

Saving the City of Stone: Economic Development through Hands-on Preservation

BACKGROUND

Cultural heritage has great potential to generate income in communities across Albania, and especially in the city of Gjirokastra, a designated World Heritage Site commonly called The City of Stone because of its massive stone tower, or kullë, houses.

At this point, Gjirokastra's architectural heritage is in extreme danger of being lost in spite of its potential as a key income generator for the community. Many of the buildings that comprise the urban landscape of the historic city remain abandoned and/or poorly maintained, their decay ending ultimately in collapse. Traditional techniques and materials needed to maintain these historical buildings have virtually disappeared along with the skilled craftsmen who long ago left in search of jobs outside the country. The skill base needed to deal with historic structures no longer exists within the general public, and this project will help reverse that loss.



Also vital is the establishment of a firm foundation of professional knowledge, based on expertise related to the maintenance and management of architectural and cultural heritage. In the current era of rapid development, professionals must be able to manage the ever present risk of destruction of Albania's cultural heritage. Public awareness is one key to this process, and there is, therefore, an urgent need to educate community members about the value of their heritage and how it can contribute to economic development and an improved standard of living.

In order to combat the current situation and create needed change, our project will combine the restoration of a kullë house with community education and hands-on skills training as well as providing financial incentives and technical support for home owners.

PROJECT

A series of hands-on building conservation workshops will be the primary means used to move forward on our project goals. These workshops will be supported by community education and professional lectures and training.

The Skenduli kullë house has been selected to initiate this program due to its significance as a UNESCO Category 1 house, the willingness of owners to allow use that provides community benefit, and based on the efforts of the dedicated owners to keep the building intact in the face of overwhelming odds. The house is structurally sound, but problems are steadily overtaking maintenance efforts. The most pressing problem is the need for repair of the stone slate roof, followed by issues with plaster deterioration; decay of wooden features such as stairs and carved wood detailing; breakage of windows; and maintenance needs for the water collection and plumbing system.



A partnership has been formed to keep Gjirokastra's kullë houses standing. The Gjirokastra Conservation and Development Organization (GCDO) with its mission to conserve, revitalise and promote the historic city of Gjirokastra is working with Adventures in Preservation (AiP), Cultural Heritage without Borders (CHwB), artist and sculptor Albert Kasi of Gjirokastra, conservation architect Camilla Nybye of Karsten Rønnøw Tegnestue A/S in Denmark.

The key to project success is community involvement in and professional support for the hands-on workshops scheduled to take place at the Skenduli house in 2012 and 2013. Preparation work will take place from June 2011 through May 2012 and includes:



- Community education program informing community members about the project and encouraging their involvement;
- Preparation of handouts and of online education materials for owners and inhabitants of kullë houses that will be made available through a newly developed website or as an addition to GCDO's website;
- Completion of a condition assessment and prioritized work plan for the Skenduli house and logistical preparation for workshops;
- Repair of Skenduli house stone roof.

This project is the expansion of an ongoing program developed by CHwB and GCDO. Our efforts are based on groundwork laid at work camps held at the Babameto house.

TARGET GROUP

Those targeted to benefit from this project are the following:



- Community members who aspire to become skilled in one or more areas of materials conservation and prepare for a career in historic building maintenance and restoration.
- Homeowners of historic tower houses who wish to maintain their homes, both to improve their living conditions and to support economic development through heritage tourism.

- Professionals and students in the fields of architecture and historic preservation who want hands-on training and experience.



All project partners are committed to supporting the participation of women in our activities. AiP workshops over the last nine years have had approximately 60 percent women and 40 percent men attending projects, and in 2010, CHwB had a two-to-one ratio of women to men reflecting the strong role of women in the field of cultural heritage.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The primary purpose of this project is to create economic opportunities through the conservation of Gjirokastra's outstanding architectural heritage and by engendering community involvement in this process

Specific Objectives

- Establish a program that provides skills training in trades such as lime plastering, wood working, stone slate roof repair, and traditional decorative painting while at the same time providing free labor for preservation projects.



- Support the education of professionals who will become leaders in the field of maintenance and management of cultural heritage.
- Train and educate aspiring tradespeople who will then be available for hire to maintain historic tower houses.



- Educate homeowners in the benefits of regular ongoing maintenance and encourage their use of tradespeople with knowledge of techniques appropriate for historic structures.
- Demonstrate the cost effectiveness of regular home maintenance.
- Emphasize the value of saving original materials, whenever possible, by securing and strengthening these materials, keeping valuable building materials in place and in use instead of in a landfill.
- Save tower houses to create long-term support for heritage tourism and sustainable economic development in the city of Gjirokastra for decades to come.

Ultimately, this project will help create the necessary chain of events that will tie together the production and selling of traditional materials, with the restoration and repair of historic houses through a well trained work-force, which will lead to sustainable economic growth and increased tourism in the area.



PROJECT DELIVERABLES

For Planning Period from June 2011 – May 2012:

- Written folder and website page for homeowners that provide recommendations on “How to Repair & Maintain Your House” including specific instructions on dealing with repairs to roof, windows, woodwork, plaster and so on, when repair or replacement is needed.
- Community informational meetings.

- Condition assessment, drawings and prioritized work plan for the Skenduli House.
- Selection of 6 local residents for training, selected through an open competition.

For period of Hands-On Training from June 2012 – December 2013:

- Training of 6 local residents, who will receive hands-on preservation skills training while working on the Skenduli house.



- Lectures and skills training available to architecture and preservation students from Albania and abroad, who register to attend the hands-on workshops.
- Complete repair and preservation of the Skenduli house.

TIMETABLE

- June-August 2011: Project architect will carry out documentation and measurements, and will complete a condition assessment and prioritized work plan for the Skenduli house.
- September 2011-May 2012: Prepare written folder and website page to provide homeowners with information and recommendations on "How to Repair & Maintain Your House".
- September 2011-May 2012: Plan and hold a series of community meetings to inform residents about community goals and answer questions.

