

Innovating the Rural: Tactics for Village Renewal in the Mariovo Region

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Abstract

Despite the evident domination of the urban and disregard of the countryside, it is precisely in rural areas that we can clearly see the various consequences, as well as the possibilities, of the underlying unequal world development. The situation in Europe today, especially in south-eastern Europe is paradoxical. On one hand, there is an enormous concentration of people, and physical and program congestion in certain urban zones. On the other hand, there is ongoing depopulation and/or intense transformation of entire areas in the countryside.

An area wherein this tendency of labour and settlement migration was most pronounced was the Mariovo region in the southern part of the Republic of Macedonia. The effect of these tendencies was complete depopulation of a number of villages, or their reduction to several elderly residents. However, the exciting natural environment and the picturesque physical structure of the man-made environment, increasingly expresses this contradiction to abandoned landscapes and uninhabited houses. Is it possible, in opposition to current waves of distress migration from rural areas, to propose some innovative scenarios for revitalization of these villages? Contrary to the existing reality, with a series of master thesis projects and architecture studio projects, we explore alternative visions of spatial, programmatic and social revitalization of individual villages. On one hand, these projects examine the inherent natural and socio-cultural potential of these villages. On the other hand, they reconcile the prospect of critical globalism as free flow of people and ideas. In this way, abandoned rural landscapes can be viewed as laboratories for dealing with extreme paradoxical tendencies in contemporary European society.

Keywords: Village revitalization; Countryside; Depopulation; Place; Houses; Innovation; Estrangement.

Introduction

For a long time, we have been witnessing the dominance of urban themes and ubiquity of urban conditions. The statistical evidence confirms the fact that the contemporary “Global City”, “Endless City”, “World City / New Meagogeography City”, “Information City in the Space of Flows and Space of Places”, are not just metaphors, but realistic descriptions of contemporary physical phenomena of the spatial and program agglomeration of the cities today (Sassen, 1991; Burdett & Sudjic, 2011; Beaverstoc, Smith, Taylor, 2000; Castells 2001/2002 ; Mostafavi & Doherty, 2005).

The popular representations of the planet Earth indicate that the ancient Great Wall of China is the only “man-made” artifact visible from space. But, in the night shots, we can see intense light zones on a dark background. It is the contemporary global city that produces the dominant artificial effect on the surface of the Earth (Beaverstoc, Smith, Taylor, 2000). The night image of the planet Earth in the pattern of light and dark zones, is a contemporary representation of the global city. But what lies in-between? Between the light fields and the points? There are dark areas. Today, the dark background is subject to intense transformation: spatial technological transformation as well as intense migration and depopulation zones. The astonishing escalation of population, territories and economic possibilities of cities has displaced other areas beyond the everyday and academic interest. They have become a background of intense urban performance. But what is there in these empty spaces? What is happening to the rural areas which were once a vital basis of our societies? What is happening to the villages, which were once authentic, productive and spiritual loci of our communities?

Koolhaas(2014) considers that far too little attention is being paid to villages, where changes occur faster than in most cities. Lozanovska (2010) recognizes villages as scenes of emigration. Today, rural regions find themselves in an ambivalent position. They lie on the frontline of transformation, between intense programmatic, productive, and infrastructural layering on one hand and ever-growing depopulation and desolation of entire regions (Koolhaas 2014; Lozanovska 2009 / 2010; Lozanovska 2010).

But these areas, the countryside, the villages, still have the original force, the authentic identity, relations and history. They can still present to us the spectacles of nature, in visual, tactile, and integral sensitive sense. They still have a productive potential and of course, can be an alternative with a “human face” to the endless modern suburbs.

We started with the assumption that the way we look at rural areas needs to be renewed not only in terms of quantification of different trends, but first of all, innovation of existing opportunities in the local and

the global context. Innovation is a challenge of the modern world. Its fundamental meaning refers to rethinking and a perception of an existing phenomenon in another, new way. Innovation is understood in the sense of rebuilding, something to be changed and seen in a new way, new things to be introduced in the already established practice. Kevin Kelly points to innovation as one of the main principles of the new economy „Wealth in this new regime flows directly from innovation, not optimization, that is, wealth is not gained by perfecting the known, but by perfectly seizing the unknown (Kelly1998) “. Or, as he has further written: “In the past, an innovation’s momentum indicated significance. Now, in the network environment, where biological behavior reigns, significance precedes momentum (Kelly1998)”.

