



THE OLD URBAN HOUSES TELL THEIR STORIES

KYUSTENDIL – DUPNITSA – KRIVA PALANKA – KRATOVO

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FOREWORD

During the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the cities of the central Balkans underwent a profound transformation – economic, administrative, and cultural – and although this transformation left traces in many layers of life, it is most visible in the urban environment and architecture. These traces know no present-day borders. Master craftsmen and woodcarvers from Debar left their mark simultaneously on the ceilings of Kyustendil, Kriva Palanka, and Kratovo. At that time, there was no administrative line between Bulgaria and North Macedonia: craft traditions and family networks extended freely across both sides of the mountain passes. The old urban houses serve as material memories of that era, which existed before the map divided the connections formed by life.

The catalogue “Old Urban Houses Tell Their Stories” was realised within the framework of the project CULTURAL heritage community and AttRactive all-sEason tourism (CULTURAL AREA), Project ID: BGMK0200027, funded under the Interreg Bulgaria – North Macedonia 2021–2027 programme. The project brings together the municipalities of Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, Kriva Palanka, and Kratovo around a common goal: to return cultural heritage to the lives of the people and to transform it into a shared tourist resource across the border.

This publication represents an attempt to document representative examples of the building stock from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in four cities. Buildings from this period are gradually losing their character and authenticity, and with them the information they carry. Digital tools–3D surveys, photographic documentation, and GPS coordinates– have been used to preserve records of their architecture, ownership history, and artisan characteristics.

The buildings examined reflect the socio-economic development of their respective cities in the post-liberation period – the tastes, construction possibilities, and cultural influences that shaped the local urban environment. It is telling how European architectural styles– neoclassicism and art nouveau (secession)– were interpreted by local craftsmen and acquired a regional character distinct both from their Western European models and from the Balkan tradition.

The documentation of these buildings has acquired an urgent character since a great number of them are threatened or have been irreversibly altered, highlighting the need for immediate preservation efforts to safeguard their historical and cultural significance. The catalogue is conceived as a starting point for researchers, experts, and institutions engaged in the preservation of architectural heritage while, at the same time, seeking to “open up” the cultural heritage of the Bulgaria–North Macedonia cross-border region and attract the interest of tourists.

The catalogue is organised in two parallel layers. The first is chronological: the buildings are arranged in two sections – Section A covers Revival-era houses from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, following the logic of Balkan domestic life and artisan tradition; Section B presents buildings from the early twentieth century, in which European architectural fashion – Art Nouveau and early modernism – meets local building expertise. The second layer is thematic: each of the buildings presented can also be read as a stop along one of the three paths that structured the region – the Path of the Masters, the Path of Capital, and the Path of Ideas. The cultural objects on which the catalogue focuses do not exhaust the heritage of the four municipalities, nor do they claim representativeness in a statistical sense. From the buildings previously identified in the four municipalities, those that simultaneously satisfy three conditions were selected: they bear a recognisable artisan signature connecting them to a broader regional context; they are backed by sufficiently documented biographies of owners and builders; and they are preserved to a degree that permits architectural reading. Each building is documented with an address, GPS coordinates, and information on status and access, which allows the catalogue to be used simultaneously as a research tool and as the basis for a cross-border tourist route.

To trace more clearly the internal logic of this heritage, the catalogue introduces an analytical framework that compares the objects according to several criteria simultaneously – period, social type, and affiliation with the three principal mechanisms of connectivity in the region: masters, capital, and ideas. This framework complements the narrative, allowing the reader to see both the individual stories and the structure that connects them.

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HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The four municipalities occupy a compact geographical strip, intersected by mountain ranges but linked for centuries by routes of enduring strategic significance. The ancient Via Militaris, following the Nishava Valley and its branches towards the Vardar Valley – together with their later Ottoman successors – maintained continuous communication between the interior Balkan cities and the shores of the Aegean and Black Seas. Thessaloniki, Skopje, Niš, and Dubrovnik were not merely geographical points – they were the poles between which the commercial and artisan life of the region pulsed for centuries. This living infrastructure is attested by the travel writers of the era: Felix Kanitz notes the dense network of caravan routes and active trade exchange (Kanitz, 1995), while Konstantin Ireček describes the markets of Kyustendil and Dupnitsa as integrated into wider Balkan networks (Ireček, 1974).

It is precisely this infrastructure – roads, markets, and artisan networks – that built the cultural connectivity of the region. It did not arise solely from a shared administrative space but from everyday ties between people, families, and communities. The rapid development of crafts and trade after the 1830s created conditions for the formation of an urban stratum with the resources and ambitions to commission a new type of home, one expressing social status and cultural aspirations (Aleksiev, p. 179; Namicev & Namiceva, 2013). The old urban houses of Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, Kriva Palanka, and Kratovo are the material expression of precisely this change.

This new type of dwelling is characterised not only by architectural solutions but also by a clearly structured internal decorative system. The interior of the nineteenth-century urban house was built upon a typology of motifs – geometric, vegetal, and zoomorphic – that were combined in a unified composition. Geometric motifs organise space through symmetry, and vegetal motifs introduce stylised elements from nature, while zoomorphic motifs are used more sparingly as accents (Namicev & Namiceva, 2015, pp. 343–349).

THE DEBAR SCHOOL OF ARTS AND ITS PRESENCE IN THE REGION

Among the artisan networks operating in this context, the Debar School of Arts occupies a special place. Having emerged in the western Macedonian settlements of Galichnik, Gari, Lazaropole, Osoy, Trebishte, and Tresonche, it is also known as the Galichko-Rekanska or Miyashka School – after the local Miyak master craftsmen. The craft was transmitted within family networks, and individual families worked in specific geographical areas (Trayche, 1935; Hristov, 1931).

The school's chronology can be traced through dated iconostases in the region: the Lesnovo Monastery (1814), “St Spas” in Skopje (1824), “St Nikola” in Krushevo (1831), and the Bigorski Monastery (1845). These reveal a consistent decorative vocabulary – vine tendril, acanthus leaf, and rosette – that was later transferred to the interiors of urban homes (Aleksiev, p. 181). Thus a transition from the sacred to the secular environment was achieved without any substantial change to the ornamental repertoire.

From the 1880s onwards, the decorative programmes in houses acquired an increasingly pronounced secular character. This change was part of a broader process of cultural transformation connected with the new urban self-consciousness and the individualisation of inhabitants (Aleksiev, pp. 187–188). In the region under examination, this is most clearly visible in ceiling ornamentation: the carved ceilings of Kyustendil and Kriva Palanka follow a similar compositional model and ornamental vocabulary.

The Debar School did not function in isolation but as part of a wide network of mobile craftsmen. The traced lineages in the Kyustendil region (Gergova, 2017), as well as biographies such as that of the builder of the Emfiedzhieva House, show how the movement of people and skills created a shared cultural horizon. It is precisely through this mobility that the similarity in the decorative language of houses on both sides of today's border is explained.



THE PATHS OF CHANGE

Against this background, the transformation of the urban environment was not an isolated local process but the result of the interaction of several parallel factors.

Trade was one of the most direct channels. Contacts with Vienna, Leipzig, and Thessaloniki brought not only goods but also new conceptions of space. Viennese catalogues for furniture and building materials attest to the concrete and material character of these influences (Genchev, 1988).

Education complemented this process. After the Liberation, an increasing number of young men from the region studied at European universities and returned with new professions and cultural models. Their new homes became visible expressions of this change (Genchev, 1988; Todorova, 2004).

The railway played a key role. The arrival of the Oriental Railway at Kyustendil at the end of the nineteenth century made industrial materials accessible and transformed building practice (Tonev, 1947). Thus, architecture began to reflect not only tradition but also the new economic possibilities.

Transformations in the Urban Landscape: From the Marketplace to the Facade

The change in the urban environment was gradual. In the mid-nineteenth century, the city was organised around the market, and dwellings were introverted– closed to the street and orientated toward the inner courtyard. Ornamentation was predominantly interior and intended for the inhabitants (Mavrodinov, 1965; Namicev & Namiceva, 2013).

Under the influence of European architecture, this logic changed. New buildings began to display social status through the façade – with symmetry, ornamentation, and stylistic influences such as Neoclassicism and Art Nouveau. These styles were adapted by local craftsmen, resulting in diverse and regionally specific solutions (Tonev, 1947; Mavrodinov, 1965).

Changes in Daily Life: From the “Odaya” to the European Room

Architecture reflects a deeper change in the way of life. The traditional room (“odaya”) gradually gave way to a new type of interior organised around furniture and objects associated with the European way of life. Photographs from the era document this transformation in clothing, behaviour, and family rituals.

This process was not uniform: the traditional and the new coexisted simultaneously, and the change proceeded at different speeds in different social groups and cities (Todorova, 2004).

REGIONAL CULTURAL HERITAGE AS A SHARED HISTORY

The processes described are not separate stories but parts of a shared regional narrative. The municipalities on both sides of today's border are linked through networks of master craftsmen, trade, and cultural influences. The old urban houses preserve these connections in their architecture and decoration. The present catalogue aims to document and interpret them as the basis for future research.

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THREE PATHS IN ONE STORY

The three paths are not an analytical construction imposed upon the material from outside – they are the mechanisms by which the region actually functioned: the masters worked without regard for borders, commercial capital determined what was built and how it looked, and education and travel brought new conceptions of space and daily life. This is precisely why they cut across the chronological division: their traces are equally legible in the ceilings of the nineteenth century and in the Art Nouveau façades of the early twentieth.

The thirteen houses presented in this catalogue are not merely architectural objects or testimonies to the achievements of their time – they are material traces of three mechanisms that kept the region connected across the centuries: masters, capital, and ideas.

The Path of the Masters

The Debar School of Arts worked without borders. Its masters left similar and often identical ornaments in Kyustendil, Kriva Palanka, and Kratovo: the vine tendril, the acanthus leaf, and the rosette in ceiling ornamentation-motifs from the group of vegetal decorative systems characteristic of woodcarving in the interior of nineteenth-century urban houses (Namicev, Namiceva, 2015, p. 349). The carved ceiling of the Emfiedzhieva House and the woodcarving of the Popgyorgina House bear the same hand – material evidence of the cultural connectivity of the region, more enduring than any administrative line.

The Path of Capital

Tobacco, coppersmithing, trade – and the connections maintained with Thessaloniki, Dubrovnik, and Vienna – these are the routes by which wealth entered the region and was stamped directly into architecture: in the oval pediment of the Karakostova House, in the grand staircase of the Bogdanova House, in the Art Nouveau oriel of the Popnikolova House, etc. It is no coincidence that the most ornate façades belong to tobacco merchants and lawyers who studied in Heidelberg and Vienna.

The Path of Ideas

The same family might have a minderlak on the upper floor and a secession-style bannister at the entrance. The Oriental and the European do not give way to each other abruptly – they coexist simultaneously in the same rooms and within the same generation. The old townhouses stand as living proof of this transition: from the enclosed courtyard with stone walls to the glazed vestibule and from the djamala to the winter garden with metal columns. In some cases, a roof with a triangular pediment can also be observed, featuring openings that simultaneously served as ventilation, natural light, and decorative elements symbolising the sun, as is the case with the Shancheva and Bogdanova houses. To understand how these three mechanisms worked in practice, the following section examines the historical and economic context in which they developed.

The three paths are indicated by pictograms at each building: a rosette for the Path of the Masters, a coin for the Path of Capital, and a quill for the Path of Ideas. A heritage object may carry more than one symbol.

For analysis, each object is also assigned a social type – artisan, merchant, intelligentsia, or mixed urban house. This allows one to trace how different social groups participated in building the cultural connectivity of the region and how architecture reflects their role.

SECTION A:

REVIVAL HOUSES (18th–19th CENTURIES)

Built before the European architectural fashion had reached the region, these houses follow the logic of the Balkan climate, the Ottoman domestic way of life, and artisan expertise – wattle and daub, timber, the semi-sunken cellar, and the enclosed courtyard with stone walls. The interior, however, is more ambiguous: individual architectural and furnishing elements are organised into a unified decorative and spatial system (Namicev, Namiceva, 2015, p. 343) – Debar woodcarving on the ceiling coexists with the domestic iconostasis and European-style furniture.



