

APPROPRIATION OF THE OTTOMAN HERITAGE IN SOCIALIST YUGOSLAVIA

BASCARSIIJA PROJECT (1948-53)

DIJANA ALIC & MARYAM GUSHEH

The University of New South Wales

Recent scholarship on modernism outside the West has begun to question the homogenized nature of the “Modern Movement” and the “International Style.” By making reference to “Orientalist” discourse, scholars in this field have brought to question Eurocentric aspects of modernism such as the binary opposition between the “East” and “West” and “modern” and “traditional.” As such, modernity is revealed as a multifaceted project manifested in response to specific political and cultural circumstances and structures of power. Particularly in countries where modernity was introduced by the educated elite or government officials, modern architecture has shown to be synonymous with the dominant political expression of national identity. This paper aims to contribute to this discussion by examining the emergence of modernity in Bosnia and Hercegovina, in the context of socialist Yugoslavia.¹

Within post-World War II Bosnia, the articulation of national identity led to a complex and layered procedure as the dominant political narrative, based on a secular and united Yugoslavia, was paralleled by the Bosnian struggle for self definition and nationhood. In this context Bascarsija, the business district of Sarajevo established by the Ottomans, was of particular significance as its built fabric could be read as representative of both the Yugoslav nation, as well as a cultural heritage unique to Bosnia. Despite the symbolic relevance of the Ottoman heritage to both national narratives, its affiliation with Islam was in conflict with Serb and Croat nationalism as well as the Yugoslav secularist tendencies.

This urban core became the subject of intense studies by prominent architects, Grabrijan and Neidhardt, culminating with Neidhardt’s redevelopment proposal for Bascarsija (1952-53). In an attempt to include the Ottoman heritage within a Bosnian national narrative, Neidhardt resorted to a unique reading of “Islamic” and the “modern,” where their oppositional relationship, known to him from Le Corbusier’s practice, was dismantled and the two began to merge. This paper aims to demonstrate that the modernist reading of the Ottoman heritage along with the specific urban strategies employed in the Bascarsija project were a reflection of Bosnia’s political and intellectual orientation in the 1940s and 1950s and indicative of a desire to synthesize seemingly

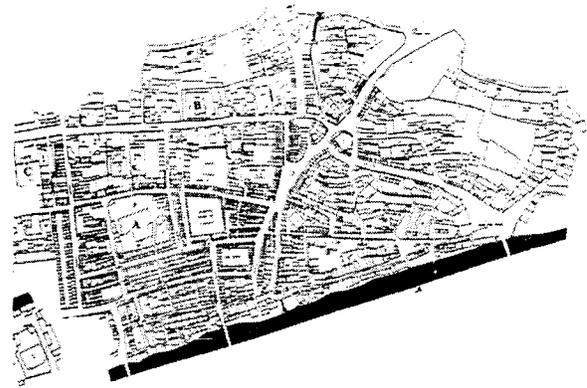


Fig. 1. Plan of Bascarsija (1878), Indicating Various Religious Buildings.³ A- Gazi Husref Bey's Mosque, B- Orthodox Church, C- Jewish Synagogue. (Ayverdi, Ekrem Hakkı, *Avrupa'Da Osmanlı Mimari Eserleri* Yugoslavia).

conflicting national objectives.

In the 15th century, Bascarsija was established as the commercial center of the city of Sarajevo. Based on the principles of the *vakuf*, the urban structure of Bascarsija relied on the integration of commercial units with those of public buildings and religious institutions.² The Gazi Husref Beg Mosque (1531) with the *hanikah* (higher school of Sufi philosophy), the *Kursumlija medresa* (Islamic school), the *hamam* (bath house) and the *caravanserai* (hotel) and *bezistan* (market place) were a typical conglomeration of buildings prevalent in Ottoman urban design. Despite Bascarsija’s distinct Ottoman superstructure and the prominence of Islamic educational and religious institutions, its built fabric also accommodated the presence of other religious groups. The Catholic church built by merchants from Dubrovnik was reconstructed during the fifteenth and seventeenth century. The Orthodox population settled in the vicinity of the main Bascarsija Bazaar and established the Orthodox church in 1539.