Operating in the same way is also the technique referred to as “estrangement” in literature (Shklovsky,1917). Perceiving the narrative material of everyday life in another way is basic estrangement procedure. It is exactly through the estrangement procedure, understood as an innovation, that we will try to develop the thesis of revitalization of villages. Estrangement is a typical procedure in artistic literature. It consists of presentation of known things and events in an unusual way for the purpose of continuing or renewing, refreshing their aesthetic perception. Such a perception makes us rediscover things.

In this research, we wanted to propose a tactic for innovation of the physical and a program structure of the village in crisis. Contrary to the official policies and strategies for socio-economic renewal of rural areas, we consider that the form and function of the villages are still important and have the potential to develop certain aspects of rural life. The research will be developed through the referent spatial levels of the rural environment: the village, the house.

Figure 1. The village of Stavica, Mariovo, a landscape of the surroundings (Shekutkovska, 2007).



The Village:

Depopulation of rural areas causes not only physical, but also socio-cultural de-evolution of the place. The place is deprived of its authentic identity, relations and history, losing its authentic forms and ways of settlement (Auge, 1995). However, contrary to the continuity of these changes, contrary to the increased intensity of unequal development in the World, its marginal areas, i.e., rural areas are exactly those that may become places for exploring different and/or innovative methods of re-perceiving the place from the aspect of both its physical structure and complex socio-cultural configuration. Can the village become that critical place of productive conjunction of the global and the local domain? Can the village become the place of revival of domestic communities in the global context? What is the way in which the present marginalized rural environments can become examples of new spatial program entities?

Mariovo is a historic region, distinctive for its geomorphological, climatic, socio-cultural characteristics. It represents an upland surrounded by mountainous massifs cut through by the Crna Reka river canyon, spreading to a length of 100 km, being the longest in the Balkans. Mariovo covers an area of 1038 m² and is situated at an altitude of 700-1000 m. According to its geographic characteristics, in respect to Crna Reka river, Mariovo is divided into Upper and Lower Mariovo, while administratively, it is divided among Prilep (47.7%), Bitola (32%) and Kavadarci (20.3%) municipalities. In this region, 40 historic settlements have been recognized and it represents a kind of an archipelago of similar rural settlements, but also a distinctive identity. During the whole 20th century, Mariovo was subject to continuous migration. Its crisis started with new geopolitical organization after the Balkan wars and the First World War when it lost its vital natural and economic connections with the formerly unitary territory of the Balkan Peninsula. The further impact on the economic and social structure came with the processes of

intensive post-war modernization and promotion of collectivization models that contributed to the fragmentation of the social and economic body of the region. So, in 1956, as a result of the industrialization process, there began mass migration of the population to closer towns and later emigration to western European countries and abroad, in Canada, USA and Australia. Finally, the post-socialist transition and deregulation of the productive and social system at the end of the 20th century, turned the entire country into an emigration zone.

Mariovo region has been experiencing the phenomenon of extreme migration, mass exodus of inhabitants from this region resulting in age differentiation of the population, the young and capable to work migrate, while the elderly people remain. Contrary to this existing reality, is it possible to explore an alternative vision of revitalization of the village?

Mariovo is an example of pronounced depopulation. According to data available (Table 1), it can be concluded that there has been mass exodus of the population. From over 12000 inhabitants in 1948 to 800 inhabitants in 2002.

Table 1: Population count in Mariovo

Year	1948	1953	1961	1971	1981	1991	1994	2002
Population	12.504	13.682	13.400	9.730	4.656	1.774	1.378	839
±%—	+9.4 %	-2.1 %	-27.4%	-52.1%	-61.9%	-22.3%	-39.1%	

Source: The data referring to the period 1948-2002 are according to official censuses/State Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia.