Kyustendil

Among the inhabitants of Kyustendil during this period were coppersmiths, merchants, and guild headmen – people whose authority was built in the workshop and the guilds. Their homes were closed to the street, but their interiors speak of ambitions, taste, and contacts with the wider world, reflecting the wealth and social status of their inhabitants, who engaged in trade and craftsmanship.

Dupnitsa

During the nineteenth century, Dupnitsa established itself as a city of tailors, woodworkers, and tobacco merchants – crafts whose prosperity left visible traces in the architecture of urban homes. The Debar School is present here too: the iconostasis of the Church of St George the Victorious was created by masters of the Filipovi family – the same hands whose signature is recognisable in the ceilings of the neighbouring cities of the region. But Dupnitsa is not only craft and trade – it is also memory: the Lazarkova House was the home of a man who recorded the history of the city before it sank into oblivion.

Kriva Palanka

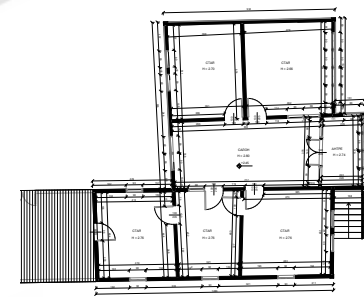
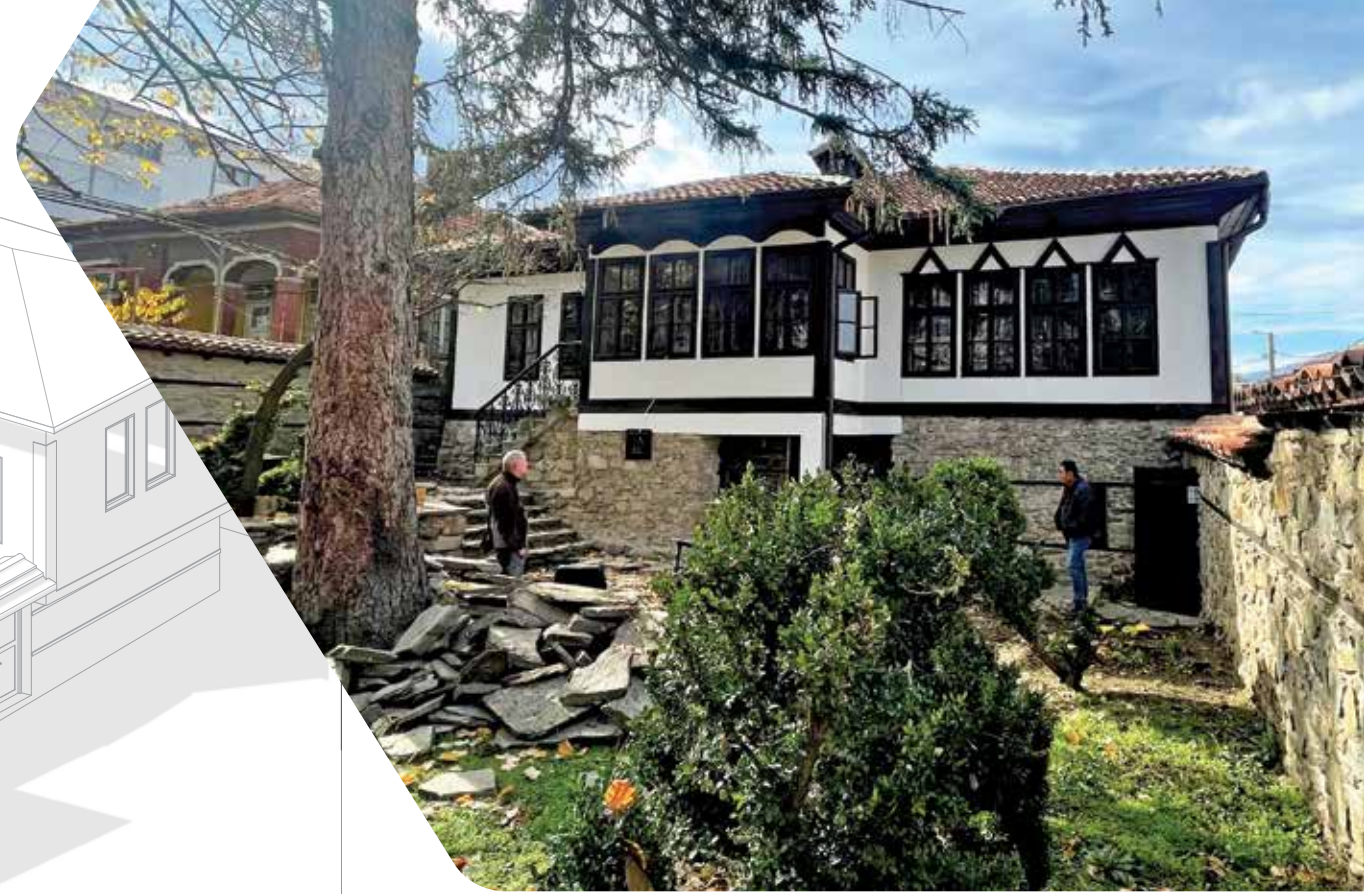
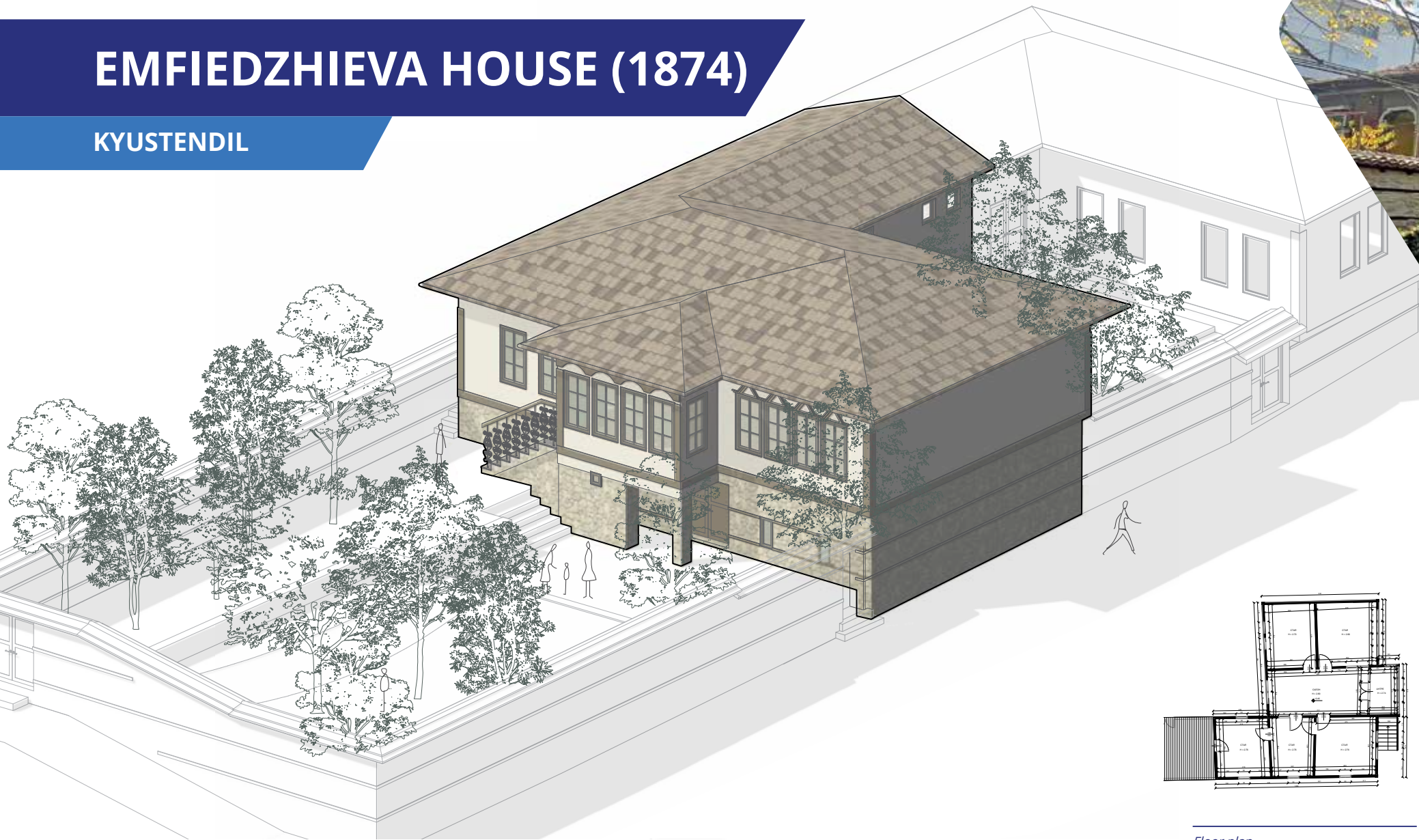
Kriva Palanka, the Balkan-Oriental and the European do not replace one another; they coexist. Within the same rooms: the minderlak beside a table set with European china, the iconostasis next to the fashion salon, and the Debar-style ceiling above European-style furniture. This synthesis is preserved not only in the home but is also visible in sacred architecture, where the Debar School and the Mijaks (an ethnographic group from Western Macedonia) left a strong mark, as seen in the monastery of Saint Joachim of Osogovo, painted by Dimitar Andonov Papradishki, the last Macedonian iconographer and the first Macedonian secular artist, who laid the foundations of European painting in the country.

Kratovo

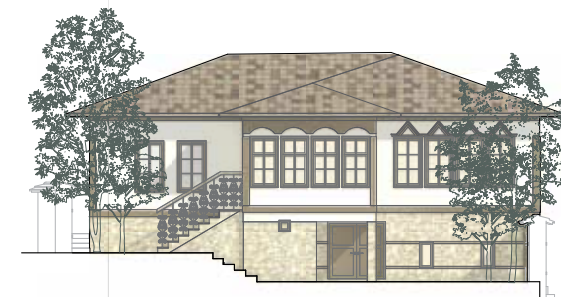
Kratovo is built in a river gorge, and its towers and bridges date from the mediaeval period. The old town preserves its urban structure to a remarkable degree – the street network, courtyards, and residential architecture speak of continuous habitation over the course of centuries. Owing to its rich cultural heritage, the city is referred to as an open-air museum.

EMFIEDZHIEVA HOUSE (1874)

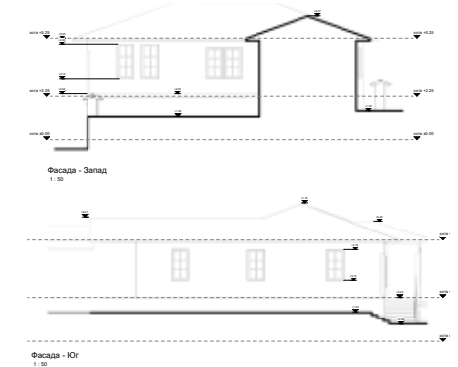
KYUSTENDIL



Floor plan



Facade - East



Facade - West and South



The master who carved the ceiling of this house was from Debar.



The household's owner – headman of the Kyustendil guild was a man whose power was measured in artisannetworks and trade routes beyond the border.

In January 1878, in the north-eastern room of the Emfiedzhieva House, Colonel Viktor Ivanovich Ertel planned the movement of the IV Uhlan Kharkiv Regiment. The owner – Hristo Lazov, the coppersmith, headman of the Kyustendil guild and active figure in the Bulgarian ecclesiastical community – witnessed foreign officers redrawing Bulgaria's fate on his table. A migrant from Štip, Hristo Lazov exemplifies those cross-border biographies characteristic of the region: his life unfolded on both sides of the mountain passes, and his traces remain in Kyustendil – in the guild, in the ecclesiastical community, and in the house itself. The heir to the property was his son-in-law Nikola Emfiedzhiev, a dealer in emfie (a type of ground tobacco powder), from whom the building takes its name. The grandson of Hristo Lazov – the musician Petar



Address: 24a Gorotsvena Street, Lozenets ("Baglak") quarter

GPS: 42.27759, 22.68752

Status: Cultural Monument of Local Significance (1974); restored 1978. Currently, there is a museum exhibition titled "Urban Life and Culture." Under revitalisation.

