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POTENTIALS OF CULTURAL ROUTES IN VRNJAČKA BANJA: UNREVEALING MODERNIST HERITAGE FOR SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

In the European context, particularly after the adoption of the Faro Convention ratified by Serbia, the past two decades have seen growing interest in the heritage of the recent past valuable to the community. Citizens' engagement increasingly shapes the interpretation of heritage, making tourism more authentic and experiential. Vrnjačka Banja, the leading spa and cultural tourism centre in Serbia, acquired its recognizable modernist identity in the 1960s and 1970s. The Sculpture Park with bivetas designed by Mitrović, the Promenade, and the Castle of Culture initiated by Protić still form its cultural core. However, lacking protection as an integrated landscape, the area has gradually lost authenticity, while key architectural and artistic works have been damaged or removed. Although local community initiatives seek to promote and reinterpret this heritage through exhibitions, public talks, and digital platforms, these remain largely invisible. This research explores the potential of Banja's modernist heritage through cultural routes, guided programs and mixed reality experiences.

Key Words: *Vrnjačka Banja modernist heritage, interpretation, Miodrag Protić, Mihajlo Mitrović, heritage landscape*
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Introduction

Reflecting, on the one hand, on the potential of the modernist heritage of Vrnjačka Banja, and on the other, on the contemporary concept of heritage – which implies a comprehensive understanding of the cultural

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and natural landscape rather than a focus on individual monuments alone, as well as the active involvement of the community that values, preserves, and communicates its heritage - this paper examines the resulting opportunities for the development of cultural and creative tourism. In this context, the study analyzes initiatives for the urban planning and cultural development of Vrnjačka Banja during the 1960s and 1970s and considers their resonance in the present day. Led by two key protagonists, Miodrag Protić and his collaborator, architect Mihajlo Mitrović, the concepts established during this period continue to form the foundation of the town's spatial organization and functional structure. However, the relationships and principles defined at that time are frequently disrupted, while the potential of the town's modernist heritage, both in terms of the urban landscape and the intangible heritage embodied in diverse cultural and sporting practices, remains underutilized or, in some cases, entirely overlooked.

The Birth of Modernist Urban Landscape of Vrnjačka Banja

A central figure in the establishment and long-term shaping of the contemporary identity of Vrnjačka Banja, both in cultural and urban terms, was Miodrag Protić. Born in Vrnjačka Banja, Protić, an artist, influential art critic, and the founding director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, maintained a continuous intellectual and emotional connection with Vrnjačka Banja, its inhabitants, and his long-standing circle of collaborators, a relationship also documented in his autobiographical memoir "Nojeva barka" (Protić, 1992). Consequently, a turning point in the cultural development of Vrnjačka Banja occurred in 1965, when, thanks to Protić's initiative, the Conference on the New Urban and Aesthetic Design of the Morava Region Towns was organized, followed shortly thereafter by the Sculpture Symposium. In terms of cultural content acting as reference points within the spatial framework of the town central park, these events opened the way for the formation of the park's artistic identity. The symposium, which brought together numerous sculptors and artists from both Yugoslavia and abroad, encouraged a unique synthesis of landscape, architecture, and sculpture, further affirming the park as a space of cultural and aesthetic dialogue. In the years that followed, some of the principles developed during this conference became the basis for a specific program of spatial culture and broader cultural activities in the town. The final outcome of this initiative was the establishment of the open-air Sculpture Park, officially inaugurated in October 1965 (Obradović, 2024). The subsequent period,

marked by a series of carefully considered spatial interventions within the park, can be regarded as highly successful in preserving its ambient character while strengthening the cultural identity of the space.