Later that century the Sephardic Jews, expelled from Spain, settled their community in Sarajevo and built their first synagogue in 1580. By the beginning of the 17th century one could view the presence of Bosnia’s four

religious communities within the one square kilometer. With the decline of the Ottoman empire and Bosnia's annexation by the Austro-Hungarian government, the city developed further west allowing the area of Bascarsija to gradually fall into disrepair. The socialist victory of 1945 found Bascarsija in a poor physical state and in need of significant repair. Within the many conservation schemes that followed two approaches dominated, namely massive demolition or complete restoration. Juraj Neidhardt's proposal to turn Bascarsija into a socialist cultural centre made use of both techniques in a way that significantly manipulated the reading of Bascarsija.

Neidhardt returned to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia following three years of employment with Le Corbusier (1933-1935). He was involved in a wide range of projects including the master plan for the Algiers project.⁴ Recent scholarship has highlighted Le Corbusier's fascination with Islam, both as a source of inspiration and as the romantic and picturesque "Other" associated with the 19th century European political hegemony and the Orientalist tradition.⁵ In both instances, the Islamic architectural heritage was interpreted as a homogeneous entity and the binary opposite to the modern, rational and scientific architecture of the west. The theme of traditional or regional versus the modern seemed to be recurring in Le Corbusier's work during the 1930s and 1940s.⁶

As an employee of Le Corbusier, Neidhardt was influenced by his mentor's ideas. In particular he was intrigued by the Algerian context, as the dialogue between the Islamic and the modern echoed themes apparent in his native country, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Grounded in an Orientalist reading of Islam, Neidhardt's analysis of the architectural heritage of Yugoslavia became focused on the Ottoman architecture which he associated with a homogenized image of the Orient. While this fascination with the Oriental was shared by foreign visitors and commentators on Yugoslavia, the promotion of the Ottoman heritage faced internal resistance as its cultural legacy was associated with foreign supremacy and the domination of the Catholic and Orthodox churches by Islam.

The domestic rejection of Ottoman symbolism is evident in Neidhardt's earlier projects which relied on mainstream modernist notions of housing for the masses emphasizing hygiene, transportation and pragmatic design. Despite the 'rational' approach apparent in these projects, and their indifference to the existing urban context, Neidhardt continued his studies of the Ottoman built heritage, a passion that was shared by his friend, the architectural theoretician Dusan Grabrijan.⁷ Their collaboration brought Neidhardt to Bosnia (1939), and together they undertook intensive studies of Sarajevo's built fabric during and after World War II. They completed the bulk of their work in the context of Titoist Yugoslavia and socialist policies.⁸

Their efforts culminated in the influential text, *Architecture of Bosnia and the way towards modernity* (1957), which contained Neidhardt's proposal for the redevelopment of Bascarsija.⁹ It is through this text that Neidhardt articulates a unique relationship between aspects of Ottoman architecture -which he carefully referred to as "Bosnian Oriental" and "modern"

architecture. In contrast to Le Corbusier's approach where the picturesque, "primitive" and Islamic East served as a critique of Western rationalism, in Neidhardt's work the distinction between the Oriental and modern is removed and the two begin to merge. The association of the Ottoman architecture, specifically the Ottoman house with stereotypical modernist forms, diverts Neidhardt's interpretation of the Ottoman architecture from the Le Corbusian model and towards the reading of Oriental as modern:

...Is Charshiya not a source of modern architecture? Why do we look for inspiration elsewhere, continuously getting it from second hand sources, when we are at its origins? ... Aren't musandere- modern built in wardrobe? Aren't secije- modern built in couch and modern low furniture. [Aren't elements of Bosnian Oriental architecture] the double height space, the single flight of stairs, and the vegetation which spills into our dwellings [all elements of modern architecture].¹⁰

To understand the meaning behind the shift in Neidhardt's reading of the Ottoman built fabric, from picturesque to modern, and in particular the philosophy behind Neidhardt's Bascarsija project, it is helpful to situate the project in its immediate political and historical context.

