

THE DEVETAKI PROJECT

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Volunteers carry out roof repairs

SINCE 2014 a small village on a remote plateau in Bulgaria has been at the centre of a remarkable project focused on international collaboration, knowledge-sharing and the relearning of traditional building techniques. The original concept of training and preservation has snowballed, generating a momentum which has drawn in students, conservators, architects, artists and volunteers from across the world, including IHBC members. In the process, the project has helped to tackle skills shortages, unemployment and the erosion of the historic built environment. It has also spawned exhibitions, exchange visits, international partnership working, films, football matches and art projects (see page xx).

The Devetaki Plateau is situated in the poorest region of one of the most impoverished countries in the EU. Made up of nine villages in three municipalities, this area suffers from a range of economic and social issues, most pertinently depopulation. This has had a devastating effect, contributing to the deterioration and loss of historic buildings and the decline of the villages as living entities.

While 20 years ago there were

900 people living in the village of Karpachevo, today there are fewer than 60. This exodus helps to explain, in part, the erosion of the village's historic built environment. Most of those who remain are in their eighties and nineties and this steadily ageing population simply does not have the resources to maintain what is left of its rapidly declining built heritage. Karpachevo is not unique in its plight: throughout the Devetaki Plateau visitors find village after village with buildings of breath-taking beauty and simplicity which, little known and largely unrecorded, now face irreversible change and loss.

Many of these rare architectural survivals have reached a tipping point of rapid deterioration. Outward migration has led to a decline in the practice of traditional skills, stifling appropriate repair and maintenance. This problem is compounded by a move towards modern building methods and materials, a lack of appreciation of the intrinsic value of the vernacular architecture and an absence of statutory protection. Furthermore, while the loss of traditional building skills is a pan-European problem, here it has

been exacerbated by 50 years of communist rule, collectivisation, standardisation and a post-soviet era of nervous autonomy. In short, the longevity of Devetaki's unique built heritage is under threat due to a lack of both the resources and motivation to invest in preservation.

On this plateau the architectural tradition relies only on materials claimed from the local landscape, such as slender timber poles, unfired clay, dry stone walls and limestone slate roofs, and it has remained unchanged for centuries. As well as providing a regional aesthetic, the buildings constitute a narrative which illuminates the political, economic, social and cultural history of the people and communities who constructed and live (or used to live) in these evocative structures. As with the most inspiring vernacular architecture, the structures are based on a fundamental knowledge of materials and craft. Walls are constructed from unhewn stone plinths, which then rise in adobe bricks, either with or without rickety timber frames. Balancing on top of these walls are roofs crafted from oak and acacia, where the natural shape of the unworked timber dictates the form.

With their low pitches and hips, the roofs carry enormous loads of stone slates laid without pegs or mortar. It is only the weight of the stones that holds them in place, creating the strange impression that the buildings are being pressed downwards, forced back to the ground. The effect is stunning and the landscape ripples with diamond patterned limestone roofs interspersed with the roman tiles and clay interlockers which were churned out in their millions here in the 1950s.

The buildings are simply crafted, without fuss, from a limited but well-explored pallet. The old people left in the village can describe how they

dug the clay from the ground and formed the adobe bricks to dry in the sun, how they would leave stones to frost and split to make the slates, about the best stone to burn for lime and where you can find the hazel, planted by a great-great grandfather, that can be used for making wattles. Cycles of building and repair followed the pattern of the year, with each season dictating a different task. This knowledge may be half-remembered, but the evidence remains embedded in the buildings and the landscape.

These buildings are proving inspirational to the young architects working on the project because they demonstrate low-carbon systems and principles of construction. Understanding and learning from these local buildings might provide insights into how local, national and global environmental challenges can be met. This knowledge may well be the project's greatest resource with the potential for far-reaching benefits.

TRAINING THROUGH CONSERVATION

The project centres around the preservation of a historic farm complex, purchased with the support of the Headley Trust, which provides the vehicle for training. Every aspect of work is carried out by trainees, students and volunteers through trial and error and based on meticulous research. It successfully

combines training and preservation and facilitates broad international engagement. Students, trainees and volunteers from Bulgaria, Britain, Estonia, and Taiwan and across the globe work side by side surveying, recording and repairing the fabric, learning from each other and from the buildings.

The aspiration is a fully repaired farm which will act as a cultural hub to promote the region's architecture, art, customs, dance, cuisine and music. Inadvertently, the journey towards this goal has already established an internationally diverse community of sharing and creativity. The intense activity both on site and remotely is having a proliferating effect, allowing the farm to act as both a prototype and a facility for the continued use and preservation of other buildings in the area.

The process of repair and conservation, learning and training has far-reaching benefits, not only securing the fabric of this building but providing the skills to maintain and repair other buildings in the area and internationally. At the same time it is instilling an appreciation of and enthusiasm for vernacular architecture and traditional skills, helping to resolve the deeper issue of the lack of motivation to invest in the preservation of buildings in the region. The approach of training through conservation allows ownership,

sharing and collaboration. It is now being replicated elsewhere in the UK and abroad as participants take home the spark of a 'Karpachevo utopia'.

