

## Architectural, Artistic, and Interior Design Characteristics of Albanian Towers in the Dukagjini Plain: A Structural, Cultural, and Aesthetic Analysis

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### Abstract

This study offers a comprehensive examination of the architectural, artistic, and interior design characteristics of Albanian towers in Kosovo, with particular focus on those located in the Dukagjini Plain. Through an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates fieldwork, historical documentation, and visual analysis, the research explores how these fortified residential structures fulfill both utilitarian and symbolic functions. Key aspects such as structural composition, construction materials, ornamental features, spatial organization, and decorative motifs are analyzed in relation to their historical, cultural, and aesthetic significance. The findings reveal a unique synthesis between Albanian vernacular craftsmanship and Ottoman stylistic influences, positioning the towers as expressions of identity, social status, and artistic heritage. Special attention is given to interior elements such as the men's guest room (*oda e burrave*), wooden ceilings, carved doors, symbolic carpets, and semi-circular arches—each functioning not only as architectural components but also as carriers of philosophical meaning and cultural continuity. Ultimately, the towers are presented as architectural embodiments of Albanian memory, where form, material, and symbolism converge into a distinct narrative of heritage.

**Keywords:** Albanian towers, Dukagjini Plain, architecture, art, interior design, symbolism, cultural heritage.

### Introduction

The Albanian tower, or *kulla*, stands as one of the most emblematic architectural expressions of cultural identity in the Balkans. In Kosovo, particularly in the Dukagjini Plain, these towers represent more than fortified dwellings; they embody a complex synthesis of utilitarian architecture, artistic sensibility, and deeply rooted symbolic meaning. Originating in the Ottoman era and flourishing primarily between the 17th and 19th centuries, *kullas* were multifunctional structures, simultaneously serving as family residences, centers of

social and political gathering, and symbols of status and resistance.

Built predominantly from stone and wood, *kullas* are distinguished by their cubic forms, thick defensive walls, small slit-like windows, and upper-level men's guest rooms (*oda e burrave*) spaces rich in traditional ornamentation. While the external architecture reflects principles of security, hierarchy, and visibility, the interior design reveals a profound aesthetic philosophy rooted in harmony, modesty, and cultural continuity.

Elements such as intricately carved ceilings, semi-circular arches, symbolic rugs, and wooden motifs are not merely decorative they are visual narratives encoding social values, ancestral memory, and spiritual beliefs. . (Drançolli, 2001)

This study explores the architectural and interior design characteristics of Albanian towers in the Dukagjini Plain, with particular attention to the integration of artistic expression within structural forms. By analyzing key examples such as the Haxhi Zeka Tower in Peja, the Osdautaj Tower in Deçan, and the Zenel Bey Tower in Peja—the research highlights how these towers exemplify a unique architectural typology where vernacular craftsmanship converges with Ottoman stylistic influence. The analysis focuses not only on spatial organization and construction techniques, but also on the semiotics of form, material, and ornamentation, offering a deeper understanding of how these buildings function as architectural embodiments of cultural identity. In approaching these towers as both physical structures and symbolic artifacts, the study aims to reveal the ways in which architecture in Kosovo has historically operated as a medium of artistic expression, social organization, and cultural resistance. This study

is based on a qualitative analysis of sources, primarily focusing on the scholarly works of Fejaz Drançolli, Flamur Doli, and other researchers who have written extensively about Albanian vernacular architecture.

#### **Exterior Decorations:**

##### **Aesthetic Identity and Social Status**

The exterior decorations of Albanian towers represent a rich layer of folk artistic heritage and constitute an essential element in conveying the aesthetic identity of the Albanian home. These embellishments are crafted with a high sensitivity to form, symmetry, and visual harmony, creating a deep connection between functionality and beauty.

Stylistically, the decorations appear nearly identical across all Albanian regions, demonstrating a well-established aesthetic tradition that transcends regional boundaries. Figurative and oriental elements are found on the front-facing parts of the tower on the ornate windows of the men's room (*oda e burrave*), on the arches of the main portals, and on the surface reliefs of the walls. These embellishments were often executed in low-relief techniques, characterized by meticulous craftsmanship and visual delicacy.



Fig. 1 Dobroshec, Glllogoc, the Star of David with crescent and star.



Fig. 2 The lions on the window of the men's room (*oda e burrave*).

In areas such as Istog, Peja, and Drenica, decorative relief is especially prominent on monumental portals, giving the tower a solemn and ceremonial character. Beyond their ornamental function, these decorative elements also serve a communicative purpose—they convey the social status of the owner. The more refined and skillfully crafted the decorations, the higher the economic and cultural standing of the family.