For the post-WWII Communist Party of Yugoslavia, Yugoslavism was based on the dialectics of Yugoslav nationalism- the unification of the six states in a patriotic struggle for the liberation of Yugoslavia from German, Italian and other occupiers- and internationalism, global unity of the working class people who would disregard nationality in a struggle for a social revolution, industrialization and progress. Both objectives relied on the ability of the Communist party to resolve the internal nationalist tendencies and replace Serb-ness, Croat-ness and Muslim-ness with a secular Yugoslav culture that would grant equal rights to all citizens.

The government's approach to combating internal nationalist tendencies was initially characterized by a campaign against religion considered as the basis of the nationalist divide. Many Catholic and Orthodox churches, monasteries, convents and seminaries were closed down. Suppression of the courts of the Islamic law took place in 1946; a law forbidding women to wear the veil was passed in 1950; religious schools were closed down and the teaching of children in the mosques became a criminal offence. The Muslim cultural and educational societies were abolished from 1947 and the Muslim printing house in Sarajevo was closed down and no Islamic text book was issued in Yugoslavia until 1964.¹¹

The government's initial harsh stance towards the states' cultural and religious independence was softened during the early 1950s, the years of conflict with the Soviet Union. While resisting Stalin's threats to Tito's independence, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia found itself increasingly isolated in the communist world and in desperate need of internal stability.¹² Further, the persistence of Serbian and Croatian nationalism

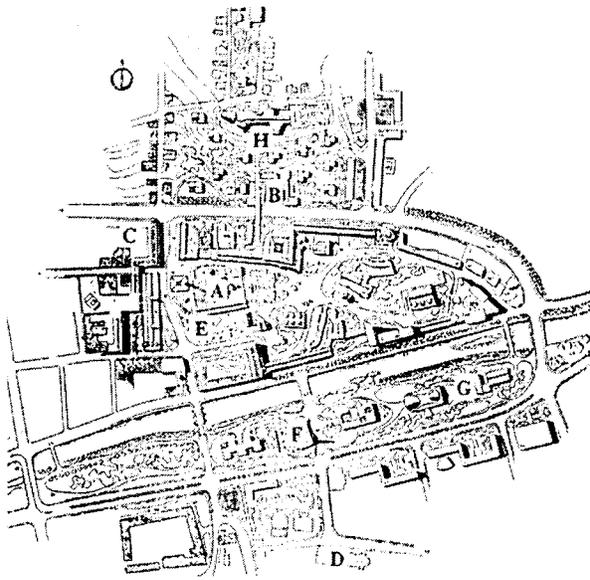


Fig. 2. Neidhardt's Proposal for Bascarsija, Plan.¹⁶ A- Gazi Husref Bey's Mosque, B- Orthodox Church, C- Jewish Synagogue, D- Catholic Church, E- New Graveyard, F- Czar's Mosque, G- New Public/ Cultural Buildings, H- New Residential Area for Cultural Workers. (Grabrijan, Dusan, & Neidhardt, Juraj, *Arhitektura Bosne i Put u Suvremeno*).

encouraged the government to adopt a seemingly more lenient approach, allowing cultural and linguistic characteristics of the nations of Yugoslavia to exist within the boundaries of, and in harmony with, the "new" Yugoslav national consciousness.¹³ In this context, the state of Bosnia gained particular political significance as its ethnic mix and history of multicultural coexistence was compatible with the highly promoted socialist slogan of "brotherhood and unity." The promotion of Bosnia as a model for socialist Yugoslavia would have allowed the government to combat divisionist tendencies and to minimize the significance of national differences.

Competing with the Yugoslav notion of Bosnian identity as a united and secular state was the confusion over the status of Bosnian Muslims as either an ethnic, religious or national community. Historically, Bosnia had escaped transformation into a nation-state and did not become a land inhabited by *Bosnians*, but the land of Muslims, Serbs, Croats and Jews. Consequently, the nationalist movements in Serbia and Croatia had managed to tie the Bosnian Orthodox and Catholic population to Serb and Croat national identities respectively, causing significant confusion over the national status of the Bosnian Muslims.¹⁴ In the 1940s the official position was that this problem would eventually resolve itself as Muslims would begin to identify themselves as either Croats or Serbs.¹⁵ Uncertainty and pressure to declare themselves as one or the other further contributed to the Muslim resistance and enhanced their claim to a unique heritage and national identity. This desire for a specific Bosnian national identity, was shared by secular Bosnians whose search for a national definition was based on cultural heritage rather than religion.