Ownership: Public municipal

Access: Physical and intellectual, unrestricted

Kazandzhiev – is perhaps the most celebrated continuation of this family.

The house itself combines a revival-era character with European influences: the alfranga in the reception room and the built-in wall stoves (djamali) introduce an aesthetic simultaneously familiar from both the Balkan and the Central European traditions.

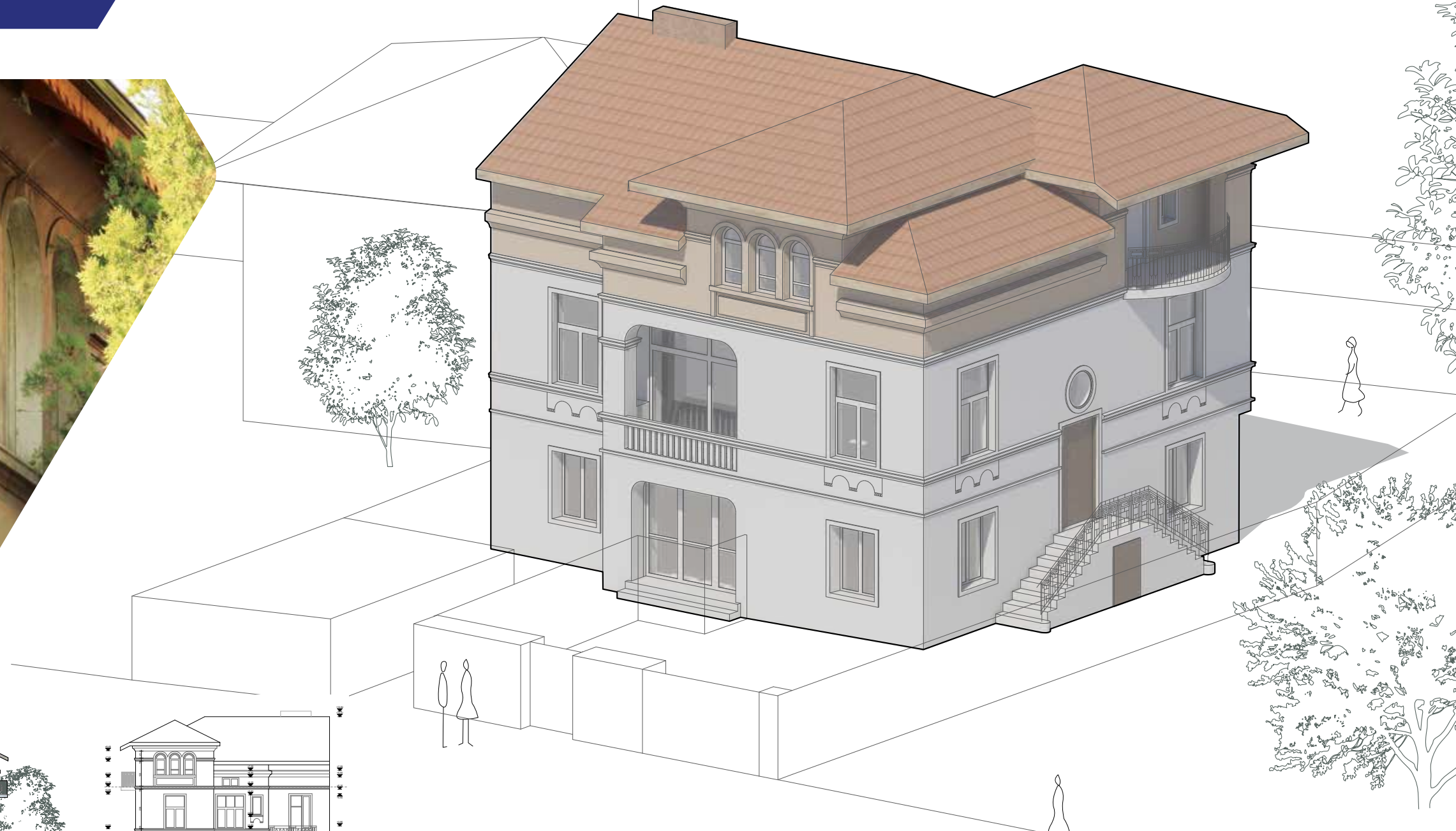
The north-eastern room (salon-reception room) is the most representative space in the house. The room's walls are painted in a flat yellow tone. The lower section has a plinth – colored brown with a black outline drawn by hand. As a unifying element, a band of curls runs below the level of the coved cornice. On the north wall (facing the street), there are "painted windows", framed by a double line whose outer edge repeats the shape and curves of the real windows. The west wall is the most richly ornamented. Its centrepiece is the alfranga niche. The niche contains an ellipse with a painted composition – a vase with a stepped base and elegantly curved handles, from which emerges a bouquet of three symmetrically arranged roses. The background of the niche around the ellipse is yellow, as on the walls. Symmetrically flanking the niche are two concentric compositions, each composed of two concentric circles with inscribed squares.

The room has a stunning polychrome carved ceiling. It is square. In each of its four corners is a small triangular panel with painted cherubs. From the central rosette radiate eight lozenge-shaped panels with alternating floral compositions – a compositional principle in which the rosette functions as the centre of the decorative system (Namicev & Namiceva, 2015, pp. 348–349). The flowers are painted freely; in terms of colour and draughtsmanship, they resemble those found on painted chests and carts. The lozenges are separated by eight pairs of small triangular panels with bouquets.

The carver-master came from Debar, where, during the nineteenth century, a school was formed that transformed woodcarving from a craft into an art form.

LAZARKOVA HOUSE

DUPNITSA



South facade



Facade



East facade

 *The Path of Ideas passes here literally: the owner not only built it – he also recorded it. His home is simultaneously an architectural object and a written source for the history of Dupnitsa.*

Nikola Lazarkov did not build only for himself – he also wrote. His work “Memoirs from Before and After the Liberation” is one of the few reliable testimonies to the events surrounding the liberation of Dupnitsa, which makes his home something more than an architectural object: here, history was literally lived.

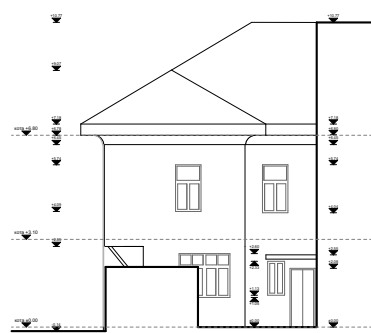
The house itself combines characteristic elements of Neoclassicism, refracted through the local urban tradition. The oriel balcony, the round window above the main entrance, and the double-sided staircase with a metal bannister create a sense of elegance. At the same time, the roof with its timber structure and wide eaves reveals the essence of this architecture: not the replacement of tradition with modern ideas, but their intertwining. The façade is rendered in a restrained yet refined style, with delicate ornamentation and a clearly expressed symmetrical composition. The roof adds to the building's overall look and feel, highlighting the shift from traditional building styles to more modern ones.

Address: 12 Hristo Grancharov Street
GPS: 42.26639, 23.11624
Status: Private property
Access: Restricted



POPGYORGINA HOUSE

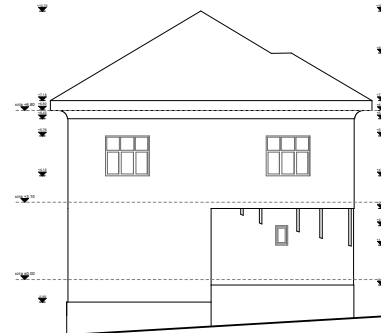
KRIVA PALANKA



East facade



Facade



South facade



The Debar ceiling connects this room to the entire region.



Beneath it the stories accumulate – from the Turkish bey to the Orthodox prelate, from the hatter to the academic painter.

The Mladenovi family purchased this house from the Turkish bey, Tali Bey, and renamed it Popgyorgina – after the priest Gyorgi, whose son Grozdan became a hatter and introduced European fashion to the province. Decades later, during the war, the primate of the Macedonian Orthodox Church took shelter in the same rooms. Different eras, different stories – all beneath the same Debar ceiling.

The Popgyorgina House is the best-preserved among the row of old urban houses. Built of adobe brick (kerpich) and timber, it has retained its authentic appearance inside and out: high ceilings, built-in minderlak seating, wooden stairs, a domestic iconostasis, and a courtyard with a wooden gate. On the second floor are the bedrooms with nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century furniture and hand-knitted curtains made by Lyubinka Mladenova – evidence that beauty was lived in here every day, not only for guests.

The house is also a family wellspring of artistic tradition: the academic painter Dimitar Stoychevski, considered one of the founders of modern painting in the region under European influence, was born in the neighbouring house of the same row – the grandson of the priest Gyorgi, after whom the entire quarter bears its name. This family is also known for making pilgrimages to Jerusalem across several generations, a longstanding family tradition from which they received the prefix “hadzhi.” The house has also received distinguished guests, among them Prof. Dr Dimitar Arsov, a relative of the Mladenovi family who obtained his doctorate at the Sorbonne (1936) and is considered the founder of modern internal medicine in the region.

The wooden window construction of the Popgyorgina house– rectangular with pronounced verticality and divided into several smaller glass panes, some with an internal cross-shaped division– can also be found in the Lazarkova and



Bogdanova houses in Dupnitsa, as well as in the Popnikolova house in Kyustendil. This speaks to an aesthetic and functional element of an older architectural tradition but also to a similar type of construction shared by Balkan houses on both sides of the border.

Address: 23 Nikola Tesla Street

GPS: 42.205639, 22.337567

Status: Private property (Mladenovi family).

No protected heritage status.

Access: Restricted

THE HOUSE OF POP STRASHKO

KRIVA PALANKA



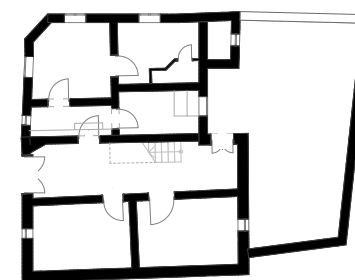
Built with accumulated wealth, as indicated by the connection with the monetary unit – ducats.



Beneath the same ceiling, generations from different worlds were born and lived – from scholars in nuclear medicine to electrical engineering.

Dukatin Yovanov built this house with ducats in his belt and a reputation that preceded his arrival. Later, through the great-granddaughter of the builder, the house passed into the hands of Strashko Bogdanov – a priest and intellectual of progressive ideas – and beneath that same Debar-style ceiling, a professor of electrical engineering, a nuclear medicine scientist, and a journalist were born.

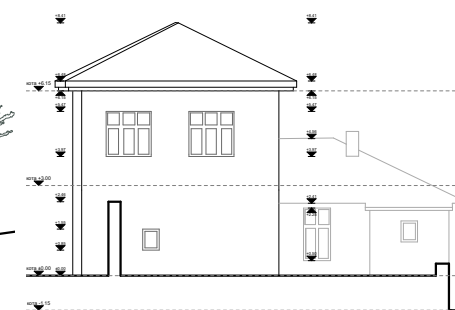
It was built by Dukatin Yovanov, named so because of his wealth in ducats. Later, through the great-granddaughter of the builder, it passed into the hands of Pop Strashko, from the prosperous Kumanovo family of the Bogdanovi. The home produced remarkable people: Pop Strashko's son Momchilo Bogdanov became a professor of electrical engineering in Skopje, his daughter Vukosava a scientist in the field of nuclear medicine, and the journalist Branko Trichkovski was born in these rooms.



