ABSTRACT

Throughout the years, it has always been possible to identify specific forms of architectural design of family houses that are authentic to specific regions of Slovenia. These characteristic forms present some of the important historical morphological elements that mark the individual identity of the different territorial regions. In recent years, however, there has been a noticeable change in the way family houses are being designed. New, completely different architectural designs are rapidly replacing the previous characteristic forms.

The results of our survey show that these ‘modern’ design approaches, initially introduced in urban and suburban areas, are rapidly spreading to countryside and rural areas. Old farm-houses are being torn down and replaced by new buildings of entirely ‘foreign’ design. We argue that, if allowed to continue unchecked, these processes present a danger of traditional architectural designs becoming extinct in the near future.

Key words: Single-family house, self-build, architectural design, built environment, housing standards.
**Introduction**

House building in Slovenia is characterised by two main housing typologies. On the one hand is the construction of individual family homes, dispersed at very low density, and on the other is the organised housing construction of housing estates, predominantly consisting of blocks of flats and high-rise buildings at high density. The latter used to be referred to as social housing before most of the dwellings in these housing estates were sold off to the sitting tenants during the privatisation process in the early 1990s. This discussion focuses on the former typology, the single-family house.

Statistical data from the 2002 population census show that more than two-thirds of Slovenia's population live in single-family houses. One explanation for the relatively high proportion of single-family houses is the generally recognised fact (supported by various research findings) that the majority of Slovenian households aspire to live in a single-family house, often situated in the middle of a large plot surrounded by well landscaped gardens. Another explanation is that before the introduction of the market system in the early 1990s, housebuilding presented the only form of capital investment that was available to private individuals since there were no other profitable forms of investment. It is also important to point out that the majority (85%) of single-family houses are constructed through self-help means, or self-build approaches, as more commonly referred to in the literature. It is the self-build single-family house which we concentrate on in this paper.

According to Golland and Blake (2004) self-build practice is highly significant in mainland Europe (for example in Germany, France and the Netherlands) while it plays a lesser role in the UK, where people normally buy a plot of land, commission an architect to draw up the plans and hire a contractor to build the house. The motivation for undertaking this cumbersome task is the strong desire for households to acquire a ‘dream home’ and to provide greater choice in the way in which housing is developed. Self-build practice in Slovenia is undoubtedly firmly seated in the mainland Europe context where the household has a significant physical input to the construction process. In the case of Slovenia, this involves high levels of personal participation whereby self-builders build all or the largest part of the dwelling themselves. This is usually done with the help of friends, neighbours, relatives and the community at large, a practice described by Barlow (2001) as 'group' or 'community' self-build. The high proportion of pro-active house-building practice in Slovenia is, above all, due to the fact that many households simply cannot afford to pay the cost of construction companies. It is a form of community self-build practice similar to the one described by Bhatti et al. (1994) which is characterised by the self-builders carrying out the majority of the actual construction work themselves in contrast to those who only retain responsibility for the management of the building project – the building work itself being carried out by a number of subcontractors. Bhatti et al (ibd.) observe that this housebuilding method involves people working together as a
group, and they suggest that it may be described as ‘social’ housing because it is aimed at households who would not generally be able to raise the finance necessary to buy land and the materials for a house.

Self-build as a mode of housing development meets several objectives. In addition to cost saving, self-build also provides significant advantages in terms of improved management of the building process and control over the layout and appearance of the dwelling. It provides a way for people to express their own individuality in a housing project. As Edge and Duncan have suggested, "self-build housing is far more consistent with the cult of the individual than many conventional models of housing provision…. The homes which are produced are likely to be individual and tailored to particular needs. Self-build ostensively offers an express route from the underclass to the middle class” (Edge and Duncan, 1998, quoted in Golland and Blake, 2004, p. 328). In other words self-build empowers households to take advantage of their own housing destinies. It is possibly the most diverse housing solution as it allows household choice, via the opportunity to decide the plot on which the households wants to live and, as such, enables each different group to ‘gain and add something different to the process’ (Golland and Blake, 2004).

But besides the positive aspects presented by this 'gaining and adding' something to the process, there is also evidence of several undesired consequences that result from these housebuilding methods. This discussion is an attempt at highlighting the negative effects of these practices which, in our opinion, need to be urgently addressed and for which appropriate solutions need to be found promptly.

**Single-Family House Building in Slovenia**

As has already been stated, living in a single-family house is one of the major life ambitions of the average Slovenian household. Most of the single-family housing is to be found, of course, in the countryside and in rural settlements. Due to inadequate planning control and inappropriate planning policy, the single-family house has also been allowed, throughout the post-war period up to the present day, to gradually eat away at the fringes of urban areas thus contributing to urban sprawl and suburbanisation. In these locations, the single-family house is often extravagantly implanted in the middle of expansive plots (sometimes lacking basic communal infrastructure). In the majority of cases, the plots exceed 1 ha in size. The average single-family is normally an over-dimensioned detached structure characterised by poor design, built according to a 'standard architectural plan' that may be found scattered all over the whole country. Given the fact that most single-family houses are self-built with minimum financial resources, the plans for the houses have to be cheap and readily available. All the potential house-builder has to do is to approach any of the design offices, browse through and choose one of the standard plans in circulation. The draughtsmen in the design offices are always willing to make a few minor
adjustments to the 'typical plan' (as it is popularly referred to) in order to satisfy some insignificant demands made by the client who would normally happily accept the design offered at a very cheap price. In the majority of cases, housebuilders then make their own additional adjustments to the plan during construction, once planning permission has been granted. Some of the alterations to the plan are made with the aim of reducing construction costs, others are intended for acquiring more space (for example by erecting partitions to gain an extra room) or in order to 'improve' the aesthetic quality of design.

