PriMera Scientific Engineering
Volume 6 Issue 3 March 2025
DOI: 10.56831/PSEN-06-183
ISSN: 2834-2550

PriMera Scientific Publications

Strengthening Tradition: A Pathway to Preservation and Revitalization in Albanian Architecture

Type: Research Article
Received: January 03, 2025
Published: February 10, 2025

Citation:
Etleva Dobjani., et al. "Strengthening Tradition: A Pathway to Preservation and Revitalization in Albanian Architecture". PriMera Scientific Engineering 6.3 (2025): 03-08.

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Abstract

This research examines the architectural and cultural significance of traditional tower houses in Albania, emphasizing their unique characteristics, historical context, and the challenges posed by neglect and abandonment. It underscores the potential of restoring and revitalizing these structures to enhance their structural integrity and foster economic development in rural areas. By employing traditional surveying methods alongside archival documentation, the study aims to digitize some of these culturally significant buildings through the creation of digital models and maps. This approach enables a comprehensive assessment of their current condition and suitability for restoration. A key contribution of this research is its integration of modern technology with traditional preservation practices, offering a framework for restoring these historical structures while safeguarding Albania's architectural heritage. The study highlights the critical role of public awareness campaigns, community engagement, and funding strategies in ensuring the sustainability of preservation efforts. By merging technological innovation with sustainable development strategies, this research provides a holistic roadmap for the protection and economic revitalization of Albania's tower houses, serving as a model for preserving cultural heritage worldwide.

Keywords: Restoration; Cultural Heritage; Traditional Towers; Digital Documentation; Economic Development

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to address the urgent need for the restoration and revitalization of traditional towers in Albania, which are significant components of the nation's cultural and architectural heritage. These structures, originating from the Middle Ages, embody the socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts of their time, having served various roles as defensive strongholds, family residences, and symbols of social status within rural communities. Built from locally sourced materials such as stone, wood, and clay, these towers represent the ingenuity and resilience of traditional building practices (Baçe et al., 1979; Riza & Kamberi, 1972).

However, many of these towers have fallen into neglect and abandonment due to the migration of rural populations to urban areas, the absence of financial resources, and a lack of institutional support for their preservation (DRTK Shkodër, 2023). As a result, they face considerable threats, including structural degradation and exposure to environmental elements, jeopardizing both their physical integrity and the cultural heritage they embody. This decline not only impacts the towers themselves but also deprives rural communities of valuable economic and social opportunities that could arise from their restoration.

In light of this context, the study aims to propose viable methods for integrating modern technologies and sustainable practices into the conservation of these towers. By focusing on potential contemporary uses such as tourism, cultural centers, and crafts workshops, the research seeks to identify effective restoration techniques that combine traditional craftsmanship with innovative technologies like photogrammetry, GIS, and drone mapping. This comprehensive approach will facilitate a deeper understanding of the current conditions of the towers and inform preservation planning. Ultimately, the study aspires to enhance the economic viability of rural areas in Albania, ensuring that these architectural treasures serve as catalysts for cultural and economic revitalization while being preserved for future generations.

Materials & Methods

This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach, integrating qualitative research and case study analysis. The research begins with an extensive review of bibliographic and archival sources to investigate the historical, architectural, and geographical distribution of tower houses in Albania and neighboring regions. Fieldwork includes an in-depth analysis of selected restored or rehabilitated tower houses, facilitated by collaboration with experts from the Institute of Cultural Monuments.

Additionally, restoration and adaptive reuse recommendations are proposed. These suggestions aim to achieve a balance between cultural preservation, community revitalization, and structural sustainability, with engineering evaluations providing insights into feasibility and resilience.

Analysis of Some Tower Houses in Albania

Tower houses in Albania are predominantly found in the northern and northeastern regions, particularly in areas such as Thethi, Malësia e Madhe, and Dibra, as shown in Figure 1. However, archival records from the Institute of Cultural Monuments (Baçe et al., 1979) indicate that these structures are also dispersed throughout other parts of the country. Built mainly during the 18th and 19th centuries, these traditional towers are defined by their thick stone load-bearing walls, small windows, and compact, defensive design, offering protection and security. Typically consisting of three to four stories, the ground floor was used for housing livestock and storing provisions, while the upper floors served as living quarters.