The tower of Haxhi Zeka in the Jashar Pasha complex, with its symbolic carvings—such as two lions on the southern façade—is an outstanding example of this artistic dimension. Such figures express the power, pride, and individuality of the family residing there, while also indicating a cultural affiliation with a shared aesthetic tradition. (Drançolli, 2001)

Even the construction material, such as stone, plays an important role in the tower's aesthetic aspect. The choice of various types of stone—reddish, gray, or white—was not merely practical, but also an artistic decision that influenced the color palette and visual composition of the façade. In this way, the raw material itself became part of the architectural artistic concept.

### Interior Decorations:

#### Everyday Art in the Albanian Men's Room

The interior space of Albanian towers, particularly the *oda e burrave* (men's room), represents an environment where folk art is not only present but integrated into everyday life as part of the residents' aesthetic experience. In contrast to the painted decorations of religious or public spaces, interior embellishments are more intimate and widespread, found in every tower regardless of the family's economic level.

Artistic elements inside the towers are expressed through wood craftsmanship, taking functional forms that are also decorative. The fireplace, ceiling, door, shelves, *trapazan* (wall niches), and especially cabinets—are crafted with extraordinary detail, reflecting an aesthetic language deeply rooted in folk tradition. The ornamentation is typically geometric or consists of stylized natural and mythological forms, executed with a profound sense of rhythm and harmony.

Decorated ceilings—also known as “ceilings with light”—are among the richest forms of aesthetic expression. In some cases, they are constructed in star-shaped patterns or intricate polygonal divisions that evoke Islamic



Fig. 3 Zenel Bey's Tower – The Men's Room



Fig.4 The Men's Room – Trapazan

art or elements of oriental architecture. This level of decoration gave the men's room a solemn atmosphere, where formal beauty equaled the symbolic importance of the space.

Decorative cabinets are another example of this integration of art and function. They are closed with single or double-panel doors, crafted with rotating hinges and open compartments in the upper part. These cabinets were more than just storage spaces—

they constituted a “display wall” of aesthetic taste and construction craftsmanship. (Drançolli, 2001)

In summary, the artistic decorations in Albanian towers are a profound expression of the cultural and aesthetic identity of Albanian communities. They represent a harmonious fusion of functionality, symbolism, and artistic creativity, embedded in both the architectural structure and daily life.



Fig 5. - The Tower of Haxhi Zeka in Peja

## The Tower of Haxhi Zeka in Peja

### Structural and Cultural Analysis of Hajji Zeka Tower (Kulla e Haxhi Zekës)

#### General Overview

The Hajji Zeka Tower, a quintessential example of 19th-century Albanian fortified residential architecture, stands in the town of Peja, western Kosovo. Constructed by Haxhi Zeka, a prominent political leader and resistance figure during the Ottoman era, the tower not only served a defensive purpose but also symbolized social status and political authority. Architecturally, it reflects a synthesis of local building traditions and Balkan-Ottoman influences.

#### Structural Analysis

##### Construction Materials

**Masonry:** The tower is constructed from locally sourced baked red brick and stone masonry, which is a distinguishing feature among Kosovo towers (many of which primarily use stone). This mixture provides both aesthetic and thermal benefits, offering insulation in winter and summer.

**Stone Base:** The foundation and lower section consist of well-cut stone blocks, providing resistance to moisture and structural stability.

**Wood:** Wooden elements are visible in the overhanging oriel (the *çardak*) and window frames, typically made from oak or walnut—woods prized for their durability and ease of carving.

##### Shape and Form

**Plan:** The tower has a rectangular floor plan with a cuboid massing, compact and vertically oriented. This shape is common for defensive structures, minimizing surface area and enhancing vertical surveillance.

**Height:** The building consists of three floors. The lower floor likely served as a storage or animal shelter, with the upper levels designated for habitation and social functions.

#### Fenestration and Fortification

**Windows:** Small, narrow windows are symmetrically distributed and often surrounded by wooden frames. These slit-like openings (similar to *frengji*) served defensive purposes, allowing observation without exposing the interior to external threats.

**Machicolations:** The presence of a projecting bay window (*çardak*) or balcony at the top level with open slots beneath it resembles machicolation-like features, used for surveillance and potentially for dropping objects during sieges.

**Openings:** The windows on the upper floors are larger and more elaborately framed, particularly the central wooden bay which likely belonged to the *oda e burrave* (men's guest room). This reflects a transition from defensive to representational use of space.

#### Cultural and Functional Interpretation

##### Social Symbolism

**Power and Prestige:** The use of baked brick and decorative woodwork signals wealth and craftsmanship. Hajji Zeka's status as a nationalist leader is reflected in the tower's architectural ambition and attention to detail.

