

Research paper

URBAN TRANSFORMATION AND RETROMANIA: SUBCULTURES RESHAPING THE AESTHETIC OF SPACE

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Abstract

Contemporary aesthetics is facing an identity issue with being truly original and rather reviving trends from the past. This nostalgia-forward approach to style has made its way to every aspect of human culture, including music, fashion, and ultimately, space. Increasingly, we are witnessing a growing trend of transforming abandoned urban spaces and former industrial sites into aesthetically curated venues, where layers of historical patina merge with contemporary design interventions, creating spaces that are perceived as highly desirable, particularly among young people belonging to specific subcultures. This paper examines this phenomenon, exploring why these groups are drawn to such aesthetics and identifying the key spatial and atmospheric elements that contribute to their appeal. The methodological framework begins with spatial mapping of selected zones across the city, identifying venues that embody specific aesthetic and atmospheric qualities associated with nostalgia and subcultural appeal. This mapping is guided by the principles of affect theory and the concept of retromania, providing a theoretical lens through which spatial and emotional dynamics are interpreted. Following this, a survey is conducted among users and visitors, examining why these spaces are perceived as attractive — whether due to branding, location, physical structure, or other symbolic and experiential factors. Special attention is given to how these elements contribute to emotional attachment and the formation of a sense of belonging within specific social groups. The expected results suggest that distinct patterns or characteristics that define the "vibe" of these spaces will emerge, explaining why young people feel a sense of attachment and belonging in these environments. These elements contribute to the creation of communal spaces where users not only engage with the physical environment but also form emotional connections, reinforcing a sense of collective identity.

Key words: urban identity, urban regeneration, retro aesthetics, youth, subculture

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1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary aesthetics is facing an identity issue with being truly original and rather reviving trends from the past. This nostalgia-forward approach to style has made its way to every aspect of human culture, including music, fashion, and ultimately, space. The term nostalgia, first coined by Johannes Hofer in 1688, derives from the Greek *nostos* (return) and *algos* (pain), reflecting a deep emotional yearning for the past [1]. It typically emerges when individuals develop a sentimental longing for previously experienced times, often triggered by both tangible elements (e.g., social groups, possessions) and intangible cues (e.g., olfactory stimuli, music) [2]. In recent studies, it is noted that nostalgia is not merely a psychological phenomenon but also a powerful marketing strategy. It has been demonstrated that nostalgic branding can significantly influence consumer engagement [3]. It is increasingly evident that retro aesthetic tendencies are permeating all aspects of contemporary consumer culture, including the spatial domain—extending even to the branding and identity of places. Notably, we are witnessing a growing trend in which elements of retro aesthetics are employed to transform abandoned urban areas and former industrial sites into intentionally curated venues. These spaces are particularly appealing to younger populations, especially those connected by similar educational backgrounds, cultural interests, social circles, or even subcultural affiliations.

This paper examines this phenomenon, exploring why this specific group of people is drawn to such aesthetics where layers of historical patina merge with contemporary design interventions, creating spaces that they perceive as highly desirable. In the context of urban youth subcultures, it can be posited that individuals belonging to these groups tend to frequent the same urban zones, particularly those outlined earlier. These zones will be systematically identified and catalogued in the initial section of the paper to clarify and structure the subsequent analysis. Through a survey of the target population, the study aims to delineate the key spatial and atmospheric elements that contribute to the appeal of these spaces where young people spend a considerable amount of their time. The expected results suggest that distinct patterns or characteristics that define the "vibe" of these spaces will emerge, explaining why young people feel a sense of attachment and belonging in these environments. The central question extends beyond the visual cues that characterize specific locations, delving into how these spaces evoke emotional attachment among young people. The spatial and atmospheric elements at play facilitate the creation of communal environments where users engage with the physical space while simultaneously establishing emotional connections. This interaction not only reinforces a sense of belonging but also fosters a deeper connection to the urban fabric, contributing to the formation of a collective identity within these spaces. By examining the nuances of these spaces, this study aims to understand the underlying factors that shape youth engagement and attachment in such environments.

