

# Oriental Style City House in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Biscevic Family House in Mostar

Ahmet Hadrovic

Faculty of Architecture, University of Sarajevo, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Email address: hadrovic.ahmet@gmail.com, ahmet.hadrovic@af.unsa.ba

**Abstract**— The Biscevic family house is located in Mostar (Geographic coordinates: 43°20'26.15"N, 17°48'46.67"E, Elevation: 57 m). It was built in 1635. It is an example of a developed type of oriental type town house in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This type of house is characterized by a highly developed layout of the horizontal and vertical plan, the richness of the contents and the separation of the public, i.e., the 'male part' ('selamluk') and the intimate family, i.e., the 'female part' ('haremluk') of the house complex. There are three units on the ground floor of the house: a hall ('hayat'), a large room ('big halvat') and a kitchen ('mutvak'). The semi-open area of the hall ('hayat') with a rectangular base measuring 7.2 x 3.9 m is paved with rectangular stone slabs and covered with Bosnian carpets (Figure 4). On the west side of the hayat, there is a large room with three windows facing the Neretva River, and one facing the hayat.

Source: <https://www.islamicarchitecturalheritage.com/listings/biscevic-lakisc-house>, Accessed: May 28, 2023.

The space of the inner courtyard ('avlija') is basically rectangular with dimensions of 10 x 6 m. It is cobbled with stone from the Neretva River. Along the northern courtyard wall, fruit trees and landscaped greenery are planted. A small fountain is arranged near the entrance to the kitchen ('mutvak'). It is interesting that small turtles move freely around the yard [1,2,3,4,5,10] (Figure 3).

**Keywords**— Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mostar, House of the Biscevic family.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Biscevic family house is located in Biscevic alley in Mostar (Figures 1,2).

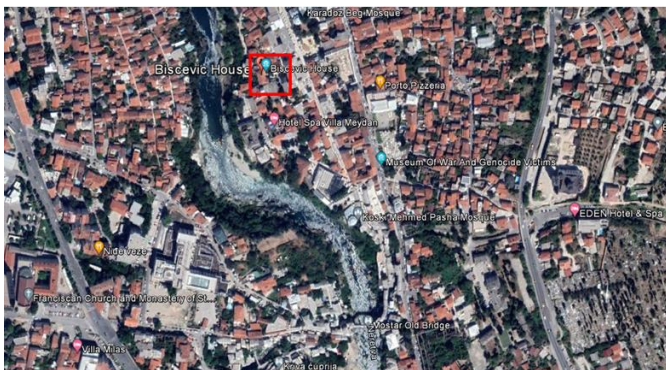


Figure 1. The Biscevic family house in Mostar. Location  
Source: Google Earth. Accessed: May 28, 2023.

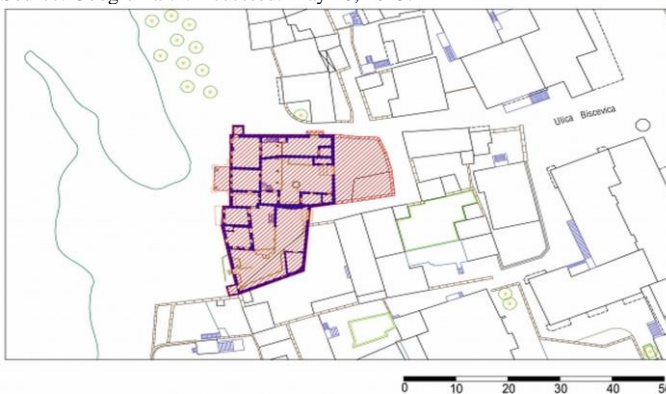


Figure 2. The Biscevic family house in Mostar. The situation



Figure 3. The Biscevic family house in Mostar. Courtyard of the house ('avlija')

Source: [https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction\\_Review-g295388-d7003059-Reviews-Biscevic\\_Kuca\\_Biscevic\\_House-Mostar\\_Herzegovina\\_Neretva\\_Canton\\_Federation\\_of\\_Bos.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g295388-d7003059-Reviews-Biscevic_Kuca_Biscevic_House-Mostar_Herzegovina_Neretva_Canton_Federation_of_Bos.html), Accessed: May 28, 2023.