Within a relatively short time, Protić succeeded in gathering a number of distinguished creators and experts from the fields of culture, art, and architecture to collaboratively enhance the spa's public space. Among them was the architect Mihajlo Mitrović, who collaborated with Protić taking part in the program preparation and realization of the Sculpture Symposium and Sculpture Park. Another well-known architect and sculptor Bogdan Bogdanović contributed later as well with the "Popina" memorial monument creation in the immediate vicinity of the Vrnjačka Banja centre, another modernist layer of heritage which is today neglected (Jokanović & Đorđević, 2022) while writer Dobrica Ćosić, together with numerous sculptors and other cultural workers, have also contributed significantly to what was thought of at the newspapers of a time as "the construction of high culture in Vrnjačka Banja" (Vrnjačke novine, 1969a, p. 6)

Furthermore, a close reading of periodicals, particularly Vrnjačke novine, indicates that during 1968 and 1969 the foundations for both the modern urban form of Vrnjačka Banja and the cultural life of this tourist centre were firmly established. In response to the need to expand and upgrade the capacities of what was then one of the most visited destinations in Yugoslavia, a general urban plan was adopted based on the proposal of Mitrović. (Vrnjačke novine, 1968a, 3) That same year, following Protić's initiative, the municipality purchased bourgeois family Belimarković Castle for the purpose of establishing the "Castle of Culture" and announced the beginning of its adaptation. At the same time, the villa of doctor Mišić was restored with careful attention to preserving the authenticity of interwar period architecture characteristic for Vrnjačka Banja, and it was later repurposed as a library on the Promenade pedestrian zone along the Park. Residents and visitors of the town gained as well two modern hospitality venues during this period: the Goč restaurant (Vrnjačke novine, 1968), which included a ceramics gallery by Milovan Stojanović MIS and was designed by Mitrović, and, the café Švajcarija, which remains an active social gathering place today. (Vrnjačke novine, 1969b) The previously, after the mentioned Symposium constituted Sculpture Park, surrounding these sites of everyday social interaction was soon further developed following the principles Mitrović introduced in the Urban plan.

Therefore, according to Mitrović's projects, four highly recognizable pavilions, bivetas over the mineral springs were constructed: "Topla voda", "Snežnik", "Slatina", and "Jezero". In addition to these, Mitrović designed elements of "small architecture" and the surrounding open spaces, creating spatial connections that linked the mentioned Goč café and other sculptures and structures within the Central Park. His final architectural realization in the town was the Roman Spring structure with a pyramidal roof above the entrance communicating with the "Topla voda" bivet on one hand, but preserving the original traditional balustrade on the other hand. This pyramidal structure was removed in 2012 during the reconstruction of the Park.

However, what particularly defines Mitrović's architectural work in Vrnjačka Banja is his commitment to understanding the heritage and tradition of the site and incorporating them into new interpretations. His architecture reveals references to Art Nouveau heritage, Northern Expressionism, and even elements of a fantastical, almost surreal architectural language. Through a simple, transparent structural system using stylized and reduced historical motifs of the square and the circle, expressed through robust concrete decorative and cantilevered elements-Mitrović synthesizes tradition and modernity in a distinctive manner.

"This specific authorial design approach can be characterized as the result of two of Mitrović's key conceptual starting points. The first concerns the importance of respecting the identity of the site, phenomenologically interpreted as the *genius loci* or spirit of place, while the second is reflected in the way Mitrović models his buildings sculpturally." (Jovanović, 2025, p. 267).

The pavilion "Topla voda," constructed in the early 1970s and still one of the most recognizable motifs on postcards from Vrnjačka Banja, represents an exceptionally successful architectural achievement, which Mitrović conceived as a particular sculpture in the park. The "Topla Voda" biveta was planned at an attractive location in the central part of the park, on the site of the old biveta and the former warm spring. At the time of planning, the spring was covered with a simple wooden structure built in the traditional Morava style, with arcades and colonnades. Having a distinctive sensitivity for recognizing the characteristics of the project site, this detail became very important to Mitrović. When designing "Topla Voda," and later other bivetas, he decided to retain and reinterpret many traditional architectural elements characteristic for Vrnjačka Banja

within his projects. (Kadijević, 1999) What he also had in mind is the wider context of immaterial heritage of Banja and the tradition of chess world tournaments being held here since the mid-20th century. Therefore, the four dominant corner towers of this biveta are designed to resemble stylized chess pieces of monumental proportions. They are made of concrete, clad in brick, and extended with almost sculptural elements of exposed concrete.

