

# DUŠAN GRABRIJAN'S MACEDONIAN HOUSE

## Fieldwork and its Influence towards a complex Modernism

Mirjana Lozanovska, Viktorija Bogdanova

**ABSTRACT:** Grabrijan sought to explain and affirm a coexistence of the modern and the traditional in architecture, especially in his seminal studies of Bosnian architecture and the Macedonian house. Co-authored with Neidhardt, his publication about Bosnian architecture is well-known and studied. Grabrijan's posthumous publication, *The Macedonian House*, based on the data collected during his fieldwork in regional towns in Macedonia (1946, 1947, 1949), serves to punctuate the progressive modernizing forces and their focus on reconstruction, urbanization, and speedy industrialization of major centers as well as peripheral areas, in the Socialist Republic of (SR) Macedonia, as elsewhere in Yugoslavia. As an archival record, *The Macedonian House* presents a different focus and a rebalance of the postwar agenda that had eclipsed small towns from architectural interest and had effectively produced the demise of the vernacular traditions in the towns. With an ideology to learn from the architecture of the people, Grabrijan's work wove the vernacular back into a more complex modernism.

Grabrijan first traveled to S.R. Macedonia in the summer of 1946 as part of a Yugoslavia-wide exchange–solidarity assistance for post-war renewal. He then organized two research journeys in 1947 and 1949, taking a group of students for fieldwork training. In his archives containing the documents and fieldwork for the publication about the Macedonian House, a drawing of a map of the Balkans resonates with the map of Le Corbusier's 1911 formative journey to the East, including a coded notation which may refer to folklore, culture, and industry. Grabrijan's enthusiasm for studying the traditional houses in Macedonia takes him to small towns, covering a broad geography of spatial dialects. Drawing from the Grabrijan archives, this paper will explore his fieldwork methods and his modalities of researching the complex conditions from which the "house for everyone" rises above the ground.

**KEYWORDS:** Macedonian House, Spatiality (spatio-plasticity), Porch - čardak (veranda), House for Everyone, vernacular

**INTRODUCTION:** Dušan Grabrijan's publication *The Macedonian House: or A Transition from Old Oriental to Contemporary European House* (1955) was published posthumously following his sudden and tragic death. It is hardly known outside of Yugoslavia, and in the era after 1994, the post-Yugoslavian era, possibly not outside of the Republic of Macedonia. The plethora of publications on the architecture of Yugoslavia, many of global significance, further profiled by the impressive and history-making exhibition at the MoMA in 2018, *Towards a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia 1948-1980*, have largely explored the substantial works, collective operations, and experimentations that strengthened

modernism within the socialist context. Research on other complex themes of architecture in Yugoslavia, including postmodernism and critical regionalism, is still emerging (Blagojević, 2013; Popescu, 2019; Lozanovska, 2015; Lozanovska & Popescu, 2023); and on vernacular architecture is almost non-existent. Grabrijan's work is often noted in contexts and productions related to other major figures rather than as a major figure in his own right.<sup>1</sup> Grabrijan was known as a phenomenal 'notetaker' and both Alić, "Vision of a Nation: From Dušan Grabrijan's Notes on *Plečnik and His School*" (2015) and Kulić in his seminal work on Yugoslavian architecture *Modernism in-Between: The Mediatory Architectures of Socialist*



01 The team taking site notes somewhere in Macedonia, 1947-49. © Grabrijan and team, Grabrijan archives, Folder 4, drawer 5.2: Macedonian House, Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana.



02 Team in Veles, 1947-49 © Grabrijan and team, Grabrijan archives, Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana.

Yugoslavia (2012) noted his documentation of the Plečnik lectures. Zupančič (2017), amongst other scholars, has also noted Grabrijan's exacting insight into the interpretation of Plečnik's architecture in addition to the recording of his lectures. Alić and Kulić examine the significance of Grabrijan's work with Neidhardt. Grabrijan and Neidhardt's publication *Architecture of Bosnia and the Way towards Modernity* (1957) generated a new orientation on Bosnian architecture, adding an explicit cultural dimension to modernist architecture while contributing to the ideological political platform of socialist Yugoslavia. Le Corbusier's foreword in Grabrijan and Neidhardt's book highlights its standing in the architectural canon and Yugoslavia's role in Europe's architectural agenda.

