some idea of the huge scale of this migration by taking the example of Kosovo, which has an overall population of 2.2 million, an estimated 800,000 of whom (although the figure is disputed) have migrated (Dahinden 2013: 3). Most are in Germany and Switzerland, with others in Italy, Austria, Scandinavia, the UK, USA, France and Canada. It is probable that almost every (extended) family in the regions that are the subject of this article has a member living abroad and sending money home, or so they claim. A significant proportion of the remittances sent home is invested by the senders, or by the heads of extended families (fathers or elder brothers), in the construction of family houses.

In these regions, the combination of mass migration for work abroad, inter-ethnic tensions and a weak local state create the specific conditions that are fertile ground for these construction booms: a) Remittances sent back home by migrants pay for hundreds of thousands of “remittance houses”;² b) the weak local state structures (especially in these regions of ethnic minorities and inter-ethnic tension) have lost control of building permission procedures and regional urban planning during post-communist decades; c) people alienated from official politics and public life embrace an ethos that is aptly architecturally expressed by the saying, “My house

2 For “remittance houses” see e.g., Boccagni and Erdal (2021), Belloni (2021), Lopez (2010), Mata-Codesal (2014) or Alyanak (2015).

is my castle”; and d) people who once were considered economically and politically marginal have been asserting their newly acquired social status via highly visible buildings.

The overall result is the paradoxical situation whereby the greatest construction activity is taking place in what have until recently been the poorest marginal areas of Yugoslavia, and relates to often the largest and somewhat eccentric new houses and expanding new village settlements and suburbs. This situation, which culminated in the 1990s and 2000s, is still one of the biggest problems of regional development.

Other studies from Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America (Lopez 2010; Lopez 2015; Belloni 2021; Alyanak 2015; Mata–Codesal 2014; Ruegg 2013; Tesar 2015 and others) have drawn attention to the same phenomenon, as inhabitants of newly prosperous, but until recently marginal or directly marginalised, areas as well as until recently marginalised ethnic groups express the change in their social status precisely by the construction of large and ostentatious houses.



Figure 1 With the aid of remittances, the construction boom has also reached the unexpectedly remote areas. (In the mountains of southern Kosovo. Photograph by the author.)

I have been following the flourishing construction activity in rural areas on my research trips to the former Yugoslavia since the beginning of the 1990s. In recent years, I have begun to study this phenomenon particularly in the south-western part of the region, where this trend is the most marked, i.e., in Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, southern Serbia and some areas of Montenegro. (Having worked in a number of other regions of Eastern Europe and the world, I also sometimes supplement my findings with observations from other territories.) As a social anthropologist, I explore the social life of these houses and the process of their construction. I conduct semi-structured interviews with the owners and their families and neighbours, participant observation of the construction and life in the houses, and phenomenological analysis of the architecture and interiors. I also make plans of the houses with commentaries from their owners and photographs. During my research trips I have visited dozens of villages, towns and suburbs and documented dozens of houses.



Figure 2 The extent of the epoch-making social change that has happened here is best observed and illustrated in architecture. (The western part of North Macedonia. Photograph by the author.)

Without a plan on paper – without an architect

Many of the new houses resemble detached homes in western European and American suburbs, but cultural hybridity and syncretism can also be observed. There are houses like medieval castles and chateaux, modern houses playing with elements of traditional vernacular or urban Ottoman architecture, or other notable ethno-national elements, or even references to Antiquity. Their excessive architectural morphology includes structurally and materially complicated ornamentation, classical pillars, turrets, balustrades, small balconies and spiral staircases. These are large, ostentatious and complex buildings. This makes it particularly surprising that many of them (especially in this first generation of this kind of architecture in the 1990s-2000s) were built without a detailed project plan and without an architect.

“My husband built it by himself, without anyone’s help, and he thought it up himself – without a paper project. He has thought up all his houses by himself! We didn’t have a project on paper, just in his head,” boasts the joint owner of a concrete villa with one wall of smoky glass, like a skyscraper, advanced Doric columns and a classical gable-like a pantheon.³ Her husband, the owner of a building materials store in a small Albanian town on the bank of the Lake Ohrid, equipped its three floors with a labyrinth of endless sitting rooms full of couches and armchairs for guests. His wife regarded the absence of a designer as something to be proud of – an advantage and proof of her husband’s independence, creativity and originality. *“All the houses here in the village have been built without a paper plan!”* says Macedonian Turk Mevlude (who will be further mentioned below).

I have written elsewhere about how this architecture, not only in the Balkans but also in other countries of Eastern Europe and the Global South, seeks to emulate and often even exceed its modern global models in western European and American suburbia in size, and about how many such houses syncretically add traditional local architectural typology abounding in references to real and imaginary historical roots.⁴ In this article, I focus on the actual process of the construction of the house and the rationality of its planning and design. Essentially, the problem is that the traditional established way of constructing a house “just by guesswork”, without a project on paper and a budget, is no longer adequate for a modern architecture full of technology and advanced luxury features. Nor is it adequate for the burgeoning new residential areas, which are expanding

3 From an interview with the 55 year-old Albanian owner of the house, which was conducted by the author of this article in August 2014. The author was also given an extensive tour of the house.

4 See Haluzík 2020.

into the countryside from the swollen villages, as there is no regional or town planning.

