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& RISK

Cultural HERITAGE Protection in Times of RISK Challenges and Opportunities

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Challenges and Opportunities**

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RISKS OF CULTURAL WOODEN INTERIOR ELEMENTS IN OLD BUILDINGS AND CHURCHES IN MACEDONIA, GREECE

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Summary

Wood had always been appreciated for its very good properties which make it an excellent raw material for the creation of many constructions and objects (artifacts). At the same time, wood is sensitive to attacks which deteriorate and finally destroy it, if wood is not properly conserved. In despite to these hazards some beautiful wooden constructions have been survived since 16th to 19th centuries in many regions of Greece. They are present mainly in old house buildings as wall paneling, ceiling paneling, doors etc. and in churches as temples and in some rare cases as ceiling paneling and special artifacts. The amount of these old house buildings is permanently reduced every year, even though they had been recognized under low protection, because of the lack of the money needed for their restoration and conservation. Contrary to the house buildings which are mainly of private property, there are much more churches with excellent wooden curved temples, icons etc. These wooden creations suffer the same risks like the house buildings plus the fact that they have been stolen many times, because nobody protects them. Finally, the situation and the specific risks which face the old house buildings and churches with cultural wooden constructions in the region of Macedonia, northern Greece are presented and discussed. The results of the research conducted in the region revealed the existence of important wooden constructions which are briefly presented. It is believed that the recording of these unknown old wooden constructions as significant part of the cultural heritage will contribute to their protection against all risks that threaten them.

Key words: cultural wooden elements, house buildings, churches, temples, Macedonia.

1. Introduction

The wood has many valuable properties which make it suitable for use in a broad field of applications. It has great mechanical strength in relation to its weight, very good acoustical and thermo-isolating properties and it is processed and fastened easily even by simple tools (Tsoumis, 1986). Furthermore, it has attractive appearance in a great scale of colours, texture and design, it offers warm sense in touch and view and can accept additional varnishes and paints very easily. Wood had been always used and of course it is still in use, in the construction and architectural decoration of a building: doors, windows, floors, ceilings, wall paneling, interior staircases, wooden railings, many decorative elements, even whole houses are made with wood (Moutsopoulos 1962, 1963).

On the other hand, it is well known that this valuable material has some disadvantages which are correlated to its hygroscopical properties. The change of wood moisture content at any time disturbs its dimensional stability by causing different change in the three directions. Apart from the relatively small dimensional stability of the wood, high moisture content is responsible for the bacteria, fungi and insect attacks to the wood (Shumka et al, 2009). Furthermore, fire poses always a serious risk for wooden houses.

During 17th, 18th and 19th centuries Macedonia is under Ottoman rule. This period, the production of some special products (cotton, clothes, furs etc.) and trade are encouraged by Sultans. Even more, special privileges are offered to the people of some villages to produce these special products.

During this period merchants and owners of small factories were acquiring considerable financial power and their way of life became more urbanized, influenced by trends from central Europe. This financial development reflected better than in any other expression of social life in the construction of new houses, the mansions and especially churches decorated with wonderful wooden carved temples and new frescoes. Many wood decorated mansions were built by wealthy merchants from the late 17th into the 19th century, in different villages and towns in Macedonia (Moutsopoulos, 1980).

The construction of the Macedonian mansions is compound: stone and wood. The internal walls and the roof are constructed mainly with the lighter material the wood. The mansions are the evolution of the local architectural tradition with many foreign influences, especially regarding the internal decoration. The paint decoration even of the smaller available surface, from the floor to the ceiling represents influences from the East. The ceilings are usually wooden with rhombal or square decorations and the tavlas in the middle. All of the surfaces of the wall paneling and wall shelves are decorated with plants paints or pictures of imagination landscapes and especially pictures from Constantinople (Istanbul). In general the decoration is present in every corner and internal column of the house with wooden carves and paintings. Among the wood carves of the wealth mansions in Macedonia we find details and technical practices from the corresponding designs present in the temples of the churches this period. Apparently the same craftsmen worked in both the mansions and the churches. The Ottoman influences in the construction of ceiling tavlas prove that wood carvers had also been worked in the construction of Mosques.

Many wonderful mansions are still present in different villages and towns of Macedonia. In some cases parts of their wooden curved decorations have been transferred to museums (Sperantza et al.2009).

The post-byzantine churches of this period are distinguished especially for their rich, polymorph and impressive internal decoration and their wonderful temples (Aivazoglou-Dova 1982, Moutsopoulos 1989, Moutsopoulos 2003, Strati 2008, Savopoulou-Katsiki 2007). Unseparably present with their wooden curved decoration are the ceiling of the churches, similarly decorated like the mansions of this period.

2. Aim of the study

The main goal of this work was to study the existence of important wooden decorative elements in houses (mansions) and churches originated from the 18th and 19th centuries. More specifically, the aims of the work were to determine the amount of these houses and churches, to record and document their position (existence) to evaluate their conditions and finally to find out ways and the possibilities of their protection.

3. Method of the study

The research was conducted in the region of Macedonia, northern Greece. First we visited all of the houses (mansions) and churches which have been officially declared National Monuments by the state and since then they are under low protection. In a second phase, we searched for less known houses and churches with important wooden decorative elements which are out of low protection because they have never recognized as important remaining of the recent Greek cultural heritage.