Dušan Grabrijan was born in Lož, Inner Carnolia region in Slovenia in 1899 and died in Ljubljana, 1952. After graduating from *oddelek za arhitekturo, Tehniška Fakulteta, Univerza v Ljubljani* [Department for Architecture, Technical Faculty, University of Ljubljana], Grabrijan received a scholarship from the French government to study at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, 1925-1926, different to Yugoslav graduates who at the time joined Le Corbusier's office. In his book *Plečnikova šola v Ljubljani* Marko Pozzetto (1996) draws on Grabrijan's notes *Plečnik in njegova šola*, to discuss the first students of Plečnik, their immense admiration, and sometimes equal frustration with Plečnik's approach to architectural education. Pozzetto acknowledges Grabrijan's book of records, in which probably all of Plečnik's main statements were immortalized, but also quotes Grabrijan stating, "I wish no-one Plečnik's love, I wish no-one his belief or pessimism, although I feel genius in these things. And if all these other things are necessary for this activity, then that also I reject" (Grabrijan in Pozzetto, 1996, pp. 91-92). A fraught statement indeed, and though Pozzetto interprets it as a rejection of architecture, Grabrijan does not reject architecture but navigates it, firstly between design practice

and writing the critical appraisals of architecture, and then as professor at the Technical High School in Sarajevo (1930-45); and after the war as Professor in History of Art and Design Basics at the Department for Architecture, Technical Faculty, University of Ljubljana. Grabrijan sought to distance himself from Plečnik and became a significant figure in the development of architectural discourse and knowledge in the formative periods of Yugoslavian architecture. Distinct from Plečnik, he was an innovative thinker who appropriated modern orientations rather than reject them, and his extensive and impeccable research, as well as writing, led to numerous posthumous publications (Džemal Čelić, 1970; Blaž Rotar, 1990; Bogo Zupančič, 2017).

Despite this central role, there is a comparative marginalization, if not omission, of the publication *The Macedonian House* in both the Yugoslavian publications and discourse contexts of the 1950s-1970s and the newer discussions developed in the English language. *The Macedonian House*, developed from the comprehensive fieldwork and early manuscript drafts, was published in three editions facilitated by Grabrijan's dedicated and grieving wife, Nada Grabrijan (nee Čeh). *The Macedonian House* was first published in 1955 (prior to the publication on Bosnian architecture) by Državna Založba Slovenije in Serbo-Croatian and Macedonian; in 1976, it was published in Slovenian by Partizanska Knjiga; then in 1986, it was published in Macedonian with a summary in English.<sup>2</sup> A draft in German translated by Nada Čeh Grabrijan remains unpublished (Rotar, 1990, p. 5). This substantial investment from the author and his closest companion increased our curiosity: what might this work contribute towards an understanding of Grabrijan's role and his contribution to architectural knowledge in Yugoslavia and the wider architectural community?

This paper focuses on the fieldwork and writings that were drawn upon for the development of Grabrijan's

book, *The Macedonian House*, and develops an argument with emphasis on Grabrijan as an architectural contributor in his own right. Drawing on the archives held in the Muzej za arhitekturo in oblikovanje, (Museum of Architecture and Design) in Ljubljana, this paper elaborates on Grabrijan's agency and subjectivity, his expertise in observation, documentation, and fieldwork, and on the theme of vernacular architecture, and its role within modernism<sup>3</sup>. (Grabrijan, 1955; Grabrijan and Neidhardt, 1957; Grabrijan, 1959; Grabrijan, 1961). The paper is structured in two parts: firstly, an exploration of the idea of 'travel' and 'fieldwork' as integral to the development of architectural knowledge with a review of Grabrijan's architectural travel route within Macedonia [FIGURE 01, FIGURE 02]; and secondly, an examination of Grabrijan's findings and reflections.