**Urban Adaptation:** Unlike rural kullas often isolated and hidden, this structure is part of an urban ensemble, reflecting a dual defensive and social-political function.

##### Interior Organization (inferred from type and typical floor division)

**Ground Floor:** Most likely used for practical functions—food storage, livestock, or defense. Entry is limited and narrow, often only via one arched doorway.

**First Floor:** Domestic use, such as the women's quarters (*harem*) and kitchen facilities.

**Top Floor:** The *oda*, or men's guest room, used for gatherings, political meetings, and receptions. This is where the most ornate decorative elements are found—elaborate wood ceilings, carved chimneys (*oxhak*), and built-in shelving (*rafte*).



Fig.6 The interior layout of the Hajji Zeka Tower reveals a sofras (traditional low dining table) positioned between two windows. It served as a table for meals and had a circular shape.

#### *Decorative Elements*

**Exterior Decoration:** The brickwork itself is part of the ornamentation—arranged in rhythmic courses, occasionally interspersed with stone. Above the windows and corners, decorative patterns may serve both aesthetic and symbolic functions.

**Carved Woodwork:** The projecting bay window (*çardak*) showcases fine woodworking—a cultural symbol of hospitality and masculine honor. It often opens toward the street, projecting authority and openness to dialogue.

**Arch Motifs:** The main entrance features a stone arch, possibly semi-circular or segmental, a form deeply rooted in Ottoman architecture but locally interpreted.

The interior of Haxhi Zeka's tower in Leshan speaks a silent yet profoundly meaningful language. It is a space that does not seek to impress through luxury,

but through the authenticity of spirit and memory. The warm wood that lines the floor and ceiling creates an intimate, almost meditative atmosphere, evoking a sense of shelter and calm. The whitewashed walls, bare of ornament, allow the space to speak for itself through a few carefully chosen objects.

The windows, framed in thick wood, act like picture frames for the light, allowing it to enter softly and deliberately. They are not merely sources of illumination, but portals to the outside world, enabling the interior to engage in a quiet dialogue with the landscape, with time, and with the past. In the corner, a hearth encased in glass with its characteristic stepped stone design resembles a fire altar a symbol of life, family, and spiritual warmth. It stands as a relic within a contemporary setting, a memory preserved not just to be seen, but to be remembered.

The red rug with geometric patterns brings color and rhythm to the floor an invitation to pause, to sit, to converse, to listen to the silence. Around it, the



low wooden table and stools speak of a shared life, grounded and conversational a kind of aesthetic born from tradition, reinforcing a deep sense of community. This interior is more than just a room it is a silent stage of Albanian memory, where every object has a voice, and each voice is connected to history, customs, and the spirit of resistance. It can be read as a poetic installation where material, light, and emptiness collaborate to evoke a profound sense of belonging and identity.

The arch of the door at Haxhi Zeka's tower in Leshan is not merely a functional detail of the structure it is a silent language of Albanian art and symbolism. Built from heavy, carefully hewn stones in a semi-circular shape, it stands like a stony crown over the entrance to an inner world. This thick, solid, enduring arch can often be interpreted artistically as a symbol of passage from the outside to the inside, from the profane to the sacred. The door is not simply a physical threshold, but a border that marks entry into a space of honor, memory, and family. In this sense, the arch creates a "portal" through time a place where history doesn't lie dormant, but takes

its place before the eyes. The semi-circle is a form that connects points, that resolves the tension of lines into a rounded stillness. It can be read as a metaphor for unity a silent message about the spiritual ties between people who have shared the same land, language, and history. For Haxhi Zeka, a figure of national unification, this door becomes a visual expression of his vision.

The tones and textures the pale, gray, and firm stone contrasting with the dark, weather-worn wooden door compose a visual poetry that speaks of time passing, of endurance, and of the path through history. Every mark on the wood and stone is like a brushstroke on a silent canvas that speaks. The shape of the arch, timeless and repeated throughout Albanian heritage, becomes a sign of collective memory a visual code that invites reflection. It is a motif that can be reimagined in contemporary art as a lasting symbol of identity and resistance. If one sees this door as the central element of a work, it not only invites the viewer to look but to pass through it toward a deeper narrative, more intimate, rooted in land and memory.



Fig. 7 The entrance door to the Hajji Zeka Tower



Fig. 8 The exterior windows of the Hajji Zeka Tower in Leshan

The exterior windows of Haxhi Zeka's tower in Leshan, as seen in the photograph, present an intriguing dialogue between defensive function and aesthetic form. They are crafted in a simple yet meaningful visual language, where every element carries historical and symbolic weight.