In her study of villas of “the new Russians”, with their abundant wealth, Caroline Humphrey (2002) showed that the dreams and aspirations of the *nouveau riche* in the post-Soviet 1990s often outstripped not only the financial resources of the owners, but also the technological resources and expertise of the local builders. Large complicated windows as if in a chateau let in drafts and didn’t open properly, elaborate roofs adorned with little turrets kept leaking, while water mysteriously disappeared from wells. In this article, however, I am concerned with the fact that what is even less adequate is the standard of planning and budgeting, both in terms of individual houses and in terms of residential complexes, not to mention regional plans. Not so long ago, people in marginal areas of the Western Balkans built houses very similar to traditional rural architecture, i.e., houses that were modern, but smaller and simpler, without the complicated infrastructure of modern bathrooms, kitchens and central heating, and, above all, without features such as eccentric turrets, balconies, balustrades and classical columns. Moreover, not so long ago just a few of these houses would appear in a village in every decade and the building boom had not yet expanded beyond village or town boundaries without any kind of plan or coordination. At that time, there was no need for regulation. The aim of this article is to show that while not so long ago construction could get by without an architectural project or even an area urban plan, today the absence of them is causing major problems, and these will be listed below.





Figure 3a, 3b Many houses are modest and simple, but several others work with allusions to real or imagined ethnic roots and local traditions. (Below – a house in central Kosovo; Above – a house in the west of North Macedonia. Photograph 3b by the author and photograph 3a from the author's archive.)

No plan on paper – no budget

Mevlude⁵ is a successful man, a worldly wise forty-five year-old from the Turkish community in North Macedonia. He escorts me through his village, showing me how the construction boom has reached even here, deep in the mountains in the west of North Macedonia. From his childhood in the 1980s, he can remember tiny houses of clay bricks or stone with two small rooms and two or three windows. But as people started to go abroad for work, from the 1990s these houses were rapidly replaced by smart brick houses with vividly coloured facades. Or without facades, because the builders often failed to finish the houses.

Mevlude's big family house from 1991 was among the first, and he too never managed to finish the facade, and much else besides. Now, after less than thirty years, which, as Mevlude is aware, is quite a short time in the life of a house, it is starting to become dilapidated. And it needs (yes, already!) overall renovation.

5 The interview with Mevlude (first name, his identity has been anonymised) was conducted by the author of this article in August 2014. The author was also given an extensive tour of the house.

I find Mevlude facing a dilemma. He has been working for years as a plumber in Italy, in Venice. And he wants to re-plumb the water in the kitchen, the bathroom and toilet himself, because while the water has been connected up, not all the taps work as they should. However, the end of the summer vacation is approaching and he still doesn't know how much the new materials will cost and whether he will have enough money for the job. He doesn't even know how much time he needs and when he will be able to get back to earning money in Italy. *"I'll carry on working until the money runs out,"* he keeps saying.

This is a man who throughout his career in Italy has worked with clear fixed (and so difficult to exceed) budgets for every job, and he is used to invoicing for every part purchased, every metre of pipe (and sometimes every hour worked), so his predicament comes as a surprise. Mevlude explains that here at home he works without a plan. And where there is no plan, with such a complicated building it is impossible to calculate how much of something is required (how many items, metres, square metres, etc.), let alone how much time it will take. Where there is no project, there's no budget either, it is the same for everyone. *"Why a paper plan for re-plumbing in my house? – all these houses here in the village are being built without plans!"* Mevlude defends himself. He leads me through the winding alleys of the village, where three-storey houses are working their way towards the light and a view. It is only now that I notice all the incomplete elements, the bits that do not function, and the lack of integration of the houses into their surroundings. *"And this is the only house in the village built to a plan!"* Mevlude points proudly (although the house belongs neither to his family nor his friends) at a villa painted salmon pink, every detail smoothly finished, a storey higher and radiating perfection – which belongs to a man who also works in Italy. *"But a plan like that will cost you at least 500 euro! It's as much as a teacher makes in a month!"* complains Mevlude. At the same time he admits that project plans are the future.

In the past, working without an architect and without a plan on paper was something that did not bother many local builders, even tradesmen like Mevlude and other men I spoke with who also work in construction abroad and are used to working from plans there. Until 10 or 15 years ago, before people began to entrust the construction of their houses to professional builders and companies (discussed below), it was more the rule than the exception. Before we examine the reasons for this situation, it is necessary to define the benefits of having a project when you are building a modern house. It is not only about perfectionism, nor is it only our western ethnocentric prejudice, the cultural construct of people from a part of the world where it is the custom (and planning is even required by law), where the rationality of the design of anything,

including the rational planning of the future, is an important (and tried and tested) value.