Source: <https://furaj.ba/biscevic-kuca-stara-osmanska-kuca-u-srcu-mostara/>, Accessed: May 28, 2023.

Source: <https://www.safarway.com/en/property/biscevic-house#gallery>, Accessed: May 28, 2023.

There are three units on the ground floor of the house: hall ('hayat'), large room ('veliki halvat') and kitchen ('mutvak'). The semi-open area of the hall ('hajet') with a rectangular base

measuring 7.2 x 3.9 m is paved with rectangular stone slabs and covered with Bosnian carpets (Figure 4). On the west side of the hayat, there is a large room with three windows facing the Neretva River, and one facing the hayat. The kitchen, located on the southern wall of the hayat, is today a modernly equipped room with two windows oriented to the hayat, that is, the courtyard.



Figure 4. The Biscevic family house in Mostar. Hall on the ground floor of the house

Source: <https://www.safarway.com/en/property/biscevic-house#gallery>, Accessed: May 28, 2023.

Inside the courtyard there is a house, on the northwestern part of the plot, a mutvak, on the southeastern part of the plot, a toilet and an exit to the terrace over the Neretva River, on the western wall of the courtyard (Figures 2,8). Mutvak, measuring 3.7 x 2.2 m, is a ground-floor room, plastered on the inside and plastered on the outside. The entrance is on the west side. The ceiling construction consists of wooden beams and a ceiling made of wood planks ('shishe'). From the open terrace above the river Neretva, there is a rich view of the river, which can be reached via the stairs that descend from the terrace towards the large rock on the shore itself.

On the southern wall of the hall, in front of the kitchen, there is a wooden staircase ('basamaci') with a stone starting point (three initial steps), which connects the hall on the ground floor and the divanhana on the first floor of the house (Figure 5).

On the first floor there are rooms in the living room ('divanhana'), a large room ('large chardak'), a 'small chardak' and an antechamber. The construction and materialization of the divanhana (dimensions 7.3 x 3.2 m in its base) is dominated by wood, which makes this space particularly intimate (Figure 6).

The hall space on the first floor is made 'like an attic with a hatch' (which corresponds to the space of the 'divanhana with kemerija' in the houses in Sarajevo, Banja Luka and on Musafirhana in Fojnica) [6], relaxation and enjoyment of the view. The space of the jazluka ('kamerija'), oriented towards the inner courtyard, is at the same level as the space of the attic ('divanhane'). A large seating area (height 40 cm and width 90 cm) is placed next to the fence itself, with a length of about 4.5 m.



Figure 5. The Biscevic family house in Mostar. Left: view of the divanhana from the courtyard. Right: the view from the divanhana to the courtyard

Source (left): Author (Drawing, 1985)  
Source (right): [https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction\\_Review-g295388-d7003059-Reviews-Biscevic\\_Kuca\\_Biscevic\\_House-Mostar\\_Herzegovina\\_Neretva\\_Canton\\_Federation\\_of\\_Bos.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g295388-d7003059-Reviews-Biscevic_Kuca_Biscevic_House-Mostar_Herzegovina_Neretva_Canton_Federation_of_Bos.html), Accessed: May 28, 2023.



Figure 6. The Biscevic family house in Mostar. The floor of the 'divanhana' (on the first floor of the house) is covered with 'Bosnian carpets'

Source: [https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction\\_Review-g295388-d7003059-Reviews-Biscevic\\_Kuca\\_Biscevic\\_House-Mostar\\_Herzegovina\\_Neretva\\_Canton\\_Federation\\_of\\_Bos.html#/media-atf/7003059/142073742;p?albumid=-160&type=0&category=-160](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g295388-d7003059-Reviews-Biscevic_Kuca_Biscevic_House-Mostar_Herzegovina_Neretva_Canton_Federation_of_Bos.html#/media-atf/7003059/142073742;p?albumid=-160&type=0&category=-160) Accessed: May 28, 2023.