A key characteristic of these towers is the wide overhanging eaves, which provide shelter from harsh weather conditions and enhance the building's visual appeal (Vicente et al., 2018). The tower-house typology is also found in other parts of the Balkans, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece (Mani region), and Romania's Wallachia. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, multi-story towers were constructed by Turkish feudal lords as both residences and fortifications (Vagelakos & Karaveziroglou, 2005). Similarly, powerful families in Greece built towers in the Mani region for defensive and residential purposes (Ivkovska, 2019).

The architectural evolution of fortified dwellings in northern Albania, particularly in Mat, Malësia e Gjakovës, and Rrafshi i Dukagjinit, shows a gradual refinement of protective features without significantly altering the original structural and functional layout of these homes (Jaeger-Klein, 2018). Analyzing these towers reveals their substantial architectural and cultural value, preserving the unique social organization and way of life of the communities that built them (Meksi, 1971; Riza & Kamberi, 1972).

Tower houses are among the most distinctive typologies in Albanian vernacular architecture, evolving over centuries to embody a blend of economic, social, and defensive factors (Thomo, 2021). Prominent in northern and northwestern Albania, they emerged during a period of insecurity in the 19th century. Their fortified construction provided defense against external threats, including attacks, blood feuds, and robberies (Karydis, 2018).

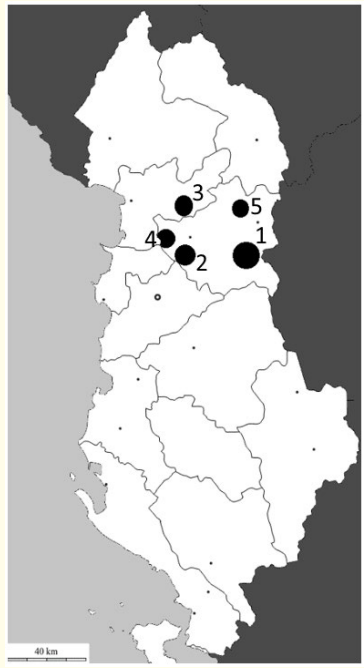

Figure 1: Some of the towers analyzed are located in northern Albania, in the areas indicated (1. Ostren i Vogel, Dibër | 2. SHOSHAJ - B.CURR | 3. Kodër Spaç, Mirdite | 4. MAKE-MAT |5 . SOHODOLL - DIBER).

Isolation and a predominantly pastoral economy influenced the design of these dwellings. Over time, tower houses adapted to evolving needs, with upper floors often hosting guests and incorporating elements like divanhanet (guest lounges) and qoshqet (niches), combining comfort and aesthetics. Initially constructed with wood, they transitioned to stone to offer greater protection and durability (Unwin, 2009).

Tower	*Location*	*Key Features*	*Condition*	*Restoration Needs*
1	Shefik Kurti, Ostren i Vogël, Dibër	Three-story adobe and stone structure with arched roof corners.	Poor condition, severe damage.	Urgent structural intervention.
2	Bajram Osmani, Shoshaj - Bajram Curri	Three-story tower with stone walls and wooden ceilings.	Deterioration in roof and plaster.	Preservation of original structure.
3	Zef Ndocaj, Kodër Spaç, Mirditë	Category I monument, single-story house with stone masonry.	Moderate issues, particularly in the roof structure.	Roof repair, maintenance.
4	Hysen Dodolli, Benjë-Mat	Three-story tower with functional layouts for livestock and living spaces.	Partial roof damage.	Restoration of roof and courtyard wall.
5	Reshit Zune, Sohodoll, Dibër	Four-story stone tower, Category I monument.	Generally stable, minor damages.	Maintenance of roof tiles and gates.

Table 1: Description and Structural Analysis of the Five Case Studies.

The isolation of northwestern Albania, combined with its predominantly pastoral economy, significantly influenced the design of these dwellings. In regions with limited external contact and scarce resources, tower houses offered a practical solution for security and stability (Zan et al., 2017). As time went on, the tower house adapted to the evolving needs of Albanian families. The upper floors were often used to host guests, with special architectural elements such as divanhanet (guest lounges) and qoshqet (niches), which provided both comfort and aesthetic appeal.