These housebuilding practices have several negative consequences. First, the single-family house phenomenon presents problems related to the rational use of scarce land resources, especially in urban areas, and high costs of provision of communal infrastructure in the dispersed settlements in suburban areas and the countryside. Second, dispersed single-family housing contributes to environmental degradation as a result of unplanned and uncontrolled waste disposal in the dispersed settlement areas. Davis (1995) warns us not to be uncritically zealous about the single-family house. He has drawn up a list of 'half-truths, myths and misunderstandings about the design of affordable housing' which are often advocated by some experts. The list includes, among others, the notion that 'the single-family house is the best form of housing, and everything ought to be done to make it affordable'. Despite the many virtues of the single-family house, he points out that it is an environmentally unsustainable form. "We cannot continue to convert agricultural land into tracts of single-family housing and the roadways that connect those houses to job centres. The cost of transportation, utilities, and service networks, as well as the resulting air pollution and environmental degradation, preclude construction of a single-family home for every household in America." (Davis, 1995, p. 4). And as has already been stated, the third negative characteristic of Slovenia's single-family house is its poor architectural design with the almost-identical façades evident in all regions of the country.

Housing construction and the quality of living constitute some of the most vital aspects of human needs. The level of provision depends on various circumstances which, generally, include the level of economic development, traditional and social aspects and the planning and regulatory system. Practice has shown that the higher the level of development of a particular society, the higher are the demands for a better quality of housing and living standards.

Irrespective of the specific circumstances and cultural and economic characteristics of a particular society it may be possible to identify general, constant and basic requirements which housing and the living environment must fulfil. Housing must, above all, provide appropriate shelter, security, protection, comfort, and a fulfilling sense of belonging to ones place of habitation.
Traditionally, the design of settlements in Slovenia (interrelationships between individual buildings, method of construction and design of individual buildings) depended, primarily on the configuration of the terrain and structure of the ground, the climate and other natural features and the building materials available in the particular area or its vicinity. The size and layout of spaces within the dwellings were adapted to the way of living and the work that was performed by the residents. And since, initially, the way of living and major occupation in the Slovenian countryside was agricultural, the functional concept of dwellings was adapted to these conditions (Dev, 2001).

Over the years, lifestyles have of course changed due to changes in the forms of occupations and technological innovations. These changes have consequently led to changes in peoples needs and, as such, also to changes in approaches to the design of dwellings in order to adapt to the new needs of the users. And this is where the issue of awareness and sensitivity to cultural values steps in. Culturally-sensitive approaches have been applied, at different times throughout history, to introduce various foreign architectural styles into traditional settlements. During these processes special care has been taken in the past not to destroy the original design concepts, which represent the unique characteristic morphological elements of a specific area. Various studies have been conducted on these developments in Slovenia, identifying the various autochthonous architectural forms that may be found in specific regions across the country (Zadnikar, 1959; Mušič, 1963; Fister, 1993; Dev, 2001). The richness of traditional designs of family houses and farm-buildings is also a reflection of Slovenia’s geographical location, extending to the Alps in the north, the Pannonian plain in the north-east and east and the Mediterranean in the west. There are also strong Mediterranean and central-European cultural influences.

It may, however, be observed that there have been major changes in single-family house design over the last decades and these changes are becoming more and more radical. The general trend of growing societal differentiation after the introduction of changes in the socio-economic system in the early 1990s has led to the differentiation of house building practices in Slovenia in recent years. The changes brought about by the introduction of a new political and economic order have consequently led to changes in the way of living, people's aspirations, and housing needs and demands. Culture change has led to changes in lifestyles and hence housing preferences and design approaches. As Rapoport (1982) has observed, “one typical change in traditional societies is a great increase in possessions; people begin to accumulate things. This apparently trivial change can be shown to have a whole set of consequences for housing, including increased need to communicate resulting status variations, increased amount of space needed and the number and specialisation of settings, and increased physical enclosure to protect possessions” (Rapoport, 1982).