The vestibule on the first floor, like a large corner, was a room for receiving guests ('visiting room'). The equipment of this space consists of a corner sofa, a 'sehara' (wooden chest, richly decorated, intended for storing more valuable woven items) and tables and chairs. The wooden ceiling of the vestibule ('shishe') is emphatically decorated (Figure 11).

From the vestibule you enter the most representative room of the house, the 'big corner' ('big cosak'). The large corner is a square room, measuring 4.5 x 4.5 m at its base, which is left for 2.75 m over the contour of the ground floor into free space, thus creating a doxat which, due to the boldness of its design (supported by two massive columns) and position, represents a well-known and recognizable characteristic of the Neretva landscape (Figures 5,7,9). The furniture of the large corner consists of a built-in sofa, divan ('minderluk') organized along three wall surfaces. From the dock area, which opens towards the Neretva with numerous windows, oriented to the north, west and east, there is a rich view of the river and the city. A shallow, plastered dome rises above the square space of the 'big corner' ('big cosak'), with a base at the level of the ceiling and a body in the volume of the ceiling (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The Biscevic family house in Mostar. Arrangement of the 'big corner' ('big cosak')

Source: <https://www.nickkembel.com/things-to-do-in-mostar/>, Accessed: May 28, 2023.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckmKTf4hlu4&t=87s>, Accessed: May 28, 2023.

## II. SPATIAL-FORM CHARACTERISTICS OF THE HOUSE

The Biscevic family house in Mostar was built in 1635 and is an example of a developed type of oriental-type town house in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This type of house is characterized by a highly developed disposition of the horizontal and vertical plan, the richness of the contents and the separation of the public, i.e. 'male' part (selamluk) and the intimate family, i.e. 'female' part ('haremluk') of the house complex [1,2,3,4,5,10,11].

The house of the Bišćević family is, in accordance with the usual scheme of this type of house, developed through the ground floor and first floor. Both 'selamluk' and 'haremluk' have an inner courtyard, 'avlija', which is surrounded by a relatively high and strong stone wall.

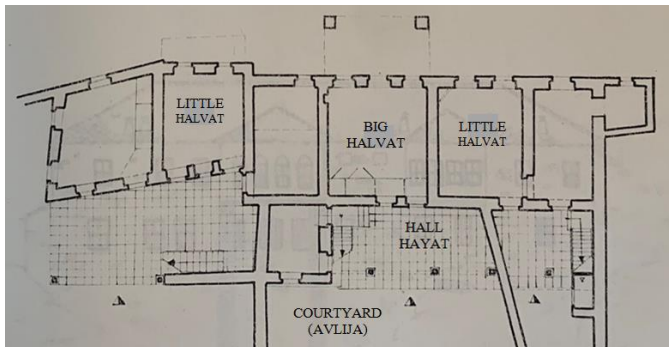


Figure 8. The Biscevic family house in Mostar. Ground floor

Source: Pasic, A. (1989). Contribution to the study of Islamic housing construction in Yugoslavia on the example of Mostar, how old is the housing architecture of Mostar an autochthonous phenomenon (doctoral dissertation), Zagreb (in Bosnian)

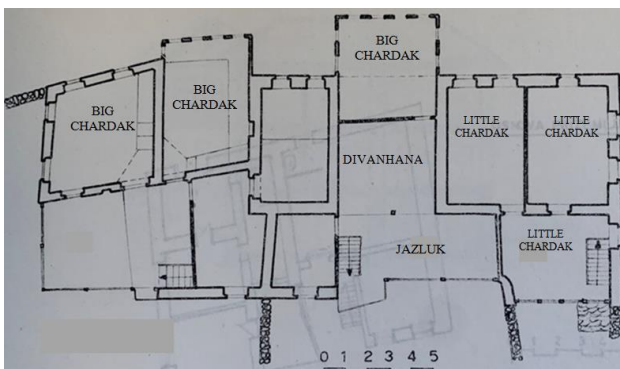


Figure 9. The Biscevic family house in Mostar. First Floor

Source: Pasic, A. (1989). Contribution to the study of Islamic housing construction in Yugoslavia on the example of Mostar, how old is the housing

architecture of Mostar an autochthonous phenomenon (doctoral dissertation), Zagreb (in Bosnian)

On the floor level, we again see open spaces covered with strong eaves (sofa rooms, chambers) and basic living spaces ('chardaks').

