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# THE BALKAN PENINSULA OF JOVAN CVIJIĆ:

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEMPORARY  
TRENDS IN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY



**THE BALKAN PENINSULA OF JOVAN CVIJIĆ**

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND  
CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY



GEOGRAPHICAL INSTITUTE "JOVAN CVIJIĆ" SASA, BELGRADE  
CULTURAL CENTRE "VUK KARADŽIĆ", LOZNICA

# THE BALKAN PENINSULA OF JOVAN CVIJIĆ:

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND  
CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

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## THE TRANSNATIONAL NATURE OF BALKAN HOUSES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

Serena Acciai<sup>1,2</sup>

**Abstract:** One hundred years after the publication of Jovan Cvijić's *La péninsule balkanique — géographie humaine (Balkan Peninsula: human geography)*, regarding the building types that have contributed to the housing culture of the Balkan Peninsula, we can highlight how the boundaries of these ways of life have perhaps been more transient than one could have considered a century ago. Following this key, we see that the word *kuća*, as it happens for the word *sofa* of the Ottoman house, indicates, in the simplest examples, a single space that is the house itself, (*vatrë* in the Albanian variant); we find that the Carso-Mediterranean house made of stone is extending along the whole Balkan Adriatic coast, and again that the Dinaric house is often completed by a wooden pergola called *çardâk* from Ottoman-Turkish (چارطاق “*arbours, summerhouse*”), that the Moravian house, composed of three planimetric elements (*ajat, kuća* and *soba*) is not so different from the planimetric layout of the Ottoman house with (*hajat, sofa* and *oda*), which then takes on a fortified appearance in the *kula* examples. All these variations are different combinations of recurring compositional elements that were combined with the architectural languages of the various climatic regions and of the various cultural and anthropological traditions.

**Keywords:** vernacular architecture; domestic culture; borders; housing typology; central hall

### Introduction: The Current Study

This study re-evaluates Jovan Cvijić's typological analysis of Balkan houses with a XXI century perspective. The overall goal is to demonstrate how the different house types of the Balkan Peninsula actually have some common compositional elements.

Using the typological studies of modern architects that have developed since the 1930s, I will highlight the recurring compositional elements of the Balkan house type. The analysis is based on selected case studies, and shows how constitutive elements of the Balkan house are repeated and could be ascribed to a more ancient idea of house: the Byzantine house type. The Byzantine house has been diffuse for centuries all over the Balkan territories. In the Balkans, in fact, the ordinary house type that for centuries was erroneously considered only as “*Turkish type*”, was instead inherited by the Ottomans when they conquered the vast territory of the

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Byzantine Empire (Deroko, 1961). This ancient culture has obviously been transformed by the architectural languages of the various climatic regions and of the various cultural and anthropological traditions that it met.

### **New reading of Jovan Cvijić's *La péninsule balkanique***

A current reading of the fundamental book on the Balkan peninsula, *La péninsule balkanique — géographie humaine (Balkan Peninsula: human geography)*, written a century ago in Paris by Jovan Cvijić, points out how the boundaries of the various house types, described by the author, have been more transient than would have been considered a century ago. Moreover, the typological analysis led by Cvijić seems to be guided also by an ethnic bias rather than an entirely logical one. Probably the *Zeitgeist* of his time had a significant echo in the reading provided by Cvijić.

In spite of his personal thoughts, he made an accurate typological analysis by reviewing all the housing types diffused over the Balkan lands, in the chapter XVII *Les types des maisons*.

Primarily, he described the meaning of the word *kuća*, the original house of Yugoslavian people. According to Cvijić, the primordial Balkan house was composed of a single room, and was almost the same for all the Slavic-Balkan homes. In these lands, the word *kuća* was identified with the concept of family. He then analysed the Dinaric house, the Carso-Mediterranean house, the Moravian house, the Greek-Mediterranean house, the Turkish-Oriental house and the *kula* (fortified house). Following an ethnographic approach, although interesting, Cvijić's typological analysis lacks an urban dimension, which usually characterizes this kind of studies.

The study of various house types has been conducted without a comparative analysis of the planimetric layout and without schemes intended to summarize the significance of the different compositional elements. Also, the linguistic similarity of many terms used in the description of the houses is not highlighted by Cvijić interpretations. Thus, the analysis of the various house types appears as a fascinating tale of separate entities that do not consider the aspects of a logical-constructive reading<sup>2</sup>.