First and foremost (as noted above) where there is no plan, there is no budget: As previously mentioned, a great many of the new houses here remained incomplete, sometimes only partially (like Mevlude's), but often chronically. In the past in the last two to three decades, if we took a walk through the local villages, towns and suburbs, we saw not only a series of completed and half completed houses, but also many shells that had been in the same state for years and even decades. (Some of them were later finished – as the remittances arrived – some of them demolished by families who did not want to embarrass themselves, and some were replaced by newer house projects.) Of course, one reason was the considerable unpredictability and inconstancy of the global financial currents that feed the construction of the houses. Work abroad could end, borders could be closed and the flow of remittances to the poor Balkan countryside could dry up, leaving construction work in a state of limbo... But there was also another reason. Without a proper plan, many builders were unable to calculate the real costs of the construction of the house, as a result of which some houses were completed after years and some remained incomplete. It was not just inflation and the continual rise in the prices of building materials and labour that was to blame. The problem was an order of magnitude greater. The builders were not incapable of estimating the real cost of a house before they started. I have been told that in the past, just a generation earlier (when the buildings were smaller and simpler, and often with just a single tap in the kitchen or near by and an outside toilet), people were able to budget. The owner himself or a hired rural master builder would – without having a plan on paper – calculate how many bricks would be needed for a house of a particular basic layout, and would add the cost of wood and roof-tiles, windows and doors, and plastering, and then estimate the cost of labour by individual masters. This would produce a minimum estimate. But such a “rough structure” is just a smaller part of the price of any modern building today!⁶ With regard to the homes of the current generation, full of complex modern kitchens, bathrooms, toilets, (where central heating pipes, electricity, cold and hot water, waste water, and also TV cables are all run through the walls), houses full

6 The Kosovo designer of houses Mr. Z, Macedonian developer Mr. B, cited in this article, as well as the other local professional builders I have asked, reckon that the so called “karajapi” – “rough structure” (i.e., foundation of the house, walls without doors and windows, interior partitions and installed roof) represents just about 25–30 percent of the cost of the usual family house. Of course, this percentage will be lower if the owner-client wants more expensive materials and equipment.

of expensive flooring, decorative tiles, paneling and steps, it is not possible to calculate a budget without a plan on paper. (When I installed “the most Spartan version of hot water” in my country cottage, i.e., just a boiler, one tap in the kitchen with a second in the bathroom, the plumber brought me a list of 120! essential parts and a budget that came as a surprise.) In short, the total costs for a modern house simply cannot be estimated in advance off the top of one’s head, without a proper plan. Yes, some (smaller) construction companies working without projects on paper often attract customers by estimates based on how much the average square metre of such a building costs. They try to calculate how much money a square meter of “rough structure” (in Albanian environment called *karajapi* – i.e., walls with roof, without windows and doors and all other equipment) costs, and how much a square metre of a building costs, if we introduce water, electricity, sanitary technology and everything else into it. But these are always just estimates. The conclusion is simple: without a proper plan there is no budget, and without a budget you soon run out of money.

Furthermore, there is yet another less obvious reason to have a plan on paper: where there is no plan, there is no final goal of construction. I have observed this phenomenon in the Western Balkans as well as in the other regions of the world I have studied (e.g., Haluzík, 2020): For example, when the Montenegrin Janica and her husband started to build their house 44 years ago, they had no clear idea of how many rooms it would have or how many storeys. They didn’t know what it would look like or how big it would be. They did not envisage the final result. As the years went by and the number of family members increased, and, primarily, the amount of available funds, they just continued to build, until the house had two storeys and 12 rooms. Similarly the Macedonian Turk – Mr. Agim, the owner of Italian restaurants in Germany, started to build his grandiose family villa in the shape of “a medieval castle” in his native village years ago. As the construction progressed he decided to “add a few rooms and it would be a small hotel”. A similar case was Andrés, from Chuj, a Maya community, whose remittance houses in Sierra de los Cuchamatanes in Guatemala I studied for two weeks. He did not originally intend them to be two three-storey houses, but simply two one-storey shops. However, as he grew richer (while working in the U.S.), he added more storeys. Other respondents of mine, a Roma couple who were the ex-owners of a small textile manufacture in Moldavia, started building what they originally envisaged as a two-storey house, but then “*worried that it would not be visible from the town below and so, to be sure, added another storey while they were building*” (even though they knew that it would remain empty). Last but not least the Ukrainian building worker Dimitri has been building his house for 25 years. He keeps coming back from his annual six months

in the Czech Republic and uses most of his earnings to add something, or to demolish something and rebuild it (despite the loud protests of his wife). In short, where there is no clear paper plan, there is often no clear goal. And where there is no clear goal, it is not possible to budget.

It is important not to be misled by the often slightly humorous character of the examples. People building houses in a society in economic and cultural transition are not essentially different from anyone else. They do not have a different sense of rationality, a lesser capacity for rational planning, a lesser capacity to think a thing through rationally, or a lesser ability to calculate (and keep to a plan). They are only reacting to different social contexts. The aspect of constructing a house in the unpredictable situation of the ‘speeding train’ of economic boom and transformation has already been mentioned. A second contextual factor is the lack of proper planning permission procedures and effective building authorities exercising supervision. The latter usually requires people who wish to build to submit plans in advance, and when construction is complete they check whether the plans have been followed and whether the result meets construction, hygiene and fire norms and regulations. In the former Yugoslavia (at least in the towns) this system was to a large extent in operation, but the weakening of the state during the post-communist transformation and ethnic wars of the break-up of Yugoslavia meant that for more than two decades it ceased to function.



Figure 4 If you build without a project plan, you do not know how much material is required, how long it will take or how much it is likely to cost. A building without a plan is an eternal improvisation. (A long unfinished house with a barber's shop and improvised warehouse in the basement in the west of North Macedonia. Photograph by the author.)