Through the topic "Scenario for Revitalization of the Macedonian Village" realized in the period 2006-2016 within the framework of the final exams at the "Ss. Cyril and Methodius" University in Skopje, we wanted to give an answer for this situation. We proposed a series of tactics for selected villages in the Mariovo region as operational tools versus official policies and dominant socio-economic strategies for reconstruction of the village (Bandevska, 2007; Shekutkovska, 2007).

We have chosen Shtavica village, at the doorstep of Mariovo region, which is still in the controversial state between abandoning and remaining.

It is situated on the southeast side of Prilep Plain, at a distance of 15 km from Prilep (fig.1). Shtavica is on the boundary of the geographic Mariovo entity and is considered a kind of a gate leading to Mariovo. It is situated at an altitude of 800 m. According to available official data in 1961 (Table 2), it had 494 inhabitants, while in 2002, it had 87 inhabitants. The data clearly point out the tendencies of stagnation, depression and depopulation that are common for the entire Mariovo region.

Table 2: Population count in Shtavica

Year	1900	1905	1948	1953	1961	1971	1981	1991	1994	2002
Population	322	360	444	493	494	413	264	127	107	84

Source: Data referring to the period 1948-2002 are according to official censuses/State Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia.

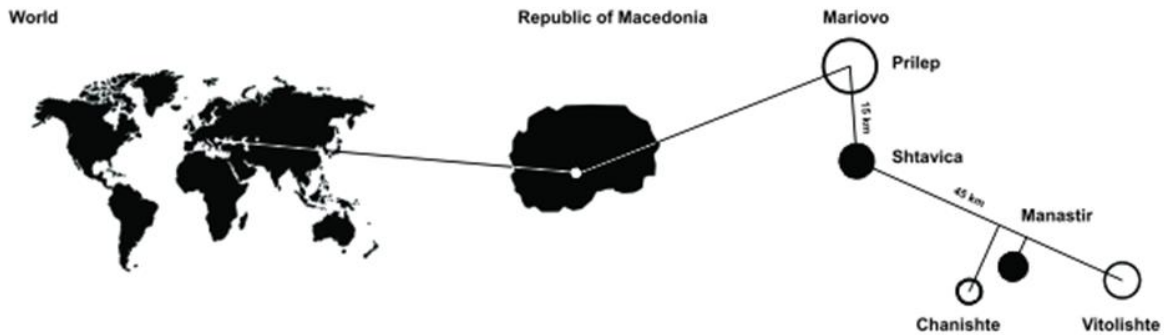


Figure 2. The world / Mariovo region, the segment of Prilep municipality.

From spatial, morphological aspect, the village represents a loose aggregation of built units, elementary, rudimentary houses, distributed around irregular ring streets with an array of wide and narrow spaces, which seem like beads on string, a “beady ring” pattern (Hillier & Hanson, 1984). The specific form of the village arises not from conscious design, but from the accumulative process of small-scale decisions taken over time.

In the film “Before the Rain” (Manchevski, 1994), this village is the background of the paradoxical merge of global and local forces. The main character stands in front of his own, almost completely ruined house in which he wants to return, as a metaphor of the character’s own identity (fig.2).



Figure 3. Aleksandar (Rade Šerbedžija), in front of his own ruined house in the Manchevski film *Before the Rain* (1994).

The House

The subject of research is the physical structure of the village. In that sense, we explored the potential of the physical structure of the village at the level of the house, as well as the possibility of its program upgrade. Thus, the analysis of the house will take place from two subsequent aspects, at the level of the physical structure and at the level of the program, and the form and the function.

Form

At the level of the physical structure of the village, through analysis of the constructed structures and inventory and selection of houses in relation to the building conditions, we selected abandoned houses in different phases of destruction (fig.4). Thus, despite their critical physical conditions, we perceived the selected houses and their lots as particular places and opportunities for potential future development of the village. We proposed their reconstruction, not in historical terms, but through a new morphological and symbolic re-contextualization. We wanted to see the houses in a new, way, through the estrangement procedure of their usual everyday performances. In this way, they will be different from their previous image and, at the village level, they will become new landmarks, monuments of the village landscape. They mark the restoration of the village in a physical sense, but at the same time, they give the opportunity for a new program upgrade.