Thanks to a more profound analysis we see that the word *kuća*, as it happens for the word *sofa* of the Ottoman house or *vatrë* in the Albanian variant, indicates, in the simplest examples, a single space that is the house itself. We find that the

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<sup>2</sup> See Grassi, G. (1967). *La costruzione logica dell'architettura*. Venezia: Marsilio.

Carso-Mediterranean house made of stone is used along the whole Balkan Adriatic coast, and again, that the Dinaric house is often completed by a wooden pergola called *çârdâk* from Ottoman-Turkish (چارطاق “arbour, summerhouse”), that the Moravian house, composed of three planimetric elements (*ajat*, *kuća* and *soba*) is not so different from the planimetric layout of the Ottoman house with (*hajat*, *sofa* and *oda*), which then takes on a fortified appearance in the *kula* examples.

All these types of houses have a common element that is the distributive space (called *kuća*, *sofa*, *odžak* or *vatrë*, in the Albanian variant): sometimes the whole house identifies itself in this space; other times it is the basic module on which the other rooms grow (*oda*, *soba*, *odaja*). This distributive space also regulates the relationship between inside and outside, thus determining its very nature. This distributive space “declines” itself and becomes the *hajat*, the *taslik*, or the *ajat* depending on its figurative meaning and its position in the planimetric layout of a mansion. It also determines the presence of pavilions (*divanhane*) or wooden pergolas (*çârdâk*). The living space, the hall, the gallery, the portico, the fire room, are all variations of the same type of space that, from a compositional point of view, derives from the ancient *tablinum* of the Roman, and then later, the Byzantine house.

A particular housing layout is the *vajat* of the Serbian tradition. These small guesthouses disseminated around the master’s house, are similar to the *Čiflik* villages that have existed on the Balkan Peninsula since the Middle Ages but that found their last form under the Ottomans (Cvijić, 1918). In fact, according to Aleksandar Deroko,<sup>3</sup> the ordinary Balkan house type that for centuries was erroneously considered only as “Turkish type”, was instead inherited by the Ottomans when they conquered the vast territory of the Byzantine Empire.

The Byzantine typology already considered the majority of themes which regulated the Balkan domestic cultures. This is particularly evident looking at the vestiges of the city of Mistra (Greece). This relatively well preserved settlement is the place where one can best see how the Byzantine house could appear. In particular, analysing the house of Laskarius,<sup>4</sup> it clearly appears that the public space of a house, the receiving room, was already present in the architectural layout.

According to Nikolaos Moutsopoulos<sup>5</sup> (1984) descriptions of the ancient Greek towns, the main elements of the Byzantine house were: (1) The central hall,

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<sup>3</sup> Aleksandar Deroko (1894–1988) was professor of the Belgrade University and member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. He was an architect, artist, and author.

<sup>4</sup> See Georgiadis, N. (2006) *Mistra*. Athens: Ninth Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Nikolaos Moutsopoulos (1927), one of the most important intellectuals engaged in the study of traditional Greek architecture, and professor at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

which makes all rooms independent; (2) the wooden balcony — called *sahnisin* — projecting on the street; (3) the main reception room *iliakos*; (4) the open hall-portico called *hayat*; and (5) the streets of the town paved with *caldirim*. In the imperial palaces, there were several reception rooms, which usually formed a section separated from the private apartments. Moreover, from the Manuscript of Skylitzès (De Beylié, 1902–1903) it is evident that rooms projecting out already existed in the Byzantine house type.

### **Typology in Modern Architecture**

By analyzing compositional characteristics of a building, typological studies are able to go beyond temporal and geographical limits. Thus, they can help find connections between buildings very far from each other in time and space. Thanks to modern typological studies, we can see how the Byzantine house already presented elements that can be found in the traditional Balkan houses. The word *type* derives from French, or from Latin *typus*, from Greek *typos* (in the sense of ‘symbol, emblem’) and means ‘impression, figure’. Typology in architecture has been present since ancient times, it has had a great influence on the way buildings have been designed or constructed. Although types in architecture have only been deeply analysed since the XIX century, they have played an important role since much earlier.

Since the 1800s, many scholars have discussed the topic of typology in architecture; including architects such as Quatremere de Quincy, Gottfried Semper, and later Saverio Muratori, Aldo Rossi and Giulio Carlo Argan, who made his deductions based on Jean Nicolas Louis Durand’s analysis.

