



Rhodo-plan



- **Strategies for the sustainable development and revival of Bulgarian villages through vernacular practices and architectural preservation.**

SCAN TO WATCH



https://youtu.be/EqMn0WmiVLo?si=1hi1_zUYtSZea9Lg

Traditional practices from Shiroka Laka, Bulgaria

Rhodo-plan





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Figure 4: Group photograph featuring Mr and Mrs Kalfovi, Mrs Boyklieva and Mr Nizamov after the interviews (Liu, 2025)

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my greatest gratitude to all those involved in the process leading up to the development of this project. This would not have been possible without the support from my family who have always offered their wisdom, energy and time throughout the days of research, site visits and hours of conversation with locals from Shiroka Laka. I would like to thank Mr Lubo, Mr and Mrs Kalfovi for sharing their valuable knowledges, experience and time through the conversations that will feature in the short film alongside the portfolio. Key for this project has been the valuable guidance of my supervisor Jane Wong, and the mutual support with my colleagues Gonzalo Castillo and Hannah Liu. Special appreciation goes to Hannah for traveling out to Bulgaria and accompanying me on the days in Shiroka Laka with her camera, endless positivity and expertise. The scanning would not have been possible without the help from Claudia Toma from UCL B-Made, responsible for facilitating the borrowing of the Faro S250 Scanner used for this project.

Abstract

Rural family dwellings within the villages of the Rhodope Mountain region, from the early 18th - late 20th century, exemplify the spirit of participatory design. Their physical fabric holds stories shaped by generations, their decisions, knowledges, memories and skills. In return, these intangible factors shaped the physical aspects of the houses across their materiality, form, function, atmosphere, aesthetic and use.

The generational construction practices, deeply intertwined with the culture of family living can exemplify deep tangible and intangible heritage within the rural regions of Bulgaria. Despite this, Bulgarian villages are experiencing depopulation and abandonment of many of these houses, putting this heritage at risk. Ever since I left behind my home village for the big city, my mind keeps racing back to the days when life was slower, and the body existed in synchrony with the environment around it. Although the standard Rhodopian home is not considered architectural heritage officially, I believe it is worth arguing for.

The intangible qualities that influenced the designs are especially under-appreciated and in the biggest danger of disappearance, threatening the loss of the physical heritage attached to it. I hope that in understanding the oral histories, context and the specialist skills that were passed down generations, we can appreciate the need to preserve and revive them as a key component to rebuilding the villages bottom-up. The research will aim to make use of national and local archival materials available, photography, film and ethnographic research methods. A variety of surveying techniques alongside 3D scanning can be useful for the recording, understanding and digitising of the physical fabric.



Foreword

Growing up in Smolyan, Bulgaria, in a multigenerational family home high in the Rhodope Mountains, I witnessed first-hand the tradition of families building and expanding their houses with the help of neighbours and local craftsmen. At that time, the local practice of designing and building our homes seemed logical and natural in the order of things. The topography was tough, the terrain was steep with flatter more fertile lands prioritised for growing, exposed to the elements with funds insufficient. The natural environment around was abundant in raw building materials such as timber, clay, stone, slate, ground, gravel, lime and marble. That was the way people could afford to build. They were locally sourced, and building knowledge was passed down through experience, not formal training. A sustainable practice we can reflect on today. My own family's experience—where my great-grandparents began construction of the family house, continued by my grandparents, and later by my father who later became a master builder and continued the construction. Now it's down to me to learn from and continue this legacy. At the time in the early 1900s, architects were highly unaffordable, specialised and prioritised for larger scale projects. However, the role of the architect is now quickly evolving and being challenged to be much more inclusive and present in society for the communities and the general public.

My interest in architecture was shaped by these experiences, leading me to study Interior Architecture at Oxford Brookes University, and now, a Master's in Architecture and Historic Urban Environments at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. My aspirations in the field of architecture as a researcher and designer are to develop hands on practice, focusing on Participatory design solutions, with a close appreciation of the factors that allow the human body to experience and connect with space equitably. I believe, the models of multigenerational design as in the case of family homes from the rural parts of Bulgaria exemplifies exactly that. Series of design decisions made around the practical needs of the family, community spirit, and physical constraints set by the context.

During my studies, I gained technical skills in historic research, surveying, and 3D scanning for historic environments, which I applied on a field trip to Eritrea with The Asmara Heritage Program (AHP). As part of the MAHUE workshops in Asmara (23/02/2025–02/03/2025), I helped document and digitise the Edna Mariam Orthodox Cathedral with 23 scans of its exterior and interior. This experience deepened my interest in researching and understanding solutions for de-centring and democratising knowledge(s) systems, skills and information through design and digitalisation.

This experience made me reflect on the challenges and opportunities for heritage protection in places like the Rhodope villages, where traditional homes are rich in history but often lack official recognition or protection.



Figure 6: Photograph featuring Mr Nizamov at the centre of Shiroka Laka (Liu, 2025)

Key terms:

- Sustainable development- “ development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (Brundtland Commission, 1987)
- Digitalisation - "The process of converting assets into digital formats (e.g. photographing a manuscript, mapping a heritage site, or 3D-scanning an amphora)" (HIGHRES, 2025)
- Decentralised heritage- “community-driven approach to heritage preservation... embodies a shift towards inclusive and collaborative heritage management; prioritising the preservation of natural and cultural heritage, and to address common challenges such as over-tourism and community displacement. The approach highlights the dynamic nature of heritage as an asset, emphasising its potential to benefit local communities and vice versa. It underscores the significance of community involvement in actively deciding the importance of preserving natural or cultural sites, practices, and celebrations bottom-up”. (European Heritage Hub, 2023)
- Multigenerational design - "The practice of building for and accommodating different generations from a family under one household. The idea is to provide privacy and independence for different generations whilst allowing for stronger sense of belonging, community, economy and sharing. Family quarters can be extended in multiple ways depending on the context and size of the family" (Authors own, 2025)
- Rhodo-plan – "The term 'rhod' derives from the Bulgarian word for family, and Rhodope refers to the region where this research is conducted. This term has been formulated to represent an approach to designing family dwellings in rural Bulgaria, with an emphasis on planning that meets the requirements of sustainable family living." (Authors own, 2025)
- Vernacular architecture – “Vernacular architecture refers to traditional building styles that reflect local customs, materials, and environmental conditions, often developed without formal architectural training" (Mileto et al., 2022)”

- Intangible heritage- “The ‘intangible cultural heritage’ means the practices, representation, expressions, knowledge skills– as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith– that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2003, article 2)
- Participatory design- “design is based on the use of techniques which communicate, interact, empathise and stimulate the people involved, obtaining an understanding of their needs, desires and experiences which often transcends that which the people themselves actually realised. Practised in its most basic form, it leads to products, systems and services which are physically, perceptually, cognitively and emotionally intuitive.” (Giacomin, 2014).

★

These terms come together to form a broader thematic focus for this project as one of questioning current practices/ approaches and evaluating how we understand them. Although the definitions offer useful insights into these very timely terms emerging from cross-diciplinary practices and research; they also make us ask further questions of the topic.

When it comes to sustainable development, whose 'needs' count, is the definition inclusive for all in different heritage contexts where cultural values shape local priorities? When it comes to digitalisation, it is useful to ask the same. Despite the usefulness of digital technologies , how can we ensure the process of documenting and 'digitising' is decentralised? Is this accessible for people without specific training? Who decides what is published and what is recorded? Can the general public become agents for heritage preservation? If the community lead the effort for local development and preservation bottom-up, how do we ensure to manage and organise this process? Do we need additional tools/systems in place? The idea of participatory design is very useful as it builds up on the emphasis of taking into consideration nuanced local perspectives, representative of the needs, knowledges and experiences. However, the biggest challenge would be how to ensure the process will remain something dynamic and mutually beneficial for the stakeholders, rather than a one-off workshop that can gather superficial feedback and insights.

Introduction

My research intends to focus on strategies for the sustainable development and revival of Bulgarian villages. I aim to do this through examining the existing tangible and intangible heritage of the village Shiroka Laka, and reflect on current approaches and structures for heritage preservation in Bulgaria. The rural villages encompass a range of traditional Rhodopian housing in the form of multigenerational dwellings. Shiroka Laka has house examples some of which have been well-preserved, many restored and others in ruins despite the government's decision to label the village an architectural and folklore reserve since 1965.

This topic is quite timely as I reflect on my lived experience from Banite Municipality, Smolyan region; a village within the same region, comparable in size and currently facing challenges as a result of depopulation and lack of clear guidelines for heritage preservation and architectural planning. Many of the lessons learned from Shiroka Laka can serve as a guide for neighbouring villages, highlighting strategies that could guide the regeneration and redevelopment of the Bulgarian family home. The skills and knowledge can enable families to personally restore and expand their houses, following certain standards that celebrate and preserve architectural history, heritage and vernacular practices of the context.

We will study the original village highstreet compared to now, reflecting the wider narrative to preservation and funding. The research investigates 3 main typologies across the village, showing current states of use and condition of the houses along the highstreet as a site of focus, examined through photography and 3D Scanning. The study will then focus on historical construction layers, as seen in the 1853 Kalajdzhieva house (one of the oldest and best-preserved family residences in the village). The houses have been constructed over generations and reflect the skills, knowledge, and experiences of former residents. Photographs, scans and resident accounts will support an analysis of current usage and opinions through a short movie accompanying this thesis.

The final chapter will stipulate models and ideas for future sustainable development and heritage protection through the case study of an ongoing effort by NGO's and researchers in the field. The personal living memory of growing up in a traditional house, and experiencing the generational contribution towards building it, will help me as a research and design through the lens of a local to the region.

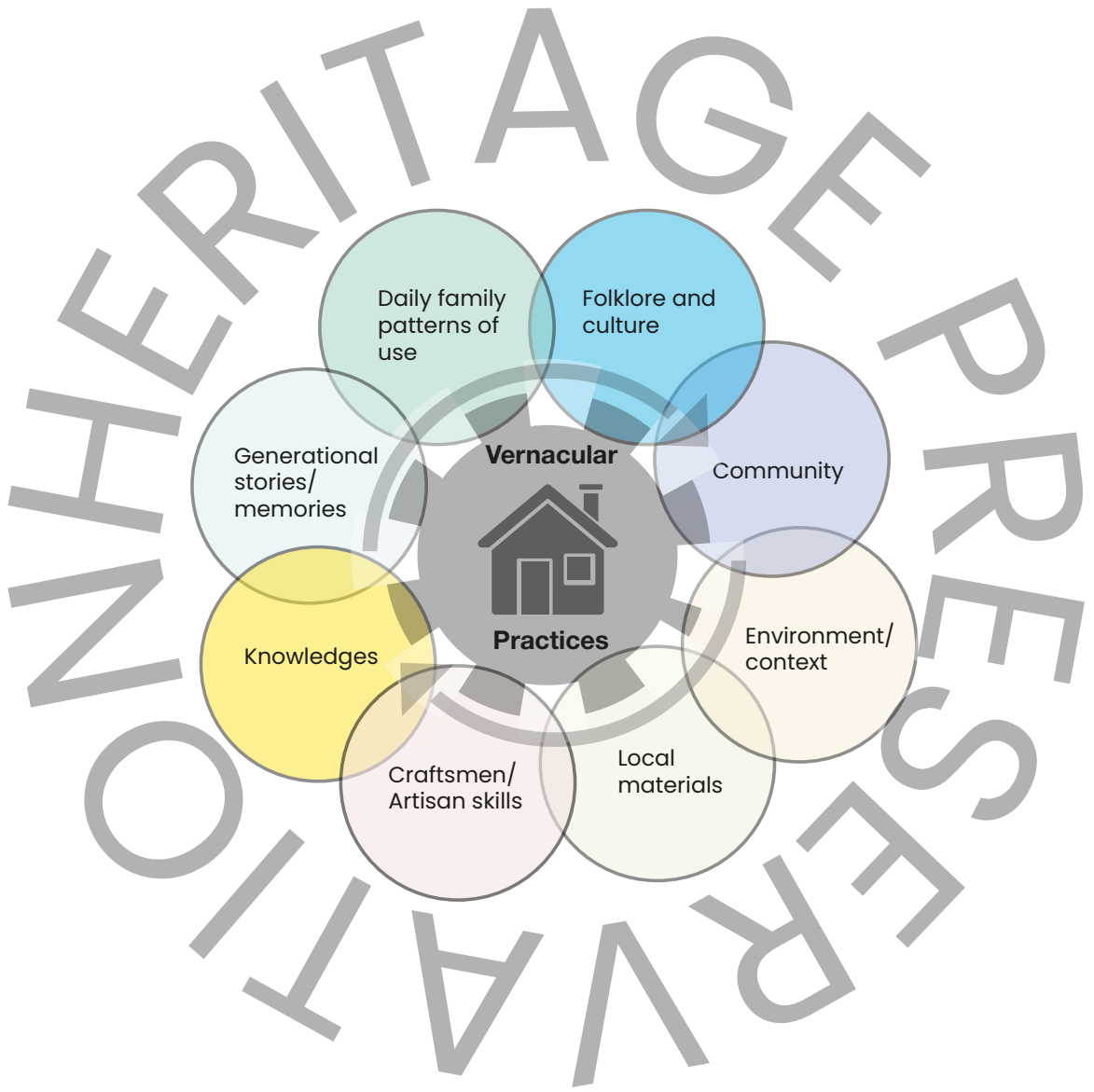


Figure 7 : Attempt to formulate the complex pallet of vernacular heritage elements for the project (Authors own, 2025)

Research elements and methodology

My methodology intends to make use of ethnographic research methods, which would entail certain oral histories and memories from residents of these villages. These will take form as interviews / conversations regarding their memories of the village's development through time, past and current trends, and personal story of how their family home has been built and evolved over time. I will also try to make use of existing documentaries and movies that showed life within these villages when it was full of life and activity. There is an element of photography that will be used to document the current state of the architectural fabric as a method of site surveying active medium for architectural preservation. Furthermore, the use 3D scanning equipment as a method to capture specific households' exteriors and interiors accurately, will play a vital role to develop 3D models and accurate visualisations for design iterations. This will help us understand why there are such differences within the typology and layout of the houses, which naturally evolved around the idea of family living, the size of the family, and specific rituals observed daily.

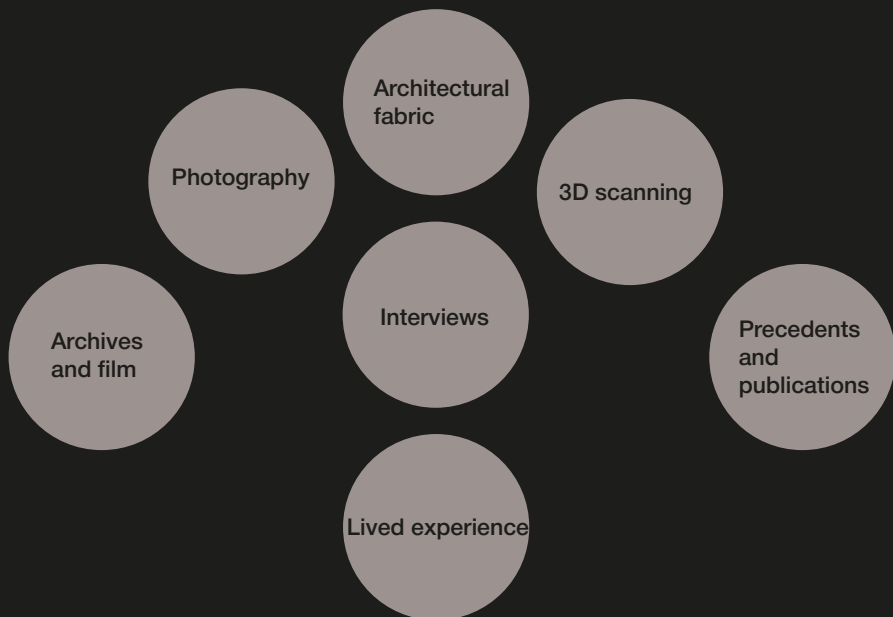


Figure 8: Research methods for the project development (Authors own, 2025)

Primary research

3D scanning

Well preserved/ empty



re-done/ in repair



abandoned/ ruins



Film interviews

Structural engineer



History teacher



teacher/ folklore singer



Photography





Site overview and brief context history

Bulgaria is a relatively small but historic country located in the Southeastern block of Europe and Balkan peninsula. Being one of the oldest countries in Europe, Bulgaria and its lands have complex and long history and heritage. Its current borders are the gateway into Asia from Europe, sharing borders with present-day Greece, Turkey, North Macedonia, Serbia, Romania and the Black Sea to its east. The physical terrain varies greatly across the country with elevation range up to 2925 metres above sea level, including valleys, mountains, basins, gorges, plains and rivers. The 4 major mountainous regions in Bulgaria are, the Balkan Mountains, Rila Mountains, Pirin Mountains, and the Rhodope Mountains, being the largest by area. The lands in the mountains are highly fertile and rich in natural resources which has allowed many small villages and towns to be built in the region, thriving especially nearby rivers and land depressions that favour agriculture. Before the recognition of the Bulgarian state by Byzantium in 681 AD, the land was home to Thracian societies and influenced by Roman, Byzantine and later Ottoman empires. "Slavic tribes who settled in the eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula in the 6th century BCE assimilated to a large extent the local Thracian culture, which had roots in the 4th century BCE, and formed a basic ethnic group. The Bulgars, who established the first Bulgarian state in 681, formed another component. With the gradual obliteration of fragmented Slavic tribes, Bulgars and Slavs coalesced into a unified people who became known as Bulgarians" (Bell and Dimitrov, 2025)

The period of Bulgarian history can be categorised under the 'First Bulgarian Empire' 681-1018, 'Second Bulgarian Empire' 1185-1396, 'Ottoman rule' 1396-1878' and 'Third Bulgarian state' 1878- present days. The current Bulgarian state has been dominated by change following the Ruso-Turkish liberation war that supported internal Bulgarian efforts for freedom from nearly 5 centuries Ottoman rule.