The goal of this paper is to give an insight into why, and on what basis, these places are attractive to certain demographics and social groups, along with questioning whether these people belong to a subculture. The presumption was, and will be proven during this research, that these types of places are commonly associated with being visited almost exclusively by young people, and those belonging to some subcultural demographic.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework begins with spatial mapping of selected zones across the city, identifying venues that embody specific aesthetic and atmospheric qualities, mostly associated with nostalgia and subcultural appeal. The mapping of these urban zones is structured to clearly define spatial entities, particularly those that align with a theoretical lens through which spatial and emotional dynamics will be interpreted [4]. Within these most frequented zones by young people, venues are precisely categorized according to specific qualities.

Following this, a survey is conducted among users and visitors, examining why these spaces are perceived as attractive — whether due to branding, location, physical structure, or other symbolic and experiential factors. Through the analysis of visiting habits, aesthetic preferences, and the level of sense of belonging, the survey explores how these spaces contribute to the formation of identity, collective values, and emotional bonds among youth, particularly in the context of contemporary subcultural patterns. The survey is completely anonymous and consists of 27 questions divided into three sections: visiting habits related to zones, visiting habits related to individual venues, and the general perception of the spaces. This phenomenon can be understood best through the lens of place attachment theory, which emphasizes how personal experiences, social interactions and the physical elements of a place shape one's sense of connection to it.

3. THEORETIC BACKGROUND

As previously stated, one of the key theoretical grounds of this paper is the place attachment theory, also referred to as The PPP model [5]. It is a theory which refers to the attachment relationship between people and places based on emotion, cognition and practice. The theory has widely shown there are common factors associated behind the reasoning of this phenomenon occurring. Its main arguments are that there are three dimensions crucial to explaining place attachment. Person, which refers to the construct of an individual or group that experiences the attachment, place, which defines the characteristics of places, also by figuring out the ties with people who visit them, and process, which deals with the specific interactions of the persons happening in the places. This PPP model was particularly relevant in forming the survey, as it highlights the importance of individuality, the ambience of the place itself, and the interactions that occur in it, all of which are covered within the survey's focus areas.

The way this theory intertwines with the hypothesis of this research is in discovering the motives of people, individuals or groups, to visit certain places or in this case, bars and/or cafes across the city of Belgrade. Few things all of these catering facilities (listed in the survey) have in common are their placement across the city (all of the bars/cafes are grouped by location and thereby divided up into zones) and the type of objects which they are located in. Most, if not all of them, are not part of a newly built, standalone building but rather situated inside run down industrial objects or historical buildings, which gives the space a certain aesthetic appeal. In this paper, the elements which cater to space recognition will be systematized and presented through the questions of the distributed survey. As noted before, the main goal was to unravel which elements of these catering facilities resonate the most with its frequent visitors by applying the framework locally.

Therefore, the survey focuses on the emotional aspect in particular, or how people develop a sense of belonging (i.e. feeling at home) in these spaces, which is central to the place attachment theory. It thus served as a means of testing whether the theoretical assumptions about the connections formed between people (identifying with some subcultural values) and places they choose to spend time in, actually held up in practice.

4. SPATIAL ANALYSIS

The study examined the most frequented spaces in Belgrade by young individuals, aiming to identify patterns of spatial preference. Six key zones were defined, each named after prominent spatial landmarks: Zone 1 (Upper Dorćol), Zone 2 (Cetinjska), Zone 3 (National Assembly), Zone 4 (Savamala), Zone 5 (Vračar), and Zone 6 (Gastrošor). Within these zones, a predefined list of venues was established under the assumption that they represent the most frequently visited locations. Notably, the use of open-ended response was minimal, suggesting a clear and defined preference for the listed venues.

