

# Revisiting Topaana: touring a neighborhood where the other 1% lives

**MSc. Jasna Stefanovska**

Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Faculty of Architecture, Department of Urbanism, Partizanski Odredi 24, 1000 Skopje, R. Macedonia  
e-mail: j.stefanovska@arh.ukim.edu.mk

## **Abstract**

*Skopje is a city with the largest Roma population, as a percentage out of its total population, in the world. Topaana is an area where a substantial percentage of the Roma people in Skopje live, and although its central position within the city matrix, the area remains marginal to the developments that surround it. The residents themselves, without any official authorization or regulation, are constructing the neighborhood whose housing conditions are substandard and the access to electricity and water is improvised. Topaana however, offers an insight in a specific culture and way of living in its full diversity and entirety, often being part of a scenography in movies and frequented by tourists searching for sites that are not part of the typical route. 'Revisiting Topaana' aims to explore and to question the area that is visited by ones that seek authentic experiences while experiencing poverty firsthand.*

Keywords: Roma, culture, movies, tourism, authenticity.

## **Introduction**

Skopje is a city with the largest Roma population, as a percentage out of its total population, in the world. Out of its 506,926 inhabitants as recorded in the census of 2002, 23,475 declared themselves as Roma. Skopje is also the only city in the world that has a municipality where Roma are a majority. Romani language is an official language in that municipality jointly with Macedonian and in that municipality the language is also spoken and thought in the elementary schools. The mayor of that municipality is of a Roma nationality.

Roma people gained recognition and a right to declare their ethnicity in Yugoslavia, and from 1981 they were given nationality status. In the constitution of the independent Republic of Macedonia from 1991, they are recognized as one of the nationalities of the Republic contributing to its long tradition of interethnic tolerance stating "Macedonia is established as a national state of the Macedonian people, in which full equality as citizens and permanent co-existence with the Macedonian people is provided for Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Romanies and other nationalities living in the Republic of Macedonia." (Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, 1991)

The census of 1948 recorded 19,500 Roma people, or 1.7% of the total population in the country. Their number increases rapidly through years counting 20,462 in 1953 (1.6% of the total population), 20,606 in 1961 (1.5%), 24,505 in 1971 (1.5%), 43,125 in 1981 (2.3%), 43,707 in 1994 (2.25%). According to the census of 2002 there is an estimated number of 53,879 Roma people residing in the country (2.66% of the total population) and 23,475 of them are based in Skopje. The disparities between the official data and the estimates are significantly different and the reality might be even more striking as it is anticipated that there are Roma people that remain unregistered and not recorded in the official statistics. It is estimated that there is somewhat between 100,000 and 200,000 Roma people living in Macedonia or up to 10% of the total population in the country. The majority of them are based in Skopje.

“Cities are where the action is: the new science-based automated industries, jobs, wages, consumer markets, political decision making, and reascent arts and culture. They provide the setting in which capital, labor and innovative genius produce the feats of modern technology that radically change our habits, ways of life, and the man-made environment. Today millions of people are seeking progress and material advancement in urban centers” (Blair, 1974, p.1) So are the Roma people.

Roma people in Macedonia populate urban worlds and the locations they inhabit are their permanent homes, in most of the cases passed from one generation to another. The changes in the population figures recorded through years occur simultaneously with rapid emergence and expansion of areas in the city such population inhabits, as the nomadic lifestyle is not part of their living any longer. Already in the 1970 it was noted that “[t]he Gipsies, on the other hand, live gregarious, outdoor lives: hardly a blade of grass survives on the hard-trodden earth between their randomly jumbled cabins. The Skopje Gipsies are also markedly different in their way of life from the wandering Romany of other European countries.” (United Nations Development Programme 1970, p.171) However their housing conditions are substandard and are frequently with unregulated ownership rights. In their houses the access to electricity and water is improvised, as well as the sewerage system in the neighborhood, roads are in a bad condition, there is no communal lighting, the densities are extremely high and the communal network is overloaded. Concentration of poverty is what is visible both from the inside and from the outside. The average square meters per inhabitant in such households varies from 2-5 square meters per person, while the average for the other ethnic communities ranges between 20 and 25 square meters. The unemployment rate among Roma population is extremely high and is higher than 70% (83.4% in 2003, 72.4% in 2002 and 71.6% in 2001) that is the highest unemployment rate compared to the other ethnic groups in the country with the national average of about 30% (36.6% in 2003, 31.9% in 2002, 30.5% in 2001). The birth rate among Roma population is however higher than the rest of the ethnic groups residing in the country, and these facts and figures are unlikely to change in the years to come.