World chess tournaments have been held in Vrnjačka Banja since 1955, continuing up to recent events when the town hosted rapid chess competitions. Contemporary community initiatives have sought to mark this important segment of local identity in public space, including the installation of a “Queen” monument and inscriptions declaring this town a “capital of chess,” as well as a large informational board in the park: “Chess in Vrnjačka Banja has a tradition spanning several decades, and it is worth recalling that important and prestigious international competitions were once held here. We have succeeded in restoring some of the town’s former splendour, and in one of the most beautifully reconstructed parts of the park we now once again have a chessboard, as well as a queen that represents not only the queen in chess but also Vrnjačka Banja itself, as the queen of continental tourism. This figure will symbolize a future capital of chess in Serbia.”, the president of Municipality of Vrnjačka Banja Boban Đurović concluded on the occasion of the monument development (Stojanović, 2023).

Invisible Cultural Life of Vrnjačka Banja

Regarding the establishment of cultural life in Vrnjačka Banja and the creation of a sustainable cultural centre, in an interview with Protić published in Vrnjačke novine (1971), he clarified that this space should function as a polyvalent cultural centre, an institution that would simultaneously serve as a forum for debates on key cultural issues, a theatre and art gallery, a research cabinet, and a venue for concerts and literary evenings. He further elaborated on the museum display within the castle: “which should have two parts: a dynamic one and a static one. Since the building is of historical significance, its interior should include a section that illustrates the era in which it was created. That static part would function as a museum, strongly emphasized, more suggested than fully developed, while the rest of the interior would be used for various activities of a very broad scope.” Such an institution officially began operating under the name “Castle of Culture” in 1983, opening with

Protić's jubilee exhibition. (Obradović, 2024) The conceptual framework of his program was actively implemented until 1995, when a change in institutional leadership led to structural transformations, renaming the institution to "Belimarković Castle", understanding it more as a local heritage traditional museum and significantly altering its mission and programming. Also, without a long-term, carefully prepared strategic plan, organized cultural programs remain a gathering point for a very small number of interested participants, despite the large number of tourists. "Protić also bequeathed a legacy of his paintings to the Municipality of Vrnjačka Banja, and in 2008 an agreement was signed with the then-mayor Radoljub Džamić regarding its display in the Castle of Culture. Under the same agreement, the Municipality transferred authority to the Cultural Center to organize the installation and opening of the Legacy. To this day, however, even the basic conditions for fulfilling the contractual obligation have not been created." (Obradović, 2024)

Despite numerous later initiatives such as symposia, exhibitions marking anniversaries of Protić's death, publications, as well as civic actions like promoting the town as a chess capital or advocating for the preservation of its architectural genius loci, alongside contemporary reinterpretations of its appearance through digital and AI-based visualizations – the core of Vrnjačka Banja has been rapidly losing the recognizable identity established in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period that consciously relied on local tradition and heritage, unlike many current developments. In recent decades, the expansion of construction activity in Vrnjačka Banja has endangered nearly all delicate cores of its public spaces, reopening questions of evaluation and preservation. Consequently, the Sculpture Park, once the most sensitive and carefully designed segment of the town centre, has been largely neglected and no longer exists in its original form. This has disrupted the previously established harmony between sculptures, vegetation, pavilions, and open spaces. As noted by architect and theoretician Andrej Jovanović, this represents "a missed opportunity to preserve and highlight the park as a valuable example of modern spatial design." (Jovanović, 2025, p. 264) Recent reconstruction plans, such as those concerning the "Goč" restaurant, do not suggest that its authentic appearance will be preserved or adequately interpreted, while official institutional narratives and tourism platforms often overlook or only superficially address the crucial period of the late 20th century.