The main living spaces are multipurpose (at the same time they are living rooms, dining rooms, reception rooms, bedrooms). Polyvalence enables the absence of furniture, which, in the European understanding, defines the purpose of the room. In fact, the main rooms, on the entrance wall of the room, have a built-in battery ('musander'), which for this type of house is standardly made up of a linen closet ('dusekluk'), a spa ('hamamdzik') and an earthen stove ('furuna') for water heating for spa needs. By 'activating' some of the contents of this battery, the space, in the European sense, becomes a bedroom or a bathroom. Along the other three walls of the multipurpose room, there is a sofa for sitting ('minderluk'), which gives the room the dimension of a living room. By introducing a low, round table ('sinija'), the living room becomes a dining room.

Since the walls were thick (especially those on the ground floor, built of stone or adobe), it was possible to install niches ('dulaf') in them, which had the role of European chests of drawers and wardrobes. Obviously, in this way, the freedom of the floor surface was obtained.

Although the disposition, construction and materialization of this house irresistibly initiates a discussion about architecture as art, architecture as a complex image of man and the society in which he lives, everything was designed and done extremely rationally, with the justification of physically proven solutions and economic expediency.

## III. CONSTRUCTION AND MATERIALIZATION

The outer walls of the building are about 65 cm thick, and the inner walls of the ground floor are about 50 cm thick. The walls between the rooms on the first floor are thinner (about 15 cm), made of a wooden skeleton ('bondruk') with adobe filling [9].

The mezzanine structure of the house consists of wooden beams that support the wooden floor of the first floor, with a floor made of finely processed boards ('shishe') [9] (Figures 10, 11).

Stone, cut into stone slabs, extracted from the surrounding meadows, was used to cover the multi-pitched roof.

The thick stone walls of the ground floor are made in nature, plastered only from the inside. The walls of the floor are partly made of stone, and partly made in the bondruk system (wooden skeleton with adobe filling). We see the light walls on the first floor as a result of people's strong need to 'go out' with their built-up space into the free space of the inner courtyard in the manner of cantilevering the floor beyond the contour of the ground floor (Figures 9, 14). In contrast to the heavy stone walls that define the contours of the floor on three sides-facade, in the natural version, the light walls are plastered on both sides, painted white with milk of lime and with many perforations and windows. They look sophisticated against the stone walls.

The playful contour of the floor is followed by a simple hipped roof whose volume (air space) is a good defense of the main living rooms of the floor (from low temperatures and wind in winter, and from excessive heating in summer). The basic roof structure is made of wood, and the covering is made of stone slabs (Figures 9,14).

The ground and first floor levels are connected by wooden staircases ('basamaci'). In the intimate and family part of the house ('selamluk') there are two such staircases: the main one, which connects the hayat on the ground floor and the divanhana on the first floor, and the economic staircase which connects the main storage room on the ground floor ('magaza') with the kitchen ('mutvak') on the floor (Figures 8,9).