“Slums are residential areas so physically and socially deteriorated as to make satisfactory family life impossible. Typically families live in unfit structures in disrepair. Health and safety are constantly menaced by lack of air, light, ventilation, toilet, and bathing facilities.” (Blair 1974, pp.46-47) Blair’s description can be applied in some areas densely populated with Roma population in Skopje. The dreadful record of living conditions and a variety of aspects complementing them contribute to what seems to be an everyday abandonment of such areas and a marginalization of their populations. They are foreign to the rush and flow of their even immediate surroundings, but also to the control of regulations and surveillance of the established planning. Such neighborhoods represent the ‘other’ spaces and their citizens are the ‘other’ people although their presence is significant in the city, and their rights are guaranteed in the constitution.

The state of the Roma people is problematic and fragile around Europe as well. In the late summer of 2010 the world has witnessed controversial deporting of Romanian and Bulgarian Roma from France. Three hundred Euros were offered to those willing to leave voluntarily while dismantling the camps where they live causing European Union to treat legal actions assuring France is fulfilling the regulations of freedom of movement within the European Union. Such moves by the authorities resulted with a nation that is divided about the expulsion, while the voice of human rights groups was

heard from all over the world. Even the Pope Benedict XVI has his say about the move "Dear parents, you can educate your children in universal fraternity." (The Huffington Post, 2010).

## Two Roma neighborhoods

Republic of Macedonia is among the countries with the highest percentage of Roma as a percentage of total population according to the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2009), while being noted that "within the East European context, Macedonia become the most hospitable place for the Roma" (Barany 2001, p.123). In the city of Skopje, the city with the largest Roma population as a percentage out of its total population, there are officially 23,475 Roma people registered, or 4.63% of its entire population, which according to the census of 2002 is 506,926 inhabitants. Roma people in Skopje reside predominately in two areas: Shuto Orizari and Topaana.

Shuto Orizari or Shutka (figure 1) as its known and widely used in the city of Skopje is home to the largest Roma community in the world with an estimated 30,000 inhabitants. Nevertheless, the official data from the census of 2002 states that the total population of the municipality is 22,017 out of which 13,342 people are of Roma nationality or 60.5% of the total municipal population.



Figure 1. Figure-ground of a part of Shuto Orizari.

The neighborhood of Shuto Orizari arose quickly after the earthquake of 1963 with donation of iron shacks by the United States of America. Parallel to this, city and republic authorities poured large sums of money into building the neighborhood that has become home to Roma families who had lost their homes as a result of the earthquake. The shacks although planned for a temporal use, remained as homes to a number of people residing in the area more than 40 years after the earthquake. The area of Shuto Orizari was planned at the outskirts of the city after 1963, and still is at its fringes expanding slowly where possible shifting the boundaries of the city. The whole area is urbanized and the people are constructing their homes with solid materials and fencing their properties, while the communal network remains in a rather bad condition. Although there is a record of building activities, many of Sutka's inhabitants are unemployed and depending on welfare, and using the money they saved while being seasonal workers in Western European Countries to construct their dream homes. The whole municipality is centered on a market where the local residents trade with cheap clothes imported from Turkey or China and the customers come from all over the city. Since 1996 the area gained

municipality status and is one of the 10 municipalities of Skopje. It is the first municipality where the Roma people are not a minority and who's major is of Roma nationality.