It is not a coincidence that in the Balkan area, a group of European educated architects, such as Dimitri Pikionis, Sedad Hakki Eldem and Branislav Kojić, promoted the study of civil architecture as a fundamental base for the development of a modern architecture aware of the “pre-existences”. They employed the fundamental concepts of type, fabric and organism when they made the first systematic surveys of traditional houses in their respective countries. Since the 1930s these architects had a relevant role in the formation of a cultural awareness of traditional domestic cultures: they organized with their students survey campaigns aimed at discovering the value of vernacular housing architecture in Greece, Turkey and Serbia. In 1936, Dimitris Pikionis, professor of National Technical University supervised the project on the analysis of the traditional housing architecture in Greece. He assigned the completion of that project to a team of young architects: Dimitris Moretis, Giorgos Giannouelis and Alexandra Paschalidou. This team studied and illustrated, for the first time

in Greece, traditional architecture as well as house decoration of XVIII and XIX centuries. The study focused particularly on the areas of Western Macedonia, Epirus, Thessaly, Pindos and the Cyclades.

In 1932, the *Seminars on the National Architectural Style* at the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul (Acciai, 2017), Turkey were instituted thanks to the joint efforts of Sedad Eldem (1908-1988) (Acciai, 2018; Bozdogan, Özkan, & Yenal, 1987) and Ernst Egli. These seminars had the merit of forming a generation of architects that were aware of the architectural value of the traditional Turkish house.

Branislav Kojić (1899–1987), belonged to a generation of French-educated architects. He was Professor at the Faculty of Architecture of Belgrade and a regular member of SASA (Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts). His research succeeded in filling gaps in the literature on rural settlements and architecture (Drobnjaković, Vuksanović-Macura, Spalević, & Todorčić, 2017). He was able to study the way of living, and to analyse rural settlements in the territory of Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Slovenia. His leading references were the studies of Jovan Cvijić. In 1940 Kojić led a survey and study of the traditional mansion of *Avzi-Pasha* in Bardovci (Kojić, 1954) near Skopje with his students from the architectural faculty in Belgrade.

In the 1930s, Pikionis, Eldem, and Kojić documented the civil architecture of their respective countries for educational and cognitive purposes, through a careful work of surveying, collecting, and cataloguing. Much of that vernacular architecture risked, at that time, to disappear forever without leaving any trace. Despite the different contexts, their approach has some similarities: Kojić particularly analysed more the forms of aggregation of spontaneous villages; Pikionis focused on the aspects of decorative arts on civil homes; Eldem applied a rigorous method derived from a Middle-European tradition and — as Durand — represented by scheme the different planimetric variations of the Ottoman-Turkish house. These authors-architects did not theorize about these great registers produced by their work with their students: they intended to make this work as accurate as possible to pass the knowledge of architecture, particularly the housing vernacular, which had not yet found a collocation in the debate of modern architecture.

Aldo Rossi's well-known typological theories came later, in a season where the studies in architecture, at least in Italy, also meant a commitment to political militancy. In his little-known study on the typological characteristics of the settlements of the Canton of Ticino, Rossi, Consolascio, Bosshard, & Vitale (1988) used the same tools of modern typological analysis employed by the above-mentioned architects in the Balkan Peninsula.

Still today the lesson by Rossi on typology remains one of the most eloquent: he defines “type as the very idea of architecture, that which is closest to its essence. In spite of changes, it has always imposed itself on the “feelings and reason” as the principle of architecture and of the city” (Rossi, 2004, p. 34). Rossi’s theory derives from Saverio Muratori’s experience in Venice, Italy. In fact, Muratori (1959) was the first who spoke about the concept of “operative history” and his work *Studi per una operante storia urbana di Venezia*, is considered, in Italy, the starting point of typological studies.

### Case Studies

By applying typological research as defined in modern architecture, the so-called Balkan house can be additionally explained by specific case studies. Coming from different geographical areas and belonging to different architectural scales these case studies have been selected to demonstrate how some of the peculiarities of the Balkan houses share characteristic elements.

Looking at housing examples on the northern Adriatic coasts it is important to highlight how one finds the same type of house on both the western and the eastern shores. The cross-cultural Byzantine, and then later, Venetian influences left a strong mark on both sides. It is interesting to observe that the house type designed around a passing-through hall (the best-known examples are the Palladian villas) is recognizable still today, comparing the houses on the seafront of Rimini (Italy) with the seafront of Zara (Croatia) (Figure 1). One can find the same two or three storied mansions, with hipped roof, quadrangular form and main distributive hall on the ground floor.