Floor plan - 1



Facade



East facade

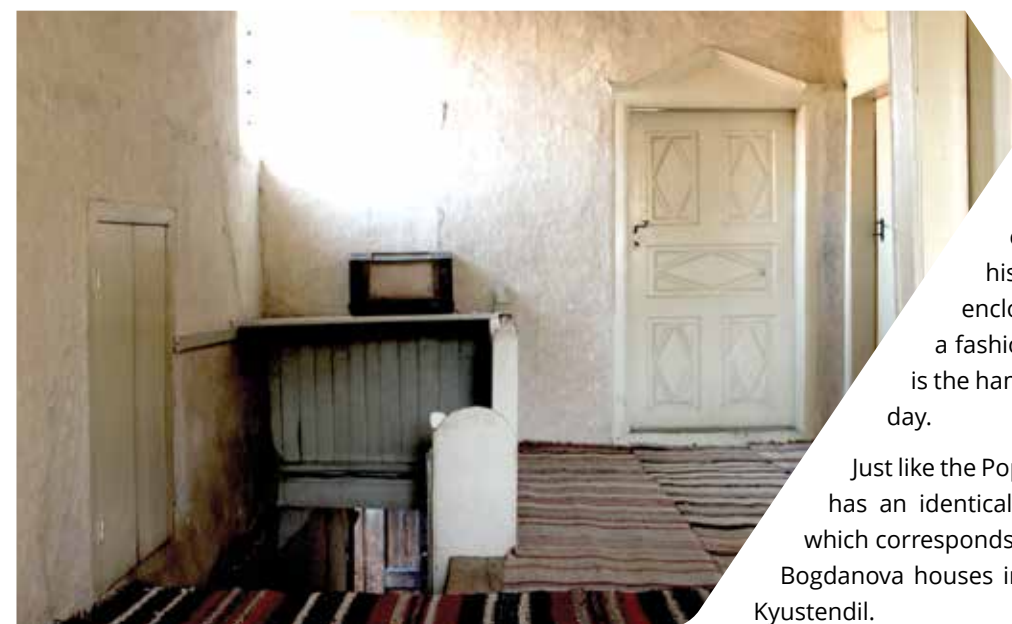


Address: 5 Orce Nikolov Street, Varoshka Maala

GPS: 42.200982, 22.334616

Status: Private property (Bogdanovi and Stoyanovi families). No protected heritage status. Good physical condition.

Access: Unrestricted

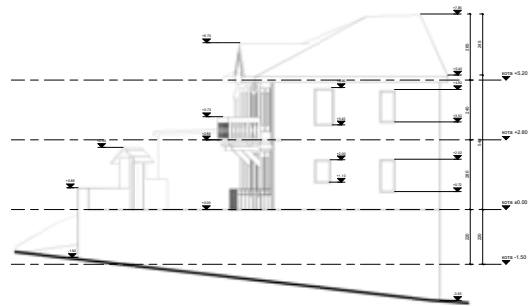


The architecture is authentic: adobe brick (kerpich) and timber, a spacious two-storey building with high ceilings, built-in cupboards, and a bathroom. The entrance corridor – the “gizentiya” – welcomes you before you enter the room where Pop Strashko kept his hiding place. Up the wooden stairs – an enclosed *çardak* and a bedroom converted into a fashion salon. A distinctive feature of this house is the hamamlaks, which have been preserved to this day.

Just like the Popgyorgina house, the house of Pop Strashko has an identical wooden construction and window form, which corresponds to this same element in the Lazarkova and Bogdanova houses in Dupnitsa, and the Popnikolova house in Kyustendil.

THE SHANCHEVA HOUSE

KRATOVO



West facade



Facade

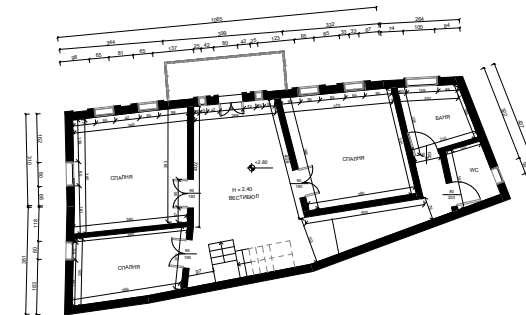
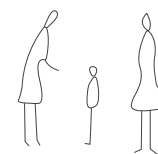


The trade routes to Thessaloniki and Dubrovnik passed through this door for three centuries, under different names and religions, but along the same route.

The foundations of this house are approximately three centuries old. Its first inhabitants were Catholics; after them came the Gyurginchevi merchants, whose trade routes passed through Thessaloniki and Dubrovnik, and whose descendant Ivan Gyurginchev became mayor of Kyustendil at the end of the nineteenth century. The house was later renamed Shancheva – after Shana, described by locals as a beautiful, elegant, and modern woman for her time. Today, one can stay the night and taste *k'tsana sol* – the Kratovo tradition of ground herbs and sea salt from Thessaloniki, prepared in a wooden mortar according to a three-century-old recipe.

The Shancheva House moved from the Oriental to the European and back again, finally finding its identity as a place where tradition is lived rather than merely displayed. Stevche Donevski purchased the property from Zorica Ilievska in 2009 and renovated it twice. The three guest rooms bear the historical names of Kratovo: Kratiskara, Koriton, and Krater.

The facade is the most representative part of the building: a centrally placed porch and *çardak*, a roof with a triangular pediment bearing two round openings symbolising the sun. The traditional furnishings reproduce the interior of the Kratovo urban home from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Floor plan

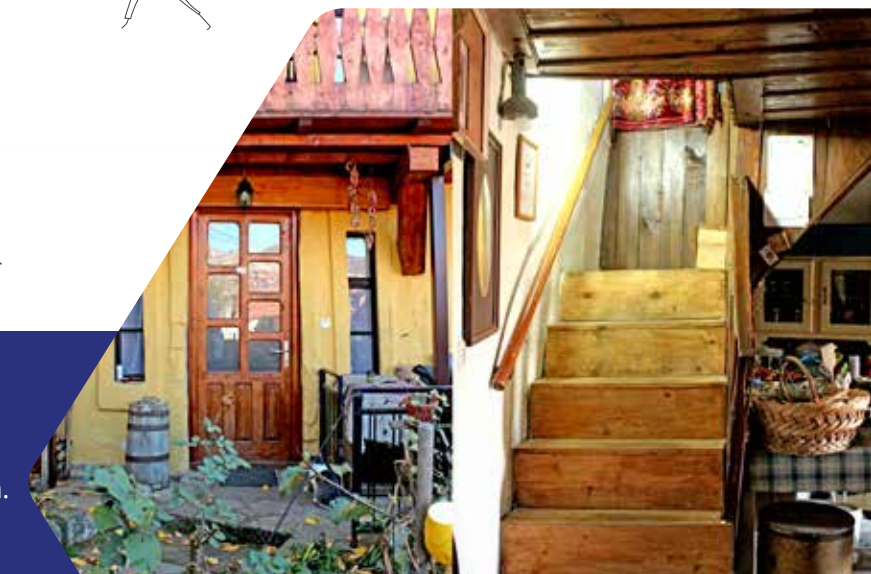


Address: 9 Skopska Street

GPS: 42.07726, 22.182584

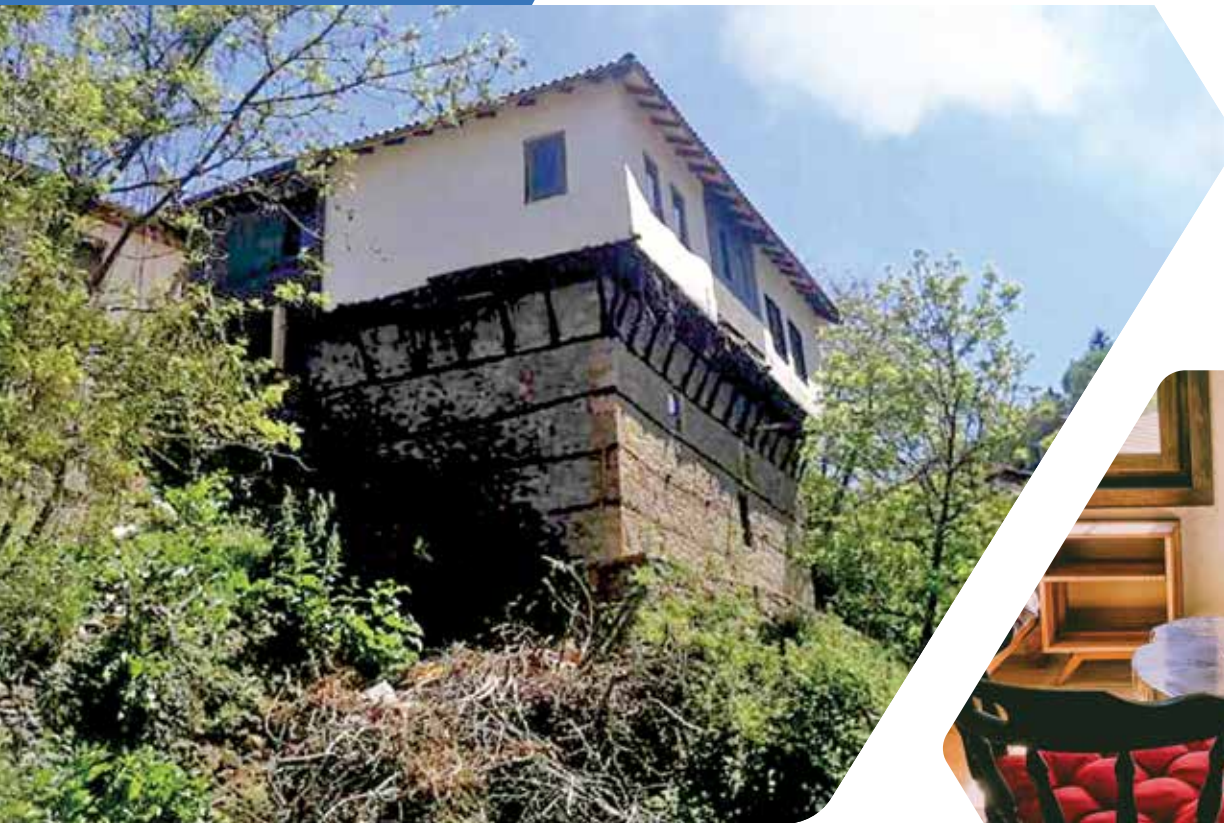
Status: Private property.

Operates as an ethno-tourist accommodation.
Good physical condition.



THE SOKOLOVI HOUSE

KRATOVO



 *The authentic timber-and-stone construction and the carved coffered ceiling are not a restoration here – they are the living presence of the artisan guilds that built medieval Kratovo.*

When the Sokolovi family settled in Kratovo, they chose a plot above the Mancheva River. From here, the old urban core is revealed with its bridges and towers – the full anatomy of the medieval city. Declared a site of material cultural heritage in 1980, this house is one of the few residential objects in Kratovo whose authentic character has survived almost intact to the present day.

The two-storey building follows the amphitheatre-style construction typical of Kratovo: it is positioned above the riverbank with a projecting *čardak* open to the panorama of the Mancheva River. The construction is timber-and-stone – half-timbered framing (*băgdadi*) on massive stone foundations, characteristic of urban residential architecture in the region from the nineteenth century. The *čardak* is the principal organising element of the plan: it simultaneously serves as a distribution zone, a summer salon, and the public face of the home towards the street. The interior preserves built-in cupboards, closets, and carved coffered ceiling panels – elements that constitute a unified spatial-decorative system in the interior of the Macedonian urban house (Namicev & Namiceva, 2015). During the 2021 renovation, the authentic spatial solutions were preserved, and the new furnishings were crafted by hand from solid timber without the use of metal fasteners – a reference to the artisan tradition of the old master guilds.



Address: Old urban core, Kratovo, Josif Daskalov Street No. 5
GPS: 42.077988, 22.181622
Status: Cultural Monument, declared by the National Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of the Republic of North Macedonia, 1980. Private property.
Access: Physical and intellectual, unrestricted (operates as a tourist accommodation).

SECTION B:

HOUSES FROM THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY (ART NOUVEAU AND EARLY MODERNISM)

After the liberation, economic life in the region accelerated. Commercial capital grew, and with it ambitions: the children of wealthy families left to study in Heidelberg, Munich, and Prague and returned with a new vision of the way of life. The result was not a break with tradition but an accumulation upon it – to the balcony with its *minderlak* was added an oriel; around the fireplace was arranged European furniture. The buildings presented in this section are a material document precisely of this transitional moment, of the architecture on the threshold between two worlds.

