

PERAST: THE MANSION OF VICKO BUJOVIĆ, BUILT IN 1694 AFTER THE PLAN OF THE ARCHITECT IVAN FONTE

HOUSES AND MANSIONS

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Architectural activity in Boka Kotorska was, during a period of three whole centuries, inseparably linked with the development of navigation. This activity was most intensive during the second half of the eighteenth century; it gradually declined early in the nineteenth century, and finally came to an end with the invention of the steamship.

The old Bokelji were, in the majority of cases, the architects of their own houses, and they planned them soberly after the traditional methods of local construction, being aided in their efforts by the local builders and masons, who carried out their designs.

The town house of those times was usually a two-storey house and invariably for the use of a single family. The ground-floor was used only for domestic purposes and wherever possible it was separate from the living quarters, which were approached by an open staircase. Often use was made of the natural lie of the terrain, the ground-floor and the floors above it being connected by steep steps. Usually the first floor contained the guest rooms, while the second was occupied by the family. It was on the first floor that the host welcomed his relatives, friends, guests, its rooms being opened also during special occasions, such as for baptism, weddings, or funerals. The uppermost floor — the part beneath the roof — contained besides extra rooms, a large kitchen, the place which was in daily family use. The life of the family flowed slowly and monotonously in the two

topmost floors, especially while the host was at sea. Only messengers, home-comers, and official visitors were entertained by the hostess in the rooms on the first floor.

A house was never designed in the modern sense of the term. Since the typical Boka town house is square, it was sufficient to settle on the length and breadth of the building, and then, after deducting for the thickness of the stone walls, to calculate the space available for use. For this purpose it was sufficient to have a rough sketch drawn by the future landlord who, skilful in the complicated commercial arithmetic of his time, was able to calculate the size of his rooms with considerable accuracy, and at the same time to plan their placing in relation to each other.

Stone and wood were the basic material, and lime, sand, gravel and clay were available locally in sufficient quantities. It is a paradoxical fact that nowhere in Boka Kotorska has a type of stone been found suitable for use in precise high-grade architecture. For this reason, all stone elements had to be worked of outside types of stone or imported as ready-made parts. Whenever the main facade was of an elaborate design, stone was always brought from the island of Korčula.

Ready-made stone elements were ordered before construction work began, always according to certain recognised measurements, which contributed to standardizing the

elements. The unit of measurement tacitly adopted was 17.4 cm., or half the current Venetian foot. Thus the future landlord determined the dimensions of openings regularly in feet or in half-feet. It follows that the basic unit of measurement both on the island of Korčula and in Boka was the same. If we add that the distance from the middle of one window to the middle of another window as well as the height of the floors was always more or less fixed, it is not difficult to conclude that all these units of measurement automatically answered the rules of unit planning, for purely practical reasons.

Simple numerical relations, based on definite common units of measurement, constitute one of the fundamental characteristics of architecture in Boka Kotorska. It should be emphasized that its beauty, in addition to its traditional use of stone and masterly workmanship, consisted precisely in its quiet, unaggressive proportions. In the uninterrupted plane of the facade, the distribution of the openings of the storeys was always strictly rhythmical. On the ground-floor, however, the distribution was less rigid. Balconies were popular, and nowhere along the coast were they as frequent as in the Boka Kotorska. The stone balconies were always given varied treatment. The balustrades of stone, the baluster profiles rectangular or circular, were later supplanted by ironwork which, regarded from the practical standpoint, was less expensive and admitted of a more comfortable