## FIELDWORK AND TRAVEL

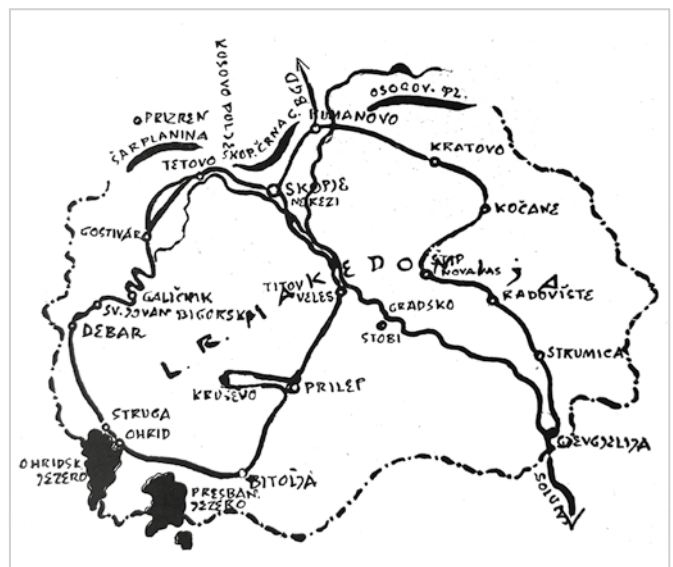
*"The battle for the right image of the past is no more and no less than a fight for the right image of one's own time and of oneself. (...) One should depart from one's own country!"*  
(Grabrijan, 1955<sup>4</sup>, p. 6)

Grabrijan first traveled to Macedonia in the summer of 1946 as part of a Yugoslavia-wide exchange–solidarity assistance for post-war renewal—but he then organized two research journeys in 1947 and 1949, taking a group of three architecture students for fieldwork training (Rotar, 1990, p. 43). The trip in the summer of 1949 was financially supported by the Slovene government and minister Kiro Georgievski in Macedonia. Grabrijan notes the reasons to go: "We have heard that their most interesting architectural heritage is located in Bosnia and Macedonia," 'their' referring to the whole of Yugoslavia, then adding, "We have read that it has many points of contact with our contemporary architecture" (Grabrijan, 1955, p. 22). These two key points—architectural heritage and contemporary architecture—evolve to be central to Grabrijan's developing and critical position on architecture.

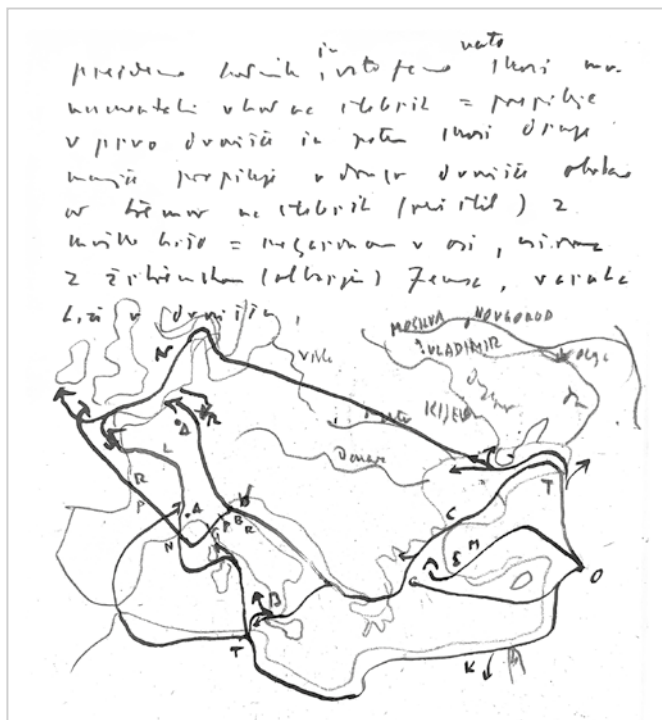
In the book *The Macedonian House*, Grabrijan draws a map of Macedonia, noting the routes and nodes of his travels (Grabrijan, 1955, p. 24). Grabrijan's focus was to study the traditional houses in Macedonia in small towns, covering a broad geography, while churches, monasteries, mosques, and urban maps are present only in dispersed fragments. He describes the two separate travels and how each repeated a circular path in Macedonia, a planned route built on the belief that the Vardar River was the "spine" of the country [FIGURE 03]. The first path started from Skopje, the Vardar Valley, and circumnavigated to Veles,