Topaana (figure 2) is home of an isolated Roma community in Skopje and its references go back to the "Ottoman census conducted in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, which refers to a small community of Topaanlija Roma who made guns and gunpowder for the Ottoman army." (Bright future, 2008)



Figure 2. Figure-ground of a part of Topaana.

Topaana is an area that has always been rather central within the city matrix however it is marginal and disconnected to the developments that surround it and that seemingly ignore it. The residents themselves are constructing the neighborhood for decades, but are still living in conditions that are substandard and the access to electricity and water is improvised. Its indeterminate status relates directly to the undefined and unregulated ownership status of the housing units. Such conditions make Topaana very vulnerable, yet is a home to a large Roma community counting between 3,000 and 5,000 people, representing the other one per cent of the city's population. The area is not part of any planning by the authorities, remaining invisible and a blank spot for decades for the officials, while perceptible and present for everyone else. It is an urban enclave representing social periphery of the city, with concentrated poverty, high unemployment rates, very low percentage of educated workforce and being there looks like "being in darkness while the rest of society is bathed in light." (Blair 1974, p.47)

Topaana is a marginal space trapped between the worlds of consumption. Its extraordinary physical and social characteristics nevertheless make it an exception in the fabric of the city, remaining untouched and unaffected with the developments that surround it and overpass it. The neighborhoods surrounding it are facing contradictory experiences of transformation and growth stimulated with the market economy. Topaana in contrary is in a constant move recreating its own image and auto constructing its growth. The limited area that the neighborhood occupies doesn't allow Topaana to grow outwards, so the growth happens inwards and upwards resulting with extreme densities and sometimes unimaginable living conditions. The development patterns therefore although one street apart are extremely different (figure 3, figure 4).



Figure 3. Figure 4.

Topaana is a fragile environment that sustained through decades illustrating socio-spatial resistance of a community capable of surviving. It is nevertheless a vital community, and contrary to the isolated and marginal position in socioeconomic terms, its population is effectively integrated in the everyday life of the city.

## Revisiting Topaana

Despite the conditions on site, people rushed to Topaana after images from the area and the everyday life of people living there were portrayed in the media. They showed images that are essentially disturbing, yet it is the environment that Roma people inhabit and what initially drew the visitors there. Through the images that were real, the spectator was in an indirect confrontation with a phenomenon that existed for decades in the city, yet remained invisible to many. The onlooker therefore first saw Topaana as a theme in the media, and revisited it later on site.

This voyeuristic practice, called slum tourism exists already for more than a century. It has its origins in London and moved quickly to New York in 1880's. Slum tourism is a form of an urban tourism, for ones looking for a voyeuristic enjoyment while consuming the slum. In 1884, a headline in The New York Times read "A fashionable London mania reaches New-York. Slumming parties to be the rage this winter. Good districts to visit." The article opens with "'Slumming,' the latest fashionable idiosyncrasy in London – i.e., the visiting of the slums of the great city by parties of ladies and gentlemen for sightseeing – is mildly practiced here by our foreign visitors..." further noting that "'slumming' will become a form of fashionable dissipation this Winter among our belles, as our foreign cousins will always be ready to lead the way." (Slumming in this town 1884)

In a rather local manner, a particular form of such tourism appeared in Skopje a century after it was first recorded and approximately at the same time with 'township tourism' after South Africa's first multiracial elections in 1994. Nowadays, slum tourism is a multimillion-dollar business, and the release of Slumdog Millionaire in 2008 further contributed to that. Today there is a township tourism in South Africa, favela tourism in Brazil, slum tourism in Mumbai, Hutong trips in Beijing, and Roma culture tourism in Skopje.