PERAST: THE COAT-OF-ARMS OF THE BUJOVIC FAMILY



PRCANJ: THE BALCONY OF THE BESKUČA MANSION, LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

DOBROTA: THE KOKOT-DABINOVIĆ MANSION

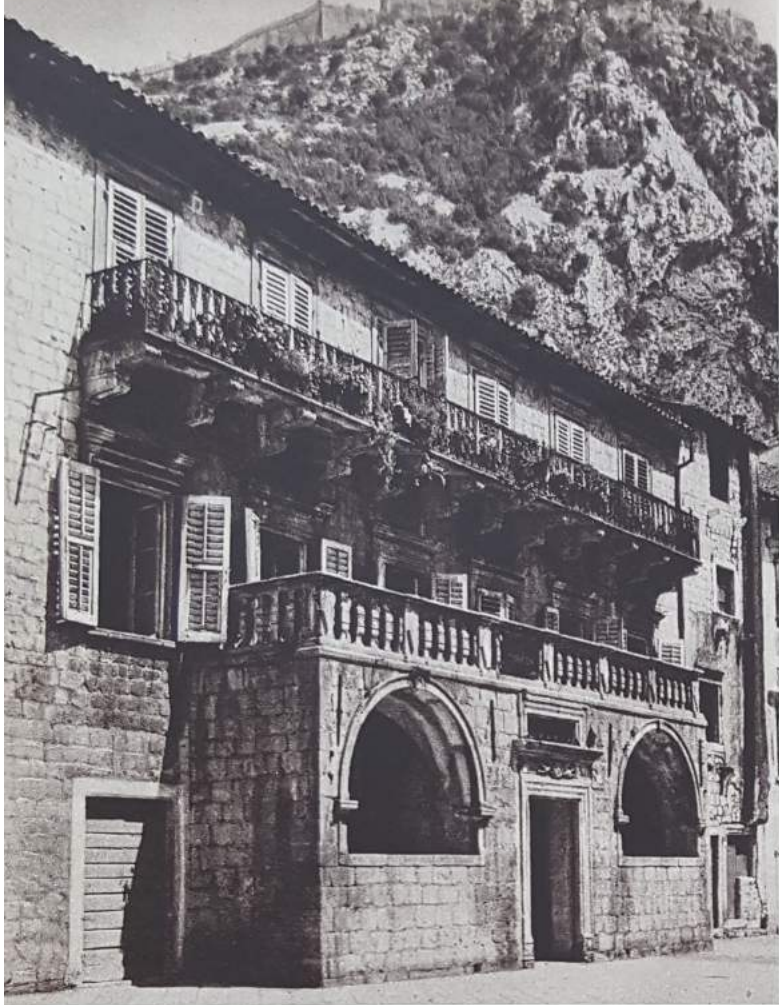


use of the balcony platform. The balcony was strong, and daring in execution; it usually rested on two or four consoles, rarely on three or six.

Considering the conditions of those times, the Boka town house was well designed. The rather high living standard was evident primarily from the furniture which, thanks to the frequent voyages of the host, his relatives and business friends, was brought from abroad. There are few buildings, however, in which the rich fittings and sturdy furniture have been preserved up to the present.

One of the old mansions of Kotor — the one-time mansion of the Grgurina family — today contains the maritime museum. The exhibits collected from different Boka houses — paintings and models of ships, nautical instruments, log-books, charters and documents, the portraits of captains, antique weapons and costumes, old furniture, etc. — vividly recall the proud and glorious past of Boka's widely-known navigation.

The pure type of Boka mansion deserves special attention. The difference between the mansion and the town house consists not so much in the working out of the details as in the general conception. The mansion — excepting those in Kotor, which are distinguished by their specific town character — is striking for its size, almost always being three stories high, with a severely symmetrical facade.



KOTOR: A PART OF THE STAIRCASE IN THE COURTYARD OF THE PIMA MANSION, AND THE MANSION FAÇADE, BUILT AT THE END OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY (LEFT)



PERAST: ONCE THE ZMAJEVIĆ MANSION, LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY
Photos by M. Grčević

The axis of symmetry is emphasized by the narrower top floor which is like a vantage point, by the obligatory balcony motif, and frequently by balcony openings with semi-circular ends, usually interpolated between the middle openings of the main storeys.

The lay-out of the rooms in the Boka mansion usually follows the Venetian model. There are always two rooms on each side of a central chamber, — the drawing-room — invariably facing the sea. The staircase is of stone.

As regards internal arrangement and way of life, the Boka mansion is an expanded type of town house, though the guest-rooms and the living quarters are more numerous.

The gardens, planned and adapted to the terrain, were the pride and joy of the hostess. The path from the house to the well was always paved, and often sheltered by a bower. The garden was an outer, inseparable part of the Boka house, whether it lay in front, at the back, or beside the house.

Some mansions, and Perast as a whole are now to be preserved as national monuments. Many abandoned buildings which were once important are to be restored, and Perast — the "dead town" of the southern coast — is to be resurrected from the grave.

The building activity of Boka Kotorska during its maritime period of advancement is a significant chapter in the history of the coastal cultural heritage of Yugoslavia. The experience offered by some of the structures in these regions may be adapted to contemporary requirements, and may thus prove useful in solving similar architectural problems.