The borders and politics were greatly influenced by wars between 1885-1945 following defeats in both world wars. The establishment of the Peoples Republic of Bulgaria in 1946 – 1990 following defeat to the Red Army of USSR, further changed the internal dynamic of the country through the rule dominated by communist ideologies. "Emerging from centuries of Ottoman rule, Bulgaria gained its independence in the late 19th century, joined the losing side of several conflagrations in the first half of the 20th century, and, despite gravitating toward the Axis powers in World War II, found itself within close orbit of the Soviet Union by mid-century. This alliance had profound effects on the Bulgarian state and psyche, altering everything from land use and labour practices to religion and the arts." (Bell and Dimitrov, 2025)

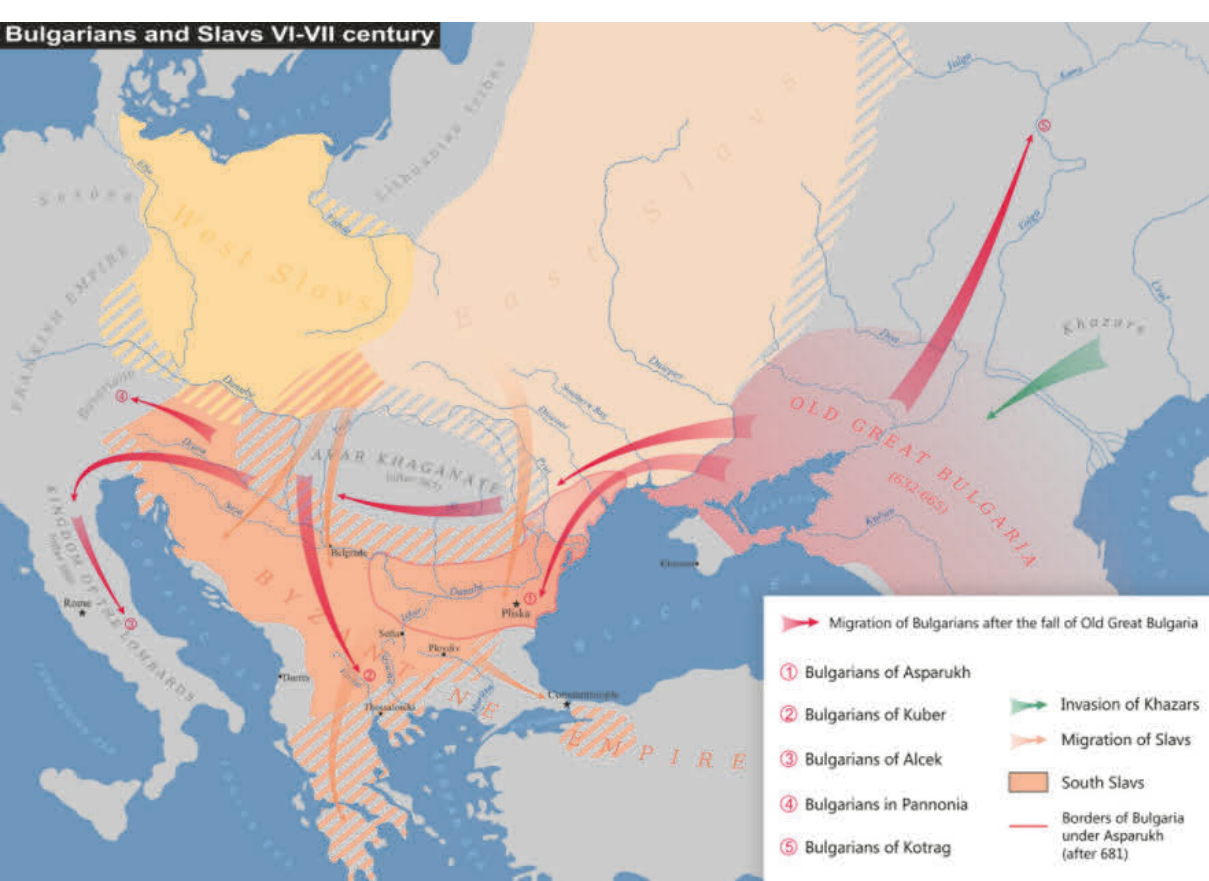


Figure 9 : The migration of the Bulgars after the fall of Old Great Bulgaria in the 7th century (HandWiki, 2022)

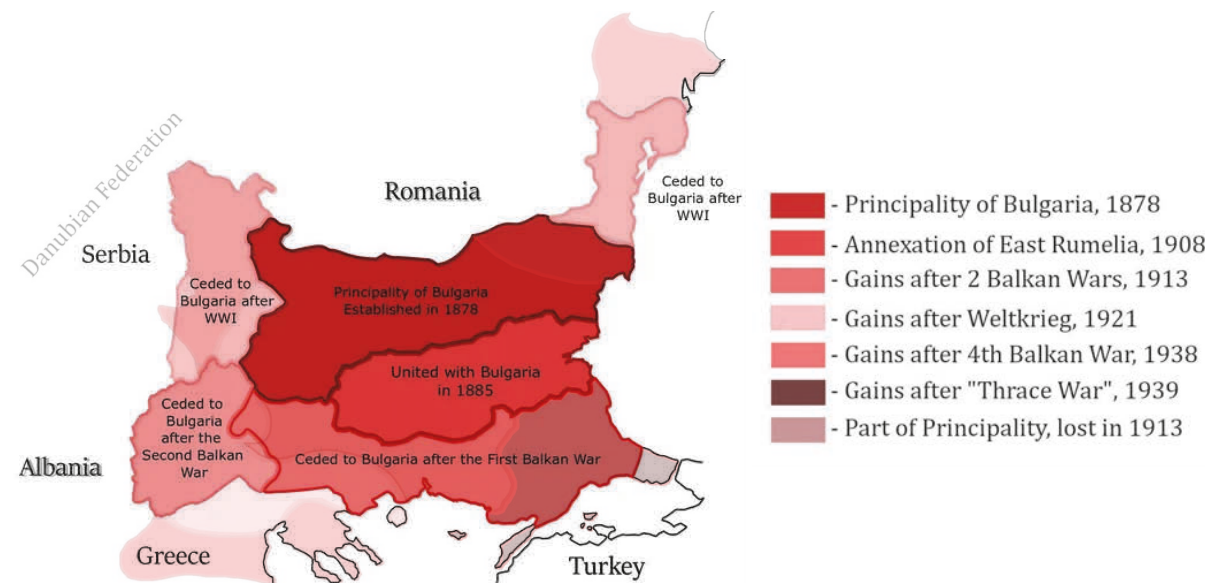


Figure 10: The change of borders and influences in the Bulgarian lands following the liberation from Ottoman rule (Wikipedia, N/A)

The present day built environment still reflects the history and heritage since the early 19th century, influenced by these shifts in ideologies, geopolitics and cultural trends. The Bulgarian cities are still dominated by the not so distant memory of communism and socialism, intertwined with the modern and post-modern architectural thinking, breaking away from traditional and classical approaches to ones that reflected the need for mass rebuilding of cities, experimentation with new materials such as glass, steel and concrete, and increased concern with functional living and social morality. This has put large pressures on heritage that reflected the context and spirit of the time before the large war destruction, land loss and new trends for architectural development. The result of depopulation across the rural parts of Bulgaria can be attributed to the rapid expansion of the cities since the 1950s. In Bulgaria, the urbanization trend peaked after World War II, specifically from 1950 to 1985, with major production and work opportunities created through the construction of large factories under the communist regime. Through those years the demographic balance between rural and urban populations shifted dramatically: in 1946, the figures stood at 75.3% rural and 24.7% urban, while by 1985, they had transformed to 35.2% rural and 64.8% urban (Statistical Yearbook 2020: 58).

"Konstantin Stoilov administration came to power that a systematic attempt to develop the Bulgarian economy could be made. Stoilov, who had once declared that he wished to make Bulgaria 'the Belgium of the Balkans', was eager for the task. In 1894 his government passed the encouragement of industry bill. Industries which were included within one of nine defined categories and which had capital of 25,000 leva and at least 20 employees were to receive state encouragement; the chief beneficiaries were mining and metallurgy, textiles and the construction industry. State encouragement was to take the form of free grants of land for factory building together with financial help for the construction of any necessary road or rail links, preferential rates on the state railways for finished products" (Crampton, 2012)

Directions of migration	Periods between censuses						
	1956 – 1965	1966 – 1975	1976 – 1985	1986 – 1992	1993 – 2001	2002 – 2011	2012 – 2019
Total (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
City-city (%)	16.6	30.2	38.3	42.5	46.2	57.4	39.6
City-village (%)	8.1	9.9	13.3	23.4	27.9	18.4	29.9
Village-city (%)	44.7	42.7	34.3	22.0	15.6	17.2	21.1
Village-village (%)	30.6	17.2	14.1	12.1	10.3	7.0	9.4

Figure 11: Structure of Internal migrations in Bulgaria (National Statistics Institute, 2023),



1971

1971

ЕДИНЪ ЗА ВСИЧКИ И ВСИЧКИ ЗА ЕДИНЪ



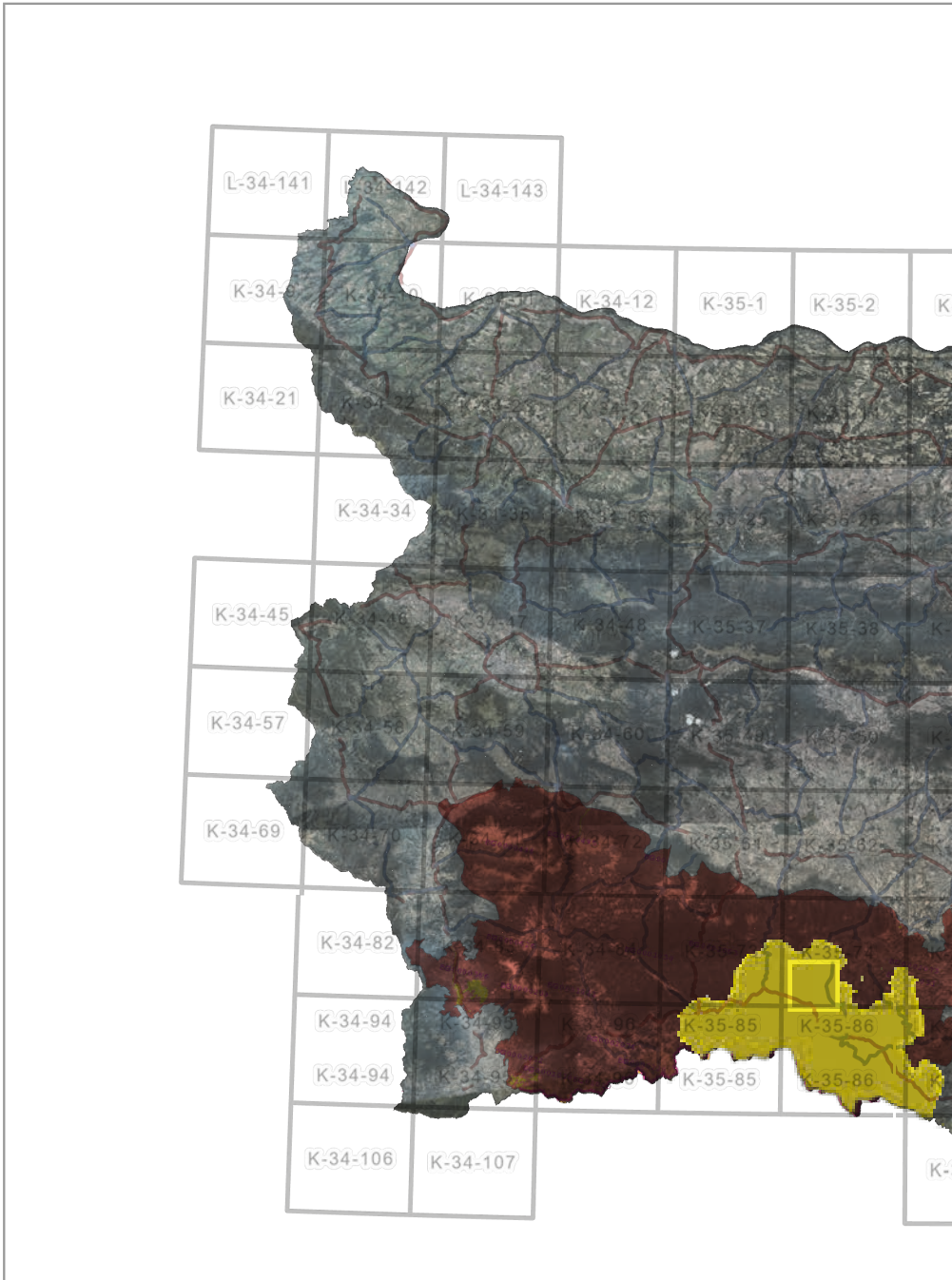
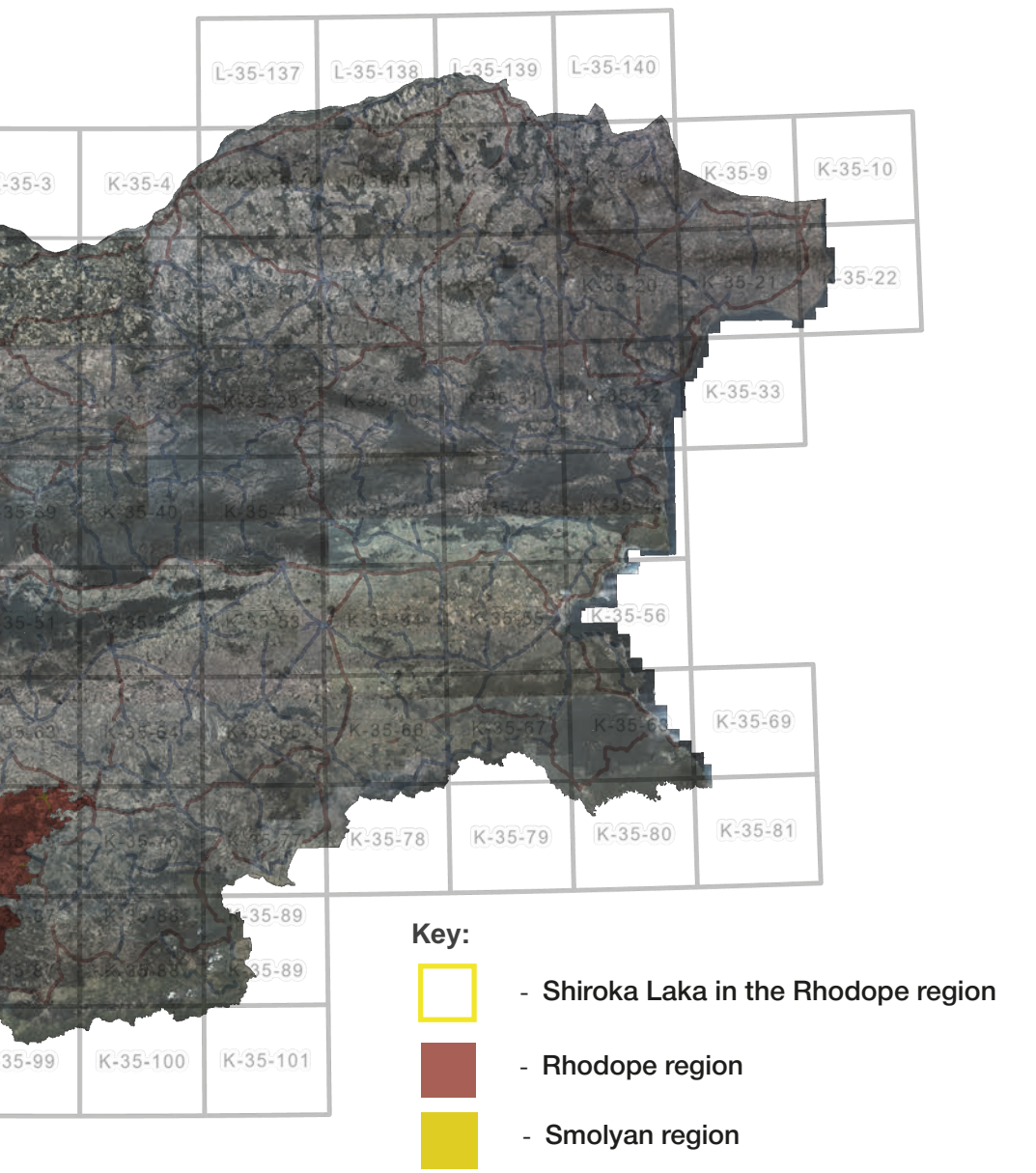