Kyustendil

The European architectural fashion penetrated Kyustendil gradually and adapted to the existing urban fabric without displacing it. Art Nouveau ornaments appeared in immediate proximity to Revival-era walls – not as a replacement but as an accretion.

Dupnitsa

The tobacco trade left enduring architectural traces in the region, both in Kyustendil and in Dupnitsa. In Kyustendil, the very name of the Emfiedzhieva House refers to 'emfie' – a type of ground tobacco powder – and is eloquent testimony to the early presence of tobacco in the economic life of the city. In Dupnitsa, this acquired a more visible urban expression: the wealth accumulated through tobacco trading is reflected in the architecture of residential buildings from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whose façades along Hristo Grancharov Street are among the most representative in the region.

Kriva Palanka

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Kriva Palanka retained its traditional urban character, but in individual residential buildings elements began to appear associated with the new architectural influences from Central Europe. These houses do not represent a complete stylistic break with tradition but rather its development – an accretion of new conceptions upon the stable Balkan model. A typical example is the urban house with a developed *čardak* composition, in which the traditional spatial scheme – a central *čardak* with rooms on either side – is preserved, while the façade begins to acquire a more representative character (Namicev, 2016).

Kratovo

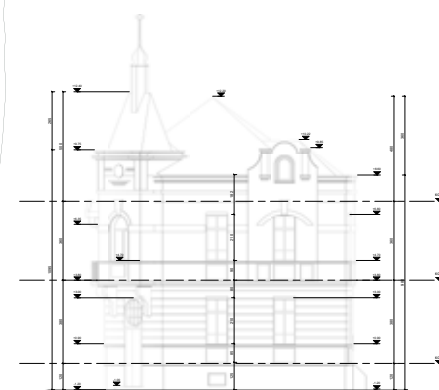
Studies of the building stock in Kratovo attest to the sustained presence of the traditional nineteenth-century timber-and-stone construction and a limited transformation of the architectural model (Namicev, 2016). The slower dynamic of architectural change is explained by the city's peripheral position with respect to the railway network and the major commercial centres, despite its connections with Skopje and Kumanovo. At the end of the nineteenth century, against the background of declining mining prosperity, the local elite invested in residential construction with moderately emphasised but still traditionally anchored decorative solutions – the last architectural expression of the wealth accumulated from the extraction of precious metals. Thus, residential architecture remained typologically fixed within the traditional model, without a clearly expressed transition towards the representative façade aesthetic characteristic of better-connected centres such as Bitola, Veles, and Skopje.

POPNIKOLOVA HOUSE (1911-12)

KYUSTENDIL



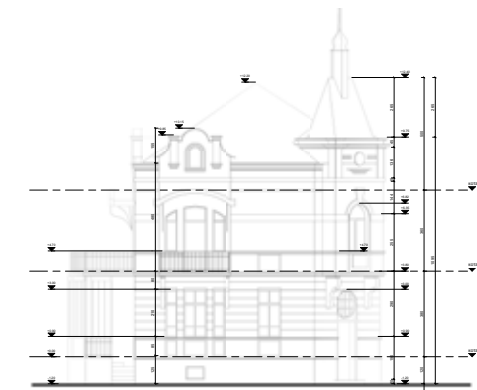
Street – with the oriel carried on corbels with lion's heads. The plastic ornamentation is the work of Ivan Lazarov: the panels with vegetal motifs below the windows, the female heads above them, and the lions on the corbels compose a decorative programme rare for a provincial building of that period. The roof concludes with a pointed-corner turret – a sign of the ambition to surpass the ordinary.



North facade



Facade



East facade

The lawyers trained in Heidelberg and Vienna made enough money to build the Popnikolova House, which was designed in the Art Nouveau style on purpose by an owner who saw European architecture as both a style choice and a social statement.

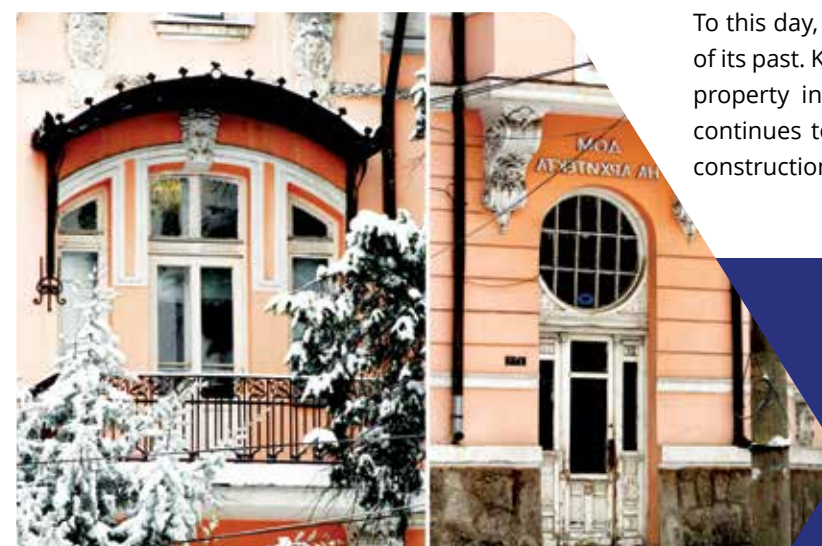
The sculptor Ivan Lazarov left a capital-city signature on the corbels of the building.

Viennese furniture, a local master, a national sculptor – here the three paths converge at one address.

The lawyer Vasil Popnikolov built this house in 1911–1912, at a moment when Kyustendil was assimilating European architectural languages with growing confidence. Architect Angel Momov was engaged for the design; for the plastic ornamentation, the sculptor Ivan Lazarov, one of the most significant names in Bulgarian sculpture of the era, was engaged. The result is a building in which legal practice and European taste found a shared architectural expression.

The Popnikolova House was built in the Art Nouveau style, modern for 1911. The two-storey building was conceived simultaneously as a workplace and a representative residence: the ground floor includes the lawyer's office, kitchen, dining room, and winter garden with metal columns, crowned with a terrace with an ornamented metal bannister. On the second floor are the spacious, sunny bedrooms furnished with Viennese furniture.

The façade makes an impression from two angles: from Vasil Levski Street – with a clean symmetry; and from Demokratsiya

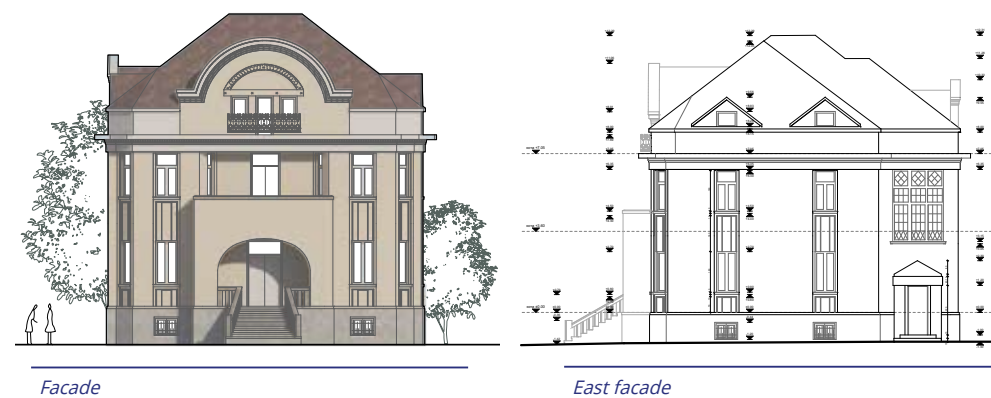


To this day, the Popnikolova House preserves the spirit and appearance of its past. Known in the city as the "Architects' Club", it is public municipal property in good physical and structural condition – a building that continues to radiate elegance and grace more than a century after its construction.

Address: 27 Demokratsiya Street / Vasil Levski Street
GPS: 42.27943, 22.68665
Status: Architectural and Artistic Monument of Local Significance (State Gazette, No. 25/1998). Public municipal property.
Access: Restricted

KARAKOSTOVA HOUSE

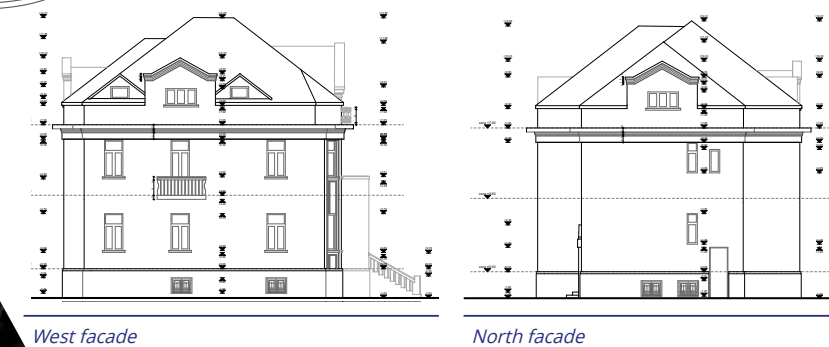
DUPNITSA



The revenues connected with tobacco created the financial conditions for the construction of this façade, allowing for the use of elaborate designs and materials that showcase the wealth generated by the tobacco industry. It left its mark in literature as well. The oval pediment is a balance sheet of the tobacco trade, written in Viennese Art Nouveau.

Karakostov Senior enters the novel "Tobacco" by Dimitar Dimov as the chief tobacco expert at "Nikotiana" AD, under the name Kostov. His real home stands on the corner of Hristo Grancharov Street: the oval pediment and the curved lines above the central balcony are Viennese and Budapest Art Nouveau, adapted to the Dupnitsa urban context.

The Karakostova House is among the most representative examples of high-grade urban Art Nouveau in the region. The grand staircase and the massive arched entrance create the impression of an urban villa – a type widely distributed in Sofia, Plovdiv, and Vidin in the period 1910–1930. The façade is partially damaged but retains remarkable architectural relief: delicately profiled frames around the windows, elegant iron bannisters, and smoothly modelled façade lines. The oval pediment with its decorative frame and the curved lines above the central balcony clearly reveal the influence of Viennese and Budapest Art Nouveau, refracted through the local urban context.



Address: 1 Hristo Grancharov Street
GPS: 42.26612, 23.11592
Status: Private property.
Access: restricted.

BOGDANOVA HOUSE

DUPNITSA



Facade



West facade



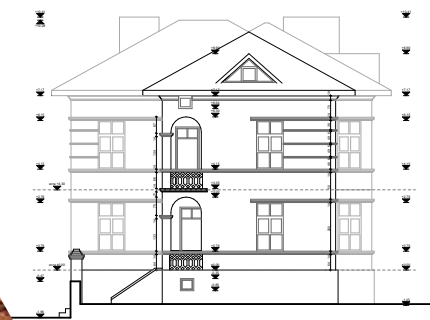
The double arch of the portal tallies the accumulated wealth, from the boza shop to the tobacco warehouses.



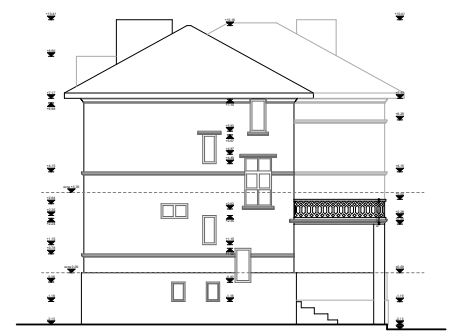
The timber eave, adorned with local ornamentation, reflects the craftsmanship of an artisan from the region that influenced the Neoclassical style.

Bogdan Petrov grew up in the Rila Monastery, where he received his education, before settling in Dupnitsa and developing commercial activities – from a boza and kebab shop to tobacco warehouses, the first in the city, built in the period 1903–1905. The accumulated commercial capital found expression in residential construction as well: around 1900–1915, Petrov built this house, which in its architectural character conforms to the typical representative urban dwelling of the era.