Starting with the “archaeology” of the village, with the traces and ruins of former houses, we provided a proposal for their renewal, reconstruction with authentic material with identical volume m^3 and area m^2 , but with different and unique geometrical shape. The renovated houses should be clearly different from the context. They should be displaced from the usual context, namely, they should be “high” houses, “slender” houses, “vertical” houses, “deformed” houses, “poetical” houses. Houses that disclose the sensation of life, to be perceived not in the way they are known, but in the way they occur. Let us make them “unfamiliar”, let us make them heavy, let us increase the weight and the duration of perception, as Shklovsky wrote (1917), let us incorporate an intrigue in the usual order of things in a way similar to the estrangement procedure in literature (fig.5).

Figure 4. Shtavica village as aggregation of houses. Selection of abandoned, ruined houses; Typology of the abandoned houses, Shtavica village (Bandevska, 2007).

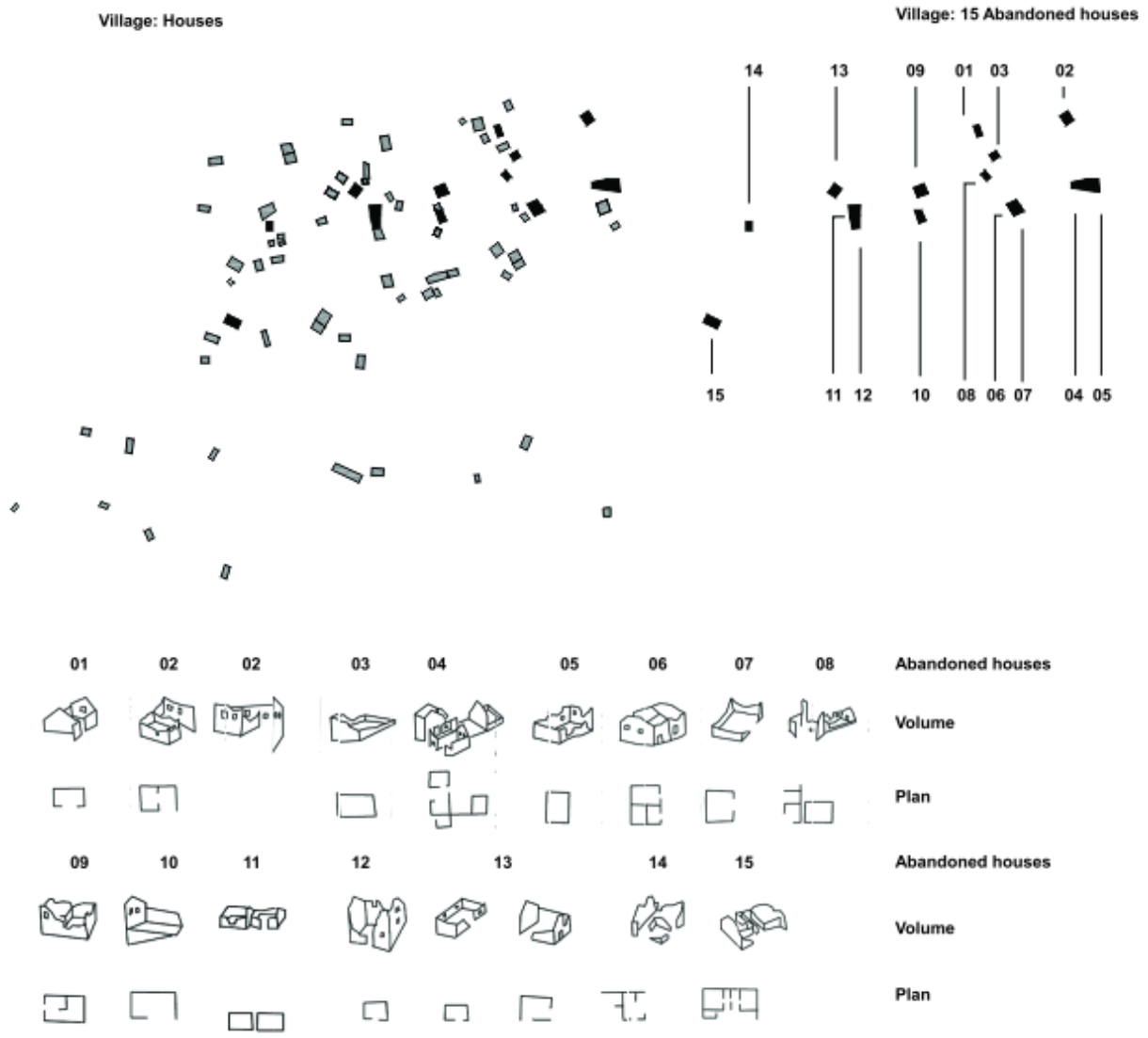
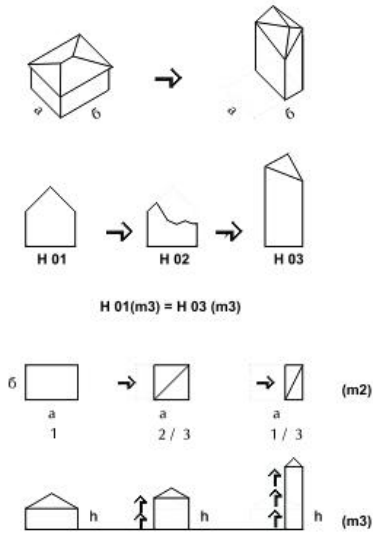
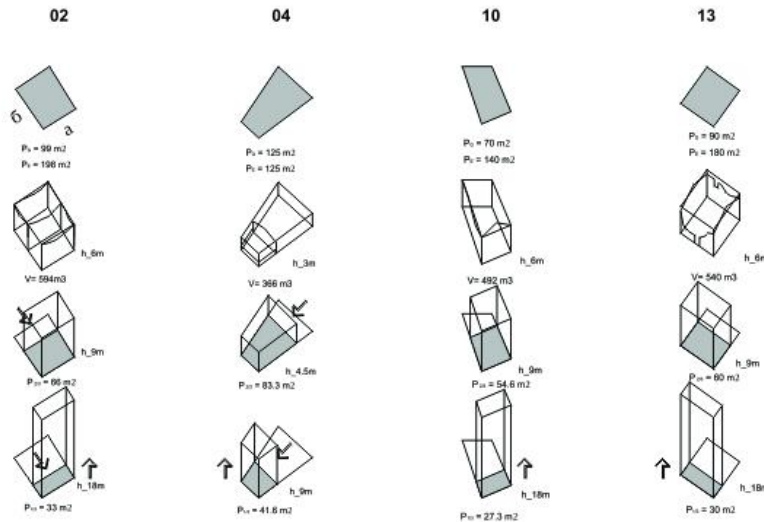
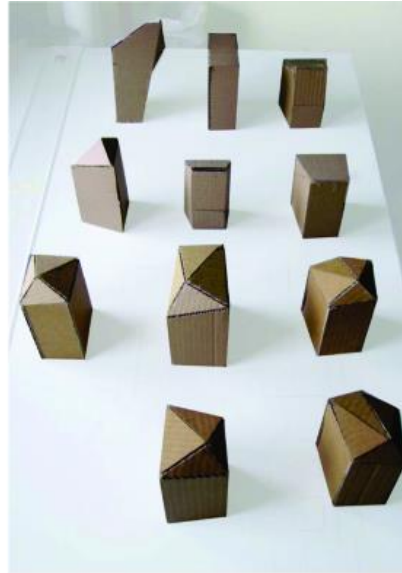


Figure 5. Estrangement procedure as a process of transforming the existing abandoned houses, as a new concrete and symbolic presence in the village. (Bandevska , 2007).