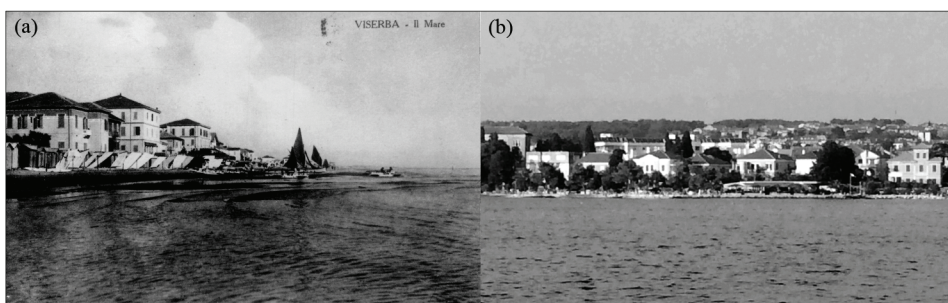


Figure 1. Northern Adriatic houses, comparison between Rimini (a) and Zara (b) seafronts  
(Source: author’s collection)

In the Miloš Obrenović’s house (Figure 2) in Gornja Crnuća (municipality of Gornji Milanovac), one of the most important monuments of Serbia, one can observe that this splendid example of *brvnara* (house in wood with a high



shingle roof) is finished with a quadrangular *çârdâk* (wooden pergola) that also is an outdoor distributive space. The house includes the *kuća*, the bedroom, and an added pavilion. Below the bedroom there is a masonry cellar. The roof has eight rows of shingles. On the inside we can see some of the base on which the beams rest in projection; here, in the form of benches, there are large joists where utensils can be placed. Above the fireplace there is the *gramada*, stone shelf, on which the dishes are kept. The internal floor is paved with stone. The *divanhane* (Acciai, 2016), (the receiving room) and as well as the *çârdâk* are the places of entertainment. This kind of space runs through all the Balkan Peninsula housing tradition having roots in the *iliakos*<sup>6</sup> of the Byzantine civil architecture.

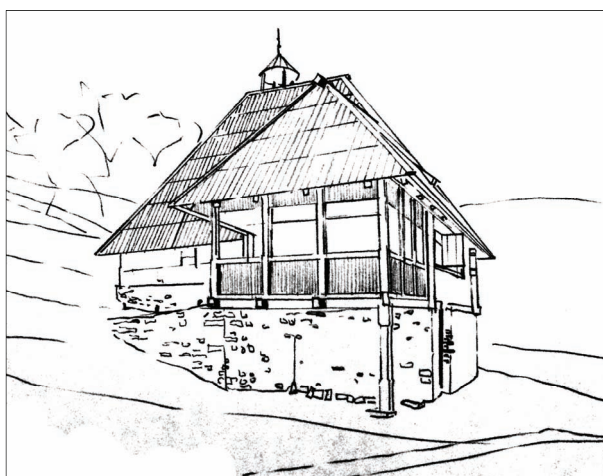


Figure 2. View of Miloš Obrenović's house (Source: author's collection)

The last case study is the aforementioned, but no longer existing, residence of *Avzi-Pasha* in Bardovci, near Skopje. This huge mansion and grounds were fortified. The living spaces presented the classical gender division of the Ottoman tradition. The *selâmlik*, (from the Arab *selâmlik*: “salutation”), indicates in Ottoman culture the section of the house where male friends or strangers were received, and was clearly different from the *haremlik*, which was exclusive to the women and the private life of the family. The Ottoman house was organized around the space-room-atrium of the *sofa*. The *sofa* was a space which changed in Ottoman architecture depending on the form, the method of construction and of its planimetric position<sup>7</sup>. This space

<sup>6</sup> Faidon Koukoules stated that the Byzantines called the protruding volume *iliakos* — a vernacular term — coming from *helios/ilios* (“sun”).

<sup>7</sup> The different planimetric distribution of the *sofa* (or its absence) determines the fundamental types of the Ottoman house: without *sofa* (*sofasiz tip*), is the most primitive typology where the function of the *sofa* was fulfilled by the courtyard; with exterior *sofa* (*diş sofali tip*, or *hayat*), in

constituted the heart of the house because it gave autonomy to the other rooms; it was a space of transition where nobody slept, and which could be accessed by all other rooms. The *sofa* was the public realm, the street or square within the house, and therefore all other rooms in the Ottoman house were more or less similar, and the bedrooms were both places to sleep and living-rooms. The great Ottoman mansions thus had “special rooms” envisaged for specific activities and which therefore had to be differentiated from the others.