The white portal with its double arch and massive columns follows the Neoclassical canon, while the openwork balustrade on the balconies introduces Art Nouveau elements. The timber eave with rich ornamentation in the under-roof space attests to the presence of the local artisan tradition, which coexisted with the imported architectural influences. The Bogdanova House is a representative example of the synthesis between Neoclassicism and Art Nouveau characteristics of the period – an architectural moment in which the two styles overlapped before one gave way to the other.



South facade



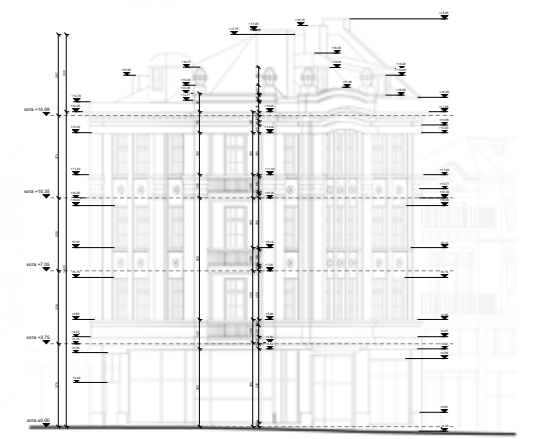
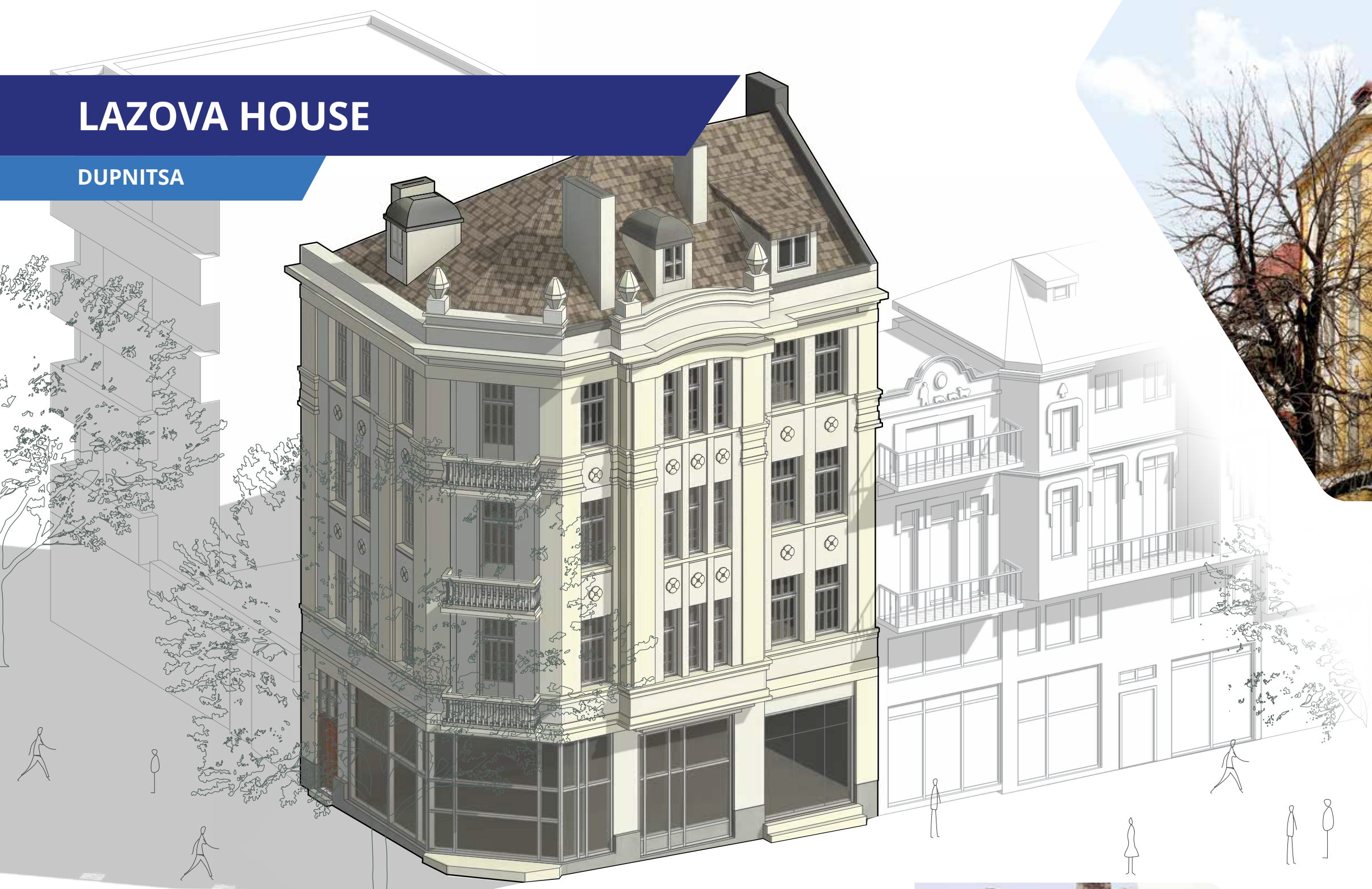
North facade



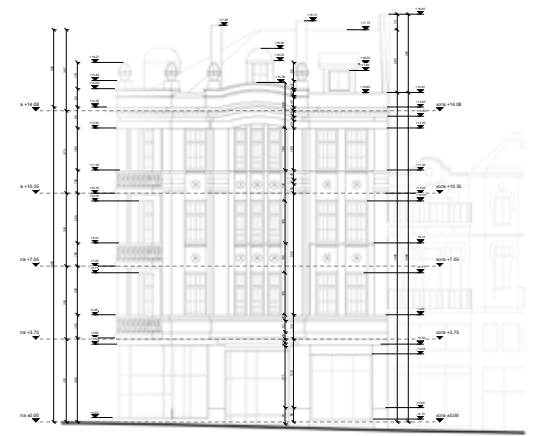
Address: 22 Hristo Grancharov Street
GPS: 42.26705, 23.11596
Status: Private property. Access restricted.

LAZOVA HOUSE

DUPNITSA



South facade



Southeast facade



The accumulated commercial capital found architectural expression in the symmetrical façade of the Lazova House.



The architectural vocabulary – Prague and Budapest by catalogue – arrived along the path of ideas: education, travel, and ambition.

Lazo Velichkov (1841–1933) worked in the monastery vineyards of Mount Athos before settling in Dupnitsa and opening a boza shop that grew into a kebab restaurant. His “Dupnitsa-style kebab” was ordered specially for the royal palace in Sofia. During his visit to Dupnitsa on 5 June 1996, Tsar Simeon II personally enquired about the recipe, preserved in his childhood memories. Many architectural monuments cannot claim such a gastronomic legacy.

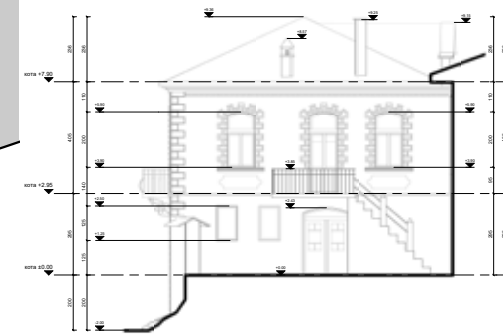
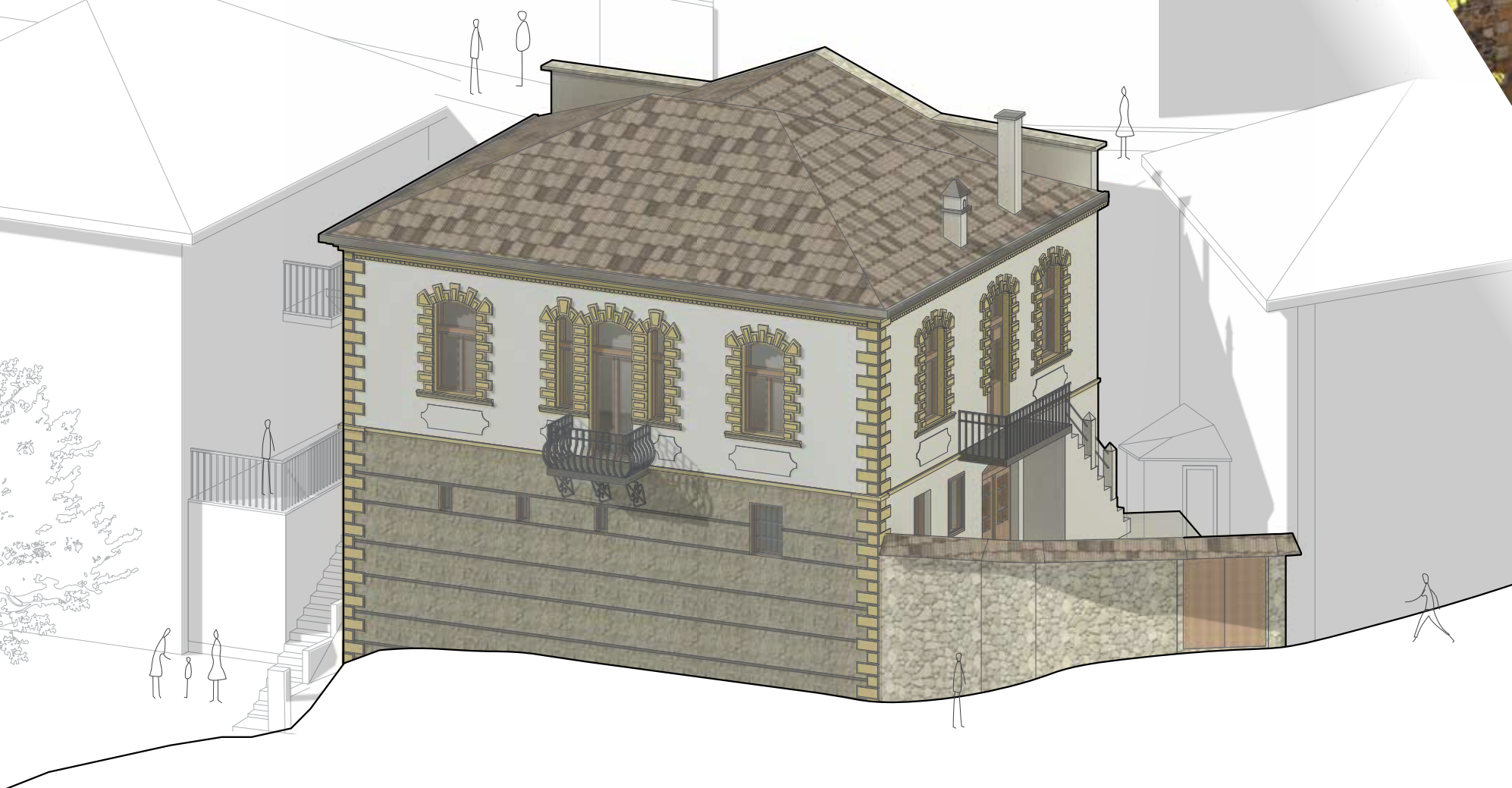
The Lazova House represents a characteristic synthesis of Neoclassicism and Art Nouveau. The symmetrically organised façade with rhythmically arranged windows, circular medallions, and stylised vegetal motifs follows an established central European model, while the slightly curved central section alludes to Baroque influences. The roofline cornice with its frieze of dentils lends the building a monumental character. The architectural vocabulary of the façade corresponds to the education received in Prague and Budapest at the time, adapted to the local building tradition and available artisan skills, which included techniques such as decorative plasterwork and stone carving that were prevalent in the region.



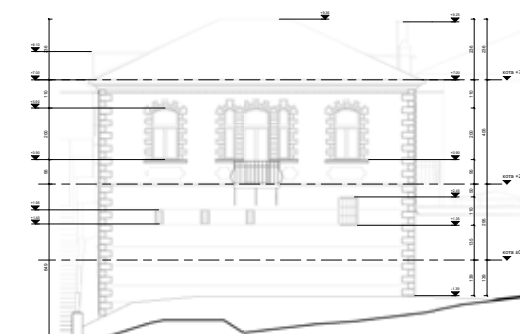
Address: 13 Hristo Botev Street
GPS: 42.26525, 23.11876
Status: Private property. Access restricted.