With a project plan and an architect

The builders of the current development booms are down-to-earth, practical people. They are well aware of the appearance of the houses in western European or American suburbs, the various models, and also how new houses look in the cities or on television. Many are aware that not all the money invested in their houses has been invested in the most effective way. Hence, the first generation of houses without a project plan, like Mevlude's and his neighbours' in the mountain village, which have often remained, with under-used interiors, unfinished and have soon started to become dilapidated, has been followed by a generation of houses in the last two decades that were "based on a part project". And in the last 10–15 years, it has even become the norm to leave the construction of your house to specialised construction companies and their designers. However, not even this has guaranteed the result or the process of building to which we are accustomed in the countries from which the architectural models come.

Mr. Z⁷ is a friendly, energetic man in his forties, and one of the first generation of designers of the current boom in Kosovo's rural architecture. Everyone calls Mr. Z an "architect", but he has no architectural degree. Nonetheless, he has many years of experience in the design of houses (and also mosques with big domes), and has taught himself to use a computer design programme from a training video on You Tube. The several hundred (!) houses that he has designed and that his family firm has built to order are bringing to the Kosovo countryside not just the expected new syncretic design, but also "German quality". The houses look excellent not only in the breath-taking 3D animations, on his company web pages, but in reality. Everything is technically perfect, finished, "but not expensive". There is ornamentation, but relatively little, "*and everything must be functional!*" says Z. If he set up shop in the Czech Republic, he would have no dearth of clients.

So here everything finally looks like in a modern design office in Germany or Switzerland, and I say to myself; maybe our story of the rationality of planning houses ends here. However, after Z has spent two days taking me to his construction sites showing me his building empire of finished and unfinished houses, and his own house, it is evident that the situation is more complicated.

Firstly, there are a range of cultural differences, elements that we would not expect from the building process of modern villas "like in Germany".

7 Interviews with Mr. Z, whose identity has been anonymised, were conducted by the author of this article in July 2017. The interviews were followed by a tour of the house and a tour of Mr. Z's company building sites.

The majority of his customers are from the rural region they left for the city a generation ago. The family houses in Mr. Z's computer animations are not unnecessarily large (although they are supposed to look imposing), the entrance halls and corridors are meaningfully designed and the rooms have clearly defined functions (unlike many houses built without a project plan). It is clear which room is the sitting room, which is the kitchen and which is the bedroom. It is clear which spaces are for public/family use and which are private and intimate. Nonetheless, here too there are certain distinctive features. For example, although the inside of these houses "like in Germany" looks at first sight, "like in Germany", there are somehow too many sitting rooms (intended for a life full of the visits and family celebrations that is typical for Kosovo), and on the ground floor of the houses there is very little but reception areas.

I became aware of the local specifics when visiting Mr. Z's own house. It is located on the main road leading to "the family's region", in a district inhabited only by members of his family clan (with its own private access road). 170 people live in this area in more than thirty houses, of whom 100 have been working abroad long-term with their families. Many of the houses of Mr. Z's male cousins have been constructed in the Albanian areas so typical fraternal pairs or triples, and Z himself has also built two identical copies of his own house beside it for his two brothers. His house is adorned with Corinthian columns, and its walls at night can be lit up with diodes that change colour like a Christmas tree. The ground floor of the house contains only two huge sitting rooms with pseudo-Neo-Baroque seating suites and crystal chandeliers and another sitting room is located on the first floor. And when you go down to the basement you find (as in many other local new homes), a kitchen and another (the fourth) very large sitting room! Here the seating suite is more modest and is located in its front section, because – as so often in a basement – the light from the small high window does not reach into the back of the room. I suspect that, as elsewhere in Kosovo, all the social life of the house will take place around the kitchen, i.e., down in the basement. Especially when the harsh Balkan winter comes, you will have the feeling that for a moment you have returned to the recent past, when the only heated place was in the kitchen and all the family lived in one or two shared rooms.

The house had been ready for more than a year, and was fully equipped. His children occasionally slept there, but Mr. Z – like hundreds of thousands of other Kosovo families – was yet to move in. For the moment he was staying next door, in the old house.

I had long conversations with Mr. Z, including about the way he creates his plans. Even when Mr. Z designs something for his customers, they often

like to suggest changes and he has to rework the project. It is not regarded as something carefully integrated, balanced and therefore definitive. I know of examples where people boasted that they brought an original project from Germany or Switzerland, but still made changes. The main issue, as already mentioned, is that, compared to a German house, there are more sitting rooms for neighbourly and family meetings, celebrations and rituals need to be added, which come at the expense of interior spaces for intimacy, self-development and hobbies.

Architects of their own success

As we have seen, this story of local modern rationality in constructing modern houses does not end with the arrival of the building plan and the expert planner. It is rather more complicated than that.

Mr. B⁸ is a well-known building magnate from Torbeshi (Macedonian Slavic-Speaking Muslim community) with a primary interest in large-scale developer projects. He employs a whole range of architects and designers and takes it completely for granted that work will proceed according to project. Even so, when he was building his own villa in his native town in the western part of North Macedonia, he would look over his architect's shoulder while the plans were being created and a few times even picked up a pen... *"It's like in a fairytale!"*, his wife said, when she first woke up in the 1,200-square-metre villa and looked out of the window at the mountains from her bed.