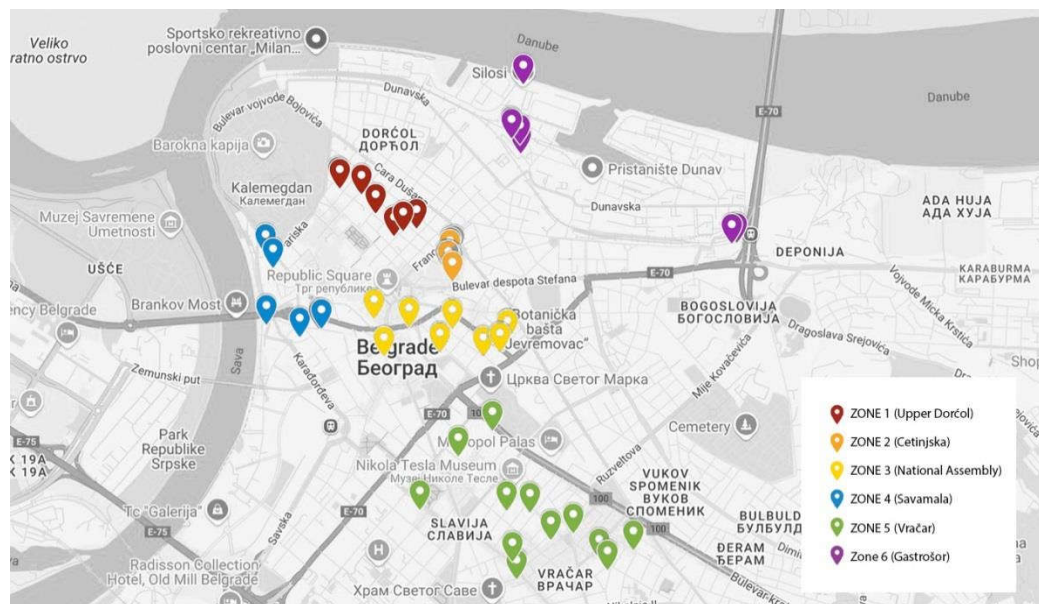


Figure 1. Map of characteristic zones in Belgrade (author: Trifunović, D. 2025)

Within the defined zones, the venues are organised according to spatial units as follows:

- Zone 1: *Meduza, Leila Records, Kuća umetnica, Shsh bar, D59B, Saće, Blaznavac*
- Zone 2: *Dim, Kula, Sprat bar, Zaokret, Polet, Ljubimac, LIFT bar, April bar, Kutijica se za sad zove*
- Zone 3: *Vjeran pas, Ljutić, Bar Vukosava, Restoran tri, Jašta bar, Štrik kafe knjižara, Kafe strip, Guvernanta drinks & decadence, Bife bar*
- Zone 4: *Leposava bar, KC Grad, Čistilište bar, Kafe Šupa, Paradajz Radio*
- Zone 5: *Monks bar, Pržionica, Bistro tri, Chillton bar, Vilidž Bar, Robusta, Single Origin, Kafe Kozmetičar, Liquid Bar&Bistro, Sonder Vračar, Bar Svetozar, Telma*
- Zone 6: *Silosi, Docker Pivara i bašta, Ruke, Dragstor, PolaPola bar, 8 Bar*

It is important to note that these bars and cafés serve as focal points of Belgrade's evolving cultural landscape, where industrial heritage and innovative design converge. Together, through urban revival, they form a network of social and aesthetic hotspots that reflect both the city's storied past and its vibrant, youth-driven present.



Figure 2. Characteristic interior shots photo collage (author: Trifunović, D. 2025)

5. SURVEY RESULTS

Focusing on six defined zones and their catering venues that blend nostalgic aesthetics with contemporary design, this survey examines how young people perceive and relate to these spaces [6]. The contextualisation of the findings within broader social context, was done through examination of the demographic profile of respondents, their professional engagement and subcultural affiliations. This was crucial for interpreting how various groups experience and value retro-inspired environments.

