

# Fire-resilience in history – a case study on Travnik in central Bosnia before and after the great fires of 1903

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## ABSTRACT

Travnik in central Bosnia served as administrative centre for the Ottoman province of Bosnia in between 1697 and 1850. In 1878, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy took command in Bosnia as direct result of the Berlin congress. During the following year, the new administration was already facing its first big fire, which wiped out a major part of the inner city of Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia since 1850. In 1880, the new administration launched a new building code, which tried to minimize the future hazard risk. A current ERC-grant financed research project on “Islamic architecture and Orientalizing style in Habsburg Bosnia 1878-1918” could already identify some of the specific technical as well as regulatory measures that the Austro-Hungarian administration established to avoid further damage through fires.

When during September of 1903 two major fires hit the district capital Travnik, the Ottoman administrative palace (*konak*) still used by the new Austrian officials was already fire-improved. It had gained a roof-cover of baked brick tiles instead of the traditional wooden shingles. Therefore, it survived the big fires of its surroundings without any fatal damage. Not so the traditional neighbourhoods (*mahale*) on the foot of the castle. They terribly burnt down into their foundations, as the up-going wall fabric, the roof structures and their cladding all consisted of wood. Especially the mahale-mosques, a distinctive traditional type made of wood still found in nowadays Bosnia, suffered fatally. Old photographs from before and after document the disaster. Probably the steep, shingle covered hipped roof in combination with the wooden minaret directly growing out of the wooden roof structure worked like a chimney. The Austrian officials reacted generously and put “urgent” on their documents for the re-construction of the mahale-mosques. Even the governor himself contributed with his private money to the re-erection of Lukačka mosque along main-street. The technicians developed a kind of model mosque type that just needed to be adapted to the different site conditions, and re-erected all of them in fireproof material and slightly different constructions. A surviving blue print plan-copy shows the now minaret in stone, brick walls, brick roof covers and the new “Viennese”-type roof structure.

Hence, already the Austro-Hungarian officials and intellectuals started to discuss immediately the loss of the traditional cityscape through their technically advanced reaction and felt sorry for losing the picturesque oriental touch of the ensembles. They started a joint effort to counterbalance for this loss by establishing a pseudo-Orientalizing architectural style for public and sacral buildings of major importance. One of the destroyed mahale-mosques in Travnik, the Varoshka mosque, was rebuilt in this pseudo-Moorish style, as the Bosnians call it. The research team documented this mosque and the others now by a combined laser-scan, photogrammetry and hand measurement.