Mr. B showed me around the grand house. It had a raised ground floor entirely given over to a system of interconnected sitting rooms, seating galleries and balconies with seats. He tells me:

"All of this was my idea. I sat down with the architect in the evenings and we designed. Everything was built in line with my ideas. I didn't put anything down on paper myself, but what I told (my people) was always what was built. And ten times we demolished what we had put up! [...] If I didn't like something, we would demolish it and build it again." In short, *"I built this for myself and not for other people: the person who designs a house should live in it. And not like architects – they design what you should live in, but don't live in it themselves. That is why you need to build a house according to your own ideas and not according to the ideas of an architect! Because who's going to live in it, you or the architect?"* Mr. B concludes.

Although after completion the villa won the House of the Year award given by a Macedonian lifestyle magazine, *"today I would like to build a number of things differently. [...] For example, there are too many of all these arches*

8 The interview with Mr. B, whose identity has been anonymised, was conducted by the author of this article in August 2014. The interview was followed by a tour of the house.

and decorations... Now – after ten years – we’re getting ready for reconstruction...” Although his companies’ constructions are strictly on budget, his own house is not. *“I financed it continuously, so I don’t even know myself how much money it cost over the years!”*

It is the owner of a house, not the architect, who knows best how he is going to live in the house, and therefore how it should look. Many owners like Mr. B believe that only the owner can be the architect of such dream house. Because what is designed here is not just a house, but a new life-style – a new life. Yes, it is supposed to be a local copy of the dreamed of global West, but in fact this new life is only just being born, and so it is no surprise that the owner continues to intervene in the plan even when construction is underway. The plan is constantly changed and the finished house constantly reconstructed.

The form of the new life of the first generation of house builders, those who have worked their way up from poor local conditions to become direct participants in the global economy, is only now in the process of emergence. Thus, just as these self-made men have built (from scratch, from nothing) their own impressive careers and their own *selves*, they logically assume that they will build their own new houses for their own new lives without help from anyone else. They are self-made men – architects of the *self*, and so of their new houses.

“Do you find this house too big?! If you could see where I started out – none would be big enough!” This is what the owner of a fine house in the suburbs of one post-Yugoslav city always tells his visitors when he takes them on a tour. Just as his life story, from a remote village in the Bosnian mountains all the way here to an opulent mansion in suburbia has been grand, so too must his house be suitably grand...

The theorist of the Czech avant-garde in art and architecture, Karel Teige (1928–9) saw architecture. i.e., the house, not just as an *instrument* of living, but also as a *monument*. A monument to its owner, his social class, but also to its builder, the architect. The (radical) modernist Teige, in search of a restrained balance between house-instrument and house-monument, criticised some of the founding fathers of modern architecture (who formally rejected the monumental forms of the political-bourgeois/imperial architectural tradition) for continuing to strive for monumentality in a bid for both fame and transcendence. He observed with annoyance that even such architects as Wagner, Le Corbusier or Poelzig speak about functionality and instrumentality, but whenever they have a little time, they are already “thinking of a cathedral”, “thinking of a palace”, reaching expansively for a monumental idiom and “wanting to build for the Lord God” (Teige 1928–9, 145–155).

If not even the great gurus of modern architecture can hold themselves back, it is no wonder that our Balkan self-made-men architects have no desire to renounce this monumentality of architecture (the chance to make a big statement about themselves and their new social class) in favour of the restraint so enshrined in the modern architectural tradition today. And just like the modern architects rebuked by Teige, they too – as people used to being masters of their fates – do not wish to relinquish the *agency* of the author-architect that monumentality offers. Why should they leave it to some paid alienated no-name architect from somewhere else?! They want their houses to be not just functioning dwellings, but monuments as well; monuments to their families, to the local/ethnic group from which they have sprung, and, of course, to themselves and the success in life that they have achieved. The journey of social advancement of our *architects of the self* has been original, unexpected and grand, and so they want their houses to be original, unexpected and grand. It is not (just) that they do not have the money for an architect or do not understand the point of having one; it is more that they want to be the designers of their own monument. They are effectively saying: I alone understand the magnificence of the difficult path to the top that I have climbed. Only I understand the profound social and cultural transformation that I underwent on this path, and so only I can be the architect of the house that is a monument to it. Ultimately, as the building magnate Mr. B. said, it is you that will be living in the house, and not the architect.

Lack of completion, emptiness, the desire for a fixed point and insurance

As stated above, especially in the transitional period of the 1990s and 2000s, if you walked through the villages and suburbs of the construction booms of the Western Balkans and looked carefully, you could not have but notice that the reverse side of the size and originality of these houses was the chronic lack of completion and emptiness. There were shells of many houses that had remained unfinished for years, while, in some, people were only living in the completed ground floor, or one room, or the kitchen. While this phenomenon has now diminished, it still occurs today...