The survey participants represented various genders (31% male, 65% female, and 4% other) and age groups. The largest proportion of respondents was within the 24-30 age range (71%), followed by the 18-23 group (23%), and the smallest group was from 31-35 years old (6%). Half of the respondents (50%) were professionally engaged in creative, artistic, or creative fields, while 23% pursued these activities as hobbies, and 17% did so occasionally or on an amateur basis. The largest proportion of respondents (46%) worked in architecture, urbanism, or design, while 34% were involved in visual arts. Other fields represented included: academia (19%), IT (13%), activism (13%), marketing (11%), craftsmanship or manual work (10%), performing arts (9%), music (8%), retail (8%), law, and administration (4%).

In terms of subcultural affiliation, 48% of respondents stated they did not feel a connection to any particular subculture, while a significant portion expressed a strong sense of belonging (20%) or a partial connection (32%). Some of the most prominent social groups among respondents included: the LGBTQ+ and queer community, alternative scenes (rock, metal, punk), skateboarders, as well as the theatre community, hipster culture, and the clubbing scene.

5.1 Visiting habits evaluation by zone

The survey is structured to progressively unpack spatial engagement, beginning with broad evaluative criteria and narrowing to venue-specific dynamics. This dual analysis of macro and micro scales places comprehensive patterns of spatial use alongside recognized local specificities. The second segment of the survey quantifies visit frequency, duration and underlying motivations across each of the six predefined urban areas, enabling a meso-level analysis of spatial engagement.

The results show that the zones most frequently visited by respondents were Zone 1 (Gornji Dorćol) (57%) and Zone 2 (Cetinjska) (49%). The least frequently visited zones were Zone 6 (Gastrošor) (49%) and Zone 4 (Savamala) (42%). Zone 5 (Vračar) showed mixed responses, with 51% of respondents considering it one of the most visited zones, while 21% stated it was one of the least visited. Regarding the frequency of visits to spaces within these six zones, respondents visit them multiple times a week (57%), once a week (16%), multiple times a month (16%), or once a month (10%). The responses indicate a range of interrelated reasons for frequent visits to these specific urban zones.

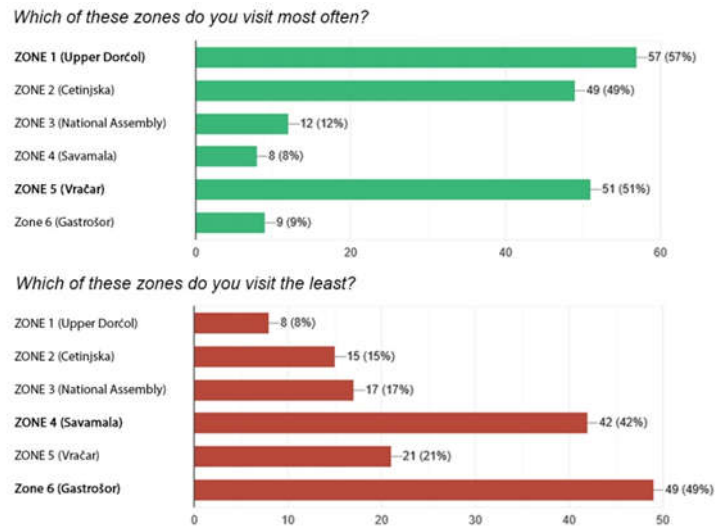


Figure 3. Visiting habits defined by zones, survey results (2025)

Qualitative analysis identified several thematic categories explaining the frequent visits. The most prominent category relates to the atmosphere and ambiance (36%), with respondents highlighting the relaxed, pleasant, homely warmth, and overall "chill" vibe of the spaces. Spaces were often described as unobtrusive and familiar, fostering a sense of belonging and comfort, with some participants even comparing them to the atmosphere of home. Proximity and accessibility (19%) were another significant factor, with respondents choosing spaces based on their physical proximity to everyday routines—such as home, university, or work—and ease of access through public transport. The third category, aesthetic appeal (17%), reflects respondents' preferences for spatial expression and coherence, particularly in the context of alternative and retro aesthetics. There was positive feedback regarding spaces that avoid dominant gentrification patterns and maintain a consistent interior identity. In the category of social factors and sense of belonging (21%), responses emphasized the importance of social identification with other visitors. There was a clear tendency to seek environments where like-minded individuals gather, contributing to a sense of community and social security. Finally, the programmatic and functional offer (15%) included elements such as quality coffee, a variety of drinks, music, as well as spaces suitable for work (e.g., laptop-friendly), gardens, and terraces. These features make the spaces attractive for longer stays and spontaneous social gatherings.