Their arched, semi-circular tops create a sense of softness and harmony, contrasting with the strong and protective nature of the tower itself. This architectural choice artistically expresses a balance between the harshness of stone and the sensitivity of light entering through these narrow openings. Surrounding the arched window frames is a subtle decorative motif made from radiating brickwork, which gives the surface a rhythmic, almost musical feeling. It's a refined way of breathing visual life into the wall without resorting to excessive ornamentation. (Doli, 2009)

The square window on the lower part of the wall, framed in wood and shaped more functionally, introduces a dialogue between time periods and stylistic approaches: it appears to be a later, more practical addition, while the arched windows preserve the tower's distinctive identity, giving the façade a unique character. Beyond their functional role, these windows can be read as the "eyes of the tower"—silent, observant, connected to daily life and history, yet filled with a hidden sense of beauty. From an artistic perspective, they invite the viewer's gaze to pause, to read the traces of time upon them, and to imagine what this tower has witnessed through the centuries. Albanian towers (kullas), such as the Hajji Zeka Tower in Peja, are distinguished by their robust structural features and refined artistic elements that reflect both defensive functionality and cultural expression. Structurally, these towers are multi-story fortified dwellings built with thick stone or brick walls,





Fig.9 The Tower of the Osdautaj Family in Isniq (Deçan). This tower dates back to the mid-19th century.

designed to withstand external attacks. They often feature narrow windows or slits on the lower levels for defense, and larger, symmetrical openings on the upper floors for light and ventilation. The use of local materials such as stone, brick, and wood contributes to both their stability and aesthetic appeal. The vertical organization includes ground floors for utility or animals, and upper levels for living and hospitality. Artistically, the towers incorporate ornamental woodwork, especially in the interior guest rooms (*oda e burrave*), where carved ceilings, decorative chimneys, and built-in wooden shelves are common. Externally, features like the wooden oriel window (*çardak*), arched niches, and blind windows under the eaves introduce stylistic complexity. These decorations often feature geometric or floral motifs, reflecting a synthesis of local tradition and Ottoman influence, and serve to express the social

status and cultural identity of the owner. Together, these structural and artistic elements form a unique architectural typology that blends fortification with symbolic and aesthetic values, embodying the historical and cultural legacy of Albanian society.

#### The Tower of Osdautaj in Isniq- Deçan

The **Kulla (tower)** of Ose Dautaj in Deçan is far more than a functional structure for shelter or defense—it is a profound expression of aesthetic and philosophical meaning. This is not merely a building made of stone and wood, but an architectural embodiment of the traditional Albanian worldview, deeply rooted in identity, collective memory, and resilience.

Its monumental form, defined by thick stone walls—some roughly cut, others carefully hewn—conveys a strong sense of permanence and endurance. The stones, arranged with deliberate precision and devoid of unnecessary ornamentation, create a quiet harmony between the structure and the natural mountainous landscape. The massiveness of the walls is not just defensive; it is also artistic—a silent declaration of strength through simplicity. And in that simplicity lies a distinct form of beauty: one that does not demand attention, but inspires reverence.

The wooden balcony, elevated above the entrance, introduces a warm contrast to the cold solidity of stone. It serves as an intermediate space—neither entirely interior nor fully exposed—a symbolic threshold

between private life and public presence. Crafted by the skilled hands of local artisans, the woodwork reveals a deep sensitivity to form and material. Each detail is a quiet gesture of traditional artistry: a careful carving, a balanced line, a symmetry that is measured not with tools, but with the human eye and instinct.

The small arched windows, positioned thoughtfully along the façade, orchestrate a dynamic play of light and shadow throughout the day. These openings are not simply functional elements—they are visual and symbolic apertures to the outside world, embodying a sense of watchfulness and dignity. They give the tower a sculptural depth and reinforce its dual character as both a home and a fortress.



Fig. 10 The Osdautaj Family Tower in Isniq (Deçan). A woman drying clothes in a room inside the tower.

The loopholes near the top of the kulla, typically associated with defense, also carry aesthetic significance. They introduce a subtle tension between enclosure and exposure—between the protective and the receptive. These features speak to a time when the household was not only a domestic space but also a bastion of security and honor. This interplay of dualities—open and closed, warm and austere, functional and symbolic—lies at the heart of the kulla's architectural philosophy.

The sloped, red-tiled roof, with its clean lines and almost pyramidal shape, crowns the structure with a sense of completion and harmony. Its rich terracotta hue contrasts gently with the stony façade, marking the tower as a visual anchor within the rugged Kosovo landscape—a silent yet powerful landmark.