Potentials of Modernist Heritage Revalorisation and Interpretation

While international visitors increasingly recognize the value of Vrnjačka Banja's modernist heritage, mapping and interpreting it through platforms such as "Spomenik database" (Niebyl, 2020), it appears that local cultural policy has, for more than three decades, tended to marginalize or render invisible the heritage of the second half of the 20th century, failing to activate it as a resource of considerable cultural and tourist potential. In this context, the question is no longer only one of preservation in a narrow, conservationist sense, but of reactivating and recontextualizing this heritage within contemporary cultural, social, and economic frameworks.

Possible strategies for safeguarding and revitalization therefore need to operate on several interconnected levels. On the one hand, the protection of the cultural landscape should be approached holistically, recognizing Vrnjačka Banja not merely as a collection of individual architectural objects, but as an integrated spatial system shaped by the interaction of natural features, designed park areas, architectural interventions, and intangible cultural practices. This implies the formal recognition and protection of the broader landscape ensemble including the Promenade, the remains of the Sculpture Park, Mitrović's bivetas, as well as following layers of modernist architecture hotels which still did not lose the authenticity such as Merkur and Breza highly resonating with the Park landscape, together with cultural institutions as a coherent heritage unit. Within such a framework, conservation efforts would move beyond isolated restoration toward maintaining spatial relationships, visual corridors, material authenticity, and the experiential qualities that constitute the site's *genius loci*.

At the same time, interpretation strategies must be significantly expanded and updated. The development of guided thematic tours focusing, for example, on modernist architecture, the Sculpture Symposium, or the chess culture of the town could provide structured narratives that reconnect visitors with the layered history of the site. These could be complemented by the production of specialized maps and interpretative materials that clearly articulate the spatial logic of Mitrović's interventions and Protić's initiatives and their relationship to the natural landscape. Importantly, contemporary digital tools open new possibilities: augmented and mixed reality applications could enable visitors to experience lost or altered elements of the landscape, reconstructing the

original appearance of the Sculpture Park or visualizing projects that changed through time as for instance the mentioned pyramidal construction over the Roman spring in the park centre, visible at least through a digital reconstruction which could be seen through the smartphone or tablet as a part of the mixed reality tour. Such approaches have already shown a great success not just in the wider European context but in local communities as well. To name just a few: the interactive augmented reality map and the tour through the Old Town of Budva, Montenegro, the Belgrade city museum mixed reality tour showing origins of some museum objects, the Viminacium Archeological Park multimedia interpretative tour (Holograd, n.d.) and many more. These would not only enhance visitor engagement and target younger audiences who already attend Banja for Love Fest probably not knowing much about the heritage and multi-layered identity of this place, but also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the site as a dynamic cultural process rather than a static artefact.

Equally important is the active involvement of the local community in these processes, in line with the principles of the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Council of Europe 2005). This perspective shifts the focus from heritage as an object of expert management to heritage as a shared resource, co-created, interpreted, and sustained by the community to which it belongs. In the case of Vrnjačka Banja, this could include participatory programs in which residents contribute personal narratives, memories, and interpretations of the spa's spaces; collaborative curation of exhibitions; and community-led initiatives for the maintenance and activation of public spaces. Digital platforms and social media - already used informally to imagine alternative futures of the spa, such as the profile of the citizen Goran Karavidić who, through creation of AI generated photos of the potential look of devastated urban landscapes in Banja or buildings changed to the level the original cannot be recognised which reminds us on the potentials of this tourist town (Brstina, 2025) - could be institutionalized as tools for participatory heritage-making, allowing broader audiences to engage with and reinterpret the site.

By integrating landscape-scale conservation, innovative interpretative methods, and community participation, Vrnjačka Banja could reposition its modernist heritage not as a neglected remnant of the past, but as an active driver of cultural identity and sustainable development. Such an approach would align with contemporary models of cultural tourism,

particularly those grounded in slow tourism and experiential engagement while ensuring that both the material and immaterial dimensions of heritage remain sustainable, meaningful, and resilient over time.

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