Slum tourism can be considered as a poverty tourism, through which the one is observing poverty personally, while others question the ethics of such a tour or a visit. In the case of Topaana, the visitors are not part of any official tour, but it's an individual sightseeing of the neighborhood and therefore there is no compensation for the visit. Visitors are there through their own initiative, chatting with the locals and attempting to have a glimpse into the lives of people in their tiny houses, unpaved roads and garbage surrounding them. The people living there allow visitors to take photos, and seem to be glad that there is someone interested in them. However, they are shyer about their living conditions, as they are aware of the poverty they inhabit. These visits leave the locals with less privacy and are often controversial. Through them, one is having a rare and revealing look in the daily lives of Topaana's residents while seeking for new experiences and exploring new cultures. This quest for new

experiences is a quest for authenticity while experiencing poverty firsthand, always seeking for something new which the visitor seem to find or rediscover in the slum, the place of the unknown other.

There seems to be few forms of authentic experiences that are introduced to the visitors in Topaana. Neighborhood's living conditions and appropriation of space are among the authentic issues that are observed by the visitors. Although minimal, they represent a fine example of an optimization of the living space for multiple uses. The limited space available for housing is changing its function through the day depending on the necessary use while featuring patterns of Roma life.

The houses in most of the cases have a main room, cooking area and a bathroom. The main room is in fact the one that is challenging the conventions of dwelling and does not have a designated use but is the one that is changing into bedroom, dining room and living room in different parts of the day representing a center of the family life. The furniture in this room is either portable or adaptable for different uses. The houses besides accommodating diverse uses accommodate diverse needs while adapting for different age groups and number of people. Such extension of possibilities of the housing unit is a result of a lifestyle of the Roma people that is no longer nomadic, but their choice for a home is a permanent one. The house initially is a home to one family and expands inwards or upwards as the family grows and can accommodate sometimes even three households at the same time. In a culture that has the highest birth rate compared with the other ethnic groups in the country it is likely to observe many people under one roof, each of them having 2-5 square meters. Multi use and adaptable housing in the case of Topaana is a process in making as the housing unit is being assembled through years and is changing relating to specific cycles and rhythm of life.

Topaana's residents are effectively using local resources while constructing their habitat and reducing environmental harms while creating a sustainable neighborhood and community. The housing units are auto constructed using cheap, disposable, recycled or raw local materials in imaginative ways and each one constructing a dwelling determines the shape individually and according to its own vision. Such construction of the units points to an unintentional yet a responsible relation towards the environment not inhibiting the opportunities of future generations. These solutions are affordable as the people constructing it are with limited incomes, yet they allow the possibility of growth of units and change through years while creating rich and complex built environment that defines an authentic living worth exploring.

The collective intelligence towards appropriation of the space that exists in Topaana meets the desires of the residents while carefully considering the possibilities of the neighborhood and its designated area. The relationship between public and private space is constantly shifting its meanings, merging the public and the private while creating a unique habitable environment. Through such initiatives public space is privatized and used as an extension of the home, and the private space becomes public opening its doors for everyday life and activities.

Another authentic experience in Topaana is the sense of community. In 1970's book published by the United Nations after the disastrous earthquake in Skopje in 1963 it is noted that "[t]he Old Town's Turks, Gipsies and Schiptars are more concerned about where they live than about how they live: they simply do not want to move to new, more commodious and better-equipped hopes at the cost of being separated from the localities with which their communities and traditional employments have always been linked." (United Nations Development Programme 1970, p.172) It can be concluded that there exists a strong sense of community among the Roma people; "the sense of community is a feeling members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and the group, and a shared faith that member's needs will be met through their commitment to be together." (McMillan and Chavis, 1986) In the case of the Roma community living in Topaana it is an enhanced territorial community. The people are associated with the neighborhood they are part of and unlikely to move out of it. In the case of Topaana the sense of community and the Roma culture present there impels people to stay together and to keep tight family relations fostering an incredible and omnipresent cultural density.

Such strong sense of belonging points out to a community, which although marginalized in the society is very vital and alive in its own.