This kulla does not communicate through extravagance or ornament. It speaks through silence, through material truth, proportion, and restrained power. It stands as an aesthetic testament to a way of life defined by honor, family, tradition, and land. Every stone, every beam of wood, every carefully measured space reflects an unbreakable connection to nature and to a past that is not simply remembered, but lived.

In this way, the **Kulla of Ose Dautaj** transcends its utilitarian origins to become a deliberate act of architectural storytelling—an enduring expression of traditional Albanian art and philosophy. It redefines beauty not as embellishment, but as meaning embedded in structure. This is aesthetic in service of life, and life immortalized through architectural form.

The interior of the Kulla of Ose Dautaj represents a silent symphony of traditional Albanian elements, where functionality is inseparably intertwined with symbolism, art, and the philosophy of past life. It is not merely a living space, but a cultural microcosm that reflects the worldview, aesthetic sensitivity, and moral codes of its time. The walls are built from carefully hewn natural stone. Their rough texture preserves a raw authenticity, resisting any attempt at polish or modern symmetry. Artistically, these walls are an “unwritten canvas” laden

with emotional charge. The creases and tonal variations in the stones resemble the wrinkles of historical memory: each stone is a witness to a conversation, a silence, an unwavering stance.

The window that appears in the wall is small, arched at the top. It is not simply a source of light, but a sculpture of light and shadow. The light that filters through it does not illuminate everything, but instead creates depth, leaving space for interpretation, for contemplation. It resembles a rift between the outer world and the inner one—a symbolic eye that watches the outside with discretion, but always from the safety of within. It is an architectural translation of wisdom. Wood is a living material. The visible beams in the ceiling are not merely structural elements; they form a linear visual rhythm that guides the eye and establishes a relationship with the body. The light carvings or marks of age upon them give the space a soft emotional tone, a warm nostalgia. This is the poetry of wood in the Albanian interior—always humble, yet ever present.

In the background appears the structure of a traditional hearth—not just as a source of fire, but as the spiritual and aesthetic epicenter of the space. Its placement is not random. Around the hearth took place conversations, storytelling, songs, blessings, and decisions. Artistically, it is a functional sculpture that gathers both the energy and the calm of the room. The surrounding elements often include symbolic objects—arms, work tools, or religious motifs—making this point an “altar” of daily life. Within the room, one notices a simple but clearly defined spatial division: one area for guests, another for family members. This is an ethical form of architecture, where space is not only physical but expresses relationships, roles, and order. This spatial logic is also an expression of balance between hospitality and the protection of intimacy.

Natural light entering through the window and reflecting off the surfaces of stone and wood creates a painterly composition. Shadows are not the absence of light, but emotional lines that add drama and meaning to the space. The colors are warm, earthy tones—beige, brown,

soft gray—evoking a sense of groundedness, humanity, and purity. What is most powerful in this interior is what is absent: unnecessary ornamentation, excessive decor. This intentional emptiness is an aesthetic statement—beauty lies in what is essential. This traditional minimalism, unlike the modern one, is imbued with ethical meaning: the space is clean so that voice can be heard, presence can be respected, and silence can be valued.

The interior of the Kulla of Ose Dautaj is a work of art that does not seek admiration, but understanding. It is a space that speaks through its material, through silence, through memory. In every stone, piece of wood, window, or shadow lies a philosophy of life in which beauty is not found on the surface, but in substance—where architecture is not merely construction, but an emotional and ethical experience.



Fig. 11 Several men in traditional Albanian clothing in the oda (guest room) of the Ose Dautaj tower in Deçan. Their seated position reflects Albanian customs and traditions.

This photograph captures a rare and deeply symbolic scene unfolding inside the Kulla (tower) of Ose Dautaj in Deçan. Bathed in the soft natural light entering through a traditional small window, figures dressed in ceremonial white garments sit closely together in a silent yet meaningful circle. Artistically, this gathering represents more than just a meeting—it is a living scenography of Albanian traditional life, where architectural space and human form merge into one.