Kruševo, Bitola towards the west, Ohrid, Struga, Debar through to St. Jovan Bigorski, Galičnik, Tetovo and back to Skopje. The second path, starting again from Skopje, moved towards the East to Kratovo, Kočani, Štip, Strumica, Gevgelija, and again back through the Vardar Valley to Skopje. In both paths, the locations explored were small towns/cities and villages<sup>5</sup> that importantly for Grabrijan, were "not yet Europeanised" or the "oldest parts of the new settlements" (Grabrijan, 1955, p. 22). Grabrijan interviewed various people of different ethnicities within the country, witnessing the complexity of the interwoven influence of the Byzantine and the Ottoman Empires, along with the evident material traces of architectural heritage. His interest was not the "question of the origin of the Macedonian house" but rather its concrete "functional, structural and formative" the qualities that link it to the modern European house (Grabrijan, 1955, p. 27).

In addition to this map, the archives contain a drawing of a different map of the Balkans, including Western Turkey, Greece, as well as Italy (southern Europe), and noting the Danube River by name (Donau) which is central in the cartographic organization of the map (Grabrijan archives, Box 58, Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana) [FIGURE 04]. Grabrijan sketched routes through this map, which appear to be a redrawing of Le Corbusier's 1911 formative journey to the East through Central Europe, towards Istanbul, Mt. Athos, Athens, and then over to Italy. But on closer observation, Grabrijan's map includes names such as 'Moskva, Novgorod, Vladimir, Kijev,' places referring to Russia at the eastern edge of Europe, with many lines converging on the Black Sea. Does this centring on the Black Sea shift a dominant attention produced by western European canons? Is the Black Sea an interface between Europe and its proximate civilizations, and is this an indication of Grabrijan's more subliminal search for another type of origin?



03 "A map of the People's Republic of Macedonia—survey of our journey," illustrating the two circular routes 1947-49 © Photograph by the authors, 2021, from Grabrijan, 1955, p. 20.



04 A sketch from Grabrijan's notebook, the map of Europe with the amorphous and blank Balkan "void." no date. © Photograph by the authors, 2021, Grabrijan archives (Box 58), Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana.

Grabrijan was strongly influenced by Le Corbusier's approach and vision and, like many architects in Yugoslavia (and Europe), regularly refers to Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier's long and meandering route through the inland Balkans contrasts Grabrijan's map where a straight line cuts through Eastern Europe, and except for the Danube, the inland Balkans remain amorphous and blank.<sup>6</sup> This imaginary dialogue between the two maps is related to inscriptions of desire and travel that coincide on similar terrains rather than as a historical claim (the dates of Grabrijan's travel 1947 and 1949 do not align with Le Corbusier's 1911 travel or his publication in 1966; Le Corbusier, 1966). Terrains, however, are not merely geographic but burdened with cultural histories and, as evident in architects' travels off the beaten track, are also a search, often oriented to the East from the perspective of Western Europe or to the vernacular from a perspective of the Western canon. Grabrijan's actual travel map of Macedonia inserts detail into that blankness of the Balkans. For Grabrijan, the journey to Bosnia and Macedonia appears to have been an antithesis to Plečnik's training, which was oriented toward Central Europe, and the journey is precisely a retraining in architecture, investigating the spatial, the functional, and the everyday as central to a new direction in architecture detouring from Plečnik. While these readings are of separate and distinct maps—Le Corbusier's 1911 journey, Grabrijan's archival map of Europe, and Grabrijan's map of his travels in Macedonia—the maps represent geocultural foundations to evolving histories of architectural pedagogy and practice in the region. Indeed, Le Corbusier's and Grabrijan's interweaving of the Balkan narrative presents, in reverse

to an authoritarian premise, dualities of the student and the teacher and of the architectural canon and an opening for alternative historiography: who is learning, who is teaching?