Perhaps the biggest asset of the community is their music. It plays an important part in the life of the Roma people and in the everyday life its a theme that puts the Roma people in the spotlight and their presence noted while being present at weddings and other festivities of all ethnic groups in the country. It is through the music that the population that is left to the excluded is present in everyone's life through the sounds of the brass bands performing recognizable rhythm of the memorable repertoire, a theme that visitors are keen on exploring.

These forms of authenticity are fundamentally embodied in the life of the neighborhood. Visitors of the area through them are offered a glimpse in the Roma culture and a unique experience of the city that is not part of the official guides. They are enriched in their understanding of the city through visiting the invisible to the formal city and tours, while being present in the area where the other one per cent lives.

## **Conclusion**

Topaana serves as an inspiration while its image is consumed the media and its voice heard in songs. There exists a set of movies (Time of the Gypsies (1988), Gypsy magic (1997)) that not only use the scenery as the background, but also use the music and the lifestyle while portraying how the other one per cent of the city lives. The movies made the area popular for tourists calling for attention while selling images of Roma lifestyle in a diverse setting.

The scenes from movies are essentially disturbing, yet they bring a sense of encouragement, painting an image and exposing a state of a neighborhood and a sense of community where the 'other' lives. At the same time they visualize the conditions and the realities of the capital, while explaining the relationships between the Roma people, the environments they inhabit and their dreams. Topaana in the movies becomes a surface in which the actions of Roma people are being shaped, heavily influencing their moves and their characters; the neighborhood is not only a setting where the action takes place but an essential part of it, a character itself.

Topaana operates without any guidelines and therefore is facing immense challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Approaching Topaana is to understand complexities of its built form but also its social aspects and in the case of Topaana they are interrelated and embodied. Topaana in Skopje is a very vulnerable neighborhood whose population is isolated and poverty is rooted in the community. Recent developments in the surrounding such as the construction of a new United States of America Embassy contribute to its fragility. Undefined ownership rights put the whole area in question in a time that is driven with the market economy increasing the pressure over the neighborhood.

Future research should focus on forms of transformation of the area and its integration not just in the planning system but in the economic and social systems of the city as well. The signs of initiative of the people inhabiting Topaana and transforming the area for their own benefit are of extreme importance and should be considered and studied. Therefore a vision for Topaana that will stimulate creative productivity and sustain its future remains a critical task for all of us.

Failing to do so can put the neighborhood on the world map of slum tourism sites, in which official tours are being conducted. Prohibiting the visits to the area can turn Topaana into a form of a gated community where the 'other' one per cent lives.

## References

Barany, Z. (2001) *East European gypsies: regime change, marginality and ethnopolitics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Blair, T.L. (1974) *The international urban crisis*. London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon Ltd.

Bright future, 2008. Available at: <[http://brightfutureforyouth.org/programs\\_international\\_topaana.html](http://brightfutureforyouth.org/programs_international_topaana.html)> [Accessed 20 July 2011].

Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, 1991. Available at: <<http://www.sobranie.mk/>> [Accessed 20 July 2011].

Council of Europe, 2009. *The Council of Europe's Roma and Travellers Division*. Available at: <[http://www.coe.int/t/dc/files/themes/roma/default\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dc/files/themes/roma/default_EN.asp)> [Accessed 25 July 2011].

Huffington post, 2010. Available at: <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/08/23/france-deports-gypsies-dr\\_n\\_691775.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/08/23/france-deports-gypsies-dr_n_691775.html)> [Accessed 27 July 2011].

McMillan, D.W., & Chavis, D.M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 14(1), pp. 6-23.

Slumming in this town. A fashionable London mania reaches New-York. Slumming parties to be the rage this winter. Good districts to visit. Mrs. Langtry as a slummer. *New York Times*, [online] 14 September 1884. Available at: <<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9A04E3D91338E033A25757C1A96F9C94659FD7CF>> [Accessed 08 August 2011].

State statistical office. Available at: <http://www.stat.gov.mk/> [Accessed 02 August 2011].

United Nations Development Programme (1970) *Skopje Resurgent: The Story of a United Nations Special Fund Town Planning Project*. New York: United Nations