Transformation of the volume through reduction of surface (1; 2/3; 1/3)



The subjects of investigation are the abandoned houses undergoing different phases of destruction (fig.4). Anticipated in the project is, first, their physical reconstruction, with the same volume value m^3 , but reduced ground floor building area, from 2/3 to 1/3 of the total ground floor area of the original plan, second, their program reconstruction by 2/3 residential program and 1/3 economic or other service program of interest for the village community. In that way, the renovated houses have a reduced plan, but a free height, in order to become distinctive morphological units, artifacts that should also obtain an upgraded social, functional role (fig.5).

Function

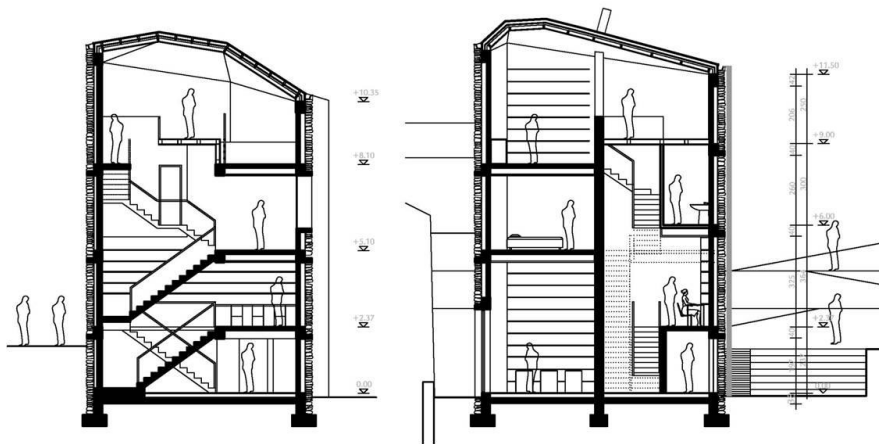
In the program sense, the selected houses are frameworks for new programs. It is the deficient programs of the everyday life of the village community that can be accommodated in some of the selected houses. These functions are introduced through individuals, carriers of certain functions and potential inhabitants of the village. The issue of revitalization of the village is related to the issue of revitalization of the social structure of the rural community. To that effect, we wanted to define the profile of future inhabitants and households based on their function in the community. We singled out several deficient and essential professions, functions that could help in practical ways, but also symbolic constitution and renewal of a community personalized through the figures of: *the teacher, the physician, the architect, the priest, the baker, the beekeeper.*

These have functional, but also symbolic importance for life in the village. They are functions that can generate people around them. Care for the children in their early age can keep and return families with children in rural areas; The village physician may provide a certain focus in the village and continuous education of the population about health; The architect may provide new visions about the village, but also lead continuous repair of the village, accept and improve traditional knowledge, skills and materials; The priest can be the spiritual pillar of the village. In the past, some of these professions were part of the systematic distribution of programs in rural areas, but these policies were lost with the dramatic trends of depopulation and erosion of the social system. Is a local renewal of this practice that starts with the needs of specific villages possible? Is the local renewal of this procedure possible?

We selected three concrete households, volunteers, through which we tested the project, 2/3 housing + 1/3 program +. The participants were a teacher with a small classroom and library; a physician with an office, and an architect with a workshop / atelier. The project led by Bandevska (2007) intended testing through concrete users. Through interviews, volunteer households were selected as hypothetical inhabitants within the project. Through their needs, we wanted to come to a specific programme and spatial organization for the selected houses.

