

Would you Love your Historic House if we Restored it? Restoring the Owner's Relationship with their Historic House rather than just Restoring the House

ELENITA ROSHI

ABSTRACT

This article is a brief narrative of a GCDO project in Gjirokastra, Albania from 2008 to 2011. GCDO is an Albanian Foundation, set up in 2001 to work for the sustainable development of Gjirokastra based on its culture heritage.

The project's initial goal was to restore a monumental house (established as such by Albanian heritage law) in the Bazaar of Gjirokastra. During the process of 'sharing' the decision to restore the house, the focus and the aim of the project shifted towards re-establishing the house owners' relationship with their monumental house and with the community living in the Bazaar quarter of Gjirokastra.

The house was expropriated during the communist regime in Albania (1945-1991); the family had thus left the house 35 years before the project and moved away from Gjirokastra. After the fall of communism, the house owners regained ownership of the building, but their natural connection with their house had been lost. Currently, the family lives in the capital of Albania and has grown in numbers so there are more members than there were 35 years ago.

Through the process of sharing conservation decisions, the house owners and the community where the house is located re-established links with each other and the house. The project provided a social mechanism: the Gjirokastra Foundation and the owners of this monumental house at risk united forces and raised funds to restore the house. The owners agreed to 'pay back' the restoration costs by granting the Gjirokastra Foundation the right to use the house rent-free for a predetermined time and for a jointly predetermined usage. It would be an "Arts and Crafts Incubator and Centre" for the training and education of young people in arts and crafts in Gjirokastra, also raising awareness about artisanship issues in Albania. GCDO had the task of running the Centre. It was opened in 2010 and has trained and supported around 50 artisans and craftspeople from Gjirokastra and has inspired more house owners to ask for the implementation of this mechanism.

Introduction

During the months that I struggled to write this article, I realized that attending the Sharing Conservation Decisions course of 2008 had upgraded my mindset on conservation.

Today, I no longer work for the Gjirokastra Conservation and Development Organization (GCDO), which allowed me to attend SCD 2008. In July 2012, GCDO changed its name to the Gjirokastra Foundation. I will always be grateful to my former colleagues for funding this training course. It transformed my perspective on the practice of heritage management and helped GCDO shape a turning point in the way it works in Gjirokastra (a UNESCO World Heritage Town in southern Albania). It also motivated the creation of a participatory mechanism of conservation decision-making, which this article is about.

The World Heritage Town of Gjirokastra in Albania

The World Heritage Town of Gjirokastra, in Albania is an extraordinary example of the long and difficult survival of a late medieval town where local and Ottoman architecture blend masterfully. Gjirokastra has some 2 200 typical stone houses and about 600 cultural monuments (monumental houses) constituting 22 percent of Albania's listed monuments. Gjirokastra was declared a Museum City by the Albanian Government in 1961. This was quite unusual for a radical communist country, which Albania was at the time.

Out of 600 monuments, 54 are first category houses (the most valuable ones) in which no changes or alterations of any type can be made. While first category houses were restored by the state during the communist regime, many were expropriated and their owners were forced to live elsewhere. During the first years of democracy (1992 onwards) a Special National Commission was formed to address the requests of former owners to have their confiscated properties returned. Before communism, generally, there was no de jure legal transfer of property