Figure 13: Basemap source: КАИС Портал • <https://kais.cadastre.bg/>

ay Bulgaria



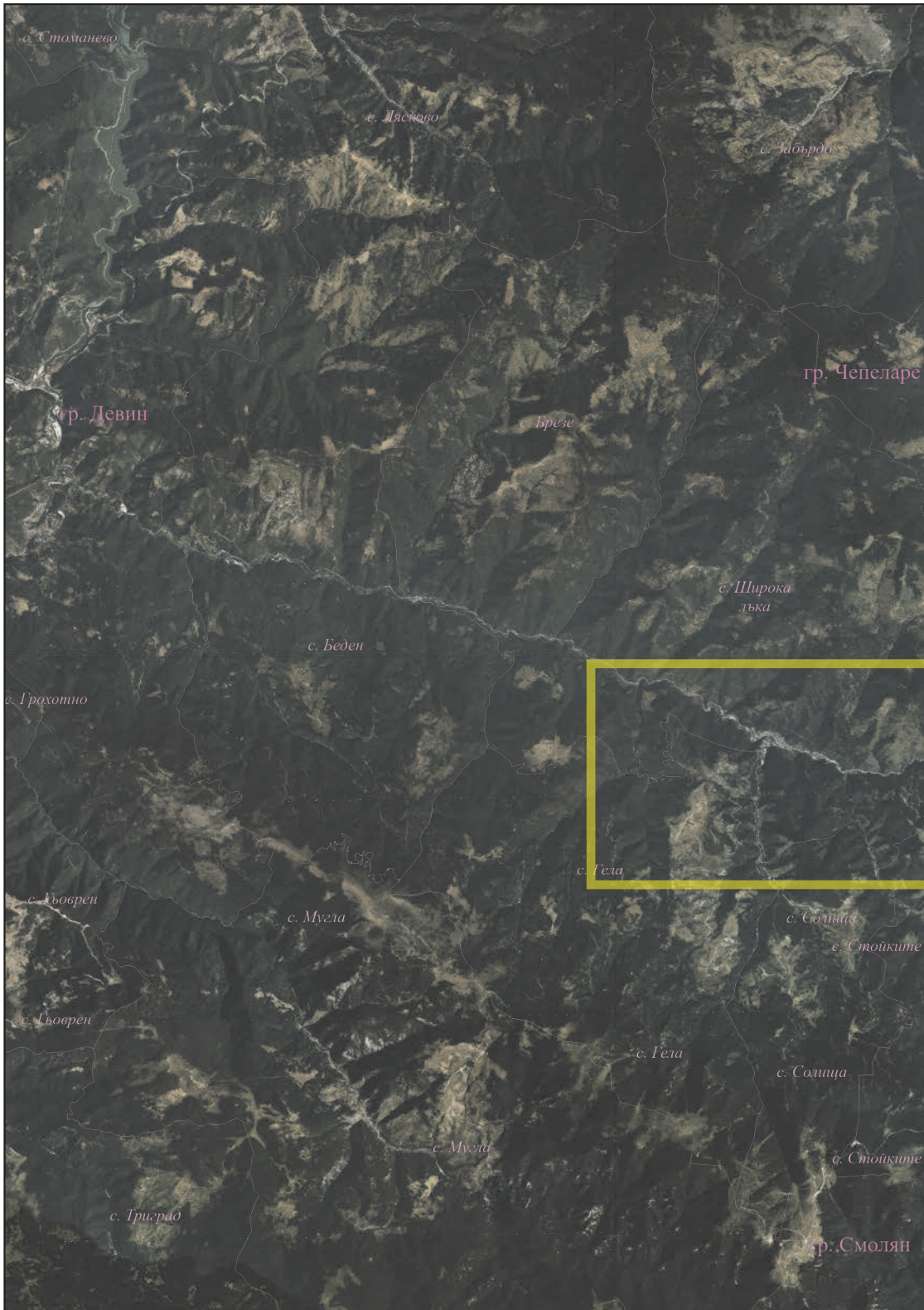


Figure 14: Orthophoto basemap 2022: КАИС Портал • <https://kais.cadastre.bg/>

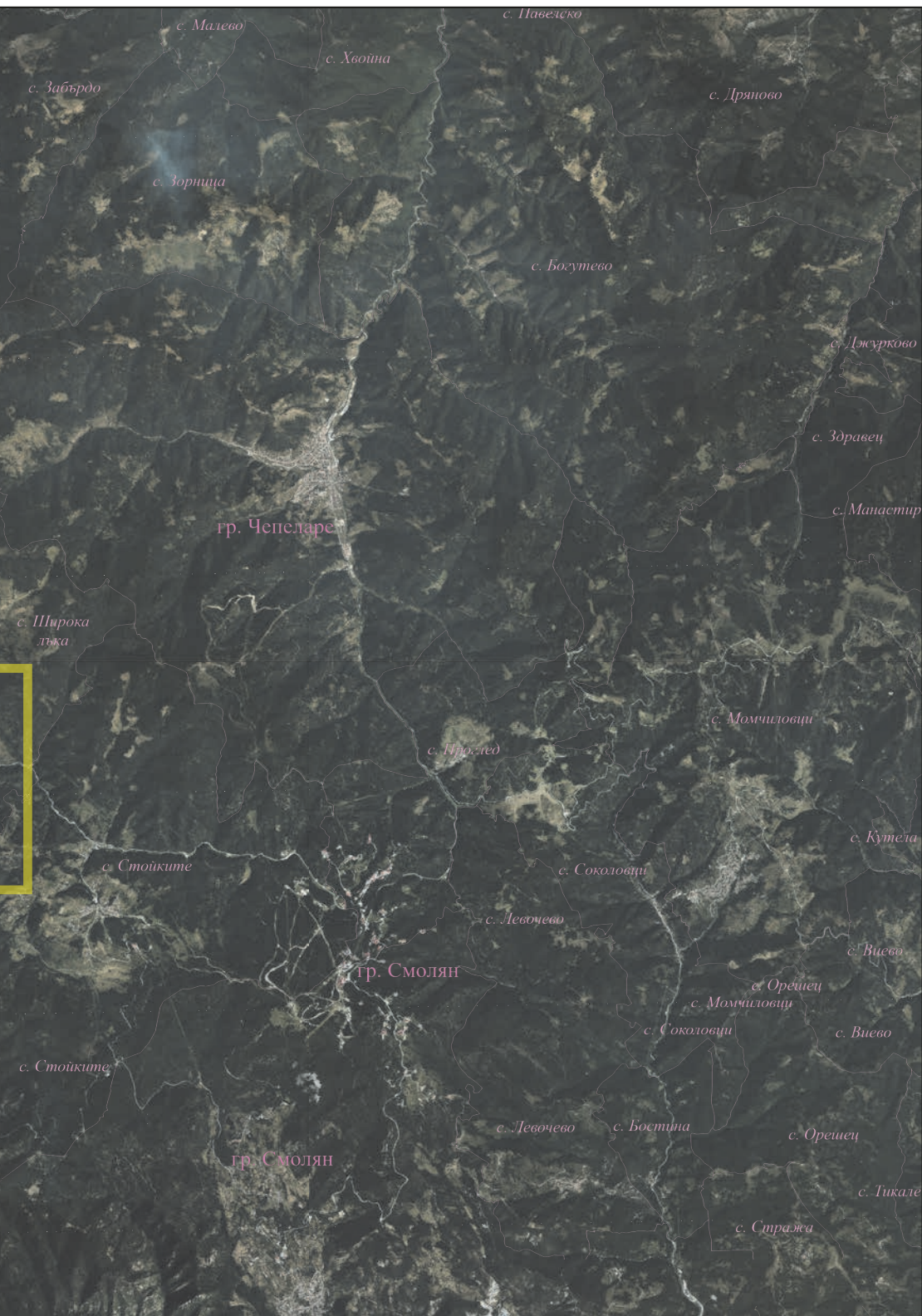
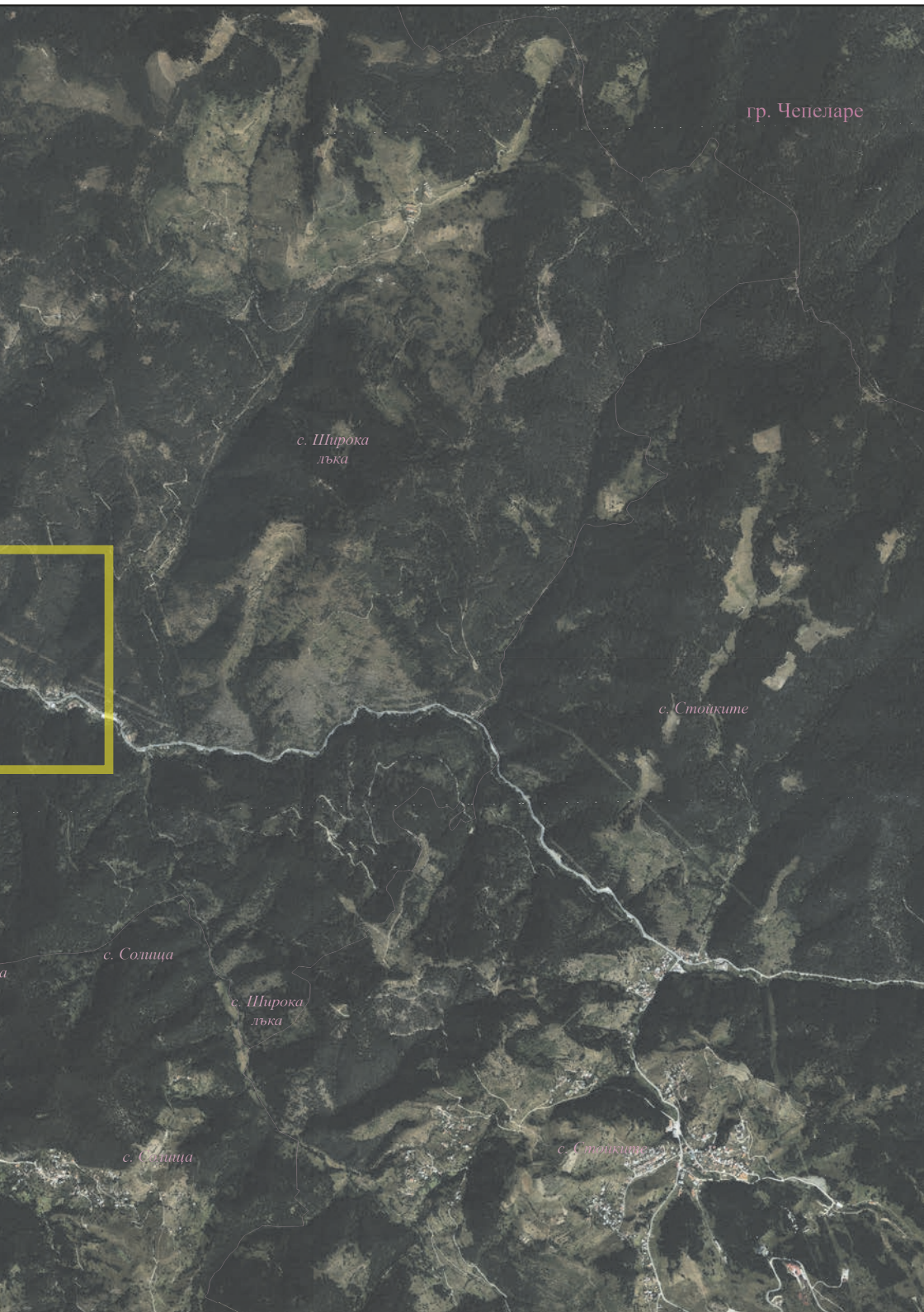




Figure 15: Orthophoto basemap 2022: КАИС Портал • <https://kais.cadastre.bg/>



гр. Чепеларе

с. Широка
лъка

с. Стойките

с. Солища

с. Широка
лъка

с. Солища

с. Стойкран

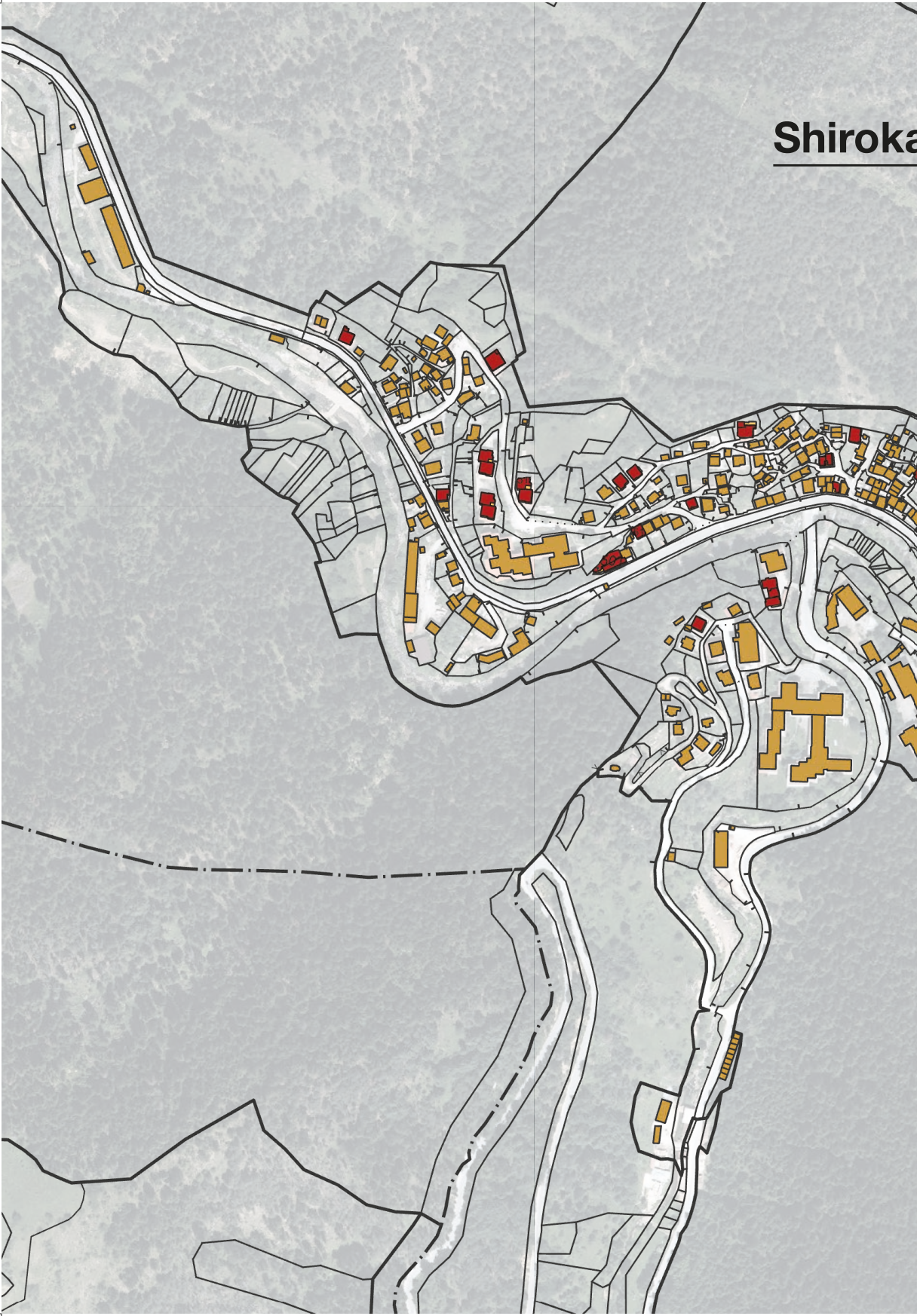


Figure 16: Orthophoto basemap 2022: КАИС Порган • <https://kais.cadastre.bg/>

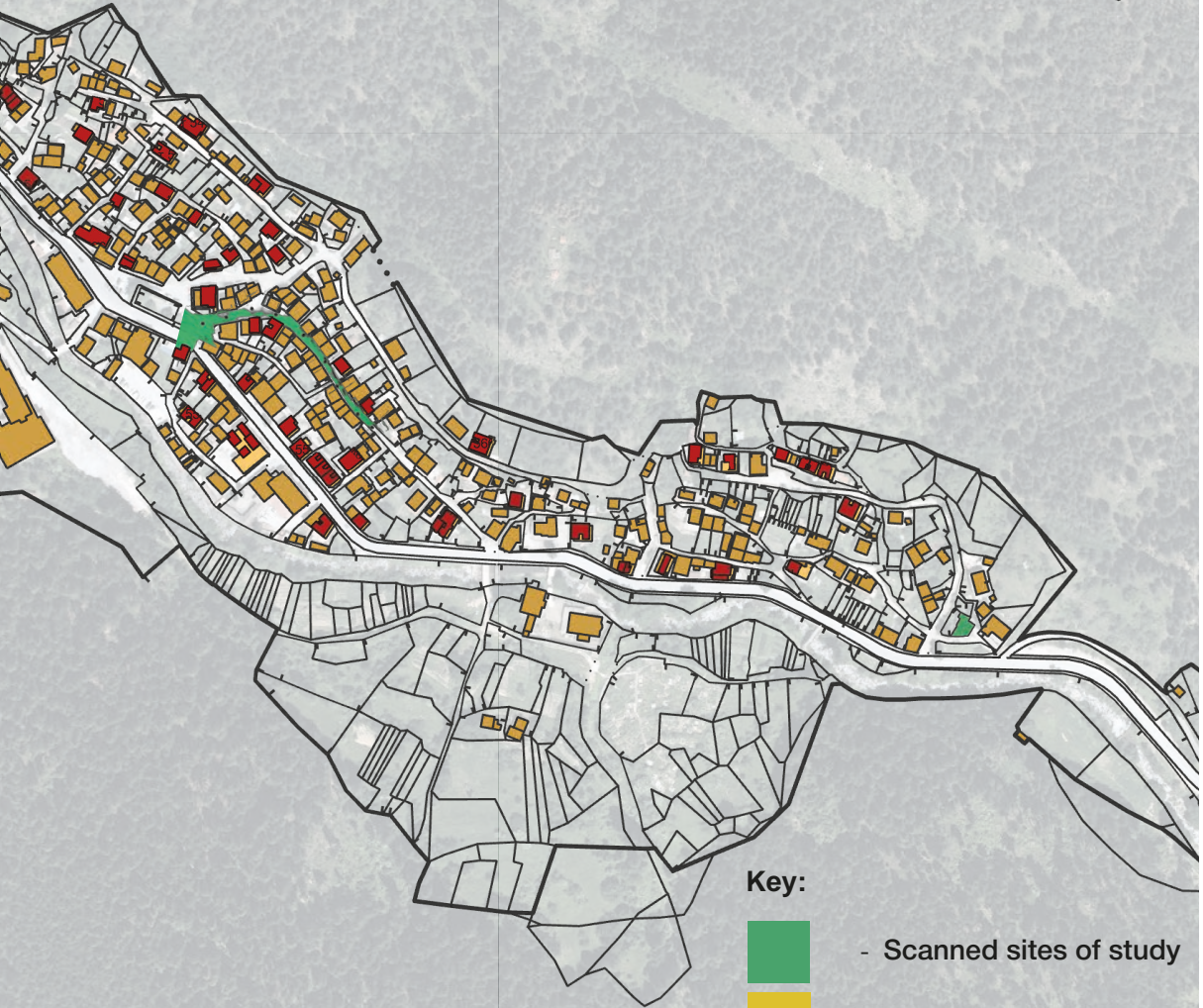


M: 1:3,035

Shiroka



a Laka



Key:



- Scanned sites of study



- Preserved buildings



- Endangered buildings

"In 1969 the urban population overtook the rural for the first time, and by the early 21st century comprised almost three-fourths of the total population. Internally, the movement of population has been from rural areas to larger towns and cities. In the 50-year period from 1949 to 1999, for example, the population of Sofia doubled; Plovdiv's population increased more than ninefold; and the populations of Varna and that of Ruse rose more than elevenfold." (Bell and Dimitrov, 2025). The villages in the rural mountainous regions were affected by the industrialization of the cities, as the population fled in search of opportunities and modernised way of living. The natural topography, local materials, and larger emphasis on traditional practice has resulted in the preservation of a more traditional built environment in the rural parts of Bulgaria. Shiroka Laka is a small village nested within the Rhodope Mountain region, with rich history and important role within the effort for freedom from Ottoman rule in 1878 . The name comes to indicate the origins of the village as 'shiroka' means wide, and 'laka' means curve or meander, referencing to the geographic location of the village at the widest point of the meandering river. This location proved to be ideal for the village to be established as it offered natural protection and refuge for orthodox Christians fleeing the Islamisation of Bulgaria in the late 17th century.

Figure 18: View from a road overlooking Shiroka Laka (Authors own, 2025)



Figure 19: View walking along Petko Voivoda street (Authors own, 2025)



Shiroka Laka will serve as my main site of study, providing an opportunity to understand and reflect on wider trends of architectural development, traditional practices, and regional historic preservation. Shiroka Laka is currently labelled an Architectural and Folklore Reserve since 1965, due to its high concentration of Rhodopian style houses, nationwide influence on folklore dancing and singing, and its revolutionaries and religious figures key for the national effort to liberate the Bulgarians preserving the national identity. The village is believed to have been established since the late 17th century under the period of Ottoman rule as a sign of resistance by the Bulgarian Christian communities. The architectural heritage within the village is considered to exemplify the 'The Bulgarian-Revival' house, developed between early 18th and early 20th centuries. The style is present in cities and villages across the whole country and makes reference to houses showcasing traditional architecture since the 'Second Bulgarian Empire' with influences by the Ottoman rule from 1396-1878.



73-3617-5-Чешма със скулптура. /Л.Георгиева/МК



73-3618-11,13-Из селото.



76-1675-7,8,11-Из селото. /Крум Арсов/ИК



73-3319-2



73-2743-5



2-Стуровският коняк.
/Т.Хорисян/ТК



73-3319-3-Каровският комплекс.
/Т.Хорисян/ТК



5,8-Хаджийската къща-стенни долаци.
/Т.Хорисян/ТК



73-2743-10-Хаджийската къща-
/Т.Хорисян/ТК

73-2743
5,8,10



73-2743-12
73-2743-12-Григорова къща-таван.
/Т.Хорисян/ТК

Current state of use and preservation

Bulgaria has 10 sites inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List, of which 7 cultural and 3 natural; and further 16 on the tentative list suggesting further interest and consideration for listing. Furthermore, UNESCO has listed 6 intangible heritage elements as part of its 2003 Convention, describing cultural heritage and practices key to Bulgaria's national identity. Those are focused on traditional crafts for textiles, carpet making, and folklore singing, dancing and rituals. However, there appears to be lack of consideration or official protection for the traditional architectural heritage and practices across the country, and especially in the Rhodope region. "The current status of the cultural heritage in Bulgaria and in the region is worrying because of its fragmentation within the closed national and local systems, rather than being seen in the existing transnational cultural corridors. In most cases, this unique cultural heritage linked together in clearly visible cultural corridors is ambiguously known in Europe, in the world and even in the region itself. There has been a deficit of effective regional cooperation for a coordinated protection and use of the existing cultural resource." (Georgiev, 2019. Heritage protection and listing in Bulgaria relies on a top-down approach with the Ministry of Culture in charge of legislation, funding and decision making regarding movable and immovable heritage. The ministry works closely with the National Institute for Immovable Cultural Heritage (NIIKP) which is in charge of documenting and keeping record of sites nationwide of significance and need of monitoring. Often, municipal bodies will work in collaboration with NIIKP to recommend sites or subjects of regional and local importance.



The local municipality in charge of Shiroka Laka is Smolyan, which is given certain power by the Ministry of Culture to administer control over local sites and drive restoration and protection efforts. Nationally, Bulgaria has a strong network of partners such as UNESCO, ICOMOS, do.co, mo. mo , European Heritage Hub, European Commission, Europa Nostra and Balkan Heritage. However, despite this extensive network of partners, a number of NGO's have had to step in to raise funds and gather volunteers necessary for the upkeep of historic villages in the Rhodope mountains without official legislation or management plans to protect them. Shiroka laka is one of them. Although an architectural and folklore reserve, the village has struggled to sustain many notable houses in the village from destruction. Up to 97 houses were declared cultural monuments and 76 of these houses were restored. There are many examples along Charshiyska street which forms an ensemble of cultural monuments, as part of an effort from heritage specialist and apprentices with funding from the ministry of culture to preserve the traditional look of the village. Shiroka Laka was once famous for its master builders across Bulgaria and many of the local masons were famous not only in the mountains, but also in Thrace and along the Aegean Sea, Asia Minor and Serbia. The old Rhodope houses were built with great craftsmanship and ability to process raw materials such as timber, clay, stone, slate, ground, gravel, lime and marble for a long lasting and comfortable home. The fact that many of the houses with their heavy slate roofs have been around for over 150 years, is a testament to exactly their ability. However, these traditional skills are yet to be protected. Yet these skills and trades have not been considered worth protecting even at the regional level as part of the cultural heritage listing framework.

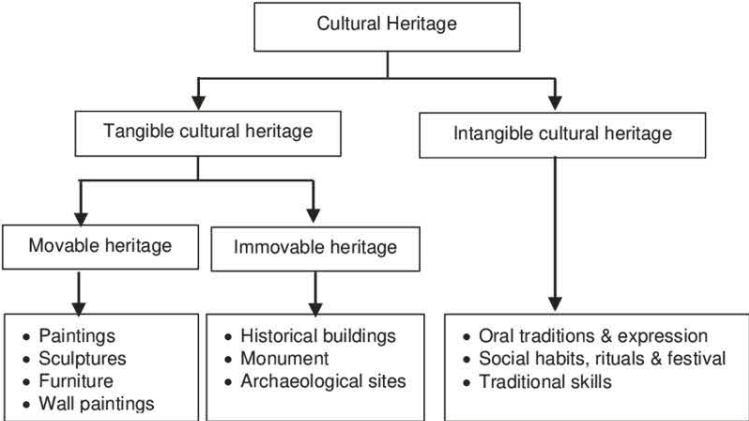
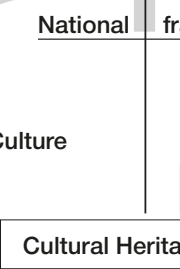


Figure 21: Cultural Heritage Classification (UNESCO, 2003)



BULGARIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION



Ministry of Culture



National Institute for Immovable Cultural Heritage (NIIKP)

Smolyan regional administration and Bulgarian Orthodox Church



Shiroka Laka municipality

Private ownership funding and initiative

Can international bodies and owners on how to preserve a

Figure 22: Diagram oragnising the National listing and funding for heritage protection framework (Authors own, 2025

and
on



framework



MINISTRY OF CULTURE
REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

Age Act 2009



**Balkan
Heritage**



NGO's give guidance/help to private
and restore their own house?

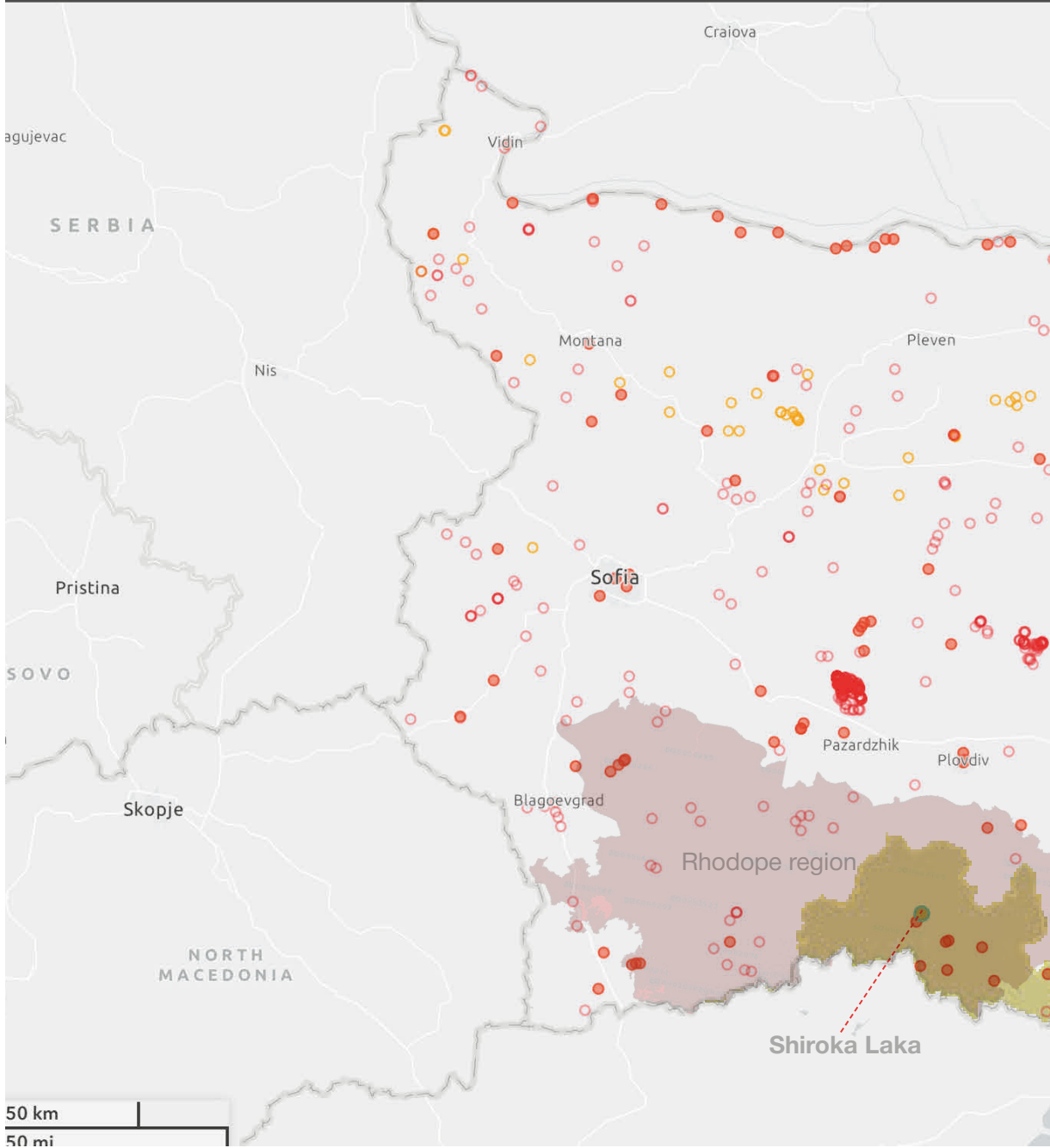
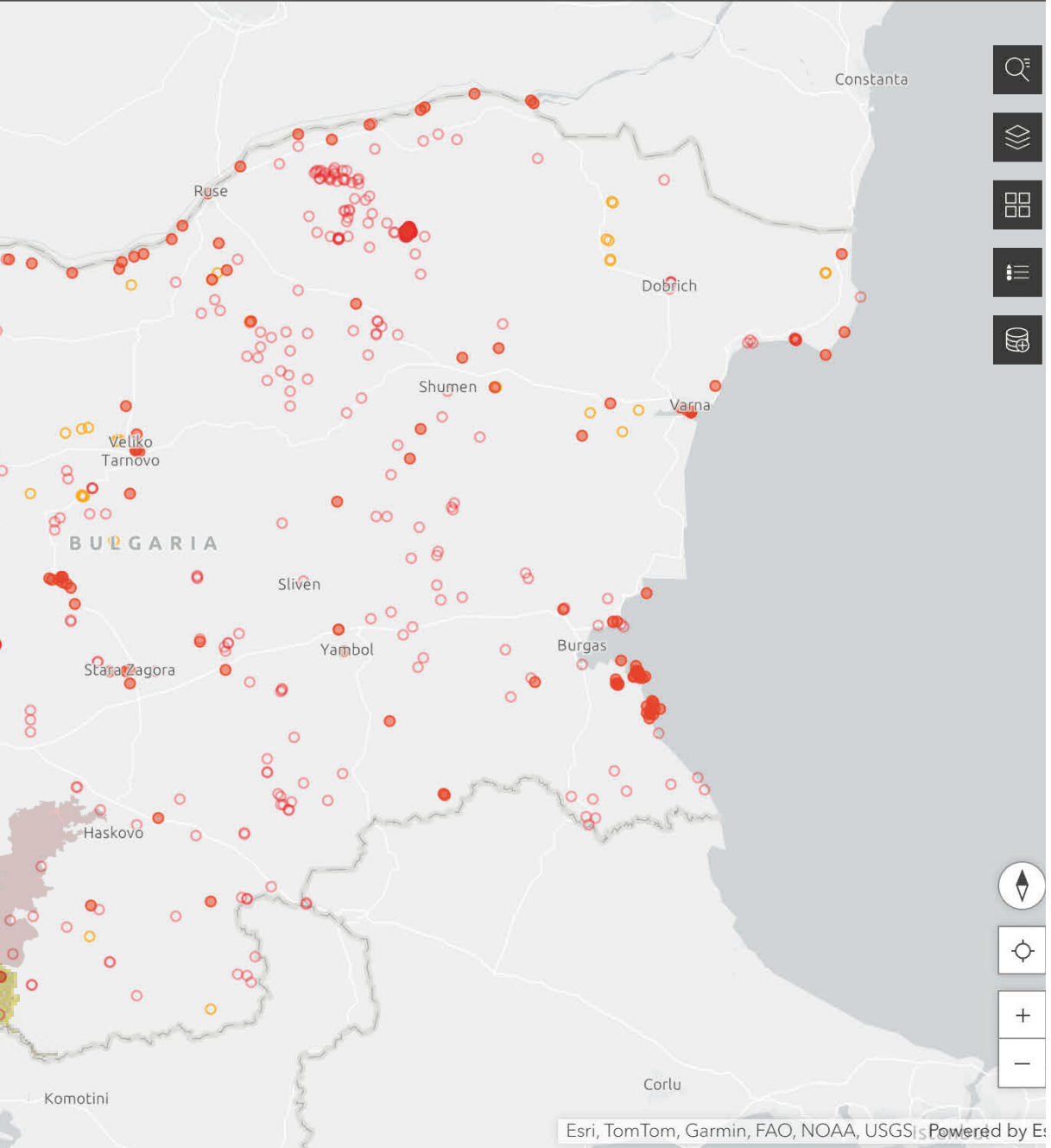


Figure 23: Atlas of protected immovable cultural heritage in Bulgaria showing 40,000 sites but no listing in Shiroka Laka. The map shows the unclear listing and protection status of the heritage in the village; despite the high concentration of immovable