It has already been suggested, as with Humphrey (2002) with regard to the houses of the “new Russians” of the 1990s, that over-ambitious ideas about the originality of the house, the financial resources of the owner, and the capacities of post-communist building technologies, went beyond the boundaries of what was possible and many houses have thus remained unfinished (for years), some becoming dilapidated before they are finished. It has also been noted that many builders did not have a realistic view of

the amount of investment needed for their houses – since without a project plan such estimates are impossible – and this is another reason for the inability to complete houses. As also mentioned, global flows of remittances are precarious and unstable; one may lose one's job abroad, one's work permit or immigration status, or the border regime may change, and construction can come to a halt.

Nonetheless, the completion of a house itself guarantees very little, because many houses are finished (and even fitted out and furnished), but still remain empty (see e.g., Dalakoglou 2010; Gregorič Bon 2017: 3). Their owners, who are working abroad with their families, come to them once a year in the summer vacation or for festivals, but there are also houses that remain uninhabited for years on end. Because – theoretically at least – the bigger and more opulent the remittance house is, the longer the builder needs to earn money abroad. A big house therefore often equals an empty house.

Even so, although an empty or unfinished house does not fulfil its instrumental function, it can still fulfil its *monumental* function. The house as *monument* here represents its owner, his family and community. Remittances generally “*stand in as a material presence for absent migrants, since they materialise relationships between migrants and their stay-at-home families. They also bring ‘migrant worlds’ into sharper relief (Basu and Coleman 2008),*” writes Gregorič Bon (2017: 304). And if these flows are materialised in the form of the house of a migrant who has not been living in his native land for a long time, this is doubly true: “*In this way, houses become symbols for the longing for home, an incarnation of those who are absent but still part of the community, as well as symbol of success abroad that transcends into status ‘at home’ and in the translocal community,*” argue Leutloff-Grandits and Pichler (2014: 180). The creation of these houses that have been incomplete for years “*is not only a simple house-building process; it also ensures a constant dwelling and dynamic ‘proxy’ presence for migrants in their community of origin,*” writes Dimitris Dalakoglou (2010: 761).

Ahmed isn't here, but his house is here, once he finishes it, he'll definitely come back – I often hear such words in my research interviews in post-communist Eastern Europe and elsewhere in the world. Nobody remembers Ahmed all that well, because he left as a young lad years ago, but the large and ostentatious house looming over the village represents him (even if unfinished) as a non-human actor in the network of social relations, in a sense better than Ahmed could represent himself. For Ahmed and his family, in their transnational situation of balancing between the global *there* (in the rich global North) and *here* (in the poor South), the house serves as an *anchor*. As a fixed point and security in the insecure and

precarious world of Bauman's liquid modernity (Bauman 2000; Bauman 2011). As the insurance of home, where you can always return if something on that precarious transnational journey goes wrong.

This investment in a house as an anchor and a form of insurance is, however, controversial in the true sense of the word. The villages in the areas concerned are full of empty or semi-empty houses, whose owners have been living abroad with their families for years. What will the future bring? Here, in the precarious world of long-distance global flows, there are always two extreme (but not entirely unlikely) fatal scenarios hanging in the air that might become realities in the future. Often they are in some ways happening already. In the first scenario, people like Ahmed prosper so much in the North (they have work, establish their own firms, their children go to secondary school there and establish their own families and become naturalised Germans or Swedes) that they never come back. In the second scenario, they return, but never find regular employment here in the Balkan countryside. In the first case, in a few years we may have grand villages without people, and, in the second, a countryside full of dilapidated houses and unemployed people with frustrated aspirations.



Figure 5 Cities and also many villages extend far into the countryside and sometimes merge. Remittance landscapes are landscapes for which we lack an established urbanist terminology. (Distant suburb of the city of Gjilan, Kosovo. Photograph by the author.)

Without town planners or a territorial plan

Connection to global economic flows has generated big, striking houses. But it would be a mistake to focus only on the houses themselves, argues Sarah L. Lopez, who has studied the phenomenon of the boom in remittance houses (Lopez 2010) in the rural region of the Mexican state of Jalisco. In Mexico, as in the Balkans, but also in many other regions of the world that until recently were poor, whole new landscapes are taking shape that she calls remittance landscapes (Lopez 2015).

Remittance landscapes are rapidly changing landscapes that reflect the global flow of money, building technologies and materials, but also human aspirations and dreams. The visitor cannot fail to notice remittance landscapes – the way in which the rural settlements have been spilling out into the countryside. This occurs especially along important communication roads, where it is often not possible to distinguish where one village ends and the next begins. Moreover, given that the new remittance houses are usually of an architecturally urban (suburban) type, it is also difficult to work out where these merged villages have become swallowed by the suburbs of the towns. For example, if you travel in North Macedonia from Tetovo (population approximately 53,000), the largest town of the local Albanian minority, –to Gostivar (pop. approx. 36,000), which is more than 25 km away, you get the impression that the almost dozen villages on the “old road” between them have merged into a single endless zone with a quite dense development of family houses. The centres of the originally isolated villages are now identifiable, if at all, by the denser development, the concrete minarets of mosques and the increased frequency of cafes and stores by the road. Remittance landscapes are landscapes for which we lack an established terminology.