The previous ‘socially oriented’ models of mass housing provision characterised by high-density housing in high high-rise construction neighbourhoods are no longer a
popular means of solving housing problems. Although a considerable proportion of households seeking housing are still not in a position to build their own house, those who can are making sure that their life-long housing aspirations are fully realised when the opportunity finally arrives for the physical implementation of their plan. Political and economic liberalisation in Slovenia offered consumers the opportunity for what Barlow and Ozaki (2003) have called the ‘customisation’ of housing design. They describe customisation as the creation of products that are in some way tailored to individual needs. They suggest that the home, as a bundle of attributes fulfilling diverse housing-related needs, offers housebuilders several opportunities for customisation which include customising the design and decorative features of the home. The notion of housing quality now means, to the majority of people, not only the typology of housing and its size but also the architectural design of the dwelling and its external image. Roof designs and curved porches and balconies are some of the recent popular forms of architectural expression. The biggest problem in all this is that there are no clearly defined standards regarding the forms of design that are desirable, from the aesthetic point of view, and acceptable with respect to geographical location. The uniform single-family house design of the post-war period is being replaced by a uniform single-family house design of the post-socialist period. The new architectural design forms are being ubiquitously implanted without any critical judgement. They are very aggressive and represent a dangerous virus that is gradually eating away at the traditional fabric. Surprisingly, and sadly, it appears that nobody is noticing, not even the experts from the physical planning and cultural heritage professions.

As Brierley (1993) has observed, a conceptual approach to design theory derived from housing research has been that of setting out possibilities available to design theorists in contrast to indicating determinist controls over design decisions. This appears to be the case in Slovenia. A similar view is expressed by Bulos and Teymur (1993) who contend that studies of the needs of people indicate that standards of design are often based upon the minimum which people will accept or tolerate. This therefore means that the changes that occur in society and personality factors may have a considerable influence on architectural design approaches especially on the design of the single-family house. Bulos and Teymur (ibid.) make reference to Susan Langer who argues that the traditional concept of place as an independent universe distinguished by a particular genius loci is breaking down. The same authors quote Norberg-Schulz’s observation that while, in the past, the purpose of architecture was to “make an ethnic domain’ visible, the general characteristic of our day is the open, ‘global’ world, where the ‘ethnic domains’ lose their definition and we, so to speak, experience a simultaneity of places” (Bulos and Teymur, 1993, p. 49). Single-family housebuilding practice in Slovenia is steadily heading in this direction.

The standard single-family house has, deservedly, had its share of criticism in the literature. Carmona et al. (2003) make reference to one of the harshest criticisms of these practices which was expressed by a UK Secretary of State who declared that it is
"an insult to our sense of place to offer precisely the same house in Warrington as in Wallingford, Wadebridge or Wolverhampton. Too many of these houses are designed for nowhere but found everywhere." (Gummer, J. quoted in Carmona et al., 2003, p. 42). Similar developments in Slovenia need to be halted promptly before they lead to the eventual eradication of traditional architectural forms.

**Conclusion**

The developments of the last couple decades or so show that the cultural landscape is undergoing major transformation due, especially, to the ‘global-design’ single-family house which is steadily and consistently creeping into the traditional rural settlements. While these alien structures have introduced some important technological improvements to these areas (advanced heating systems, modern telecommunication infrastructure, higher housing standards etc) they are, on the other hand, a manifestation of a total disregard for traditional historical architectural forms which previously constituted the characteristic identity of each specific cultural region.

It is, however, important to stress that architecture is not an abstract concept. It’s a live and dynamic discipline that is constantly evolving. It must, analogously, be deduced that architectural design is also an evolving process that constantly changes in accordance with changes in lifestyles, technological advances and specific needs within a given historical period. The pioneers of architectural Modernism (among them, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe) created an architecture, which took the greatest advantage of the possibilities provided by the new technologies that were invented towards the end of the 19th Century. The new architectural designs that were developed with the help of the new building materials (concrete, steel and glass) laid the foundation and opened the way for a global design approach that would be totally independent of locally available building materials. Such designs would also no longer have to be in consonance with existing architectural forms.

Technological advances are, of course, necessary and have always constituted a major factor of development of humanity. It is, as such, illusionary to expect that architecture and architectural design would remain unaffected by modern developments. And nor is this entirely desirable. Technological innovations that dictate new approaches to architectural design are a fact that needs to be accepted. Buildings – dwellings in this case- need to be designed in a way that satisfies the needs of users and fulfils the standards that are generally accepted at a given time in a specific area. Building and housing standards are, to a large extent, normally based on the prevailing technological standards which, in turn, greatly influence the state-of-the-art architectural design approaches. What is vitally important in these processes is the capability of designers to appropriately adapt and translate these approaches into space without completely destroying the existing fabric, especially in areas of
historical traditional heritage. Changes in architectural design must always be introduced cautiously and must be sensitive and take into consideration the basic norms and values that have traditionally prevailed in a particular area throughout its historical development. In order to ensure that traditional forms are sustained, the new architectural design approaches must be adapted to the specific circumstances that constitute the constant characteristic features of individual areas. As (Rapoport, 1982) has argued, all built environments need to be culture-specific, but this applies particularly to housing which, as the primary setting for life, needs to be highly supportive of culture. The challenge for architects is to ensure that modern designs are not aggressively imposed in a manner that may lead to the eventual total eradication of traditional forms.

References