Shiroka Laka despite its status as a Architecture and Folklore reserve since 1965. This reflects inconsistency and the lack of protection of cultural monuments (97) in Shiroka Laka, they are not noted as protected on the Atlas. (NIIKP, 2025)



Arbanasi (Arbanassi)



Boženci (Bozhentsi)



Gložene (Glozhene)



Kapinovo, Veliko Tärново (Veliko Turnovo)



Koprivštica (Koprivshtitsa)



Kovačevica (Kovachevitsa)



Melnik



Mogilica (Mogilitsa)

Figure 24: Compilation of Bulgarian revival house ensembles listed as cultural monuments across B



Nesebăr (Nessabur)



Plovdiv



Rila



Rožen (Rozhen)



Smoljan, Široka Laka, Bačkovо



Tryavna



Žeravna (Zheravna)

Key:



- Highly Recorded and protected



- Preserved buildings but no heritage management plan



- Endangered heritage



Figure 26: Currently protected intangible cultural heritage in Bulgaria (UNESCO, 2025)



Figure 27: Collage from 'Dive into intangible cultural heritage' project and massing plan of Shiroka La



Laka. Highlighting Intangible elements key for Shiroka Laka's vernacular heritage (Authors own, 2025)



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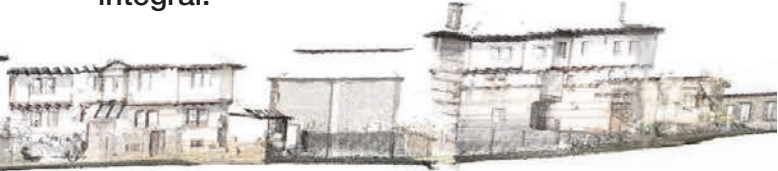
Ulitsa Charshiyska wider narrative for development

Ulitsa Charshiyska once held the position as Shiroka Laka's highstreet; positioned at the entry point from the widest part in the village forming the public square. The houses in the village are built in tiers, organically on both sides of the Shirokolashaka river and the topography, forming a series of narrow streets branching out to form acoustic tunnels for local folklore events. The village is considered the folklore capital of Bulgaria, with number of the country's best singers, musicians and dancers graduating from the 1972 National School of Folk Arts, located in the village centre. The village has become a living museum for traditional folk practices and performing, with the festivals 'pesponedelnik', 'saint Elijah's day' and 'kaba gaida competition' all held annually. The village square often becomes packed with visitors and locals that come together to support and sustain the spirit and practices of these traditional events. Memories shared by Stoil Kalfov—a local resident, history teacher, and former headteacher of secondary school 'Nikola Vaptsarov'—offer valuable insights into local history and changes on the high street. He remembers the times when the village was livelier with young people, and the schools full of students. Currently, due to the migration of young families to the big cities and abroad, Shiroka Laka like most other villages in the region are experiencing the effects of depopulation. He recalls from over 300 students in the school 15 years ago, now there are under 40. Despite the rich heritage and abundance of local knowledge, it's proved difficult to find young enthusiastic people to pass it onto. The rapid depopulation and abandonment of local family homes has put many of the historic houses at risk.



Figure 28: Charshiyska street 3D processed showing the street along the street an ensamble of monuments in Laka(Authors 2025)

Stoil recalls a great effort from Smolyan's Municipality through their Cultural Heritage and Restoration Project funded with the support of the Ministry of Culture; the exact year is unclear as the process had not been documented or published, however through older images we can reflect on the changes. The project has been successfully delivered with the help of local tradespeople and volunteers directed by heritage specialists from the НИКР. The effort resulted in the renovation and repair of 76 houses from the 97 listed immovable Cultural Monuments in the village. The houses had been repaired free of charge for the owners in order to preserve and enhance the character of the village and its status as an architectural and folklore reserve. There has been a tendency to convert traditional houses into guest houses within the village and many others in the region; often altering the character and aesthetic of the place and historic fabric due to the more commercial nature and requirements for guest houses. Many of the restored houses are found along Ulitsa Charshiyska, with majority still with a residential status. I chose to use the whole street as a site of study, providing an opportunity to utilise a 3D scanner I had travelled with in order to document and record the historic fabric of these houses. Most of these houses had retained their traditional frontages as compared to others along the current main road who have adapted them with commercial shop fronts, signs and cafes. The work done was visible on the exteriors through their cleaner and fresher look yet original materials. The stucco looked brightly painted, and timber members from the façade looked fresher and more structurally integral.



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The village Highstreet Ulitsa Charshiyska - 3



It has been impossible to access any documentation or reports in relation to the works done, (a reflection of the current transparency of planning and development processes) however, through images and the original scans of the street I can highlight some of the changes to the historic fabric. It will also be useful to reflect as to why there are still examples on the street of houses in ruins which were not considered worth restoring. Why is the overall character of the street not be considered as a whole rather than separate cultural monuments along it?



Figure 29: Charshiyska street 3D scan locations and compilation of careful documentation

3D Scanning for heritage digitisation





Figure 30-31: (Above) Final 3D model of Charshiyska street (Right) 3D scanning as a survey of the current state of cultural monuments and those at threat along it (Authors own, 2025)





Figure 32-33: (Bottom) Elevation along Charsh



hiyska street (Top) 3D renders and key traditional elements (Authors own, 2025)

1-2.





3.







Restored
stone wall
and
repointed
cavities

Figure 36: Archival photo of houses 1-3 along Charshiyska street showing the facade of the houses before the restoration effort .(Kyoseva, 2017)





Changed old timber frame windows to new double glazing pvc in a similar style



Figure 37-38: (Above) Current photo of houses 1-3 along Charshiyska street (Bellow) 3D render of the current state of the houses .(Authors own, 2025)





Built up main entrance in the same style in order to change main access away from the street

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Figure 39: Archival photo of house 2 along Charshiyska street showing the facade of the houses before the restoration effort .(Kyoseva, 2017)



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Changed old
timber frame
windows to new
double glazing
pvc in a similar
style



Figure 40-41: (Above) Current photo of house 2 along Charshiyska street (Bellow) 3D render of the current state of the houses 2-3 .(Authors own, 2025)





Refreshed
timber and
lime stucco
colour

Figure 42: Archival photo of house 4-5 along Charshiyska street showing the facade of the houses before the restoration effort (Djumailiev, 2020)





Figure 43-44: (Above) Current photo of house 4-5 along Charshiyska street (Below) 3D render of the current state of the houses .(Authors own, 2025)



6.



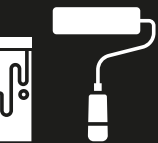




Figure 46: Archival photo of house 6 along Charshiyska street showing the facade of the houses before the restoration effort .(Kyoseva, 2017)



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Figure 47-48: (Above) Current photo of house 6 along Charshiyska street (Bellow) 3D render of the current state of the houses .(Authors own, 2025)



7.







Figure 50: Archival photo of houses 6-7 along Charshiyska street showing the facade of the houses before the restoration effort .(Robinson, 2021)



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Figure 51-52: (Above) Current photo of house 7 along Charshiyska street (Bellow) 3D render of the current state of the houses .(Authors own, 2025)



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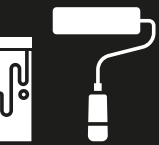




Figure 54: Archival photo of houses 8-9 along Charshiyska street showing the facade of the houses before the restoration effort. (Kyoseva, 2017)



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Figure 55-56: (Above) Current photo of houses 8-9 along Charshiyska street (Bellow) 3D render of the current state of the houses .(Authors own, 2025)



9-12.







Figure 58: Archival photo of houses 10-12 along Charshiyska street showing the facade of the houses before the restoration effort .(GOOGLEMAPS, 2021)



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Figure 59-60: (Above) Current photo of houses 10-12 along Charshiyska street (Bellow) 3D render of the current state of the houses .(Authors own, 2025)







Layers of History through the 1853 Kalajdzhieva house

The Kalajdzhieva house dates to 1853, and is considered one of the oldest and best-preserved Rhodopian style houses in Shiroka Laka. It is located right next door to the Ethnographic Museum (Zgurovski konak) in the village which has been set up to showcase traditional living of the past. Both the Ethnographic Museum and Kalajdzhieva house are linked through history as they belonged to two brothers who were very wealthy at the time. The term 'konak' refers to the residency intended for an Ottoman administrative. The Bulgarian revival style and the Rhodopian style are closely linked as they both exemplify an approach to functional living for the Bulgarian families and a sign of resistance through traditional practices. Both styles feature upper levels supported by wooden beams, (usually wider than the ground floor), typically 2- 3 stories featuring long rows of windows on upper floors and smaller windows on lower, and stone and timber framing construction with lime stucco rendering of residential floors. The two styles begin to differ when it comes down to the form, massing, level of ornamentation, decoration, and materiality. The revival house often intended to showcase Bulgarian wealth and skill, with interiors decorated in stucco mouldings and woodcarvings, and exteriors painted in bright pastel colours influenced by the Baroque. On the other hand, Rhodopian style focused on material simplicity and more asymmetrical façades, prioritising functional needs of the house having to adapt to steep terrains, rather than following uniformity with the street. Bulgarian revival houses were more widely designed across the country and the cities where the sites were much flatter, and subject to larger urban scale street planning and uniformity.



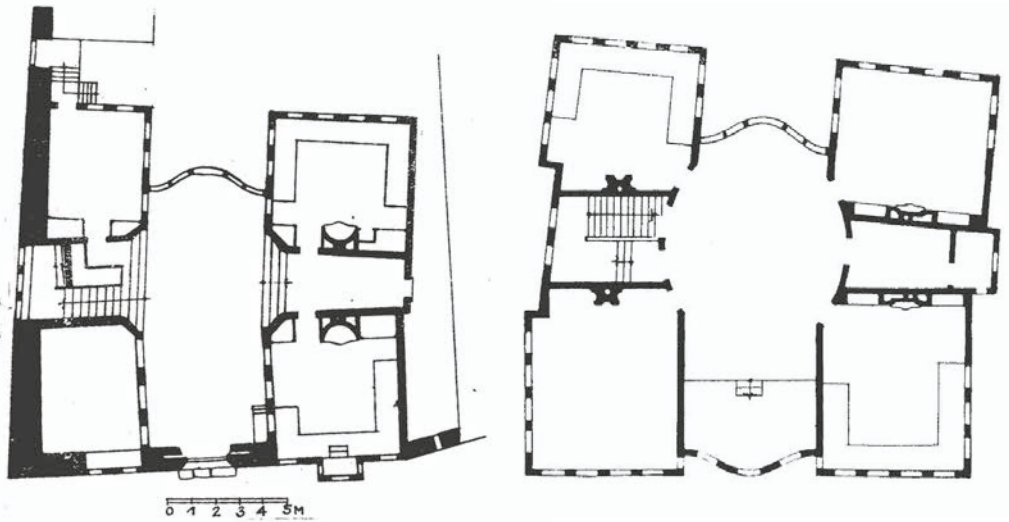
Figure 61: Location plan of the Kalajdzhieva house (plot 663) and the Ethnographic Museum (Zgurovski konak) (plot 670) next door built in 1853 Shiroka Laka, Smolyan (Authors own, 2025)



Figure 62:A scaled model of the Kalajdzhieva house built in 1853 currently exhibited at the Regional Museum of History "Stoyu Shishkov" in Smolyan (Authors own, 2025)



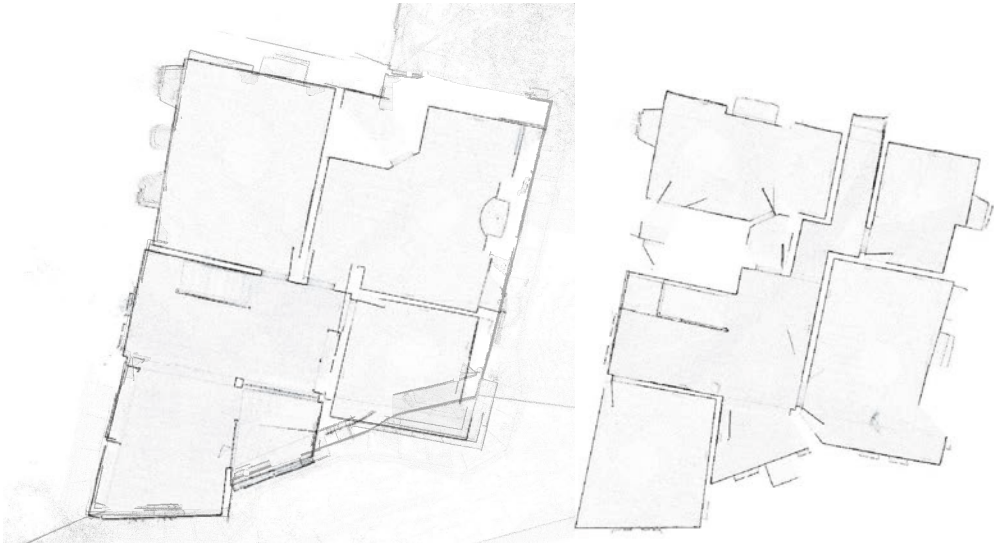
Figure 63: Gueorguiadi House 1846, build and designed by one of the most respected master builder Hadzi Georgi Georgiev for Georgi Kendindenoglu Hadziyski; plans and photograph (Marinova, 2019)



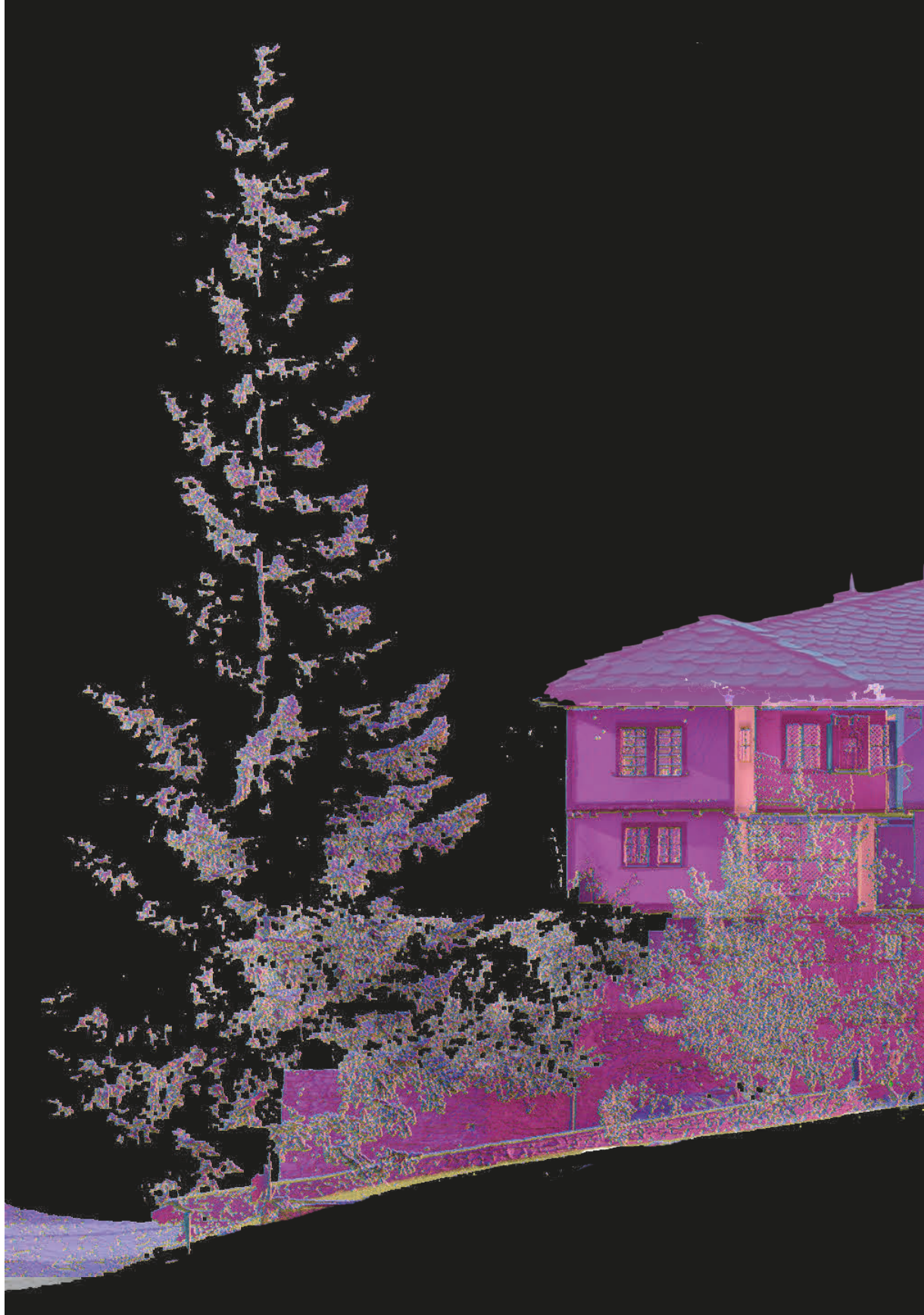
The Gueorguiadi House is one of the best preserved examples in Plovdiv of a Bulgarian revival design. The Kalajdzhieva house build only 7 years after offers a contrast across Bulgaria. The asymmetrical façades in Rhodopian style houses reflects the conditions in the mountainous regions. The focus is on material simplicity, economy, and efficiency. The house had to enter also in order to access the animal quarters located at the ground floor. The roofs are more typical for Rhodopian as compared to red clay tiles for others.