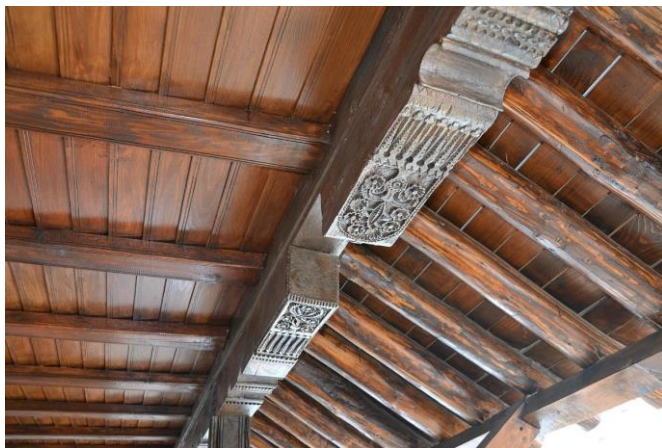


Figure 10. The Biscevic family house in Mostar. Wooden ceiling ('shishe')  
Source: [https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction\\_Review-g295388-d7003059-Reviews-Biscevica\\_Kuca\\_Biscevic\\_House-Mostar\\_Herzegovina\\_Neretva\\_Canton\\_Federation\\_of\\_Bos.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g295388-d7003059-Reviews-Biscevica_Kuca_Biscevic_House-Mostar_Herzegovina_Neretva_Canton_Federation_of_Bos.html)  
Accessed: May 28, 2023.



Figure 11. The Biscevic family house in Mostar. Wooden ceiling ('shishe') in the hall on the first floor of the house ('visit-room')  
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckmKTf4hlu4&t=87s>, Accessed: May 28, 2023.

#### IV. DOORS AND WINDOWS

Similar to other oriental-type town houses in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Sarajevo, Bnjaluka, Foca) that belong to the 'developed type of house', in the house of the Biscevic family in Mostar we encounter a developed palette of door and window designs. The access door from the street to the inner courtyard ('avlija') is a double-winged, rustic design, with a

canopy shaped to emphasize the approach to the rich house (Figure 12).



Figure 12. The Biscevic family house in Mostar. Entrance gate to the inner yard ('avlija') of the house

Source: <https://www.safarway.com/en/property/biscevic-house#gallery>, Accessed: May 28, 2023.

Internal doors in some rooms are made of wood, of a finer design. The door on the 'big corner' is decorated with rich carvings. In addition to geometric motifs, there is also a wreath on the door, as a frame, and floral decoration in the semi-arched part (Figure 13).



Figure 13. The Biscevic family house in Mostar. An example of an interior door

Source: [https://www.triptadvisor.com/attraction\\_review-g295388-D7003059-Reviews-biscevica\\_biscevic\\_House-Mostar\\_herzegovina\\_neretva\\_canton\\_federation\\_of\\_bos.html#/media-tf/70030/14\\_albumid=-160&Type=0&Category=-160](https://www.triptadvisor.com/attraction_review-g295388-D7003059-Reviews-biscevica_biscevic_House-Mostar_herzegovina_neretva_canton_federation_of_bos.html#/media-tf/70030/14_albumid=-160&Type=0&Category=-160) Accessed: 28 May 2023.

Source: <https://www.safarway.com/en/property/biscevic-house#gallery>, Accessed: May 28, 2023.

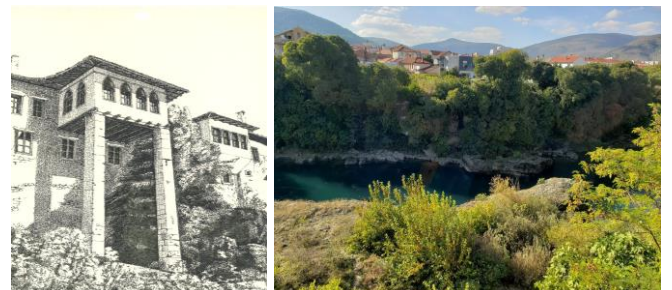


Figure 14. The Biscevic family house in Mostar. Left: View of the house from the Neretva river. Right: view of the Neretva river from the house

Source (left): Author (Drawing, 1985)

Source (right): <https://www.safarway.com/en/property/biscevic-house#gallery>, Accessed: May 28, 2023.

The window design is different. Most of the windows have a rectangular profile, and the windows on the 'big corner' are

larger in size, ending in the form of a spiral arch, which emphasizes the representativeness of the room where they are located (Figures 7, 14). These windows have a specific design: they are made as vertical-sliding windows ('windows on the surma'). Most windows have a protective grille made of wrought iron.