In both cases, we examined in these buildings the situation of their wooden decoration, the degree of deterioration caused by fungi and insect attacks, the broken parts etc. Furthermore, we examined the treatments which applied for their protection, the interest of the local society for these buildings, the difficulty of accessing them by visitors, the frequency of the visits, the guardian etc.

4. Results and Discussion

The research results revealed that mansions built during 17th, 18th and 19th centuries there are not only in the well known traditional settlements of Kastoria, Siatista, Kozani, Erateira, Arnaia, etc. but also in many villages and settlements through the whole Macedonia. The traditional settlements with a big number of

mansions have been recognized as national monuments and part of the cultural heritage. Within these settlements some of the mansions have been turned to museums (Figure1) after their restoration and they have conserved most of their wooden decoration. Another small number of them have been turned to hotels and residence of their owners but the great majority of them have been abandoned by their owners to the final collapse.



Figure 1. Preservative mansion as museum (Siatista 2010)



Figure 2. Stone and wood abandoned mansion with sachnisi (projecting porch) (Kastoria, 2010)

According to the Greek law only when a preservative mansion throw down to ruins could his owner to built a new house in the same position (Figure 2). So, because of such a bad low status hundreds of mansions in many villages and settlements through the whole Macedonia are without any serious protection. Following the bad luck of the old buildings their wooden decoration parts are destroyed every day (Figure 3). The only real effort to change this bad situation is carried out by some local Cultural Societies and Unions of active and sensitive citizens.



Figure 3. Wooden decoration ceiling part exhibited in a museum (Kastoria 2010)

Contrary to the limited number of mansions, there are much more churches of the same period, almost unknown to many people, which have very important wooden decoration. Despite the wars and local conflicts of the past which caused extensive destructions and the stealing followed the richness of their wooden decoration that has remained is still enormous. If we consider that many Greek wooden ecclesiastic artifacts adorn museums and private collections worldwide, we stay amazed of the creativity and high production of the local carpenters and wood carvers during that period.



Figure 4. Wooden curved temple (Kozani, 2011)



Figure 5. Details from a wood curved door (Vimothiro) (Sidirokastro, 2009)

Some of these churches, mainly the older ones with the most interesting wood carved decorations have been transferred under a special status of protection and restoration (Photo 4). Apart from the few churches which officially declared as monuments there are too many others with equally interesting wooden decorations still remaining unprotected. Even though, they represent unique local cultural heritage remainings of the region, mainly of the early 19th century, they have abandoned to collapse (Figure 5). Some of these churches open once a year to accept visitors (Figure 7).

In some settlements, new churches have been constructed where the wooden decoration (temple and other items) from an old and abandoned church have been used. Normally, conservation and restoration of the wooden decoration of these churches never carried out. The most usual conservation treatment that is applied to wooden curved artifacts is the oil painting which actually destroy the artifact by disappearing all of its details (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Overlay wood curving by oil painting (Drama, 2012)



Figure 7. Wooden ceiling panelling ready to throw down. (Kastoria, 2010)

On the other hand, in some regional mainly ecclesiastic museums have been gathered many different wooden curved artifacts from the old churches of the surrounding area in order to protect them from stealing. The problem is that the visit to these small museums is very difficult because they are not open very often and when you are lucky to visit them they don't give much information concerning the origination of the artifacts.

5. Conclusions

Obviously, the recent historical cultural heritage of the 17th to 19th centuries is the poor relative for the Greek state, comparing to the earlier periods of the Greek cultural heritage. For the official Greek state the protection and conservation of the recent cultural heritage seems to be of minor priority in comparison to the protection of the ancient Greek and Byzantine cultural heritages. Nowadays, the "economical crisis" makes it more and more difficult to improve the state's interest for the protection of the recent cultural heritage.

In order to focus on the importance of the maintenance of the wooden artifacts of the mansions and churches of the 17th to 19th centuries we should start a dialogue with the local societies. A serious discussion with the local authorities, small museums, cultural societies, unions etc. is needed, regarding the risks of this valuable cultural heritage.

In the frame of this information campaign it is important to be explained that wood is a sensitive material and old wooden decoration artifacts of old mansions and churches are continuously under threaten if they don't properly protected.

Mansions and churches that stay closed for long time and create a high moisture content environment inside are enemies to their wooden decoration artifacts.

The restoration of a building is always a work of high cost and sometimes impossible. So, the protection of its wooden decoration should not connected necessarily to the luck of the building. In this case, the extraction of the wooden decoration part and its transfer to another safe building is the better solution for its protection.

For the restoration of a wooden construction specific rules should be followed by specialists in order to achieve the better result.

The recording of all of the churches of this period with remarkable wooden decorations is very important for the cultural heritage of the region of Macedonia and no one relative research has been carried out till now.

These amazing wooden artifacts have been created many decades ago by simple unknown carpenters and wood carvers, working under very hard conditions. Today, the least we have to do, in order to protect this part of our cultural heritage against all risks that threaten them, is to respect it and appreciate it as a valuable part of our cultural heritage. Actually, this obligation reflects the quality level of our today's culture.

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