The top 3 most visited venues per zone are as follows:

- Zone 1 – Blaznavac (49%), Meduza (35%) i Leila (23%)
- Zone 2 – Zaokret (59%), Lift (43%), Ljubimac (40%)
- Zone 3 - Vjeran pas (49%), Restoran Tri (34%) i Bife bar (15%)
- Zone 4 – KC Grad (61%), Leposava bar (37%), Kafe Šupa (25%)
- Zone 5- Monks bar (46%), Bistro Tri (27%), Vilidž bar (22%)
- Zone 6 – Silosi (53%), Dragstor (42%) i Ruke (36%)

5.2 Visiting habits evaluation by individual venues

The third segment examines venue-specific patronage criteria, probing how factors such as spatial layout, nostalgic cues and social ambience drive micro-scale patterns of use and attachment. Regarding the habits of using these spaces for leisure or work, 48% of respondents use these spaces for socializing and going out multiple times a week, while only 9% of respondents use these spaces for work multiple times a week. Based on the analysis of the responses, the three most frequently mentioned venues that respondents use or would use as workspaces are Zaokret (13%), Bistro Tri (10%), and Leposava (9%).

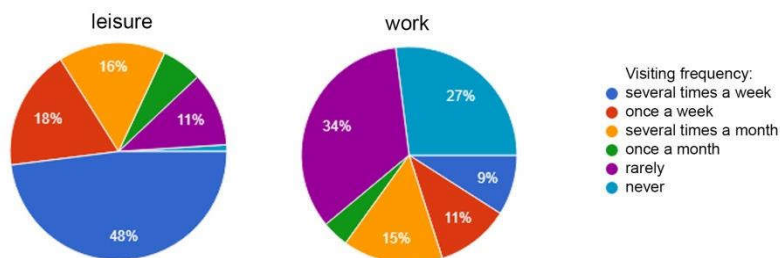


Figure 4. How often do you use these spaces for leisure or work?, survey results (2025)

For other purposes, such as personal artistic or creative activities, only 16% of respondents have occasionally used these spaces, while only 4% do so regularly. The most frequently mentioned contexts are exhibitions, performances, or workshops/courses. Venues such as Polet and KC Grad stand out as the most frequently mentioned in this regard. A significant 51% of respondents stated that the appearance of the spaces they visit is very important or moderately important (48%). For 82% of respondents, the most important criterion when choosing a venue for going out or staying is the ambience/interior design, followed by location and accessibility (66%) and the type of clientele visiting the venue (62%).

5.3 Place attachment

The expected result was confirmed by the survey, with 75% of respondents indicating an emotional connection to one or more of the spaces. The main reasons for this connection include events and experiences in these spaces (72%), the atmosphere and ambience (63%), and the people they have met (44%). A noteworthy proportion of respondents also emphasized a sense of belonging to a particular social group (30%) and shared ideological or cultural values (24%).