#### V. SPECIFIC ELEMENTS OF HOME EQUIPMENT

Similar to other oriental-type townhouses in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the house of the Kajtaz family in Mostar also has its own specific characteristics in terms of space equipment and envelope surface treatment. The main rooms of the house, the halva on the ground floor and the conservatory on the first floor, are, conditionally speaking, 'empty'. The fixed elements of the 'furniture' are: a sofa for sitting ('minderluk'), a battery built into the wall ('musandera') with three 'compartments' - for storing bedding ('dusekluk'), a spa ('hamamdzik') and water heating for spa needs ('furuna') – a fireplace for preparing coffee ('kahve-odzak') and a service table for drinking coffee ('mangala'). Niches ('dulaf') are arranged in the thick stone walls, where small equipment, books, souvenirs are kept.

Portable elements of furniture, decorative chests ('sehara'), stand freely in the space (Figure 7). By bringing equipment from the storage room and the kitchen ('huđera' and 'mutvak'), (Figure 15, right) the living room ('halvat' and 'chardak') is converted into a dining room [3].



Figure 15. The Bisevcic family house in Mostar. Left: arrangement of one of the conservatories. Right: dishes in the pantry ('huđera')

Source: <https://www.safarway.com/en/property/bisevcic-house#gallery>, Accessed: May 28, 2023.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

The Bisevcic family house in Mostar is one of the most representative examples of an oriental-type town house in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The house of the Bisevcic family was converted into a museum after World War II ("Ottoman

House Museum"), and its owners continued to live in the house. During the war (1992-1995) the house was damaged, and after the end of the war the house was rebuilt. The Commission for the Protection of National Monuments of Bosnia and Herzegovina declared the Bišćević - Laksic residential complex in Mostar a national monument of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Decision no. 09-2-92/04-1, May 4, 2004 [12]. The house still has the function of a museum, which is very visited.

This house is one of the examples of bioclimatic architecture in Bosnia and Herzegovina, so it is often visited by students of the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Sarajevo, as well as from other universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider region.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Pasic, A. (1994). Islamic Architecture in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Organisation of The Islamic Conference Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture, Istanbul, pp. 33-43
- [2] Pasic, A. (1989). Contribution to the study of Islamic housing construction in Yugoslavia on the example of Mostar, how old is the housing architecture of Mostar an autochthonous phenomenon (doctoral dissertation), Zagreb (in Bosnian)
- [3] Hadrovic, A. (2007). Defining Architectural Space on the Model of the Oriental Style City House in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia, Booksurge, LLC, North Charleston, SC, USA, pp. 195
- [4] Hadrovic, A. (2010). Research study on Architecture and Overview of the Architect's Experience, Sarajevo, Acta Architectonica et Urbanistica, Faculty of Architecture, University of Sarajevo, Sarajevo, pp. 67 - 70.
- [5] Hadrovic, A. (2018). Architecture in the travelogues of an architect. Book 1: Balkan, Faculty of Architecture University in Sarajevo, Sarajevo, pp. 389 – 414 (in Bosnian)
- [6] Ahmet Hadrovic, *Musafirhana in Fojnica*, International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies, Int. j. adv. multidisc. res. stud. 2023; 3(1):648-654
- [7] Hasandedic, H. (1990). Muslim Heritage in Eastern Herzegovina, El Kalem, Sarajevo (in Bosnian)
- [8] Hasandedic, H. (1996). Sloboda newspaper, no. 8 (in Bosnian)
- [9] Hadrovic, A. (2009). Structural Systems in Architecture, Booksurge, LLC, North Charleston, SC, USA, pp. 138, 145
- [10] Ahmet Hadrovic, *Drawings by architect Ahmet Hadrovic*. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation, ISSN (online): 2582-7138 Volume: 03 Issue: 04 July-August 2022
- [11] Ahmet Hadrovic, *The Place of Wood in the Design of Oriental Type City Houses in Sarajevo*, International Journal of Scientific Engineering and Science, Volume 6, Issue 8, pp. 42-58, 2022.
- [12] Commission for the Protection of National Monuments of Bosnia and Herzegovina (in Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian) [http://old.kons.gov.ba/main.php?id\\_struct=6&lang=1&action=view&id=2431](http://old.kons.gov.ba/main.php?id_struct=6&lang=1&action=view&id=2431) Accessed: May 28, 2023.