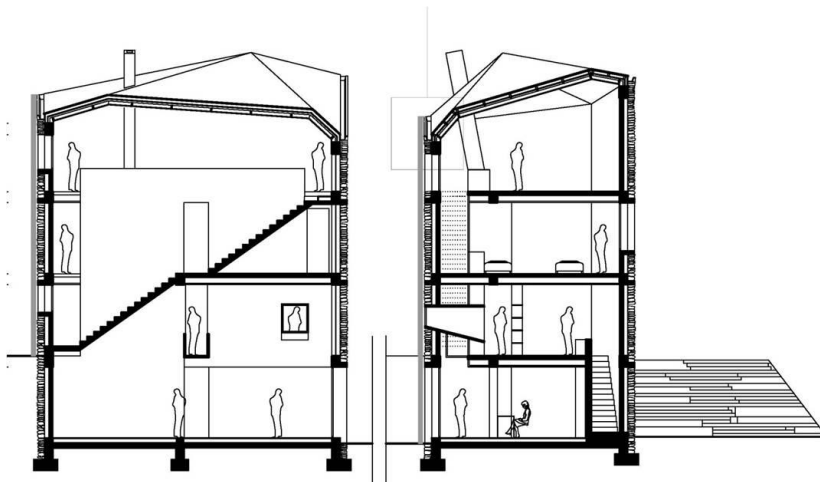
The house of the teacher refers to a single member household. The first two levels are intended for a common programme. On the ground floor, there was a small classroom and a gallery – library/individual work space. On the second level there was a bedroom, while on the third level, a living room with kitchen and a dining space (*Figure 6*).

Figure 6. Teacher's house, cross-sections: classroom, library, at the ground floor and the gallery, residential part at the first and the second storey (Bandevska, 2007).



The house of the physician refers to a four member household, a husband, wife and two children. It consists of a residential part and a part for medical practice. The outpatient department is on the ground floor, while the residential part is on the next three levels. On the first level, there is a guest room, on the second level, there is the common living space, while on the third level is the parents' bedroom and the bedroom of the children. In addition to the space for the doctor's practice, they also wanted an additional bedroom that can be connected with the outpatient department or can be separated from it. It is to serve for emergency situations and also guests expected to come from the city (*Figure 7*).

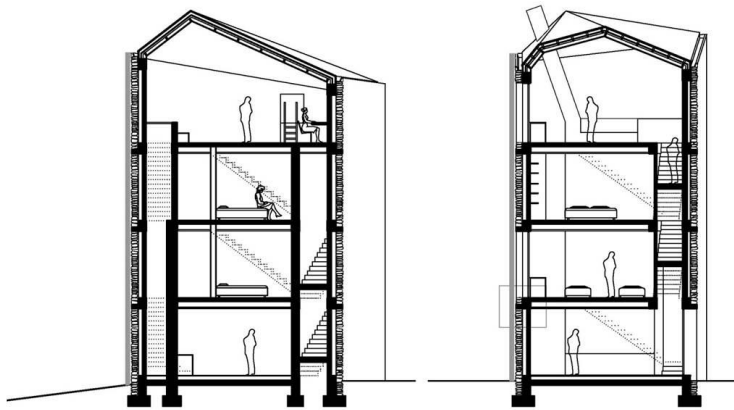
Figure 7. *The house of the physician, cross-sections: outpatient department at the ground floor, a guest room at the first storey, a residential part at the third and the fourth storey (Bandevska, 2007).*



The house of the architect refers to a three-member household: a husband, a wife and a child. The residence starts at the ground floor, the living space. The next two levels are the part intended for sleeping: the domain of the parents, the first level; the domain of the child/children, at the second level.

At the fourth level is the studio of the architect. They wanted the studio to have the highest position, to be separated from everyday life, but at the same time, to be a place overlooking the village and its surroundings (*Figure 8.*).

Figure 8. The architect's house, cross-sections: residential part at the ground floor, the first storey, the third storey; studio at the fourth storey (Bandevska, 2007).



Through these examples, we wanted to come to a specific program through the needs of the selected households, but also to the possible generative structure of the relationship between the residential part and the additional function within the frames of a house (*Figure 9.*). In all examples, the program distribution was followed by careful connection and distinguishing of different program units. The public parts have independent access in respect to the private residential domain, but also a possibility for alternative interior communications between these two parts. The teacher has independent access to the residential levels, but these can be connected at the gallery level. The architect has an independent access leading to the studio as well as access through the residential part so that these two flows can be connected at the studio level.

Figure 9. Teacher's house, Physician's house, Architect's house, disassembled models (Bandevska, 2007).



