

rights from one generation to the next. The house was de facto bequeathed to the youngest man of the family. The Special National Commission decided to give the property rights to the oldest person in the family who had an old legal document proving property rights (this could be a document from the time of the dead great-grandfather of the family); once produced, all his descendants were held to be owners (the old owners were mostly men). This reinstated ownership created a situation of multi-ownership (one first category house had 72 owners). This factor, combined with the long-term physical separation from their properties caused ‘the big families’ to lose interest in their monumental houses.

To make matters worse, as things stand, the state no longer has the power or money to take care of the monumental houses and families have neither the money nor the will. As a result of neglect and abandonment, the most endangered monumental houses in Gjirokastra are the first category ones, the most refined examples of vernacular architecture in Gjirokastra.

The Gjirokastra Foundation (GCDO) approach

The Gjirokastra Foundation strategy is based on the belief that heritage has to be a means of development for the local community and not just an ‘object’ of pride. Since Gjirokastra’s heritage mainly consists of vernacular houses, GCDO has adopted the philosophy expressed in the ICOMOS Charter on Built vernacular heritage, ratified by the ICOMOS 12th General Assembly in Mexico in October 1999, which states the following:

The built vernacular heritage occupies a central place in the affection and pride of all peoples. It has been accepted as a characteristic and attractive product of society. It appears informal, but nevertheless orderly. It is utilitarian and at the same time possesses interest and beauty. It is a focus of contemporary life and at the same time a record of the history of society. Although it is the work of man it is also the creation of time. It would be unworthy of the heritage of man if care were not taken to conserve these traditional harmonies which constitute the core of man’s own existence (ICOMOS, 1999).

The Gjirokastra Foundation has also embraced the Getty Conservation Institute’s conclusion on historical cities and the challenges they are facing today:

At a time of rapid urbanization and globalization, the conservation of historic cities is one of the most urgent and difficult challenges facing the field of heritage conservation. The task extends beyond the preservation of the architecture and landscape, and requires the careful management of change through adaptation of historic buildings and urban fabric to new forms of living, evolving land uses, and consideration of intangible heritage that contributes to the city’s cultural significance (Getty Conservation Institute, 2015).