The structure of the room reflects deep cultural and aesthetic values. In the background, a monumental fireplace—meticulously carved in whitewashed stone or wood—stands not merely as a functional feature, but as a symbolic sculpture. To the right, a window gently diffuses light, casting controlled shadows and highlights that add poetic depth to the scene. One of the most important spatial elements here is the *oda*, the guest room where men traditionally gathered for discussions, decisions, and hospitality. This space is carefully arranged, with a deep red woven carpet stretched across the floor—a symbolic canvas where each color and pattern carries a story, a message. The men's traditional garments are, in themselves, a living exhibition of Albanian textile art. The dominant white color signifies purity, honor, and ceremony. The black details that outline the clothing emphasize the body's contours, creating a clean, graphic contrast. This visual contrast resembles the stylized aesthetics of ancient folk drawings, giving the scene a solemn and artistic quality. (Beqiri, 2013)

The composition of the photograph is balanced: the men are arranged in a circular formation, creating a symbolic center that conveys equality, unity, and mutual respect. This spatial positioning is not accidental—it reflects the ethical and aesthetic code of Albanian hospitality, where each person has both a place and a voice within the shared space. The whitewashed walls bear a few small paintings and objects, reflecting history and faith, yet the space remains uncluttered. This intentional emptiness is a crucial part of traditional aesthetics: what is absent speaks as powerfully as what is present. In this photograph, the Kulla is not merely a building; it is a symbolic platform where history, identity, and art unfold organically through form, wood, stone, and human presence. The entire scene is a slow-moving work of art, where every visual element carries a deeper message of belonging, memory, and resilience.

These wooden stairs, positioned on the exterior of the Ose Dautaj Tower in Deçan, constitute an architectural element that serves not only a functional purpose but also expresses a restrained traditional aesthetic. Attached to the massive stone walls, the stairs rise





Fig. 12 The exterior wooden stairs of the Osdautaj Tower in Deçan.

with monumental simplicity toward an elevated door, supported by heavy wooden beams. What at first glance appears to be a practical construction is transformed into a visual symbol of protection, dignity, and controlled hospitality—core principles of life in the Albanian tower. Their structure is linear and straightforward, built with thin vertical balusters that emphasize symmetry and uprightness. The steps themselves are made of aged

wood, now weathered to a gray-brown tone, refined by time and the elements, cloaking this object in a rare poetic patina. Each step resonates like a memory of the past, carrying within it the silent stories of those who once climbed them. Artistically, the stairs are stripped of any unnecessary ornamentation, and it is precisely this restrained simplicity that grants them an authentic elegance. They are like a poem of stone and wood,



Fig.13 Exterior view of the Zenel Bey Tower in Peja

where the contrast between the rough texture of the tower's wall and the worn surface of the wood creates a silent yet powerful visual dialogue. Their color, naturally faded by sun and rain, has blended into the surrounding environment, forming an inseparable connection between nature and structure. This fading is not a loss but an artistic value in itself, as it speaks to the passage of time and endurance in the face of it. (Toska&Ballaci, 2011).

Poetically, these stairs are a bridge between the earth and the inner soul of the tower—where hospitality begins, but is not granted lightly. They are a silent test of intent, an entry into a world of honor, masculinity, and tradition. They are a threshold before crossing into another universe—one of memory, conversation, and belonging.

### The Tower of Zenel Bey in Peja

The Tower of Zenel Bey in Peja represents one of the finest examples of traditional Albanian architecture from the Ottoman period in Kosovo, and it stands out as a unique work of both artistic and historical significance. Constructed in the second half of the 19th century, this tower serves not only as a residential or defensive structure but also as a manifestation of refined aesthetic taste and elevated social status. The tower is built with

finely hewn stone, where the interplay of stones in varying hues—grayish, pink, and white—creates a visual rhythm and a dynamic aesthetic comparable to baroque-Ottoman construction techniques in the Balkans. This craftsmanship is particularly evident in the corners of the building and around the window frames, forming a design that is simultaneously structural and ornamental. The cubical form of the structure is characteristic of Albanian towers and emerges from a defensive logic in construction. However, it may also be interpreted artistically as an expression of solidity, gravity, and monumental simplicity. Its visual weight imbues it with a commanding presence in the urban landscape.

The first and second floors feature small, arched windows that are symmetrically aligned. Their arches, built with light-colored stone, contrast with the darker wall surfaces, emphasizing their contours. This treatment reflects clear influences of Oriental art and an aesthetic sensibility concerned with proportion, balance, and visual rhythm.

On the upper floor, a large horizontal wooden window protected by a lattice dominates the lateral façade—typical of guest rooms (men's chambers) in grand towers. This element conveys the dual function of hospitality and visual control of the surroundings, symbolically



Fig. 14 The interior of the Zenel Bey Tower

acting as a “window of prestige.” The integration of wood and stone establishes a pleasing harmony between solid and warm materials. The architectural style of the tower can be described as a fusion of Albanian vernacular architecture with elements of Ottoman-Islamic art, particularly evident in the use of arches, symmetry, and restrained yet sophisticated ornamentation. Compared to other towers in the region, it shares distinct similarities with the Tower of Haxhi Zeka in Peja, as well as with prominent towers in Gjakova and Prizren, where the use of carved stone and finely crafted windows are hallmarks of artistic excellence.