But, who are the real people to settle into the abandoned houses given that we know that the villages in the Mariovo region are undergoing permanent depopulation? How can we find inhabitants for these houses and these villages? What if we can use the global flows of people and ideas for new people in the village? What if we can establish a global network of villages with their own needs and offers?

What if we can conceive these personalities connected with the defined functions, the pillars of traditional communities, as not necessarily permanent or necessarily local?

So, similar to the theory of morphology of tales, the character-function relationship is ambivalent, the functions are permanent, invariable elements, while the characters are variable (Propp, 1927). The term “function” is understood as action of the character defined from the aspect of the character’s importance for the course of the action.

In that way, the selected protagonists may stay, for a certain period, performing the function and the role intended for them and be cyclically replaced according to individual needs and the needs/agreements with the local community. Furthermore, they could originate from the village, but this is not necessary, nor it is necessary that they are from neighboring domestic towns. It seems that the local communities should be made open to the world, connected with the global network of flows of people and ideas toward a kind of a professional mobility. So, these functions and these houses should become a temporary practice and a temporary habitat for different people from different parts of the world that become part of the community, constitute and represent it in a certain period. They can perform their practice in the village and amend the social community in a specific way for a definite period of time. In that way, we can construct a local/global community, a local community with “global” actors and form an electrical rural community. To that effect, we can connect with the arguments referring to the new economy given by Kelly (1998) and those of Collins & Porras (1994) in respect to productive, successful companies that are sustainable for years, keeping the small core of invariable values and stimulating progress of all the remaining ones. Beyond the core of values, nothing is excluded from the flux. In the same way, if large rural communities cannot survive, we should preserve their core of values that can be connected to the global flows and can stimulate future progress.

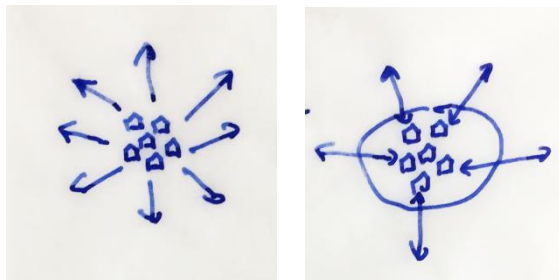
In that way, different regions of Europe should help themselves in profiling spontaneous flows and becoming aware of people, space and places that constitute them, for their own heritage, for the key, valuable socio-cultural elements that constitute them and from which they can step forward into the *envisioned future*.

Conclusion

For the investigated case, we proposed a scenario for revitalization of the village as a procedure of innovation of the existing reality, similar to the “estrangement” procedure in literature. Through the “estrangement” procedure, we can see the subject of exploration, the village, not only in its naturalistic givenness in its own context, but also in its separation, semantic transfer to the global flows. We started with the issue of extreme depopulation and the possibility for social, spatial revitalization. The selected case is specific in respect to specific place, but also generative in respect to the proposed model. In the case of Shtavica village, we first of all proposed a selective renewal of the spatial structure, renovation of the ruined and abandoned houses and their spatial and program transformation in respect to the village

morphology and, second, their becoming referent places for revitalization of the social and symbolic structure of the rural community. In that way, former ordinary houses become “unusual”, “strange”, “defamiliar” in the formal sense as well, but also with the “upgraded” program and symbolic role in the rural community. They become frames of selected functional and symbolic activities of the key actors of the village, the pillars of the village, “eminent houses” of “eminent persons”. The proposed model refers to maintenance of the permanentness of the rural community on a temporary basis. The physical structure is “permanent”, the key actors are variable, temporary and can be local or global as well. We started with the local conditions, with the authentic place, its identity, relations and history, but we connected it with possible global flows of people, services and knowledge. It is exactly the conceiving of the rural area not as an isolated fragment of artificial regionalism, but as an essential constitutive part of an urban rural network, not only from a physical but primarily functional aspect of modern life, that makes a step forward toward true revitalization of villages as an integral and essential part of modern society.

Figure 10. Process of revitalization of the village: from the deserted village to a permanent village core and temporal actors as key figures.



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