THE JEWISH HOUSE

KRATOVO



Southwest facade



Northwest facade

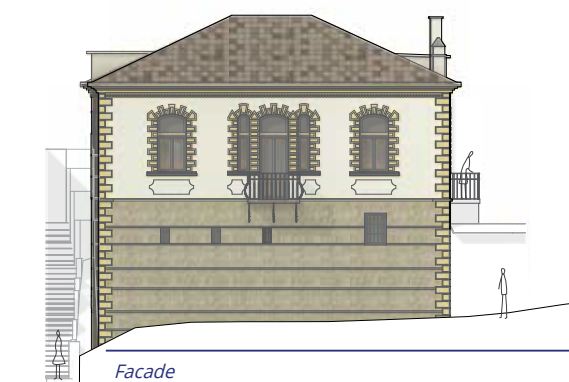
  *The commercial capital of the ethnically diverse communities and the richly ornamented façade connect it to the Path of Capital. The succession of owners of different origins and faiths – without changing the character of the building – inscribes it in the Path of Ideas as well: shared space as a form of coexistence.*

The house is an important example of late-Ottoman urban residential architecture with noticeable aspects of eclecticism and neoclassicism, typical of Balkan towns around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Built of native stone, with enormous walls and sharply accentuated corner quoins, it possesses a visual stability and a sense of monumentality. The facade is partially rendered, keeping the contrast between the rough stone structure and the ornate completed parts.

In 1911, the Jewish family left Kratovo on the eve of the Balkan Wars, leaving behind a house with richly ornamented windows and a shop selling sal ammoniac and candles. The building changed names and owners: it was registered successively in the name of Abdul, then Stefan Mazhev, then Manas Manasov. For a short period, Dr Nikola Nezlobinski, a Russian physician who left for Struga in 1921, also lived there. The character of the building, however, remained unchanged.

Architectural typology specialists suggest a medieval origin with subsequent reconstructions, the material evidence dating from 1911. The house is part of the protected monumental ensemble “Old Urban Core of Kratovo” and is among the most decorative objects in the city. The interior is authentically preserved: a cellar, two floors, and windows with rich ornamentation – and the silence of those whose names were not preserved in the documents.

The Jewish House features a wrought iron balcony, similar to the balcony of the Karakostova house in Dupnitsa.



Facade

Address: 20 Skopska Street
GPS: 42.077455, 22.182849
Status: Protected heritage within the monumental ensemble “Old Urban Core” (NCC, former EMBD 4-814-013/004). Private property (Manasovi family).

THE HOUSE OF KOLE VASEV

KRIVA PALANKA



Address: 6 Boris Trajkovski Street
GPS: 42.202359, 22.336929
Status: No official protected heritage status
Ownership: Private
Access: Restricted



The Path of the Masters passes here in a particular sense: not the celebrated school with its personal signature, but the anonymous local master, who assimilated a foreign architectural vocabulary in his own way.

This house bears no single personal biographical name – it is the imprint of an entire generation. Built in the early twentieth century on commission from a family of the middle artisan-merchant stratum of Kriva Palanka, it presents not the exceptional but the typical choice: how the provincial master assimilated a European architectural vocabulary with the available means.

This is a two-storey urban house from the early twentieth century that illustrates the transition between the traditional Revival model and the emerging European architectural influences. The facade is symmetrically organised with a calm and balanced composition. The windows feature clean lines and understated frames, while the decorative surfaces beneath the roofline introduce a geometric accent. These elements do not constitute a pure style but rather a carefully combined expression – a blend of Neoclassicism and local tradition.

The house marks the moment at which architecture became part of everyday life for broader layers of society – when European forms were no longer a distant reference but practical knowledge. Not perfectly applied, yet clear enough to convey ambition, taste, and a desire to belong to the modern age.

The first owner of the house was Kole Vasev, and it later passed into the ownership of Boyan Mitov, a teacher of the Macedonian language, who lived here with his family until 1965. The house was subsequently purchased by the Deyanovski family, from whom their son Zhivko Deyanovski inherited it, and today it is in the possession of a new owner.

The son of Kole Vasev is the distinguished oncologist Nino Vasev, who served as director of the Oncology Clinic at the Mother Teresa Clinical Centre in Skopje.

The building documents that moment in which the European architectural vocabulary ceased to be the exclusive privilege of the educated and the wealthy, becoming instead a shared urban norm – gradually absorbed, practically adapted, and applied without academic rigour, yet with a clear ambition.

THE HOUSE OF HARALAMPI POPANASTASOV (1907)

KYUSTENDIL



The home is a reflection of the Path of Capital and the Path of Ideas taken together: European education returned home, and the changed worldview was imprinted in the stone of the Kyustendil façade.

Yordan Popanastasov returned from Heidelberg to Kyustendil in 1900 with a law degree and a European horizon. He worked successively as a notary, prosecutor, and judge; purchased commercial premises; and, in 1907, built this house. The home received the judge and writer Georgi Stamatov, who lived with the Haralamoiev family in the period 1924–1925, and the folk healer Petar Dimkov – evidence that the Popanastasov home was not merely a residence but a centre of urban intellectual life.

The building was modern for its time: rusticated stonework on the façade and ornaments around the windows; it was built in brick masonry with timber floor beams. It fits well into the architectural complex of “Varosha” – nearby are the Lekarova and Granitskata Houses, and across from it is the Mutual School of Ss. Cyril and Methodius (who operated 1849–1888).

Yordan descended from an old Kyustendil family. His three sons – Boyan (who died young), Aleksandar, and Haralampi – inherited the home and its history.



Address: Corner of Targovski Street and Ilarion Lovchanski Street
GPS: 42.27922, 22.68820
Status: Architectural Cultural Monument of Local Significance (State Gazette, No. 25/1998). Private property – Nedyalka Haralamoieva Popanastasova.
Access: Restricted

THE OLD URBAN HOUSES TELL THEIR STORIES

KYUSTENDIL – DUPNITSA – KRIVA PALANKA – KRATOVO



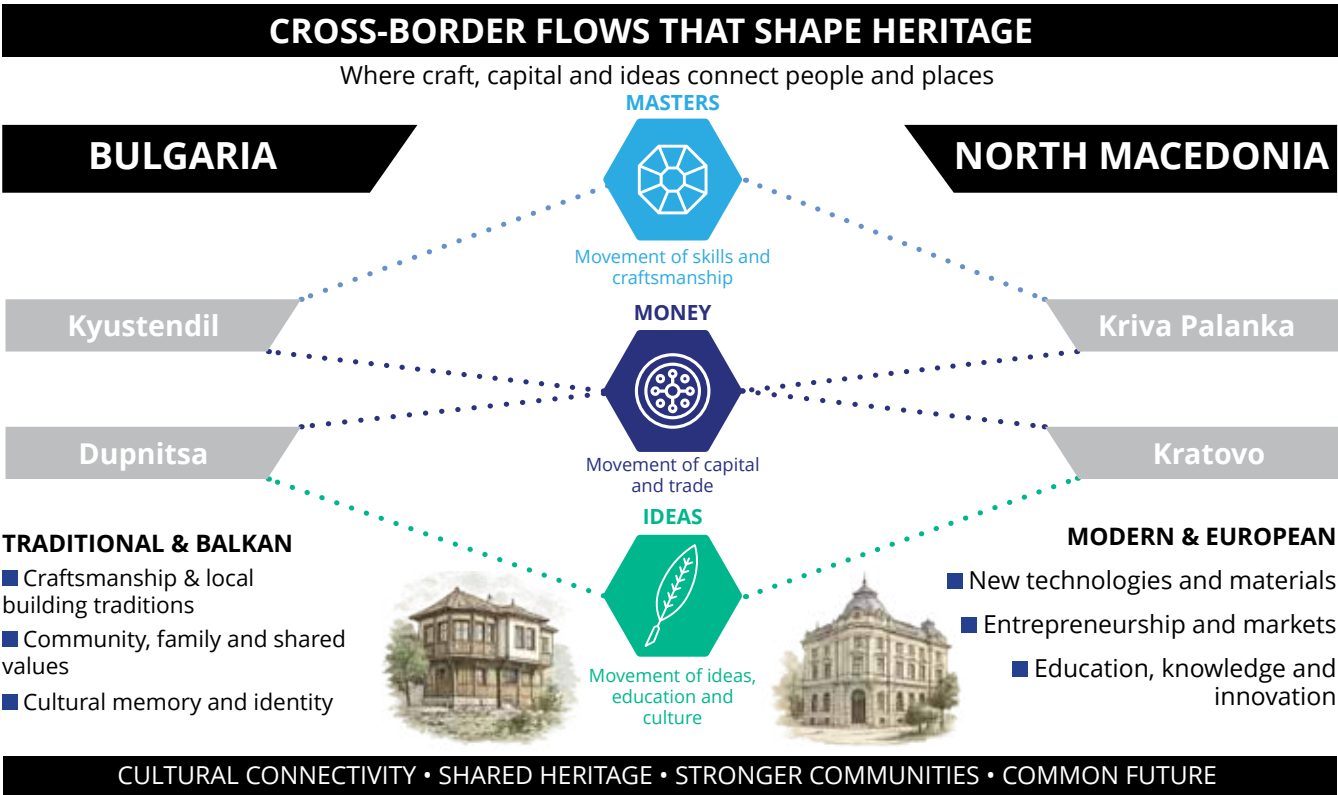
ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

To reveal the internal logic of the objects presented, they may be examined not only as independent architectural units but also as parts of a shared system structured by several interrelated criteria: period, social type, and affiliation with the three principal mechanisms of cultural connectivity in the region – masters, capital, and ideas. The table below summarises this distribution and allows a simultaneous “reading” of the objects in different directions.

OBJECT	CITY	PERIOD	TYPE	MASTERS	MONEY	IDEAS
Emfidzhieva	Kyustendil	19Th C.	Mixed			
Lazarkova	Dupnitsa	19Th C.	Intellectual	-	-	
Popgyorgina	Kriva Palanka	19Th C.	Mixed			
Pop Strashko	Kriva Palanka	19Th C.	Mixed			
Sokolova	Kratovo	19Th C.	Craft		-	-
Shancheva	Kratovo	19Th C.	Commercial	-		
Popanastasov	Kyustendil	20Th C.	Intellectual	-		
Popnikolova	Kyustendil	20Th C.	Mixed			
Karakostova	Dupnitsa	20Th C.	Commercial	-		
Bogdanova	Dupnitsa	20Th C.	Commercial			-
Lazova	Dupnitsa	20Th C.	Commercial	-		
House “Nikola Tesla” 13	Kriva Palanka	20Th C.	Mixed			
Jewish House	Kratovo	20Th C.	Commercial	-		

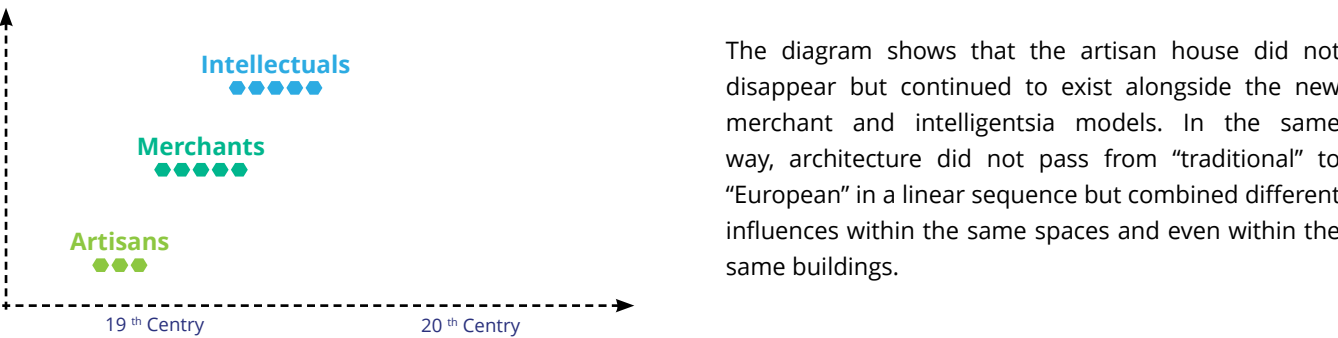
Viewed in their entirety, the data delineate a clearly expressed tendency. The revival period (nineteenth century) is more closely connected with the artisan tradition and the mobility of master schools, while at the beginning of the twentieth century, commercial capital and new cultural models – linked to education, travel, and social mobility – come to the fore. It is precisely for this reason that the mechanism of ideas proves the most widely represented, followed by capital, while the Path of the Masters, although more limited in quantity, remains the strongest carrier of cross-border continuity.