The interior of the Zenel Bey Tower in Peja is a sophisticated interplay of tradition and modern refinement, where every element speaks a silent language of cultural memory and aesthetic consciousness. The wooden ceiling, carved in the shape of a starburst with rich oriental overtones, evokes the celestial geometry

of Islamic art, symbolizing order, infinity, and divine harmony. This motif anchors the entire room like a visual compass, drawing the eye upward in a gesture of contemplation and reverence. Beneath it, the wooden framing that borders the ceiling extends the sacred geometry along the horizontal plane, establishing a visual balance that mirrors the architectural logic of traditional Albanian towers—where function and ornament are inseparable. The windows are framed with deep, dark wood, evoking the protective eyes of the house, while the natural light they invite in softens the mass of the thick walls, a nod to the duality of strength and hospitality that defines the kulla. The bed and furnishings are minimal but intentional, their forms restrained so as not to compete with the expressive language of the ceiling and rug. The handmade rug at the foot of the bed—bright red with traditional Albanian motifs—serves as a cultural anchor, grounding the space with a sense of place and memory. It is a field of woven



symbols, a tactile narrative passed through generations, echoing the communal stories told in the oda. A low circular table, humble and unobtrusive, alludes to the traditional sofër, around which people once gathered in fraternity and counsel. The sofa, modern in form but softened by traditional embroidered pillows, bridges eras—linking past customs with present comfort. Everything is composed in dialogue: wood with light, tradition with modernity, symbolism with utility. This interior is not merely a room—it is a curated experience of Albanian heritage, translated into spatial poetry.



Fig.15 The symbol of the interior door in the Zenel Beu Tower

The interior door of the Zenel Beu Tower, with its semi-circular arched form, represents more than just a physical passage from one space to another—it serves as a symbolic threshold into the depths of Albanian traditional identity. The arch, sculpted into the surrounding stone wall, evokes archaic forms of Oriental and medieval architecture, reminiscent of the serene porticos of sanctuaries or the entrances of harems, where every transition is an act of humility and reverence. Artistically, the arch embodies the embrace between stone and wood—two materials that, in Albanian architecture, carry opposing yet complementary values: the eternal solidity of stone and the everyday warmth conveyed by wood. The contrast between these two elements is softened by the gentle light that falls across the natural textures of the walls and the traditional carpet below, which itself adds an emotional and cultural dimension to the space. The path defined by the carpet leading toward the door creates a symbolic axis of spiritual transition—from the outside world into a warm, protected, and intimate interior.

The semi-arch form, in traditional philosophy, signifies not only architectural stability but also an intermediary state—neither sky nor earth—a bridge connecting the physical to the sacred. The arch is also a symbol of hospitality and humility, as it is not a threatening or closed shape, but one that is open and embracing. This door, beyond its functional role, becomes an aesthetic statement: it speaks to an attention to detail, to the harmony between form and function, and to a belief in the power of art to elevate the everyday. It stands as an architectural metaphor for a worldview in which every entrance represents a journey—from matter toward spirit.





Fig. 15 The wooden star adorning the ceiling of the room in the Zenel Bey Tower

The wooden star adorning the ceiling of the room in the Zenel Bey Tower in Peja is a deeply symbolic and artistically rich element. With its pronounced eight points, the form is closely associated with Oriental and Islamic traditions, where the star often represents divine light, spiritual guidance, and universal harmony. In this context, the star functions as a gravitational center of the room—a kind of cosmic nucleus within an intimate space that preserves the values of cultural heritage.

The sharp, symmetrical points convey a sense of balance and perfection, connecting the structure to the philosophical concept of cosmic order and harmony. The warm tone of the wood, with its dark hues and natural depth, evokes a feeling of warmth and solemnity. It

reflects the craftsmanship of hand-carved woodwork, a centuries-old tradition in Albanian architecture.

The style is a synthesis of Oriental Baroque and Balkan vernacular elements, where geometric ornamentation serves not merely decorative purposes but communicates unspoken messages about the structure of the world and the soul. At the center of the star is an intricately carved medallion, which may symbolize a point of unity—a core from which light, knowledge, or shared familial energy radiates throughout the space. This ceiling is not merely an aesthetic component; it is a reflection of identity, history, and the philosophical worldview of the tower's inhabitants, who, through art, have carved the enduring presence of their cultural legacy.