Clearly the construction of Bosnia's national identity relied on the dialogue between two competing narratives. Firstly, the more dominant Yugoslav notion of Bosnia as a symbol of united Yugoslavia, and secondly the persisting Muslim and secular Bosnians' claim to a unique cultural heritage distinct from the neighboring Serbia and Croatia.¹⁶ In response to the competing national narratives and their search for cultural symbols, the built fabric of Bascarsija became significant as the Ottoman architectural legacy could be read as uniquely Bosnian and the coexistence of all the main religious institutions could be read as uniquely Yugoslav. While Bascarsija's potent symbolism and contribution to multiple national narratives ensured its partial conservation, the extent and choice of buildings restored posed political difficulties. Essentially the problem was the association of the Bosnian Muslims and their built heritage with the Ottoman colonial rule. For socialist Yugoslavia the Ottoman architectural legacy remained associated with a foreign rule and the restoration of its architectural heritage could be interpreted as the promotion of Islam, and a threat to the Catholic and Orthodox population.

Initially, the governments response to this dilemma was massive demolition. In 1945 the City People Committee formed a "demolition board" in charge of the clearance which took place over a period of five years and resulted in the destruction of 246 small shops. With the slogans such as "our history is not in old timber shutters," that "the shops have no historic or cultural value," and that they are only a "fire hazard," and a "source of infection" the government justified their planning decisions, which were ultimately resisted by significant protest amongst prominent city figures.¹⁷ Changes in the political circumstances in the 1950s and the shift in government policies towards supporting the states' cultural independence, marked a new approach towards Bascarsija, perceiving it as a single entity. Although Bascarsija's conservation as an urban whole supported Bosnia's independent character, the threatening nature of Ottoman associations remained unresolved.

It appears that Neidhardt would have been aware of

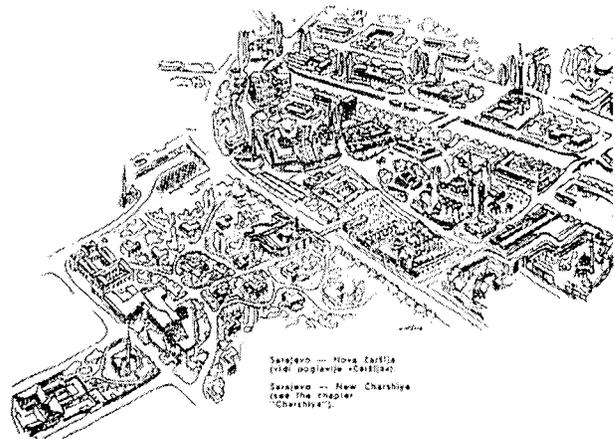


Fig. 3. Neidhardt's Proposal for Bascarsija, Perspective. (Grabrijan, Dusan, & Neidhardt, Juraj, *Arhitektura Bosne i Put u Suvremeno*).

the problems of Ottoman symbolism, in particular its religious associations. His reliance on the Ottoman house as a symbol of Bosnian Oriental architecture shifts the gaze from Ottoman religious institutions to a more secular one, somewhat alleviating this dilemma. In escaping the religious components of the Ottoman legacy, Neidhardt was able to discuss the Ottoman house in abstract terms, changing its symbolism from a colonial architecture to a Bosnian regional building tradition with essentially modern qualities. In doing so he successfully distanced these structures from overtly Ottoman and religious associations, creating a unique Bosnian architecture whose modern qualities would influence and contribute to the architecture of the revolution.

While Neidhardt's reading of the Bosnian house in modernist terms was helpful in disassociating the Ottoman connotations, the same techniques proved insufficient in dealing with the prominent religious monuments of Bascarsija. In his proposal Neidhardt relied on a series of urban strategies ranging from massive demolition, selective restoration, the introduction of new structures, and the importing of existing structures, all aimed at rupturing the link between the Bosnian Muslims and the Ottoman rule and their religion. The choice of restored and imported structures, their proximity, function and positioning, viewed in light of the political context, can begin to highlight the complexities of the Bascarsija project and the manner in which Neidhardt's urban policies addressed particular cultural and political dilemmas.