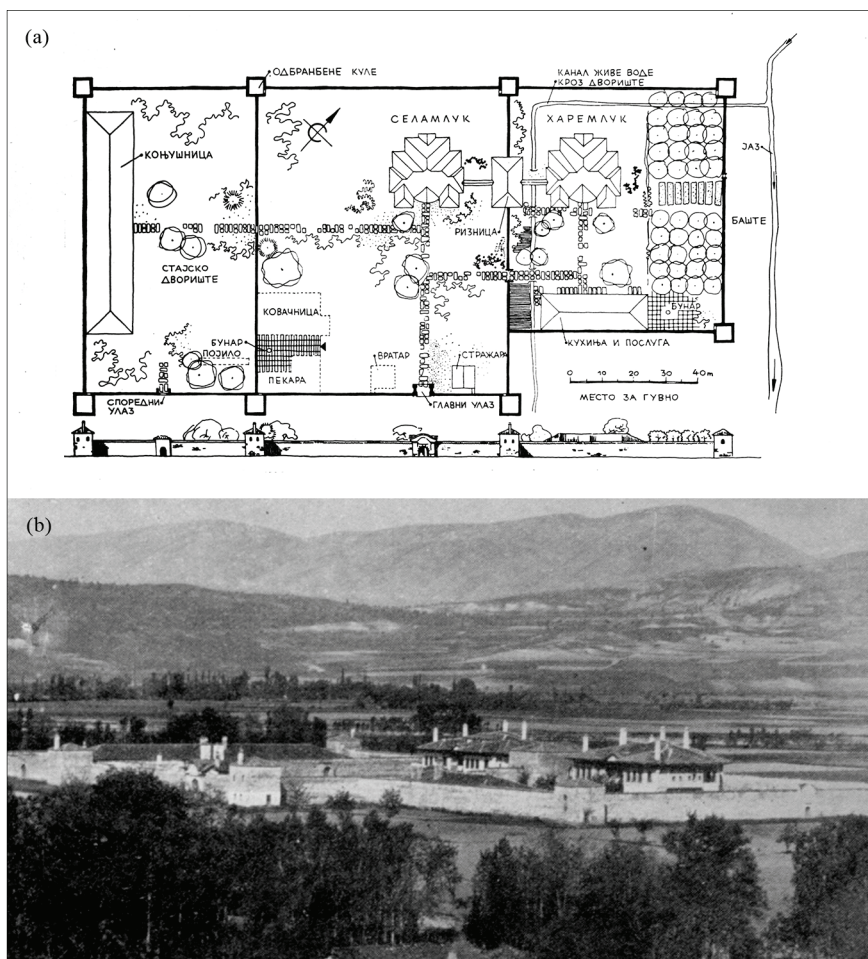


Figure 3. Avzi-Pasha manor in Bardovci, plan (a) and view (b) from the exterior (Source: Kojić, 1954)

which the *sofa* becomes an open gallery facing the exterior, with interior *sofa* (*iç sofali tip*), and finally the typology with central *sofa* (*orta sofali tip*) (Akcan, 2012).

This extraordinary example of a large fortified manor shows how the northern housing tradition of the *Čiflik* villages finds its typological correspondence in the current Macedonia, which is geographically situated much further south. However, the layout within the fortified fence is not the same. Jovan Cvijić himself in 1906 wrote the first descriptive graphic documents on this manor. Cvijić asserted that Avzi-Pasha complex was quite different from the other *Čiflik* villages (Figure 3), but the way of life behind a fence with a series of separate special rooms and houses, was undoubtedly similar to the Ottoman planimetric tradition of houses arranged as groups of pavilions.

### Conclusion

In light of these significant case studies on typological analysis, carried out by modern architects starting in the 1930s, it is easy to see how at the time of publication of Cvijić's book, rising nationalistic feelings hid an open outlook on similarities in architecture in different countries.

The experience of modern Balkan architects in documenting this particular cultural heritage, together with the fundamental work of Jovan Cvijić, form an essential passage towards a contemporary awareness of how we can still learn today from a way of living that is millenniums old. Working on this paper I have been able to collect examples proving how the Balkan house concept is related to a shared culture.

The essence of the Balkan house is in the melting pot of different domestic and anthropological cultures that share some constitutive elements. These houses are the testimony of a great housing tradition. If we consider the nations of the Balkan peninsula as the regions of a single large territory we see that they have characteristics of similarity, unlike what happens in the vernacular architecture in Italy.

History in these places has acted not by substitution but by addition: thus, the Balkan housing tradition should be considered a common heritage to be studied and valued.

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