This logic of connectivity manifests not only through time but also in space. The four cities do not function as isolated points but as mutually bound nodes in a compact regional network.



In this scheme, the lines do not denote specific routes but rather the intensity of connections – the constant exchange of people, knowledge, and resources that historically shaped the region as a unified cultural space.

If this spatial network is compared with the development over time, another important regularity emerges. The transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century does not represent an abrupt replacement of one model with another but a gradual transformation in which new social and cultural strata are accumulated upon the existing foundation.



The diagram shows that the artisan house did not disappear but continued to exist alongside the new merchant and intelligentsia models. In the same way, architecture did not pass from “traditional” to “European” in a linear sequence but combined different influences within the same spaces and even within the same buildings.

Considered as a system, the thirteen objects delineate a clear model of cultural connectivity. The artisan tradition creates the stable foundation upon which commercial capital and new cultural horizons – brought through education and travel – are accumulated. This multi-layered character manifests both in the architectural appearance of the buildings and in the biographies of their inhabitants – biographies that often unfolded beyond today’s borders.

In this sense, the cross-border character of the region is not the result of a contemporary interpretation but a historical reality that materialised in the houses themselves. It is they – with their similarities, differences, and accretions – that make visible the connectivity that political borders may interrupt administratively, but not culturally.

CULTURAL HERITAGE IN MOTION: A CROSS-BORDER ROUTE

The objects of material cultural heritage presented here are not merely archival documents; they acquire an additional dimension when viewed not only as independent architectural units but also as nodes of a connected spatial network – a cross-border route tracing in situ the logic of the shared regional heritage. They are also a starting point for a cultural route connecting four cities in two states.

The route covers approximately 167.10 km and may be completed in one to two days, passing successively through Kyustendil and Dupnitsa in Bulgaria and Kriva Palanka and Kratovo in North Macedonia.

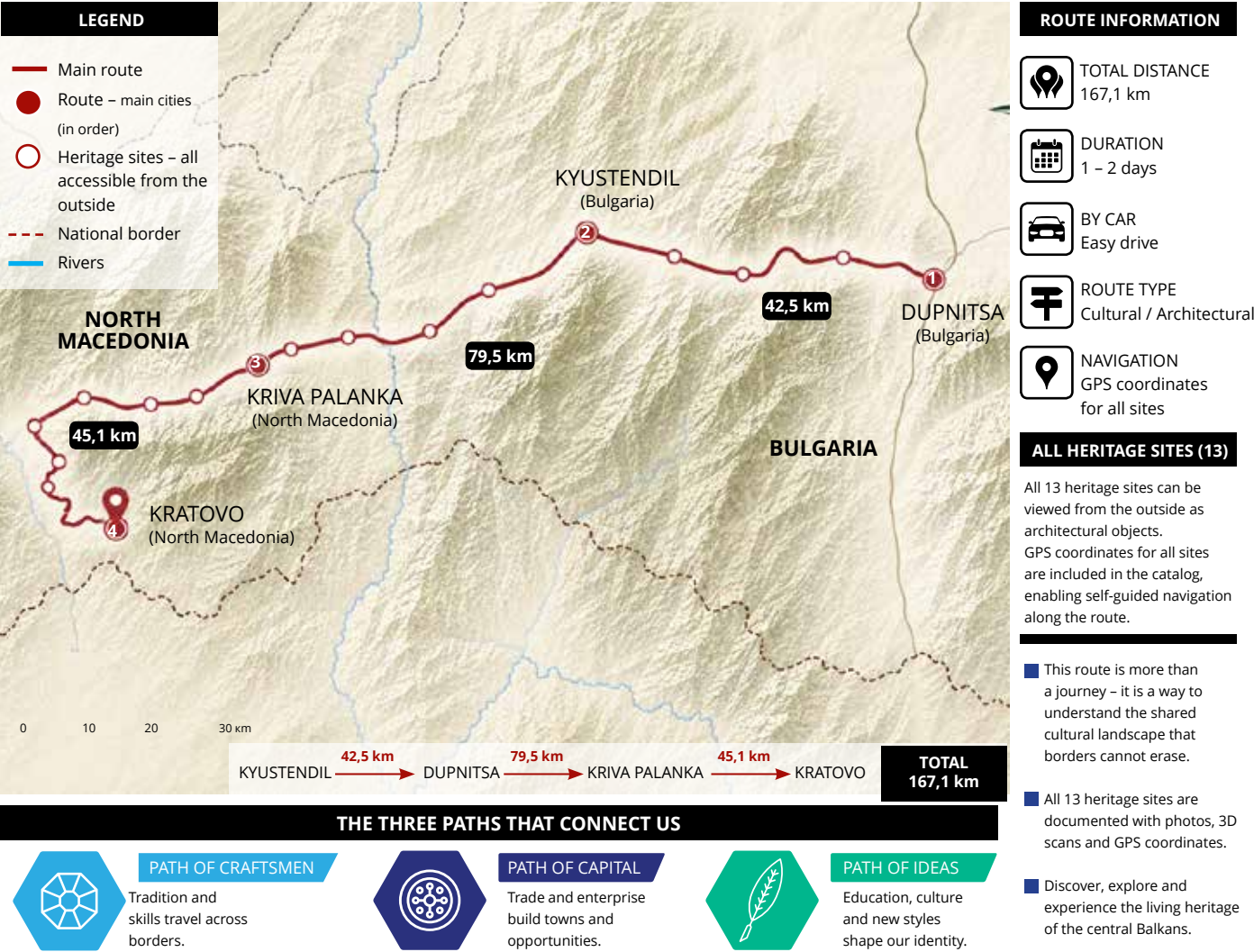
Four of the thirteen objects have unrestricted physical access: the House of Pop Strashko in Kriva Palanka, the Emfiedzhieva House in Kyustendil, which operates as a museum exhibition, and the Sokolovi House and the Shancheva House in Kratovo, which also offer accommodation. The remaining buildings are in private ownership with restricted access but may be viewed from outside as architectural objects. The GPS coordinates of all buildings are included in the catalogue, enabling independent navigation along the route.

The route is conceived not only as a tourist product but also as an instrument for reflecting upon the shared cultural heritage of the region – a heritage that the administrative border has divided but not erased.

CULTURAL HERITAGE IN MOTION: THE OLD TOWN HOUSES

A CROSS-BORDER ROUTE: Four towns. Two countries. One shared heritage.

Following the in situ logic of our common past, this route connects architectural treasures across the border – where craftsmen, merchants and ideas once moved freely. Today, these heritage sites invite us to rediscover the connections that still unite the region.



THE OLD URBAN HOUSES TELL THEIR STORIES

KYUSTENDIL – DUPNITSA – KRIVA PALANKA – KRATOVO



GLOSSARY OF ARCHITECTURAL TERMS

Alafranga – From Turkish-Greek à la franga – “in the European manner”. In Balkan architecture, everything is associated with the European urban way of life – from draped curtains to sideboards with porcelain. Contrasted with alaturka (Oriental style).

Openwork carving (Ajurna rezba) – A woodcarving technique in which material is cut away to create an ornament of apertures and solid forms. In ceilings, it takes the form of deep relief. Openwork carving is characteristic of iconostases, ecclesiastical furniture, and other furnishings.

Amamlak – A small room for personal hygiene in the traditional Balkan house. From Turkish hamam. Found in the House of Pop Strashko.

Balustrade – A row of small turned or cast posts supporting the handrail of a balcony or staircase. Mentioned at the Bogdanova and Lazarkova Houses.

Gizentiya – The entrance corridor of the traditional Macedonian urban house – a distribution zone between the street and the living quarters. Found in the House of Pop Strashko.

The term “eam ceiling” (gredored) refers to a ceiling construction made of parallel timber beams. Typical of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Djamali – A built-in wall stove, often used to heat two rooms. Sometimes has a wide heart from The Turkish Cemal. A djamali stove is preserved in the Emfiedzhieva House, Kyustendil.

Dyukyan – A commercial or craft premises on the ground floor with a shopfront onto the street, from Turkish dükkân.

Oriel (Erker) – A projecting volume on an upper storey, carried on corbels. Enriches the façade. Characteristic of Art Nouveau.

Guild (Esnaf) – An organisation of craftsmen of one trade. It determined the rules and social status of its members.

Root cellar (Zimnik) – A semi-sunken room for food storage. Characteristic of Kyustendil Revival-era homes.

Iconostasis – In a domestic context, a small niche or shelf with icons. Characteristic of traditional Balkan homes.

Corbel (Konzola) – A load-bearing architectural element fixed at one end only into the wall. In the Popnikolova House, ornamented with lions’ heads.

Cornice (Korniz) – A horizontal profiled finishing element of a façade. Both constructional and decorative functions.

Kiosk (Kyoshk) – A light-glazed superstructure or garden pavilion located on the roof. From Turkish köşk.

Medallion (Medalyon) – A circular or oval decorative relief on a façade. Typical of Neoclassicism and Art Nouveau.

Minderlak – A low divan or built-in bench along the walls, covered with cushions. From Turkish minder. Found in the Popgyorgina House.

Neoclassicism – A style of the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries inspired by Graeco-Roman models. Symmetry, columns, triangular pediments.

Panel (Pano) – A decorative field on a façade with vegetal motifs or figures. Found in the Popnikolova House.

Half-timber construction (Payantova konstruktsiya / Bondruk) – A timber frame filled with brick, stone, or mud. The principal technique for two-storey urban houses of the nineteenth century.

Kerpich / Plitar – A handmade brick made from sun-dried clay mixed with chaff. The principal material in Macedonian architecture.

Rosette – A circular ornament stylised as a fully opened flower. A characteristic motif of Debar woodcarving.

Rustication (Rustika) – A façade plaster imitating rough-hewn stone. Lends monumentality to the ground floor.

Art Nouveau / Secession – A style from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, disseminated from Vienna and Budapest. Floral motifs, female heads, curved lines.

Porch (Trem) – A covered open portico before the entrance to a building. Found in the Shancheva House.

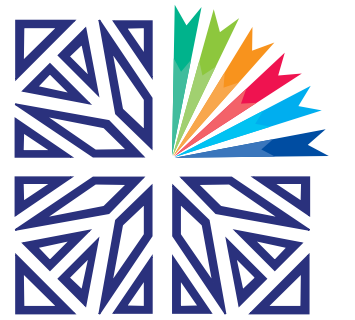
Pediment (Fronton) – A triangular, semicircular, or oval termination of a façade. Both constructional and decorative functions.

Čardak – An open or glazed terrace on the upper floor. From Turkish çardak. Found in the House of Pop Strashko.

Box tree (Chimshir) – A low evergreen shrub (Buxus sempervirens) used for shaping courtyards.

THE OLD URBAN HOUSES TELL THEIR STORIES

KYUSTENDIL – DUPNITSA – KRIVA PALANKA – KRATOVO



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THE OLD URBAN HOUSES TELL THEIR STORIES
KYUSTENDIL – DUPNITSA – KRIVA PALANKA – KRATOVO

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**HERITAGE DOES NOT DISAPPEAR SUDDENLY.
IT DISAPPEARS QUIETLY, WHILE NO ONE IS WATCHING.
BUT AS LONG AS IT IS TOLD, IT LIVES.**



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