The disassociation of the Ottoman-built heritage from the Ottoman political and religious structure was primarily achieved through the dismantling of the *vakuf* system. The particular structure of the *vakuf* with its integrated public and commercial buildings not only helped to interlock the institutions of the town with those of Islam, but it also ensured the economic funds that secured the financial independence of public buildings. Prior to the introduction of socialist policies, the authority of the *vakuf* and the interdependence of public and private structures had ensured the application of conservation policies to all components of the built fabric. Neidhardt's proposal completely ignored the principles of the *vakuf*. He suggested a massive demolition of surrounding structures deemed as insignificant and left specific monuments as single floating objects. Religious buildings such as Gazi Husref Bey's mosque with its surrounding complex of *harem*, water fountain, *turbe* and graveyards, as well as the Gazi Husref Bey's *medresa*, the Jewish Synagogue, the Old Orthodox church, the Catholic church, the Bascarsija mosque and other prominent public buildings were selected for preservation and the area around them cleared of all structures. The isolation of these monuments was enhanced by surrounding them with open greenery, linked by winding paths and the creation of vistas. Devoid of their immediate context they were only to be viewed in relation to each other or as backdrops to the new structures introduced.

The break between the Ottoman public and religious institutions and their supporting commercial units allowed these buildings to become financed and managed by the state. As properties of the state the buildings original

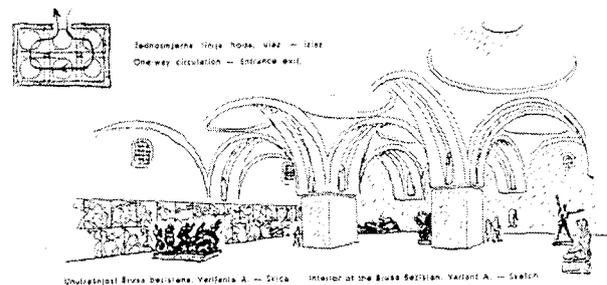


Fig. 4. Proposal to convert the Brusa Bezistan to the National Liberation Museum. (Grabrijan, Dusan, & Neidhardt, Juraj, Arhitektura Bosne i Put u Suvremeno).

function was replaced by activities regarded as more suitable to the socialist society. Apart from religious institutions, most other buildings acquired a new function. For instance the old hans were adapted for hotels and restaurants. The Brusa Bezistan was converted to a museum of the socialist revolution, Gazi Husref Beg Bezistan became a national restaurant, the hanikah became an ethnographic museum and the medresa was made into an Oriental library.¹⁹ While the proposal honored the original function of religious buildings, their independent status would have been jeopardized by the socialist policies which insisted on supervised religious activities. Having redefined the role and function of existing buildings and stripping them of their immediate context, Neidhardt emphasized particular links between isolated monuments in Bascarsija. Specifically, the presence of all religious institutions preserved as "sparkling jewels of the past" enabled the reading of Bascarsija as a place where all cultures and religions were united. Neidhardt's interest in including all the main religious institution is clear as his proposal carefully extended the area of Bascarsija further to the south, incorporating an existing Catholic church on the left bank of the river.²⁰

As a result of this expansion, the area of "new Carsija" included buildings of all the main religious groups: the Jewish synagogue, the Catholic church, the Orthodox church and the Muslim mosque. The tourists and visitors to the new Carsija were presented with an exceptional opportunity for seeing the places of worship of all main religious groups in close proximity to each other, giving the impression that the socialist theme of brotherhood and unity was based on a solid cultural foundation.

As well as reducing religious monuments to symbolic objects and properties of the state, the elimination of the *vakuf* allowed the introduction of a new organizational principle more suited to the socialist rule and the Marxist view of history. Based on the belief "that historical continuity was to be maintained at all costs," the Bosnian history was portrayed as a linear and progressive development, on display within Bascarsija's redefined boundaries.²¹ Low scale rows of shops, arcades, and walkways rapped around the new carsija defining its new parameter. The entrance was marked by a monumental portal, a threshold separating the Bascarsija district from the Austro Hungarian quarter and opening vistas to a number of monuments on display. Passage through this

WWII (from 1930s to 1950s). He was one of few qualified architects working in Sarajevo at that time, and certainly the most prominent architectural theoretician.