Given that the houses mimetically imitate models from western European and American suburbs, this poses a whole range of challenges and problems. Whole landscapes generated (consciously or unconsciously) in this way also imitate the western European and American suburbs. The houses growing up here are in suburban not rural style; agricultural activity has become marginal (as signalled by the park design of the gardens around the houses); a lot of space is devoted to cars (driveways, parking spaces, garages and car services); the residential buildings spill out from the villages into the fields and countryside, and sometimes eventually merge with distant suburbs; and increasing numbers of shops and services are established along the roads. A new type of countryside is emerging, and this poses even more challenges and problems.

Neither the suburban architecture itself nor the spontaneous centralisation along major roads brings the desired suburban standard of living in the

larger cities. Paved roads, electricity, water and the other infrastructure, as well as the urban planning that suburbs require, are lacking. The houses often block each other's light and views (they are often only a metre two away from each other). They sometimes have no car access or roads (wealthier neighbours/communities often raise funds for the creation of paved or concrete roads and, if they are on a steep slope, walls to prevent erosion). Some lack proper electrification or grid connections (so that if you switch on lights in more than one room in your palace, the fuses blow). The waste water is piped out somewhere behind the house or into the village stream. In only a generation a significant waste problem has appeared – there is a huge amount. At peak times of the day, it is clear that the village, with its thousands of inhabitants, needs proper street signs, a one-way street or no parking zones in places, and perhaps a clearly defined car park. The proliferation of new streets and neighbourhoods of the expanding village requires the clear naming of streets (as was done recently in Kosovo) and the numbering of houses “like in the town”. Conflicts between neighbours and between individuals and the local authority are growing; overall tension and disruption are on the rise.

This chaos accompanying the transformation has its causes not only in the sheer scale of the cultural and urbanising change, but also – as has been mentioned – in the weakened role of the state in recent decades. As local government offices, media and activists have pointed out, the crisis of the role of the state means that literally hundreds of thousands of illegal houses without building permission have been constructed, and dozens of new unofficial/illegal town suburbs have formed with no territorial urban plan (and often no infrastructure networks, or only partial or improvised ones). Until recently, the enforcement of any kind of building-permission or town-planning measures was not easy. According to the urban planner Kobe Boussauw (2012: 149–150), who monitored the situation in Kosovo towns ten years ago, there were (and still are) three main reasons for the problem: the lack of power of municipalities (as opposed to the companies or extended families doing the building); their lack of knowledge and expertise; and the lack of social support for territorial planning and building permission procedure as such.

After some acknowledgment of the need for an architect, who will bring a plan and budget for a house, comes the need for another form of expert knowledge: a call for town planners – for a territorial/urban plan on land use. And then routine administrative approval procedure for the plan, permissions and legal action against infraction. For many, this may seem like a “huge novelty” but in fact here, as in the question of architecture and inspection of building, it has a neglected history. The former Yugoslavia,

which struggled with the massive growth of its urban settlements, had a relatively strong tradition of town planning, drawing inspiration from, or even trained people from abroad. (For example, a number of cities in the region in question still benefit from several successful reconstruction projects that in the 1970s–1980s radically but quite sensitively transformed *čaršijas* into modern town centres, pedestrian zones where the local life of the traditional market is combined with modern shops and services and global tourism.) The problem is not the absence of a town-planning tradition in the (communist) past, but more the effect of what came after it. It is not only a matter of the weakened role of the state in the period of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the ensuing ethnic conflicts. It is also related to the post-communist neoliberal atmosphere, in which the freedom of the individual was defined by freedom of expression, freedom of movement, freedom to do business and also “freedom to build”. In other words, a new dangerous mutation of the “neoliberal urbanism” where every free individual “can build where he wants and what he wants”, and “no one else has any right to interfere.” Ultimately, in that new refreshing climate of post-modern relativism, which set in after the fall of communism – who has the right to tell you how *your house* should look and where it should stand, i.e., what is good and what is bad? In this new world with new architecture and a new type of suburbia and countryside, who is to say what the newly emerging normality and the new norm should be?



Figure 6 Settlements that today have thousands of inhabitants and an urban style of architecture require public space of an urban kind, which also needs proper planning. However the gifts of wealthy neighbours and community collections, which in the past two or three decades have funded public improvements, are no longer enough for its upkeep and new projects. (Southern Kosovo. Photograph from the author’s archive.)

Conclusion: Seekers of a new normality

The until recently rural, marginal or directly (ethnically) marginalised populations of the regions in this study have experienced immense social change. There has been state-directed (but also state-neglected, and therefore spontaneously undertaken from below) modernisation, urbanisation, later post-communist transition, globalisation, the westernisation of lifestyle and rise of consumer society and pop-culture... You no longer get food in the fields or gardens but in the supermarket, building material is no longer quarried in the local quarry or felled in the woods, furniture is imported from Germany, you don't see your father at home in the kitchen, but in Switzerland, or even better on Skype or Facebook... What just a generation ago was a remote region or even a corner of the countryside, living mainly from local sources of food, local raw materials, local energy and local construction materials, has plugged itself directly into the heart of the life of the planet's economic centres.