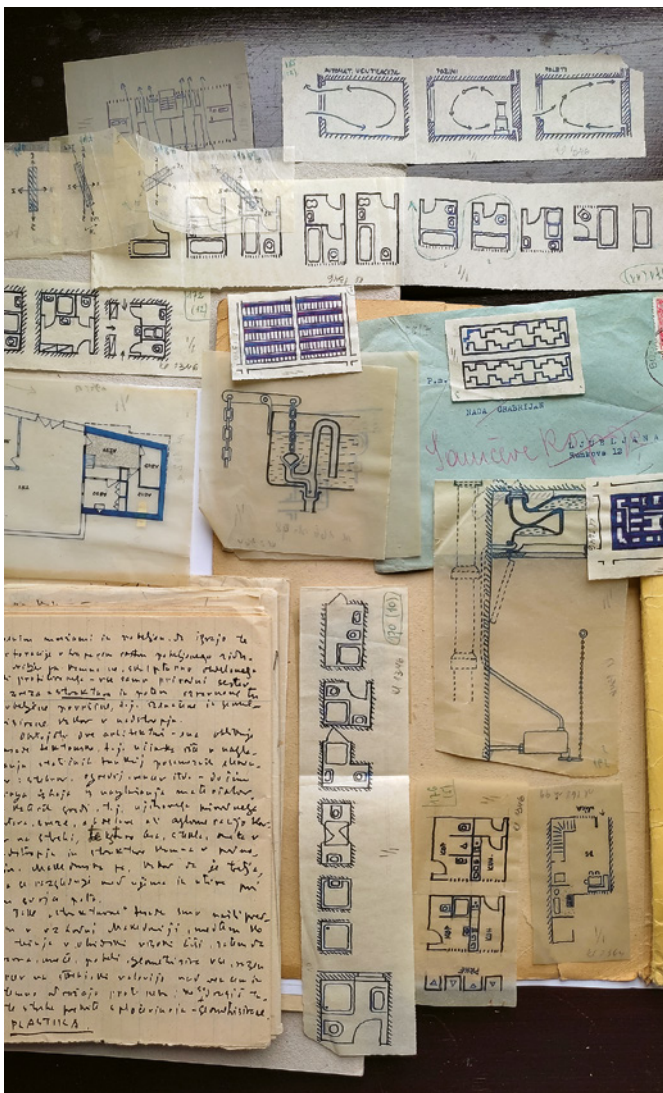
## FINDINGS—OBSERVATION, DOCUMENTATION, REFLECTION

Grabrijan and his three students were 'skeptical' about the travel to Macedonia, and while their route evolved from information from local people, their rule was: "Be skeptical until you examine things on your own!" (Grabrijan, 1955, p. 22). Grabrijan's fieldwork and travel documentation are extensive and detailed and build a substantial and evidential base impeccably maintained in the Museum of Architecture and Design archives in Ljubljana. His attention to careful observation is a trained practice of looking again and again at the physical, appreciating the aesthetic style, but recording the architecture as a spatial structure and setting for domestic life, towards a paradigm of spatial functionality. Grabrijan builds what we might call today, a socio-spatial paradigm, as evident from this perspective are the elements documenting social and temporal aspects of the house, and from these developing the diagrams that form a series of spatial patterns.

Drawings, documentation, plans, and photographs illustrate the layered rigor of this type of practice of fieldwork and observation. The data is then analytically processed via a series of themes—the house types, climatic and functional necessity, architectural-spatial elements, the human scale, materials and structure, and organic urbanism—which develops the overarching analytical framework [FIGURE 05]. Additionally, the theme of the house type is further unpacked with identified typologies—low house, high house, hangar house—and we learn these are related to legislative parameters within the history of Ottoman colonized Macedonia, equally as they are determined by structural necessity or contextual and topographic terrain [FIGURE 06].