The construction materials of these towers also evolved. Initially built with wood, they transitioned to stone, offering better protection and durability against both natural elements and external threats. This shift became particularly important with the introduction of firearms, which necessitated stronger, more fortified buildings (Unwin, 2009).

Over time, the tower house underwent various modifications to suit the changing needs of families. The addition of upper floors and new architectural elements marked the adaptation of the structure to new living conditions. These changes reflected a balance between defense, comfort, and aesthetics, resulting in buildings that were both functional and visually appealing.

With improvements in the region's economic and social conditions, the architecture of tower houses became even more sophisticated and diverse. Wealthier families, seeking to reflect their status, designed homes that offered more comfort and specialized spaces (DRTK Shkodër, 2023). These socio-economic shifts fueled further development, leading to tower houses that not only provided protection but also ensured sustainability and aesthetic value.

The evolution of the tower house was shaped by various economic, social, and political factors, reflecting the changing lifestyle and needs of the Albanian population. Today, tower houses remain a vital part of the cultural heritage of northern Albania, standing as a powerful testament to the region's history and culture.

Architectural Elements of Tower Houses

Tower houses are characterized by distinctive architectural elements that have been traditionally used in fortified constructions, designed to ensure the protection of the inhabitants and their possessions. These elements are commonly found in various villages, particularly in the northern regions of Albania, where tower houses are most prevalent. Some of the key features, based also in the table 1, that define the architectural style of these buildings include:

- ***Kullëza***: A prominent defensive structure rising above the main dwelling, enclosed with thick stone walls and equipped with small windows (çikmas) for monitoring surroundings.
- ***Çikma***: Strategically positioned small windows for surveillance and defense, offering visibility while minimizing exposure.
- ***Sharapoll***: Smaller towers located atop the main dwelling, serving as open balconies or enclosed niches for observation and defense.
- ***Steep Roofs***: Designed to withstand harsh weather, these roofs effectively shed snow and rain.
- ***Ahuri***: Ground-floor space used for storing livestock and provisions, essential for the pastoral lifestyle.
- ***Qoshk***: Upper-floor projections with small windows (frëngji) for observation and defense, enhancing the strategic design.

Functional Layout of Tower Houses

The layout of tower houses, as evidenced by the projects from the five case studies presented in Fig. 2 and supported by references from various books, was meticulously designed to balance both functionality and protection.

1. ***Ground Floor (Technical First Floor):***
    - Typically housed the main entrance to the dwelling.
    - Featured thick walls and small windows, often with fortified elements to provide protection for this level.
    - In some cases, the ground floor was used for storing livestock or agricultural tools, though its primary function was for security and the storage of essential supplies.