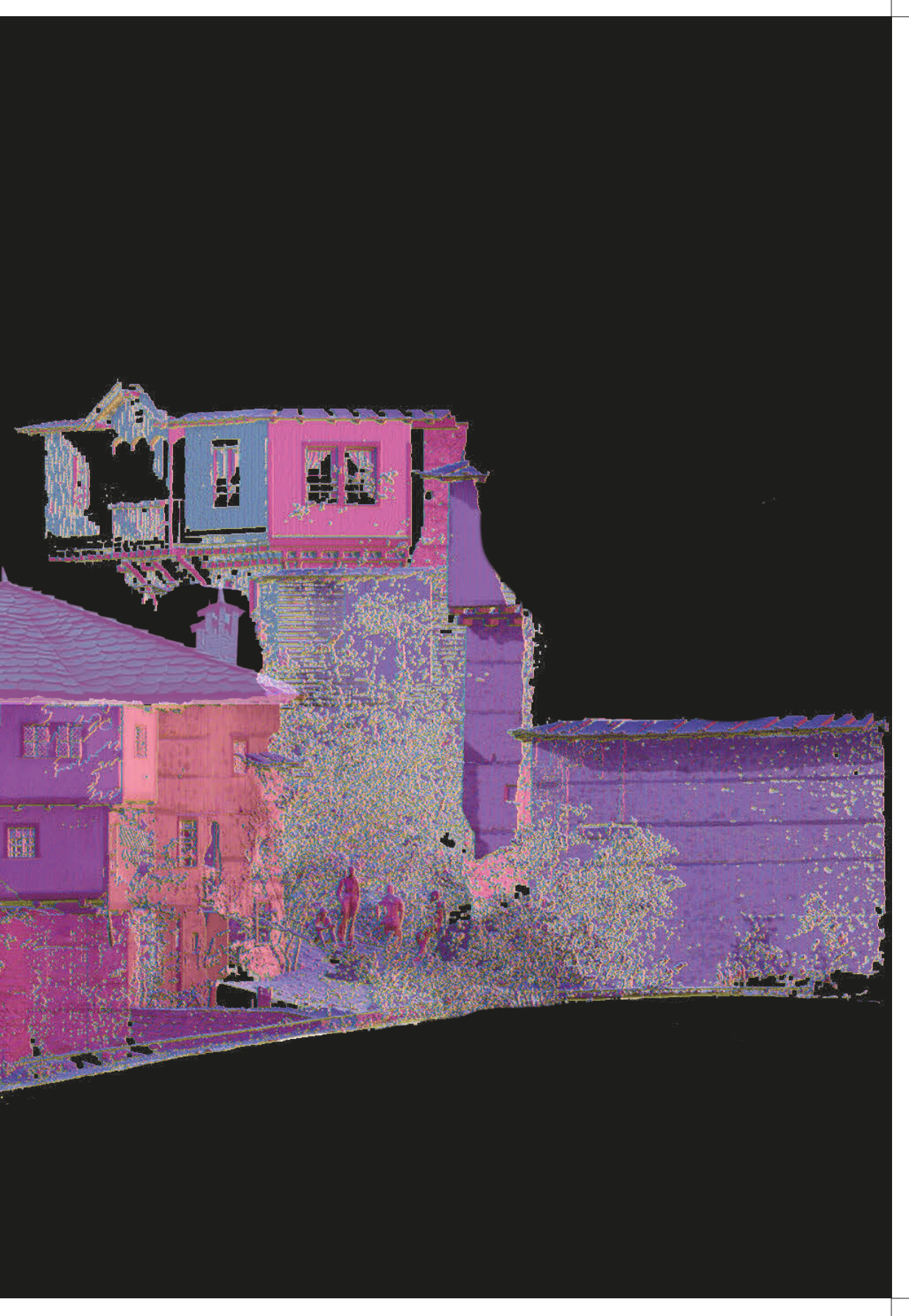


Figure 64: Kalajdzhieva house built in 1853 by local master builders alongside the Ethnographic museum opposite to it; plans and photograph (Authors own, 2025)



rian revival house. The facade gives away the first point of difference for the regional a great point of comparison between the Rhodope style and the revival style in cities changing demands of the context and the adaptation of designs to the steep terrains efficiency for the family. The gates are also wider in the Rhodope examples as livestock of the houses in proximity to the owner during harsh winters and for feeding. Slate

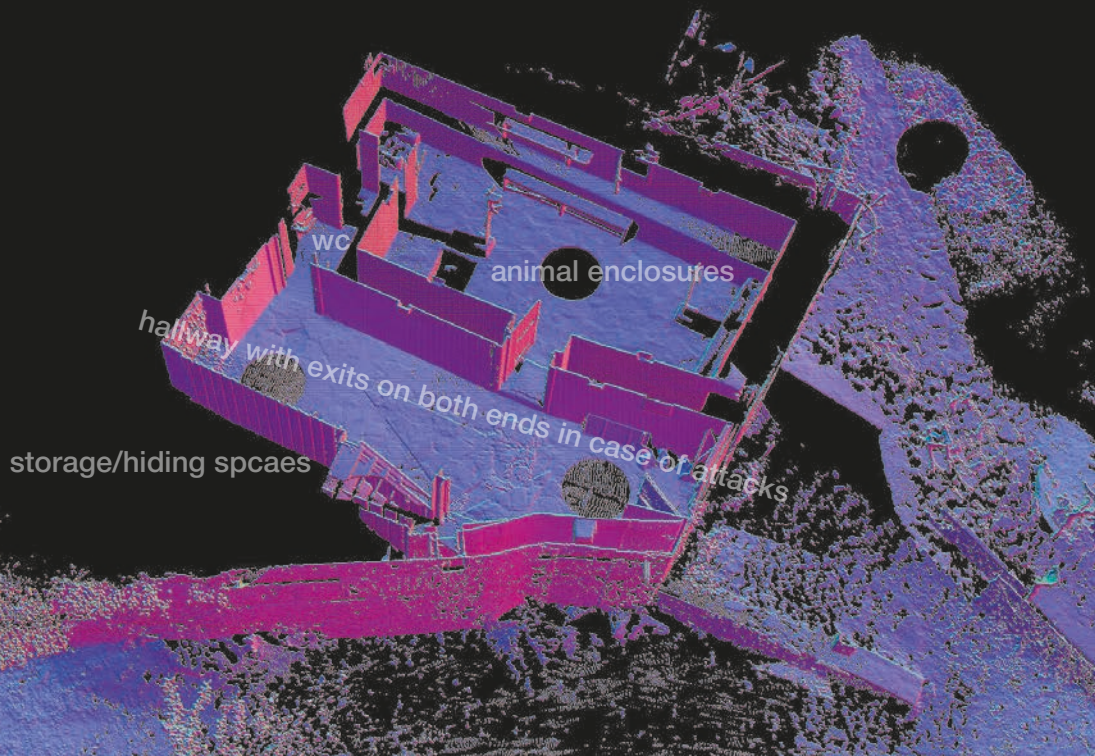




Typically, the ground floor was intended for livestock, food storage, workshops, and even point of defence against attacks through the small openings. The houses consist of several rooms of different sizes and set functions.



Figure 66-68: (Above) Construction details from a houses along Charshiyska street showing external load-bearing walls (50-60cm wide) construction using stone layering with horizontal timber elements for masonry levelling (typically every 60cm height). (Bellow) Axonometric view from the 3D model of Kalajdzhieva house, (Right) exposing internal arrangements and construction elements (Authors own, 2025)

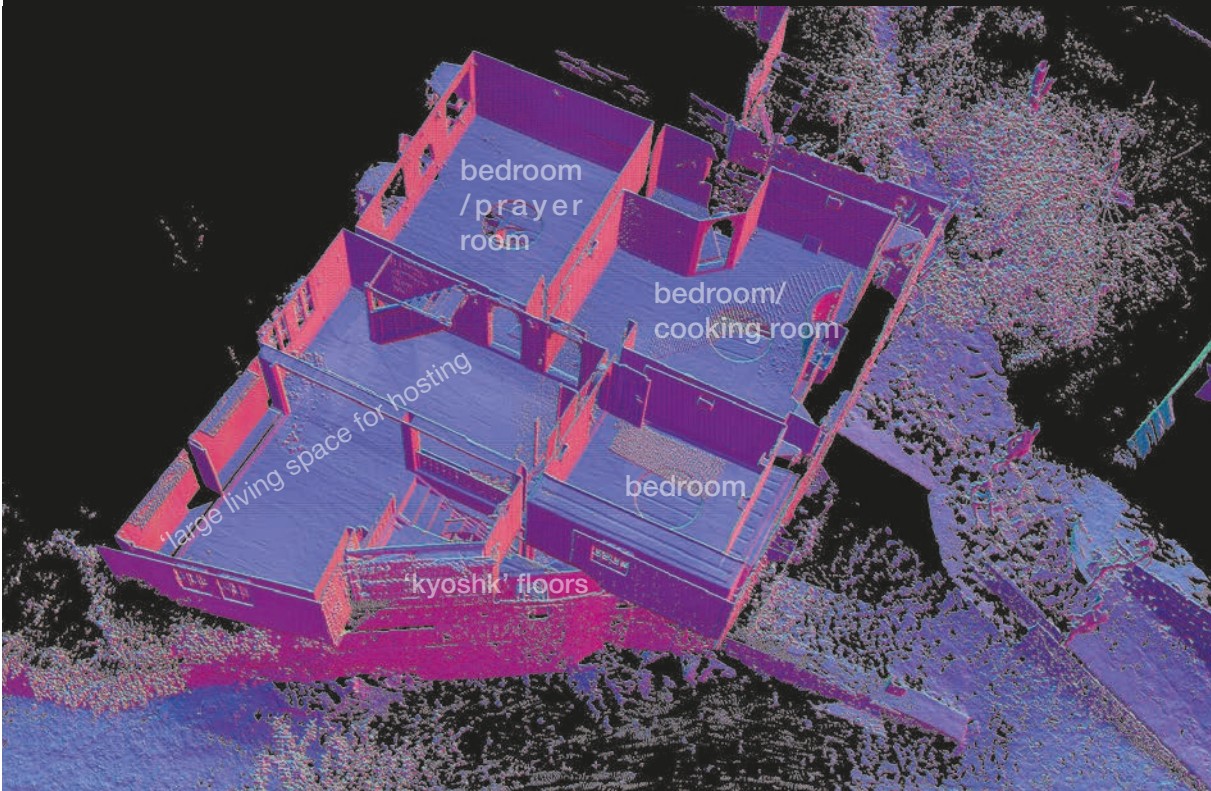




Each room had a specific purpose; a master's room, a cooking room, a guest room, and a large living space. When the daughter or son would marry, the young family will be given their own room on the floor unit an extension is build either upwards or in the close proximity of the courtyard.



Figure 69-71: (Above) Construction details from a house in ruins along Charshiyska street showing internal partition wall construction using wattle-and-daub walls (clay with straw mixture onto wooden lattice). (Bellow) Axonometric view from the 3D model of Kalajdzhieva house, (Right) exposing internal arrangements and construction elements (Authors own, 2025)

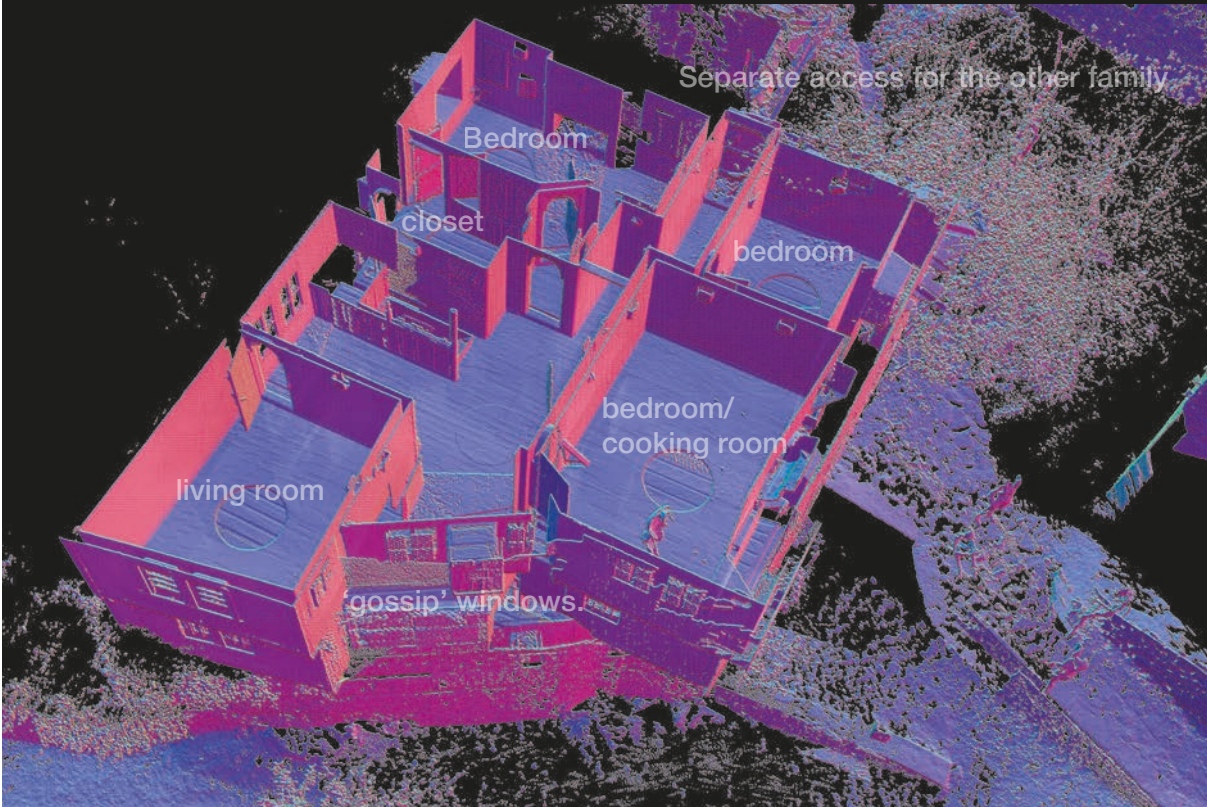


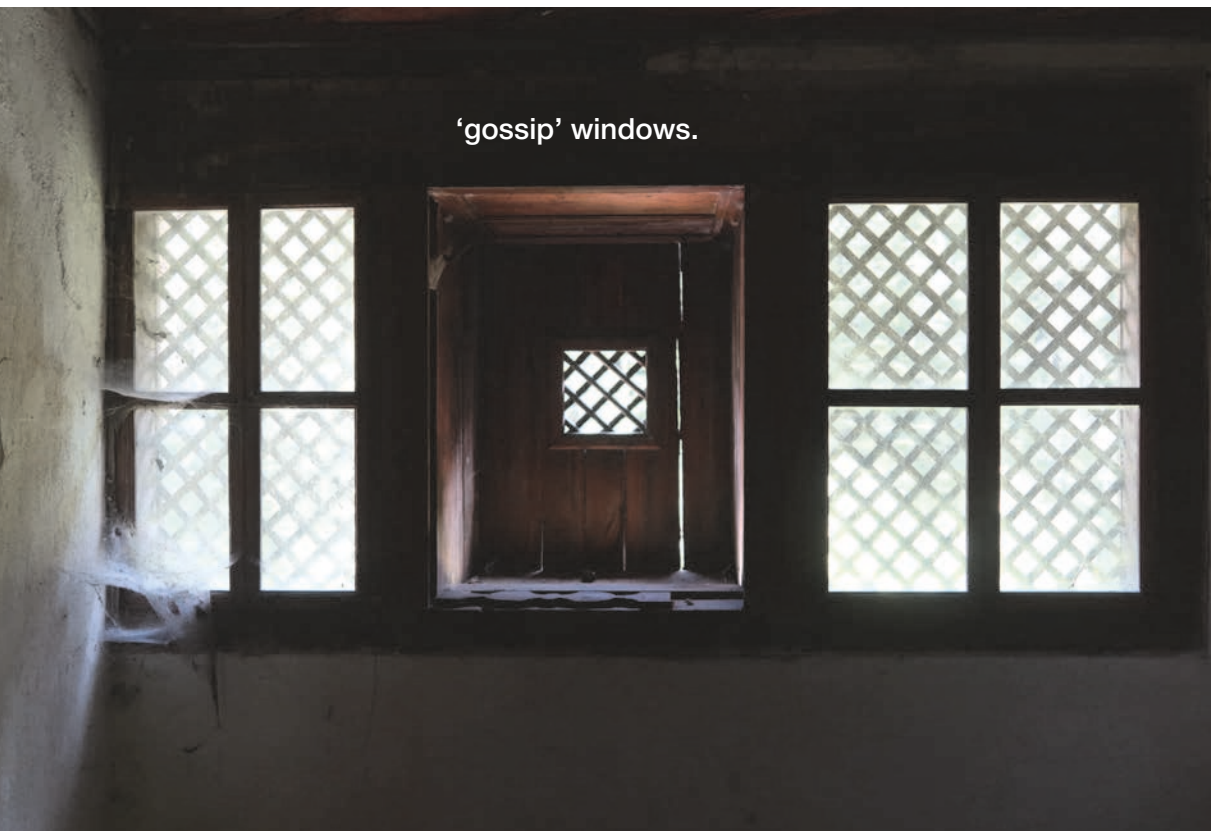


Only the upper levels which were considered as the family quarters, were designed to optimise natural sunlight and visual access for better connection to the outdoors, but also surveillance through the 'gossip' windows. The central living room was the heart of the houses where most of the day-to-day activities happened; families would often even cook, eat and sleep in the same room to optimise heating resources and space as a multigenerational practice.