An intensive analytical exchange takes place between the findings of the fieldwork—the meticulous and sensitive observation, the systematic recording and documentation—and a powerful idea about spatio-plasticity, a contemporary agenda, and synthesis. This exchange produced the groupings, the patterns of the architectural elements, the conceptual orders evident in the content page of the book, the way that the data was collated, organized and orchestrated. Spatio-plasticity is a media through which architectural concepts of space and time, structure and movement, site and culture become radically altered.

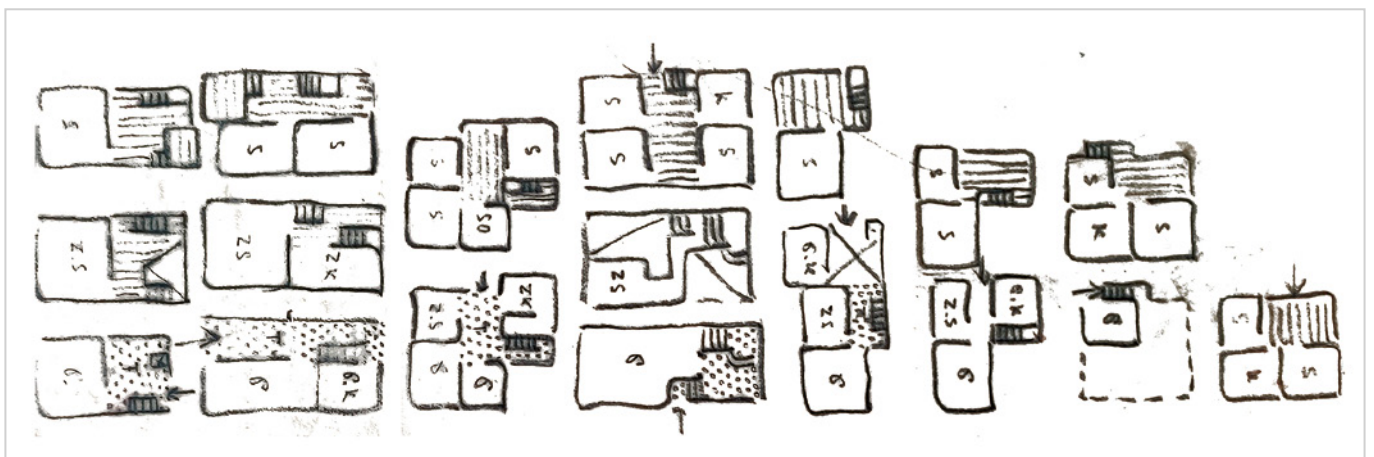
The extant data and rigor of observation and documentation are nonetheless ultimately directed by a very powerful focus and vision. Grabrijan argues the evidence



05 Macedonian House: Process drawings by Grabrijan, 1947-1952. © Photograph by the authors, 2021, Grabrijan archives (Box 58), Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana.



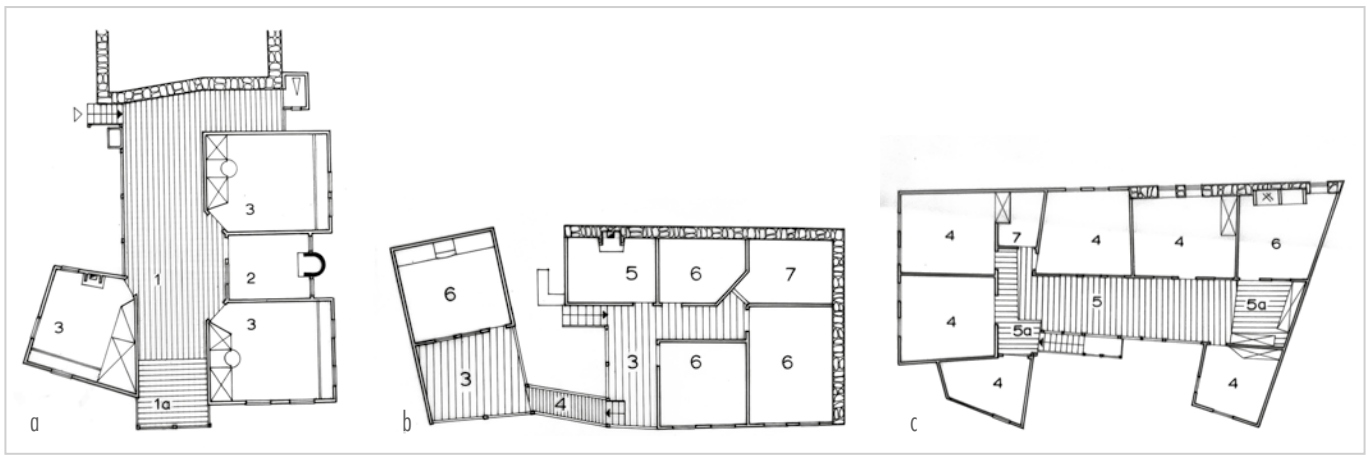
07 The spatial journey between the stairs linked to the čardak by an open bridge, and from all these spaces a connection to the outdoor and public realm. Note the openness of the liminal space between the closed private rooms and the exterior, Veles, 1947-1949 © Photograph by the Grabrijan and team, 1947-1949, Grabrijan archives (Folder 4, drawer 5.2: Macedonian House), Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana.