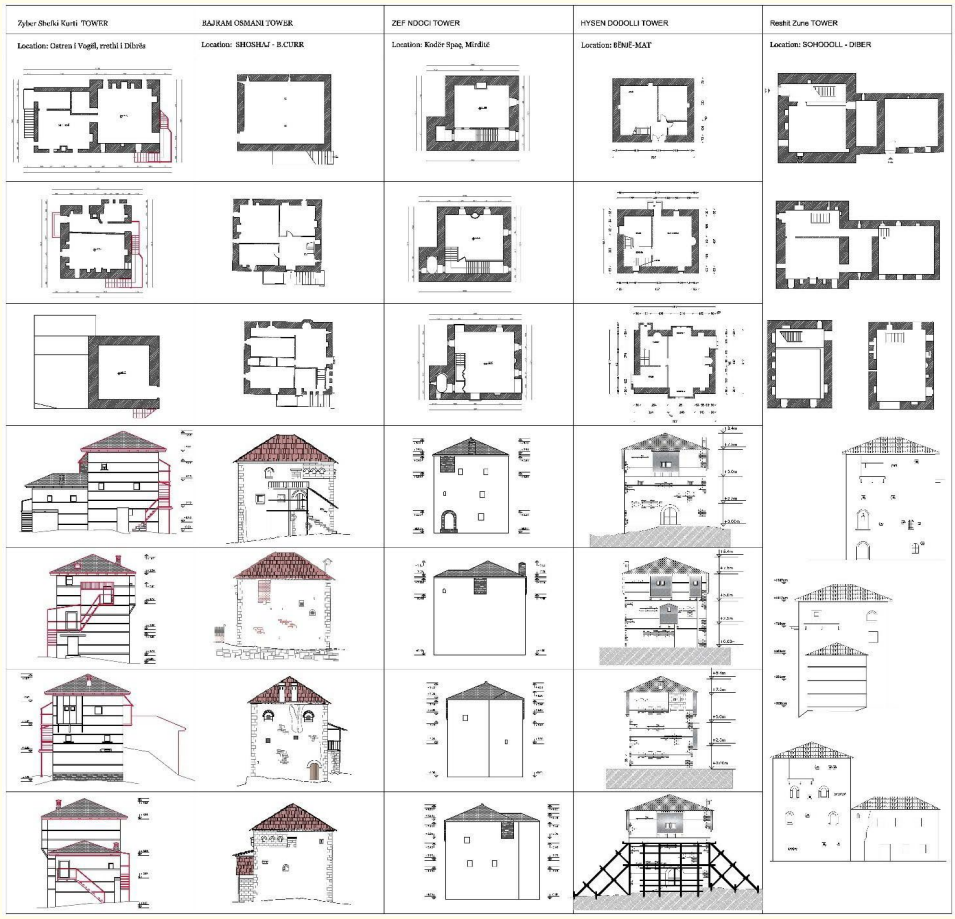

Figure 2: Five case studies of tower houses, showcasing the floor plans and facades of each.

2. ***First Floor (Technical Second Floor):***
   - Served as the primary living space for the residents.
   - Included areas such as bedrooms, living rooms, and spaces for daily activities, offering comfort and functionality for the family.
3. ***Second Floor (Technical Third Floor):***
   - The highest part of the dwelling, often incorporating the tower or main defensive feature.
   - Used as a control and observation point, with loopholes and small windows strategically placed to enhance security and provide a vantage point for monitoring the surrounding area.

Each level of the tower house was carefully designed to balance efficiency, safety, and functionality, reflecting a sophisticated approach to fortified architecture.

Restoration Projects and Ideas for Revitalizing Tower Houses

Restoration of tower houses requires a balance between traditional craftsmanship and modern techniques. Surveys using traditional tools, site visits, and advanced technologies like photogrammetry and 3D modeling ensure precision and authenticity. Using traditional materials like stone and lime is essential for preserving cultural heritage (Karydis, 2018; Meksi, 1971).

Adaptive reuse offers opportunities for economic growth, such as converting tower houses into guesthouses, restaurants, or cultural centers, fostering tourism and rural development (Pérez, 2015; Ivkovska, 2019). Restoration projects must address both structural and functional aspects, incorporating sustainable practices while preserving historical and architectural integrity.

Conclusion

This study underscores the critical need to preserve and revitalize Albania's tower houses, which represent a unique and integral part of the nation's cultural heritage. These historic structures are not just architectural relics; they play a central role in reinforcing local identities and fostering rural economic development. Their defensive and social functions, combined with their aesthetic value, make them key symbols of Albania's past, offering valuable insights into its traditions and way of life.

Restoring these towers goes beyond cultural conservation—it is an opportunity to stimulate local economies by repurposing them as cultural and tourism hubs. The combination of modern documentation and restoration technologies, increased community involvement, and the securing of external funding can facilitate the reintegration of these structures into contemporary society, allowing them to function both as historical landmarks and active contributors to local development.

The research also lays the groundwork for future studies, particularly in the areas of digitalization and systematic documentation of Albanian tower houses. Continued focus on these efforts will ensure the preservation of these remarkable buildings, enabling them to remain not just as monuments of the past, but as living parts of the community fabric. However, balancing the authenticity of these structures with modern needs remains a challenge that must be addressed with care.

Through ongoing research, collaboration, and increased public awareness, Albania's tower houses will continue to stand as powerful testaments to the nation's rich heritage for generations to come. The role of digital tools and the involvement of local communities will be essential in ensuring the sustainability and continued relevance of these heritage sites.

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