Figure 72-74: (Above) Construction details from a Kalajdzhieva house, exposing the layers of render within the interior and a fireplace insulated with cob (clay and straw) and rendered with lime plaster). (Bellow) Axonometric view from the 3D model of Kalajdzhieva house, (Right) exposing internal arrangements and construction elements (Authors own, 2025)





An important feature of the Rhodope houses are the beautiful 'kyoshk' floors, which increase the volume of the upper floors. The bay window protrudes up to 1 meter outwards and is always supported at the bottom elegantly by curved wooden consoles firmly attached at its lower end to the load-bearing wall of the lower floor. These curved wooden consoles, very characteristic of the Rhodope houses, are called "undercuts" or "pipes". The outer three or two walls of the corner have always been whitewashed with stucco and lime. On the walls of the houses, you can clearly see the stones from which they are built, and the joints between them are carefully plastered. Typical for the Rhodope houses are the large stone chimneys. They are high, almost always over a meter and end with two rectangular openings on each of the four sides through which the smoke comes out, with a small roof of tiles, on which there is a small sharp tip of mortar.

"В приземието на широколъшката къща има малка изба и вътрешен двор, застлан с каменни плочи. На долния етаж (долната къща) има една-две стаи, които обикновено служат за запазване на багаж. На горния етаж (горната къща) са стаите, в които живее семейството, пешкентарят (домашна църква), праговата пейка, клетът (килера), къшкът, пеща, мусандрата (долапа за храна) и пр. Таваните на отделните стаи са дървени, често оформени с богата резба. Особено характерни тук са вътрешните врати, долапите и другите дървени елементи, които са богато оформени с декоративна резба.

Мебелировката на широколъшката къща е типично българска — ниски одъри, застлани с козаци, кичени халища, диплари и др. Пред пещта винаги има обширно огнище с необходимите съоръжения — пиростия, верига и прибори, необходими за затопляне на вода и приготвяне на хляба. Гостните стаи имат високи миндерлъци, застлани с бели кичени халища и извезани възглавници. Въобще цялата подредба на широколъшкия дом говори за добрия вкус на планинците, за умението, находчивостта на родопската жена да използва наличната площ, да подрежда с желание своя дом.

А това е достатъчно, за да се отдаде заслужена | почит на онези, които са изваяли тази красота, които са съградили не къщи, а са сътворили песен" (Zoinski, 2012)



stone chimneys



whitewashed with stucco and lime.



"undercuts"



bay window








Currently the Kalajdzhieva house belongs to a Spanish family that had invested in property but have since decided to resell, unable keep funding works necessary to maintain the house. There is a need to make the interior up to modern requirements for energy efficiency, comfort, health and safety, and at the same time to maintain its character. The house is currently on the market for sale at the price of 250,000 Euros, despite its significance for the locality and its status as a cultural monument, its future is unclear. The next owners would be tasked with the project to renovate the house whilst maintaining its character and layers of history. Its listed status suggests the process of how the house is to be best renovated by the new owners, yet it is not mandatory and closely managed as a process.



Current trend for renovated properties


Guest House Filter 30+ days ago

 nights Shiroka Laka, Smolyan region
 Type of accommodation: **Villa for rent, Guest House Shiroka Laka** Rodopi, Western Rhodopes, On the mountain | 14 places
 Guest House "Filter" offers 4 rooms, of which 2 triple and 2 quadruple, each with a private bathroom and TV. One of the rooms has a terrace that offers a panoramic view of the whole village and the surrounding picturesque nature. For common use by all

Guest House Tanchevata Kashta 30+ days ago

 nights Shiroka Laka, Smolyan region
 Type of accommodation: **Villa for rent, Guest House Shiroka Laka** Rodopi, Western Rhodopes, On the mountain | 8 places
 The Tancheva house is located on the southern slope in the village of **Shiroka Laka**, 50 m from the central square in the direction of Devin ... to the Shirokolashka River, Perelik Peak and the picturesque mountain village of **Shiroka Laka** ... In the

Spa Villa Mezinska Jacuzzi Sauna Exceptional 9.9

 Shiroka Laka Show on map 100 yards from centre
 Location 10
 Two-Bedroom Villa
 Entire villa • 2 bedrooms • 1 living room • 2 bathrooms • 1 kitchen • 1,507 ft²
 3 beds (1 sofa bed, 2 large doubles, 2 futons)
 5 nights, 2 adults
 £1,287
 Includes taxes and charges
 See availability

Майорвата къща Exceptional 9.8

 Managed by a private host
 Shiroka Laka Show on map 100 yards from centre
 Location 10
 Three-Bedroom House
 Entire holiday home • 3 bedrooms • 1 bathroom • 1 kitchen • 753 ft²
 3 double beds
 ✓ Free cancellation
 5 nights, 2 adults
 £533
 Includes taxes and charges
 See availability

АРТ Къща Широка Лъка Exceptional 9.0

 Managed by a private host
 Shiroka Laka Show on map 150 yards from centre
 Location 10
 Three-Bedroom Villa
 Entire villa • 3 bedrooms • 1 living room • 2 bathrooms • 1 kitchen • 1,615 ft²
 5 beds (2 sofa beds, 3 large doubles)
 ✓ Free cancellation
 5 nights, 2 adults
 £1,101
 Includes taxes and charges
 See availability

Hotel Kalina Superb 9.6

 Shiroka Laka Show on map 150 yards from centre
 Location 9.6
 Double Room with Mountain View
 2 single beds
 Breakfast included
 ✓ Free cancellation
 Only 4 rooms left at this price on our site
 5 nights, 2 adults
 £243
 Includes taxes and charges
 See availability

Shiroka Laka Hotel Exceptional 9.5

 Shiroka Laka Show on map 100 yards from centre
 Location 9.4
 Deluxe King Room Without Balcony and Street View
 1 extra-large double bed
 Breakfast included
 ✓ Free cancellation
 Only 2 rooms left at this price on our site
 5 nights, 2 adults
 £422
 Includes taxes and charges
 See availability

Yakusha - Якуша, къща за гости Exceptional 9.5

 Managed by a private host
 Shiroka Laka Show on map 0.3 miles from centre
 Location 9.5
 Two-Bedroom House
 Entire holiday home • 2 bedrooms • 1 living room • 1 bathroom • 1 kitchen • 753 ft²
 5 beds (2 singles, 1 sofa bed, 2 large doubles)
 ✓ Free cancellation
 5 nights, 2 adults
 £595
 Includes taxes and charges
 See availability

Къща за гости Гайтана Exceptional 9.9

 Managed by a private host
 Shiroka Laka Show on map 0.4 miles from centre
 Location 9.7
 Standard Double Room
 1 large double bed
 Breakfast included
 ✓ Free cancellation
 Only 1 room left at this price on our site
 5 nights, 2 adults
 £244
 Includes taxes and charges
 See availability

Figure 79-80: (Above) Screen grabs of current listings for guest houses in Shiroka Laka, (Right) (Booking.com, 2025). Highlighting 'Gaitana Guest House' which is owned by Mr.Lubo who shared in an interview his experience of renovating it and his practical experience through the process of creating a new house in the traditional Rhodopian style. (Authors own, 2025)







Sustainable model for development

'Sustainable' is a term we have all come across in one way or another; whether it is from within the work environment, informal conversations, media or practice; the modern discourse has focused so much on it. Living sustainably, eating sustainably, working sustainably, designing sustainably, all so important to tackle the challenges to our life on the planet. In the 2021 publication 'Flourish', Sarah Ichioka and Michael Pawlyn challenged some of those ideas and models of practice. The authors critiqued conventional sustainable practice as "doing less harm" rather than a more proactive approaches such as regenerative design which puts the environments in a position to enhance existing ecosystems, communities and cultures. The thinking welcomes a mentality shift from reducing harm, to active restoration, a theme key for the sustainable development of villages and their heritage preservation also.

Many people have begun to appreciate the lessons from old practices and lifestyles that can serve as the model for sustainability we should be living by. The trends are emerging of people from the big cities choosing the simpler and slower life in the more rural parts of countries, prioritising more natural environments. Across Bulgaria, there is a trend for families making the move and purchasing remote properties in villages as the beginning of a personal project for their new homes. This is the case for Bulgarians, but also foreigners ready to make the move because of the lifestyle prospect offered by villages in Bulgaria. The move is especially attractive due to the low price of properties in need of new owners, and villages in need of younger people. The properties often come with large plots of land that can be used for farming, access to private natural spring water, abundance of raw materials, and the ability to form belonging to small and closely knit community. The 2023 publication *Moving to the Village- Aspects of Contemporary Urban-Rural Migration in Bulgaria* by Desislava Pileva, Violeta Periklieva, Ivaylo Markov, and Nadezhda Zhechkova from the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, reflects on some of these trends and challenges for rural communities. "Through identifying motives, settlement choices, adaptation processes, and the persistence of urban practices in rural settings, the study reveals how counter-urban living is transitioning from "exotic" exception to a potential mainstream lifestyle in Bulgaria. "(Markov, Periklieva, Pileva, 2023)

The research collected in-depth interviews, visual documentation of homes and participant observation from 45 households tracing daily rituals and adaptation to life in rural communities. "In contrast to the Western European countries where the process of returning to the villages is well-known, in the countries of Eastern Europe (including Bulgaria) it just becomes apparent. One of the main reasons is the purposeful policy of the socialist government of migration from the village to the city whose effect is hard to overcome after the fall of the regimes. Although in the post-socialist period the population is free to travel around and the industries settle in the rural areas as well, only in the late 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium the people began to rediscover the "rural values" and the significance of the rural tourism" (Markov, Periklieva, Pileva, 2023). This trend of practice is evident across many villages in the Rhodope region. The national TV NOVA Media Group has developed and airing a series 'Catching the Forest', focused on documenting exactly this process, the stories of people who have made the move away from the city, and embraced life in the villages. The work showcased often focuses on new approaches to sustainable living, creation of an environment and infrastructure to support elements for organic food production, animal farming, off grid energy production and heating, as well as more sustainable house building and use of materiality. However, the challenges come when the owners are faced with the land in traditional villages, having to make decisions how to re-purpose an old house; should they just start fresh by demolishing the old and using new construction technologies and materials?

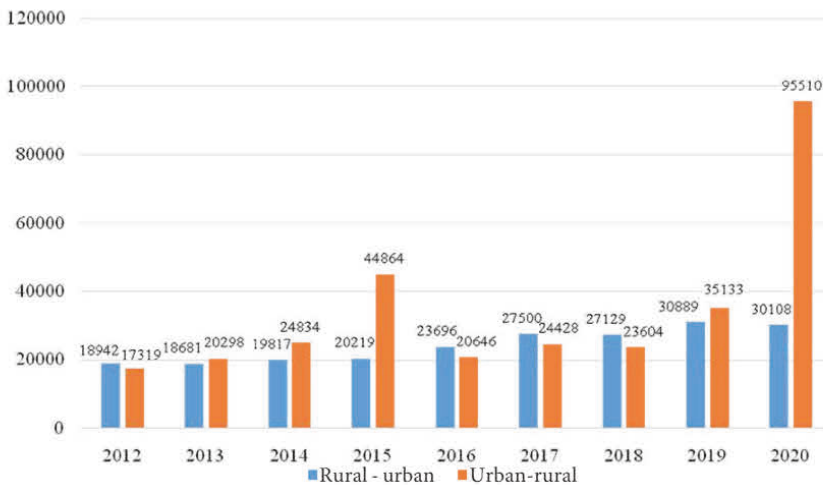


Figure 81: Internal rural- urban and urban-rural movements (National Statistics Institute, 2023),

The building technology from old traditional houses has been increasingly in the spotlight as researchers, modern builders and enthusiasts are looking into for sustainable design solutions. Vernacular architecture has been considered an important subject of study in order to support the effort for sustainability and achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs) by the United Nations for 2030. The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro marked the start of international efforts toward sustainable development, leading to global partnerships between the UN, its member states, and developing countries. Over 178 countries adopted Agenda 21, a plan to promote human well-being and environmental protection (United Nations, 2024). Since then, partnerships have grown, research has expanded, and organisations have formed to drive local government action. The 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development produced "The Future We Want," calling for sustainable development goals and appropriate funding. In 2015, the General Assembly's Open Working Group created the '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' with 17 core goals. This has inspired new research and approaches to sustainable practices worldwide.

Vernacular buildings represent environmental responsiveness and adaptation naturally. The nature of construction is organic, with the materiality locally sourced and tailored to the environment "Vernacular heritage is composed of traditional buildings, which represent a morphological response to the constraints of the environment and climate. Additionally, the materials and architectural components used are climate responsive, tailored to distinct locations, adapted to seismic, geographical and climatic features, as well as to social behaviour and cultural traditions. It is also a cost-effective architecture with low environmental impact" (Vegas, 2023). The abundance of research in this field is proving successful as awareness has increased and more and more people are considering experimenting with and learning about local approaches to design.





Figure 82: Compilation of screen-shots from NOVA Media group TV Series 'Catching the forest'; documenting the stories of people who have made the decision to move to and embrace life in rural villages across Bulgaria. The episodes knowledges and experiences gained in the process of moving (NOVA, 2021-2025)

Decentralised heritage protection

The documentation of heritage through the means of photography, film and professional equipment such as 3D scanners is proving to be a meaningful tool for the process of decentring knowledge and information. Modern methods for 3D model generation such as Photogrammetry and LIDAR scanning are quickly gaining popularity as a powerful tool for preservation and architectural planning. The technology can enable the creation of 3D environments and detailed plans that can be of use to both the general public and local and national planning bodies in charge of planning. A shared repository of material can allow a more transparent planning process and better-informed decision making, especially when it comes down to historic environments.

A recent publication from 2024 titled ‘Supporting Digitization of a Cultural and Historical Heritage Platform’ by academics from the Plovdiv University and Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, has highlighted a recent shift in mentality towards utilising digital tools for heritage preservation in Bulgaria. The research project focused on exploring the potential to a digital catalogue of cultural and historical sites across Bulgaria. The idea and research resulted in a mobile app designed to help tourist interact with and get informed about cultural and historical heritage in the locality of Gabrovo. Despite the early stages of the research, the idea has great potential as they have outlined future for the integration of thematic ontologies focusing on Rhodope Folklore Ontology, Humanities, Bulgarian Folk Dances, Residential Revival Figures and Organizations, and Bulgarian Revival Residential Architecture.

The topic was further explored in a different academic paper in 2019, titled ‘Digitalization of Bulgarian Cultural Heritage’ by Georgi Georgiev from the New Bulgarian University, Department of Architecture. The paper largely focuses on explaining current technologies for digital recording of cultural movable and immovable heritage, with a specific focus on Photogrammetry as an inexpensive and inclusive method for the public to get involved in the process of heritage digitalisation. In the paper Georgiev highlights the actions by ICOMOS started in the region and Bulgaria “to assist in the investigation, preservation and enhancement of the values of the cultural heritage: monuments of culture, historical areas, towns, ensembles and sites, as well as in the use and promotion of the heritage” (Georgiev, 2019).



A great example of good practice comes from the European project '3DPAST', coordinated by esGallaecia (Portugal), with the partnership of the University of Florence (Italy) and the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (Spain) and the institutional support from the Chair UNESCO-Earthen Architecture, Constructive Cultures and Sustainable Development and ICOMOS. The multidisciplinary team from experts across heritage, architecture, urban design, art and multimedia; all contributed to the digitising of sites across European countries and their heritage, focusing on capturing vernacular and intangible elements. "It also enhanced, the creative potential associated with these sites' intangible culture and with their vernacular expression. This technological way of reaching new audiences was a distinctiveness factor, to document and disseminate vernacular heritage, little known by the general public, contributing to local identity and cultural diversity...3DPAST brought the opportunity to discover the 'spirit of place' of vernacular dwellings, across Europe. The project aimed to attract new audiences to these properties, through AR experience in books, a Platform, and a in situ Mobile App (3DPAST is available to download at App store and Google Play)" (Correia, Carlos, 2023)



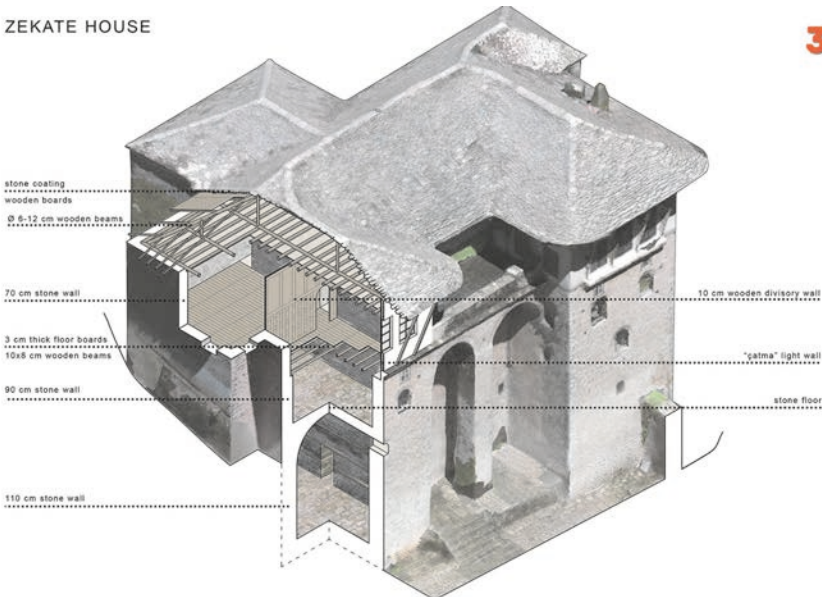
Figure 84: Project sites of digitised heritage under the project '3DPAST', (3DPAST, 2023)

The project resulted in the successful digitalisation of heritage sites in Greece, Portugal, Italy, Spain, Georgia, Finland, Romania and Albania. This example can serve as a precedent for good practice in order to preserve current vernacular heritage across Bulgaria also.