Fig.16 The Artistic Dimension of the Ceiling in the Zenel Bey Tower

The ceiling of the Zenel Bey Tower in Peja, as shown in the image, is characterized by a minimalist yet symbolically profound design. Dominated by a series of exposed wooden beams embedded into a white plaster ceiling, this architectural composition carries both structural and aesthetic significance. The beams, crafted from richly grained dark wood, provide a visual rhythm and depth, contrasting harmoniously with the clean, smooth surface of the ceiling. Symbolically, the parallel wooden beams evoke a sense of order and direction, guiding the gaze linearly across the space. This linearity may be interpreted as a metaphor for continuity and stability—values deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual foundation of traditional Albanian tower houses. The choice of wood as a material is also deliberate: it reflects a connection to nature and an

enduring respect for craftsmanship passed through generations. From an artistic perspective, the design strikes a balance between traditional rustic elements and a contemporary sensibility. The beams are not overly decorative but remain expressive through their natural texture and grain, embracing the principle of organic beauty. The embedded lights positioned between the beams enhance the aesthetic effect, casting soft glows that dramatize the interplay between shadow and light, adding a layer of warmth and intimacy to the room.

In terms of color, the juxtaposition of dark wood and white plaster creates a classic dichotomy—earth and light, tradition and modernity, weight and openness. The overall style may be described as vernacular minimalism, where the essence of heritage is retained within a simplified and functional framework.

This ceiling, while seemingly modest, becomes a canvas of cultural expression—projecting strength, elegance, and a quiet philosophical depth that defines the identity of the Zenel Bey Tower.

The carpet on the floor of the Zenel Bey Tower in Peja is a decorative and symbolic element that encapsulates the cultural heritage and folk artistry of the Albanian tradition. More than a functional floor covering, it serves as a visual testimony to the identity and spiritual expression embedded within the tower.

The dominant color is a deep, warm red—a tone traditionally associated with life, passion, and spiritual strength in Albanian culture. Red is frequently employed

in traditional textiles as a symbolic safeguard against malevolent forces. This central color establishes a powerful visual and emotional foundation for the design. Along the sides are white borders adorned with geometric motifs in blue and red, potentially representing protective symbols or natural harmony—a synthesis of fire (red), water (blue), and purity (white). These colors create a strong aesthetic and emotional balance. The central motifs are symmetrically repeated—small rhomboid figures and horizontal lines interspersed with dots that may depict stars, eyes, or other natural elements. The symmetry and repetition in the design suggest notions of harmony and order, which, within the context of a traditional Albanian tower, convey messages of social structure and the preservation of heritage.



Fig.17 Carpet on the floor in the Zenel Bey Tower

Artistically, the carpet exemplifies masterful craftsmanship, characterized by a consistent ethnic style that merges simple geometric elements with deep symbolic meaning. It is an object that brings forth history, culture, and aesthetic sensitivity—a foundation where time, art, and national identity converge in silence.

## Conclusion

The Albanian towers (*kullas*) of Kosovo, particularly those situated in the Dukagjini Plain, represent an extraordinary convergence of structural ingenuity, cultural identity, and artistic expression. Far beyond their primary role as fortified dwellings, these architectural forms serve as visual and spatial narratives of Albanian life—embodying resilience, hierarchy, hospitality, and tradition. This study has examined several key towers—such as those of Haxhi Zeka, Zenel Bey, and the Osdautaj family—through the lens of architectural and interior design, uncovering layers of meaning embedded in both form and material. Structurally, the *kullas* demonstrate an adaptive vernacular logic that responds to both climatic conditions and social needs. Their use of stone, wood, and brick reveals a deep knowledge of local resources, while the spatial organization—especially the hierarchical division of floors—reflects societal values and functional efficiency. Elements such as small defensive windows, projecting oriels (*çardak*), and thick walls are not only functional but symbolically charged, signifying dignity, strength, and control over space. Artistically, the towers offer a rich canvas of symbolic language expressed through carved ceilings, ornamental arches, geometric carpets, and subtly decorated facades. The *oda e burrave* (men's guest room) emerges as the cultural and aesthetic heart of each tower, where hospitality, discourse, and artistry converge. The careful balance between simplicity and meaning, evident in unadorned whitewashed walls juxtaposed with intricately carved wooden details, reflects a traditional Albanian aesthetic of restraint, rooted in ethics and memory rather than ornament for its own sake. This research confirms that the Albanian tower is not simply a historical dwelling but a living artifact—an architectural embodiment of a worldview in which space is ethical, beauty is functional, and memory is

carved into stone and wood. Each *kulla* narrates its own story, yet collectively they form a heritage mosaic that is essential to understanding the cultural and artistic legacy of Kosovo's Albanian communities. As such, preserving and studying these towers is not only a matter of architectural conservation but of safeguarding intangible cultural identity.

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