Furthermore, 84% of respondents strongly believe that these spaces contribute to the formation of a collective identity among specific youth groups [7]. In order to qualitatively examine a deeper articulation of place attachment, the survey included a set of questions that aimed to provide a more precise insight into the duration, intensity, and complexity of the emotional bond with these spaces. Respondents were asked, *"To what extent do the following statements apply to the spaces you frequently visit?"*

The statements were designed to measure various aspects of the respondents' feelings of closeness to these spaces:

- A. *I feel relaxed and "at home" in this space* (Intimacy and emotional comfort);
- B. *I feel that this space is familiar and close to me* (Recognition and continuity – spatial familiarity);
- C. *This space gives me a sense of security and acceptance* (Social security and emotional stability);
- D. *When I am here, I feel that I belong to this environment* (Sense of belonging and identification with the community)

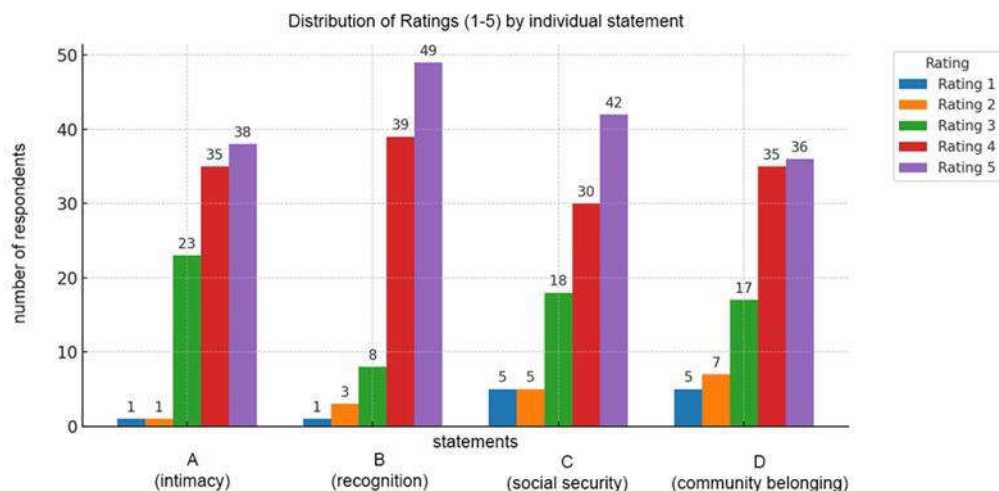


Figure 5. Distribution of ratings (1–5) for place attachment statements, survey results (2025)

Although these statements may appear similar, each one touches upon slightly different aspects of attachment to the space. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 represents the most positive rating, the most common responses were as follows:

- *I feel relaxed and "at home" in this space* (average rating: 4.06, rating 5 by 38% of respondents);
- *I feel that this space is familiar and close to me* (average rating: 4.32, rating 5 by 49% of respondents);
- *This space gives me a sense of security and acceptance* (average rating: 3.99, rating 5 by 42% of respondents);
- *When I am here, I feel that I belong to this environment* (average rating: 3.90, rating 5 by 36% of respondents)

6. CONCLUSION

Based on the questionnaire and theoretical analysis, it can be concluded that emotional attachment constitutes a significant determinant in the selection of urban spaces for both work and casual social gatherings. Equally critical, however, are the aesthetic qualities of these environments and the sense of belonging they foster. This effect is particularly visible among subcultural communities, for whom spatial identity and affective resonance are inseparable from venue choice. The consensus states that young people care deeply about the ambient properties of the physical environment they socialise, create or work in. In fact, the results speak strongly about the importance they see in the spatial elements of these places, and how specific ambients are what they seek, especially those found in the proposed physical structure and city zones.

The connection between individuals and the spaces they frequent plays a crucial role in shaping their perception and experience of the urban environment. Emotional connections are formed through repeated interactions with these spaces [8], contributing to a sense of community and collective identity. Additionally, the aesthetic qualities, ambiance, and functionality of the space were found to influence the degree of attachment, with factors such as interior design, atmosphere, and social dynamics playing significant roles.

This study contributes by applying the PPP model to retro-inspired urban spaces in Belgrade, demonstrating that nostalgic atmospheres actively shape youth subcultural identity. Practically, these findings suggest that designers can enhance social cohesion and cultural vitality by integrating carefully curated nostalgic elements (such as lighting schemes, material textures and thematic décor). By fostering environments that resonate emotionally and support vibrant social networks, cities can sustain subcultural vitality and enrich the collective urban experience.

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