Figure 85: Digital outcomes of 3D scans under the project '3DPAST', digitising Zekate House in Gironkaster, Albania (Below), and a photogrammetric survey of a traditional house in Svaneti, Georgia (Above) (3DPAST, 2023)

ZEKATE HOUSE



On a more local scale, the power to our environment lies in our hands as we are enabled to learn from and encourage participatory models of rebuilding villages. Current models for heritage preservation in Bulgaria rely heavily on a top-down approach, deeply dependant on a strong legislative framework and funding from international heritage partners, European funds, and ministry of culture budgets. Many Rhodopian villages and their heritage is currently on a crossroad as the challenge lies with families that have decided to embrace rural life with time and enthusiasm to repair and transform abandoned houses and piece of land into a new family home. Houses once build with so much skill and intention, full of heritage through the intangible qualities such as traditional practices, oral traditions, skills and knowledges, and folk rituals and events.

The effort for practical skills and knowledges dissemination is greatly supported by the vast amount of information available now through social media channels such as video tutorials, blogs, academic publications, book guides and even TV shows focused on showcasing the process of passion projects taken on by families. The advancement in technology has enabled seamless transfer of knowledge and skills, and has supported the documentation and digitalisation of resources, archiving, and active preservation of heritage through detailed surveying and modelling of movable and immovable artefacts. The availability of resources online can be seen as the enabling factor for people without prior professional training in design and construction to be able to complete the process from beginning to end.

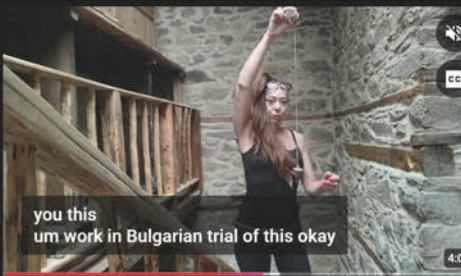
To take it one step further, people through this skills and experience gained in the process, are enabled to become part of a circular process of post occupancy maintenance, improvements, and expansion of their homes. These are the people who become active actors in sustainable design; ones who can repair the chain of knowledge and skill transfer though generational practices. "Digitising technologies have become indispensable tools in cultural heritage protection, offering advanced methods for documenting, preserving and sharing historical artefacts and sites. ; Collectively, digitising technologies expand on how cultural heritage may be protected and preserved, interacted with and shared across communities and borders" (McKenna et al. 2025).



Repairing My Traditional Bulgarian House - Solo DIY Renovation
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TOMA KADROV
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4K
4 chapters Intro | House tour | Demolition work | Digger to remove water pipe



BULGARIAN LESSON - Rebuilding an Old House in the Mountain - house & tools - related vocabulary
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Yana on Grammar
6:24 The Bulgarian word for house is kashta this is a very old house that's actually being renovated reconstructed this is. Okay I'm ...



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Figures 86: Few examples of current video publications on YouTube from people willing to document their journey moving to rural Bulgaria and share their experiences (YouTube, 2025),





Practical knowledge transfer

Heritage is deeply intertwined with vernacular practices though the knowledges and skills necessary for processing and working with local raw materials. These intangible heritage elements are arguably the most important when it comes to considering the aspect of sustainable heritage. Ensuring the continuation of these skills and knowledges is necessary for the future of the tangible and immovable heritage. Education of young people and enthusiastic people can ensure a more resilient and enabled network of heritage protectors, as active actors in repair and heritage management. It is often tempting and easier to start building from scratch, and many take the choice to demolish the old and start fresh with new materials and technologies for construction. Many of the new homes in villages use large amounts of concrete, plastics, adhesives and paints. The choices often led by economy and speed of construction, rather than principles to honour and celebrate the old, the local and the natural. This is the reason why an emphasis needs to be put on sustainable heritage.

There are regional NGOs and initiatives which are leading by example in this way of thinking, and inspiring many other to do the same. The 2025 'Handbook on Intangible Cultural Practices as Global Strategies for the Future' edited by Christoph Wulf, is a multidisciplinary collection of research and case studies focused on the role of vernacular heritage in shaping sustainable futures. The essays advocate for integrating vernacular architecture into modern sustainability frameworks, highlighting how heritage can support environmental resilience, social cohesion, and economic development. Much of the research also aligns with numerous of the UN SDGs, and forms a framework for reference when looking to restore, document or preserve heritage.

Similarly, The project 'VerSus+ / Heritage for People' across Spain, Italy, Portugal and France, serves as a great precedent for good practice in the active effort to facilitate knowledge and skill sharing of vernacular practices. The project was materialised in 2023 featuring academic partners from architecture schools in four countries under the 'Creative Europe Culture Programme' co-funded by the European Union, and supported by International Committee of Vernacular Architecture ICOMOS-CIAV, and UNESCO Earthen architecture and ICOMOS Earthen Architectural Heritage. The VerSus+ was developed over 9 years as an assessment tool that can be implemented by the general public and people looking to understand how to approach a personal project dealing with heritage and new build.



МЕШПРА - ТРАДИЦИОННИ ЗНАНИЯ И ЗАНАЯТИ - meshprano.com



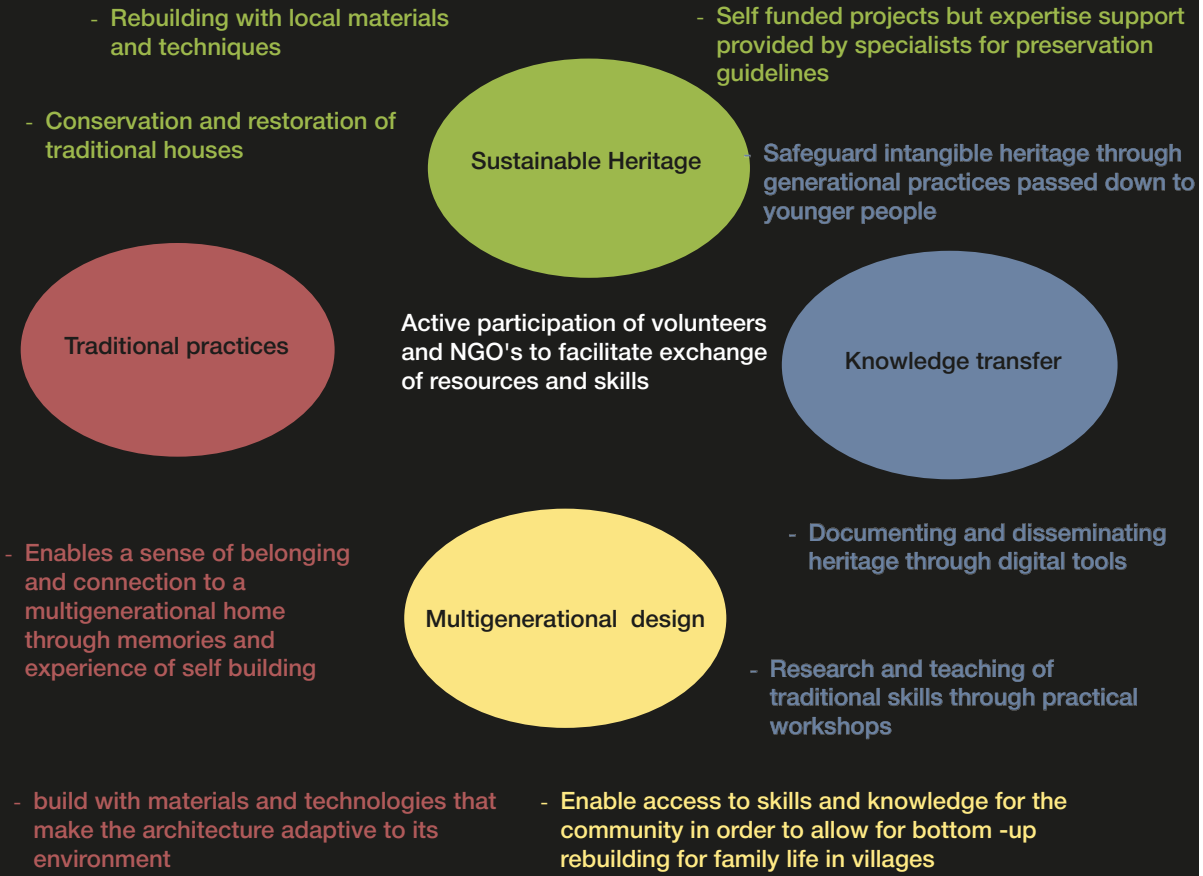
МЕШПРА - ТРАДИЦИОННИ ЗНАНИЯ И ЗАНАЯТИ - meshprano.com



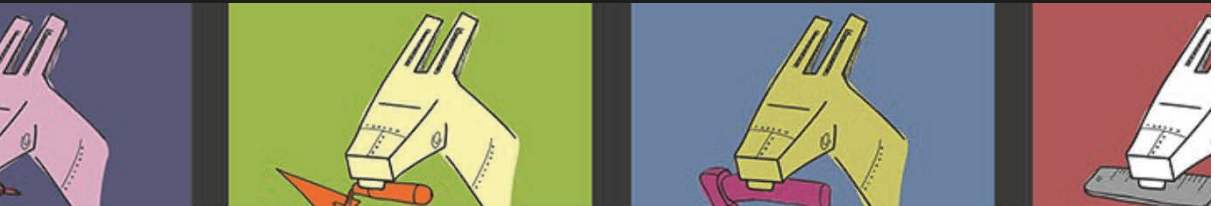
Through the Rhodopian style and the traditional practices we have been taught the importance of community and family practices for the construction of most of the houses. The physical aspect of being in contact with raw construction materials over hours allows the person to connect with and appreciate the process on a much deeper level. Despite the accessibility of knowledge and skills online, the hands-on aspect remains key for the passing of these skills. "Traditional crafts and their related knowledge are dependent on transmission practices (such as apprenticeship) and environments of practice where skills can be trained, learned and techniques can be refined and adapted, and sometimes even changed. This has been the way (generally outside formal contexts) to preserve and continue the dynamic transformation of traditional know-how. (Dipasquale, Ferrari,2023)

The work of local NGOs across Bulgaria is so important for this model similar to that of The project 'VerSus+ / Heritage for People', supporting real life learning through specialised workshops and volunteer projects for conservation and sustainable construction. The most notable examples are the work of Meshtra, an organisation of architects and professionals in the heritage protection and conservation. Meshtra focus their effort on the rural parts of Bulgaria with the idea of disseminating traditional knowledge and crafts through alternative forms of education. Their work came to my attention after beginning more in-depth research in this topic and the current progress towards practicing traditional forms of construction and crafts in the field. Their team has managed to achieve series of partnerships with local community leaders, master builders, volunteers, young apprentices, international professionals in sustainable building and researchers interested in documenting their work. Together, they have managed to restore old houses which are not yet designated as protected heritage and have actively been advocating for the recognition of rural villages for their vernacular heritage.

This mentality of designing and building together as a community, with the idea of striving towards sustainable family life seems to be gaining momentum as a model for the revival of rural parts across Bulgaria. As long as there are professionals willing to share their knowledge and experience, and there are young people willing to participate and learn; there will be great potential for the rebuilding of rural communities' bottom-up. Despite the lack of funding and management plans across governmental bodies for heritage preservation in rural villages, traditional skill learning and practice offers a great opportunity that can empower people towards a model of community managed heritage, resilient construction, sustainable living and thriving villages.



Figures 88-89: Diagram (above) bringing main elements for the Rhodo-plan strategy (Authors own, 2025), Screen-shot from Meshtra's website(below) (Meshtra, 2016)



Apply for Summer Workshop in Preservation of Cultural Heritage 11-17 July 2016, Dolen village

🕒 20/04/2016 🗨️ Comment Closed

The Department of "History and theory of architecture" at UACEG and association "Meshtra - traditional knowledge and crafts" invite you to a summer workshop in Preservation of cultural heritage. The event is aimed at people interested in cultural



Figures 90-92: Archival image (Top) my family home in its original state in 1940s, now at a crossroad thinking about how best to preserve the traditional construction and expand the household within the courtyard and other 2 houses within it, Stone masonry ground floor and a more lightweight adobe brick structure. All materials sourced from the land around and build by my family. (Bottom) current floor plan after renovations introducing a structural extension as a retaining wall for the earth above the house. (Right) recent retaining structure added (Authors own, 2025)

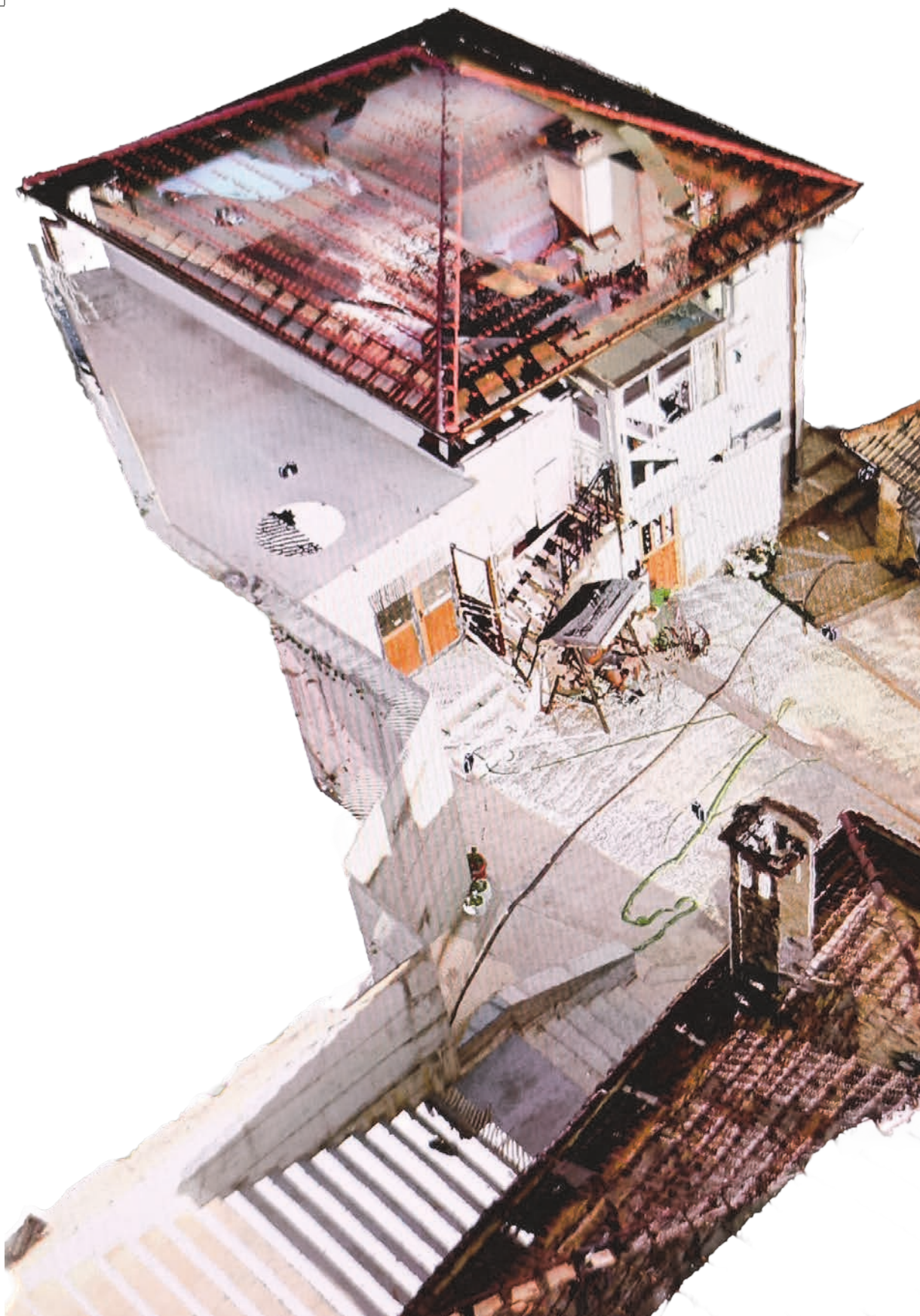


**Rhodo-plan - Summer workshops for traditi
Regional NGO partnerships?
multigenerational effort?**



onal practice ? How can we restore it ?







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MA Architecture and Historic Urban Environments



Stiliyan Nizamov