- ⁸ Karlic-Kapetanovic Jelica suggests a number of reasons for Neidhardt's arrival in Bosnia, the main one being his need to obtain a secure job and build some of his projects; in addition his wife was Bosnian and his close friend Grabrijan was living there at the time.
- ⁹ Original title Grabrijan, Dusan, & Neidhardt, Juraj, *Arhitektura Bosne i Put u Suvremeno*, *op cit.* The book was published as a result of approximately fifteen years of work.
- ¹⁰ D. Grabrijan & J. Neidhardt, *Arhitektura Bosne i Put u Suvremeno*, *op cit.* p. 11.
- ¹¹ For a thorough general history of Bosnia see Malcolm, Noel; *Bosnia- A Short History*, (London: Macmillan, 1994). Malcolm notes that the Communist Party took a softer approach towards the Orthodox church as some of its clergy served as 'progressive' priests in Tito's army. He also indicates that some of the measures introduced by the Communists were covertly resisted. Islamic texts continued to circulate, children were taught in mosques, the dervish orders kept up their practices in private houses, and one student organisation, the young Muslims, resisted the campaign against Islam until several hundred of its members were imprisoned in 1949-50. Malcolm, N *op cit.* pp. 195- 196.
- ¹² Aleksa Djilas, *The Contested Country, Yugoslav Unity and Communist Revolution 1919- 1953*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 174- 176.
- ¹³ After 1954 the general conditions of religious life in Yugoslavia improved, a new law was passed guaranteeing freedom of religion (again) and placing churches under direct state control. Vigorous programs of restoring Orthodox monasteries started from 1956 onwards, partly for tourist purposes. From 1947 a state controlled Islamic association was permitted to operate, together with its one carefully supervised medresa for training the Muslim Clergy. Malcolm, N. *op. cit.*, p. 196.
- ¹⁴ Amila Buturovic, "Producing and Annihilating the Ethos of Bosnian Islam." *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, (Sum. 1995), pp. 29-33.
- ¹⁵ Malcolm indicates that in the 1948 Yugoslav census the Muslims had three possibilities to declare their nationality as: Muslim Serbs, Muslim Croats or Muslims, nationally undeclared. Their reluctance to choose either Serbian or Croatian national identity resulted in: 72,000 Muslims declared themselves as Serbs, 25,000 as Croats, but 778,000 registered as undeclared. The next census in 1953, produced a similar result. This time the official policy promoted a spirit of Yugoslavism and the category Muslim was removed from the census altogether, but people were allowed to declare as Yugoslav, nationally undeclared. In Bosnia, 891,800 did so. Malcolm, Noel. *op cit.*, p. 198.
- ¹⁶ In the confusion over the Muslim status the term "Muslim" became ambiguous as it was used for denoting a national group as well as a religious one. In this text we refer to Bosnian Muslims as a national group interested in a Bosnian nationalism rather than a culture based on the principles of Islamic religion.
- ¹⁷ Bejtlic, Alija, *Stara Sarajevska Carsija- jucer, danas i sutra, Osnove I Smjernice za Regeneraciju*, (Sarajevo: Gradski Zavod za Zastitu i Uredjenje Spomenika Kulture, 1969), p. 61.
- ¹⁸ Illustrations used in this paper were originally published in (original title): Grabrijan, Dusan, & Neidhardt, Juraj, *Arhitektura Bosne i Put u Suvremeno*, *op cit.*
- ¹⁹ D. Grabrijan & J. Neidhardt, *Arhitektura Bosne i Put u Suvremeno*, *op cit.* p. 137.
- ²⁰ The old Catholic church in the Bascarsija area burnt in the fire of 1697. The Austro- Hungarians established a new town centre further west from Bascarsija; in 1884-89 they built a new Roman Catholic Cathedral.
- ²¹ W. Lesnikowski (ed), *East European Modernism, Architecture in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland Between Wars*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), p. 10.
- ²² D. Grabrijan & J. Neidhardt, *Arhitektura Bosne i Put u Suvremeno*, *op cit.*, p. 137.