06 Macedonian House: Typologies, analytical drawings by Grabrijan, 1947-49. © Photograph by the authors, 2021, Grabrijan archives (Box 58), Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana.

for the Macedonian house as an origin or foundation of the contemporary modern house will not be found in the closed rooms, nor the traditional kitchen, or the materials and method of construction (Grabrijan 1986, p. 61). Rather, it is found in the way the house is organized around a *spatial journey*, with the čardak playing a central role. The čardak is a wide open space, usually elevated and

covered by a roof to which the interior private rooms of the house have access. Significantly for Grabrijan's comparison between the oriental and Macedonian house, in the latter, the čardak is oriented to the exterior, including the street [FIGURE 07]. Numerous examples of the spatial location and orientation of the čardak and its spatial variation are illustrated in plan drawings and photographs of the



08 The čardak in relationship to the rooms: 8a house with a moving čardak transforming from lateral to central, Veles; 8b spacious house with a bridge, Veles; 8c house with a lateral čardak, Veles. © Photograph by the authors, 2021, Grabrijan archives (Folder 4, drawer 5.2: Macedonian House), Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana.

different house typologies of the Macedonian house—meandering house (Grabrijan, 1976<sup>7</sup>, p. 64), hangar house (Grabrijan, 1976, p. 73), spacious house with a bridge/gallery (Grabrijan, 1976, p. 71), deep house with a double čardak (Grabrijan, 1976, p. 68), house with cross-shaped čardak (Grabrijan, 1976, p. 62), house with an elevated summer room (Grabrijan, 1976, p. 58), high house with a balcony (Grabrijan, 1976, p. 31), worker's house—transition to Ohrid's high house (Grabrijan, 1976, p. 35), house with hipetron and tronj (Grabrijan, 1976, p. 37), fisherman's house (Grabrijan, 1976, p. 77) [FIGURE 08]. The čardak does not achieve spatio-pasticity or the spatial journey as an autonomous element but in combination with other architectural elements [FIGURE 09]. Grabrijan's argument is more literally about the continuity of space and the openness of the house and this includes the open staircase equally as a significant element (Grabrijan, 1986, p. 79).

The distinction of the Macedonian house from what Grabrijan has called the oriental house is exactly the spatial connection between the public outdoor/street and the house interior, understood as a spatial continuity and layering between the inside and outside of the house (Grabrijan, 1986, p. 57). This is not a simplistic distinction, and Grabrijan's consideration of it takes him onto a longer investigation, as evident from a paper he had prepared and presented in 1950 at the annual architects' meeting in Dubrovnik, titled "Our Oriental and Contemporary House" (Zupančič, 2017, p. 167). The čardak and the open stairs play a special role as these spaces are open to both the public exterior and the private spaces of the rooms, noting that the rooms would be closed in winter. This distinction might be said to have a gendered layer and understanding, as the link between the private, domestic interior as the realm of women to the public exterior of the street or the neighborhood, is materialized in the orientation of the spatial journey within the house. This can be a subtle, nuanced distinction Grabrijan explores. Careful observation produced a collection of just enough details, differences, and settings to