Following standard conservation practice, the teams started by surveying and recording the built environment. This allowed the buildings' cultural and architectural significance to be placed within a regional, national and international context. Understanding provided the first step towards making informed decisions about repair, management and preservation. This systematic process gave credibility to the architecture as having historical, architectural and cultural worth. The process was also used as a means of training with architects and surveyors guiding others.

As repairs to the farmhouse progress, philosophical approaches to conservation are explored for both the buildings and their contents. One result of depopulation is the sheer number of abandoned buildings, seemingly vacated the day the iron curtain fell, with contents left, tables set for breakfast, unmade beds, and personal items such as letters and photographs scattered and undisturbed for years. These time capsule rooms are a rich learning resource, providing opportunities to research historic and cultural significance, and to learn about recording and conservation.

Connections and collaborations began to form very early on between architects, artists and conservators, resulting in creative and alternative approaches to preservation and interpretation. There is something sublime about seeing a Taiwanese conservator sharing carpentry skills with a Bulgarian architect, an Estonian carpenter sharing folklore with a British artist, or a Turkish master demonstrating drystone walling through a language of gestures.

The repair phase of the farmhouse and barns – including the walls, outbuildings and restoration of the land for agriculture – is undertaken during a series of annual workshops. These workshops have become an established part of the growing Bulgarian conservation movement and have caught the imagination of people



A traditional dwelling in the village of Karpachevo with typical construction of stone plinth, timber frame with adobe bricks and low-pitched roof bearing unsecured stone slates

THE ART OF ABANDONMENT

The Devetaki Project has inspired interventions in abandoned buildings across Bulgaria, Britain and Taiwan which respond to and explore the connections between art, architecture and preservation. The interventions are ad hoc, occurring naturally as conservators, artists and architects collaborate and react to abandoned spaces. The first took place in the redundant church of St John's, Great Yarmouth. The church was full of abandoned objects – the remains of jumble sales, debris and rubbish – much of it of little consequence but all connected to previous memories and uses. Architects and conservators from Bulgaria and Yarmouth used the objects to question preservation conventions, especially what is deemed worthy of preservation.

The abandoned objects symbolise everyday life, the unremarkable, that which is considered culturally worthless. In contrast, however, the project treats waste as part of our cultural identity, living as we do in a throw-away society that creates objects which quickly become obsolete. Importantly, preserving what has been discarded serves to question who decides what should be preserved. The project also sought to articulate the architectural space in which the objects have accumulated by suspending them from the vaulted ceiling. This manipulation of objects in the building allowed the architecture to be addressed rather than simply used as an exhibition space.

Similarly, the project used an abandoned building in Bulgaria (above) to define depopulation and the loss of a way of life. The poignant abandoned houses echo with the lives of former inhabitants. The significance here is not only the architectural space itself but the smells, marks, memories and shadows of occupation. The narrative is powerfully enhanced by these remnants, but even without such obvious connections the space resonates with a weight of memory.

Suspending the objects in one room preserves them, albeit temporarily. What was once cherished and was then abandoned now floats liberated: a photograph, a shoe, a letter from a daughter, tools used to gather corn, a century of heavy trivia. This small intervention in an abandoned building on a forgotten plateau describes depopulation, the plight of a community, a diaspora.

Participants in the project exchange concepts and approaches to spaces and to the theme of preservation. These ideas are shared internationally and put into practice with an ethos of testing and experimentation and with a belief that working together in unrestricted and undefined ways can lead to new approaches.



eager to learn, to help and to share in the spirit of internationalism.

The work is hard; challenging but rewarding. Clay pits are dug and adobe mixed, timber is gathered from the forest for repairs, fallen dry stone walls are dismantled and rebuilt. The energy and enthusiasm for the tasks is overwhelming. Accommodation is provided and everyone takes a turn in preparing meals, sharing their culture through food and recipes.

This approach has a number of important advantages:

- the preservation of an important collection of buildings
- the long-term maintenance and stewardship of the buildings
- the creation of a locally trained workforce
- and the legacy of the next generation of architects and conservators who appreciate and will ultimately maintain the buildings.

This continuity and fostering of international relations at the student stage is particularly important because it creates a generation which is eager to engage with and advocate the vernacular and the use of traditional materials and practices. Building up a pan-European network of emerging heritage professionals encourages the ongoing sharing of information, training and experience from a broad range of cultures and perspectives.

In the long term the farm will host working parties which will tend the land and maintain the buildings. Workshops will continue to be run on traditional building skills, smallholding agriculture and local crafts. Project partner the University of Architecture, Engineering and Geodesy in Sofia will continue to use the building as a research centre, exploring how traditional building materials can be used in contemporary

architecture and helping to spearhead a Bulgarian conservation agenda.

The village and its unique vernacular architecture will ultimately be preserved and its cultural identity strengthened and used to inspire others. The project has succeeded in highlighting the vernacular architecture of the region and, through the combined efforts of many people and organisations, has placed it in an international context while helping to secure its future.

Darren Barker is the principal conservation officer at Great Yarmouth and managing director of Great Yarmouth Preservation Trust. His background is in architecture, art and conservation. With a track record in creating viable new uses for redundant buildings and spaces he is particularly interested in community inclusion and training. He devised and leads the Devetaki Project.