Nobody is in much doubt that this immense cultural change has brought with it a range of modern features, such as, modern technology, communications, computers or the visa and migration policy of the EU, which requires expertise to navigate and the need for expertise in mastering them. But it has brought also many simple things that have seemed as plain as day, because everyone knows them from the past: Houses have walls, windows and a roof, today the new one are just bigger – what's so difficult about that?! In what way does it need planning – I often hear from my respondents. A village has a centre, where there are cafes, a store and a mosque, around which houses stand, and then it's just fields, fields and forests – what's the point of laboriously pondering about it, or regional planning? Nevertheless in modern houses, where, for example, a whole labyrinth of arteries issue into a single place in the kitchen (hot water, cold water, waste water, electricity, plus a gas canister or a ventilator outflow), what used to be a simple thing has become a real puzzle. In the Kosovo countryside today, where from the bedroom (once a strictly enclosed space) there is now a view through a big French window out onto a terrace, and from there into the garden, in which, instead of vegetable beds, there is a pool and a trampoline for the children, and instead of surrounding fields there is just endless suburb, is design of space an architectural-sociological equation with many unknown quantities...

It is becoming clear that this new complexity requires expert solutions and experts, i.e., architects and town planners, and a local supervisory authority that knows how to cope with it. This may sound rather ethnocentric – insofar as these are experts who in Enlightenment style introduce

the contents of “western knowledge”, norms and standards into local reality *from above* and then demand compliance with them – and it is. On the other hand, certain problems and equations involving many variables in the world of modern technologies do not have an infinite number of solutions. If we agree that hot water (right next to the oven) in the kitchen is a useful thing, there are not an infinite number of ways of organising the necessary pipes and wires. For some parts of the modern house, there are not many different solutions, just as there are not many town planning solutions with regard to how to group urban functions logically in one central place. This is why the successful (and in some places already locally tried and tested) approaches, for example, the kitchen counter (an American invention), have spread all over the world. Inventions like the kitchen counter, the sitting room with couch and television, the Turkish bath, the Japanese garden, and also the whole urbanist masterplan of the Parisian model of a city, American suburbia, or the East European prefab tower block estate, have travelled around the world and been adopted by half of it. These inventions have been understood in local terms, variously interpreted, adapted in hybrid ways, and sometimes misunderstood and misinterpreted in some places, but they remain themselves.

Not only does every society absorb such housing and urbanist novelties from elsewhere and change them, but the novelties themselves change people and society: human requirements for space, hygiene, luxury and aesthetic preference – the whole lifestyle. Dimitris Dalakoglou (2010: 773–4), who has studied the influence of the unfinished houses of migrants on the post-communist Albania in the period of post-communist transition, – i.e., the society which is itself “in the process of construction”, talks of the mutual influence of these phenomena in the following terms: “*The houses of Albanian migrants are characterised by material dynamism,*” by a flowing ontology, a materiality of “openness” and an aesthetic of fluidity. “*The ‘open’ characteristics of these houses under construction enable a flexible negotiation with the ambiguity and fluidity of contemporary socio-cultural conditions in Albania.*” In the moment of historical transition, it is not only the house but the whole of society that is seeking a new form or face. In this process, the house is not just the result of these changes, but a key (non-human) actor in them. In post-communist Albania, “*transnational house-making is so widespread a practice that the transition and transnational flows shape the materiality of migrant houses as much as the houses shape the aesthetics and materiality of Albanian transition and transnationalism,*” concludes Dalakoglou (2010, 774).

A half-built house with an open future in a society in the middle of a historical transition with an open future... It is coming into being, it is being searched for, the new face of home; a new lifestyle – a new life (which

is neither a mimetic copy of the “Western”, nor what it was years ago, nor a simple syncretic fusion of the two). This new life, the shape of its homes, suburbs and countryside is being born. Its written and unwritten mores do not quite exist yet, or else they exist, but have not been verbalised and formulated. Experts such as architects, town planners, supervisory officials, hygiene specialists are usually not (and cannot be) the creators of the normality of the new world (they are more the guardians of already existing and established building, hygiene, fire-prevention, urbanist, and territorial planning norms). Finding the shape of the new home and new world remains up to our *architects of the self*, – the subject of this article, who are seeking and creating this new normality *from below*. And on their admirers, followers and critics, who appreciate and praise or conversely criticise or even ridicule their authorial creations (behind their backs). Our *architects of the self* may strike many people as a little absurd in their utopian megalomania, contradictory in their attempts to reconcile opposites (local versus global, tradition vs modernity) and quixotic in their approach to their transnational situation (between work and life in the distant abroad and investment in their native village). But they are genuinely looking for a form of life and a world that is just beginning to emerge. On the path to the future, the shape of which no one knows, they are pioneers.

Today, when the lifestyle of the new houses and landscape is gradually starting to settle after several decades of rapid change, the question of the new normality that will emerge from it is still open. As well as the question of what aspect of it will be transformed into new (architectural and urbanistic) norms that the authorities will require with the support of the whole of society. We can observe a similar process in connection with construction booms and the development of new remittance landscapes in a number of other areas not only of Eastern Europe, but also in Asia, Latin America and Africa. Here in the former Yugoslavia, which has its own strong architectural and town planning tradition, as well as a tradition of a relatively strong state and local government, the people have an advantage in the sense of a relevant past on which to build. A cause for concern, however, is the above-mentioned issue of what will happen to these new remittance houses if the sources of funding are interrupted, or if their owners (or their children) settle abroad and do not return. When the new architectural and urbanist world has been born and normalised, but lacks either money or physically present people, or both, what happens then?

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