09 The "hovering" house, Veles: the position of čardak opens the house on several sides. The plan of the house is visible in Figure 08a. Photographer: Grabrijan and team, Veles, 1947-1949 © Photograph by the Grabrijan and team, 1947-1949, Grabrijan archives (Folder 4, drawer 5.2: Macedonian House), Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana.

identify a distinction between the oriental house and the Macedonian house for Grabrijan to state:

*"If we want to move from the oriental to the contemporary house, we have to pass through the Macedonian house"*  
(Grabrijan, 1986, p. 220).

## HOUSES FOR EVERYONE/ANYONE

The first posthumous publication of the Macedonian House in 1955 is followed by a posthumous publication *Kako je nastajala naša sodobna hiša* or *How has our contemporary house come into being?* (Grabrijan, 1959). By incorporating discussions on Le Corbusier's and Loos worker's houses, as well as early houses, this book collects Grabrijan's preparations that broaden the discussion on the Macedonian House towards both a universal and a regional (Slovenian) idea about the contemporary house. Nonetheless, many of the findings and identifications in the Macedonian House are integral to this book. A large part of the chapter on 'Space' is dedicated to a subchapter named "Macedonian Intermezzo." Grabrijan's fieldwork and interest appear to be oriented toward eastern Europe rather than central western Europe, in contradistinction to Plečnik. His search for an 'origin' of the architecture of the region, while inspired by Plečnik, also deviates and develops a significant and alternative framing for the architecture in Yugoslavia. This orientation resonates with Le Corbusier's approach but makes explicit that these ideas draw from and refer to those vernacular houses in Macedonia and elsewhere and thereby contextualize the origins as cultural as well as spatial phenomena, and as a consequence of regional and historical architecture traditions.

A key concept in which Grabrijan understood the contemporaneous architectural quality of the traditional Macedonian house was 'spatio-plasticity' through which he identified a historical and cultural transition from the architectural organization of the oriental house, noting that it does not have the equivalent connection between public and outdoor space with private and interior space. Grabrijan's initial task and agenda was to identify the evolution of the contemporary house. Yet the trajectory and double circular travel route of fieldwork immerse him for years in the study of traditional architecture in Macedonia. Comprehensive and rigorous documentation, the development of architectural methods and templates for analyzing traditional architecture, and the detailed recording of the Macedonian house establish vernacular studies within the postwar architectural discourse in Yugoslavia, an alternative trajectory to the dominant progressive modernist narrative. Grabrijan's thesis that the architectural scholar or practitioner must pass through the Macedonian house

in order to understand the architecture of the contemporary house situates studies of traditional architecture as integral to the modern agenda.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 We have reviewed publications in Slovenian, Serbo-Croatian and translations of publications in Italian. In publications in English that have evolved since the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1994, Grabrijan has been linked to Neidhardt. Nonetheless, to this date there has been little analysis of Grabrijan as a significant figure in his own right.
- 2 It is this latter edition that I (Mirjana Lozanovska) purchased in 1989 when I ventured on architectural travels in Macedonia as part of a doctoral study on the architecture of emigration and immigration that draws the village into connection to the diasporic city.
- 3 We found only minimal discussions of this book on the Macedonian House and vernacular architecture in the references on Grabrijan, funneling our focus on an analysis and interpretation of the book itself.
- 4 Please note that this refers to a posthumous publication. Grabrijan would have written this during or after the trip in 1949.
- 5 Grabrijan does not refer to "villages"; the toponyms are towns, except for the villages Galičnik and Lazaropole.
- 6 Le Corbusier traveled to the east in 1911, but the *Voyage d'Orient* was not published until 1966, long after Grabrijan had died.
- 7 In the first, Macedonian version from 1955, there are no drawings of plans. We extracted the pages numbers from the Slovene version from 1976.

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