

Research paper

PROTECTION OF THE ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE OF VLASOTINCE – NEMANJINA STREET

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Abstract

The potential of Vlasotince, a small town in southern Serbia, along with that of similar settlements, remains largely unrecognized and underutilized. Until recently, the town's significant architectural heritage had been almost entirely unexplored. However, in 2023 and 2024, comprehensive research was conducted on the architectural heritage of Vlasotince. As a result, the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments in Niš, in collaboration with the Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture in Niš, published the Study on the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Vlasotince – Stara Čarčija, as a potential basis for development. This study aims to highlight the role of architectural heritage as a foundation for the city's future growth. This paper presents a detailed analysis of the architectural heritage along Nemanjina Street in Vlasotince, with the objective of drawing attention to its cultural and historical significance. Furthermore, it explores potential models for the preservation and promotion of this heritage, emphasizing its importance in the broader context of sustainable urban development.

Key words: *architectural heritage, protection, presentation*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Vlasotince, a small town in southern Serbia, shares the fate of most settlements of its type and size in the country. The built environment, particularly the architectural heritage as a potential driver of future development and a possible catalyst for positive socio-economic and societal change, is hardly ever considered. Unplanned urbanization and construction are slowly erasing valuable traces of the past embedded in the urban fabric.

In many cases, the architectural heritage of small towns remains unexplored and insufficiently examined. The trend of conducting heritage studies, an initial step toward drawing attention to architectural heritage and creating clear guidelines for its protection, has only gained momentum in recent years. The legal framework for protection was partially improved with the adoption of the Cultural Heritage Law in 2023 [1], as well as the National Architectural Strategy of the Republic of Serbia [2], which recognized architectural heritage as one of the most important categories of cultural heritage. Heritage protection studies have become a mandatory component of planning documents, thereby providing heritage protection with a more solid legal foundation.

The architectural heritage protection study of Vlasotince was developed during 2023 and 2024 through the collaboration between the Institute for Cultural Heritage Preservation Niš and the Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture at the University of Niš. This comprehensive analysis of the built environment, including the evaluation of individual buildings and entire ambient units, not only highlights the town's potential from the perspective of architectural heritage but also provides an overview of the degradation it has suffered, offers guidelines and protection measures, and aims to prevent further decline of the ambience.

One of the identified subunits with significant loss of architectural structures is Nemanjina Street in Vlasotince. Once a hub of social life and one of the most important traffic arteries, this street forms the urban heart of the town on the Vlasina River. However, due to recent interventions that are incompatible with the context of architectural heritage, Nemanjina Street is increasingly losing its architectural identity, transforming into a disjointed composition of buildings differing in volume, style, and materials.

Due to the pronounced degradation of its ambient values, this street is presented in the study as a representative example of the process of urban identity deterioration. The aim of this case presentation is to identify the types of degradation, propose measures for their mitigation, and define construction and design rules that would help preserve the character and identity of the space.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Vlasotince is a small town located in the southeastern part of Serbia, in the area of the lower and middle basin of the Vlasina River. It lies at the crossroads of the Leskovac–Pirot and Leskovac–Crna Trava–Surdulica–Vranje routes. It is a relatively small municipality, where the farthest point from the center does not exceed 25 kilometers. The central point, the town of Vlasotince, is an urban settlement with the characteristics of a small city and serves as the municipal center. All 47 settlements within the municipality gravitate toward Vlasotince, as it hosts all the key institutions and services.

In historical records, Vlasotince was first mentioned in the 12th century, in the work *The Life of St. Simeon*, a biography of Stefan Nemanja, under the name Uska, referring to the area along the Vlasina River. During the period of Ottoman occupation, Vlasotince served as a refuge for exiled fugitives from across Serbia, which is why its population is largely considered to be of migrant origin. It appears in Ottoman records in 1516 under the name Vlasotinac, as a cultural and agricultural center. In the 16th century, it had around 600 inhabitants, and by the census of 1879, the population had grown to approximately 2,600. It was officially designated a town in 1878 [3].

After liberation from Ottoman rule, many young people from Vlasotince went abroad for education, especially to European countries, bringing back progressive ideas that contributed to the town's rapid development. This development was further accelerated by the growth of the textile industry, trade, crafts, brick-making, and viticulture.

The built environment of Vlasotince gradually formed at the end of the 18th and during the 19th century, reaching its peak development in the 20th century, when most of the buildings still standing today were constructed. In the 19th century, Vlasotince developed spontaneously as a road settlement. From the mid-19th century, it began to take the shape of an elongated linear agglomeration with a trade and crafts character [4], which can still be observed today. Toward the end of the 19th century, the *čaršija* (commercial core) continued to develop with elements of European architectural styles, and many representative buildings were constructed during this period, shaping the identity of the town as we know it today. A period of intense development occurred in the early 20th century, especially between the two world wars, when conditions were favorable for architectural and urban transformation, marked by significant building activity [5]. This era also introduced a greater diversity of styles. In addition to academicism, two completely different stylistic movements emerged: the Serbo-Byzantine (national style) and Art Nouveau (Secession) [6]. Family residential and commercial buildings constructed in the first decade of the 20th century are characterized by massiveness, symmetry, representativeness, and academic design [4].

3. RESEARCH ON ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

During 2023, the Institute for Cultural Heritage Preservation Niš conducted extensive research in the municipality of Vlasotince with the aim of assessing the condition of immovable cultural heritage. The survey focused primarily on officially protected cultural monuments, specifically the Church of the Holy Spirit and the Giga House, now home to the "Desanka Maksimović" Public Library. Additional analysis was carried out on the Old Municipality building (the so-called "Tower"), the memorial complex at the old cemetery, various other public buildings, as well as a large number of structures within the spatial unit of the Old *Čaršija* (market district). This area includes Dragoljub Petković Square, 12th Brigade and Dušanova Streets, Liberation Square, and the streets of Marko Orešković, AVNOJ, Ivo Lola Ribar, Nemanjina, Dimitrije Stojanović, Njegoševa, and Vuk Karadžić.

3.1. Methodology

Field reconnaissance, mapping, and on-site data collection have been carried out. In addition, technical and photographic documentation for around 100 buildings has been updated, and 3D photogrammetric models have been created for individual buildings as well

as entire urban ensembles. A comprehensive study of literature and archival material was undertaken, along with a review of previous construction interventions. In addition, the research involved historical-architectural, artistic, and urbanistic analysis of the building stock, as well as a comparative analysis of current conditions with historical photographs of individual structures and segments of the Old čaršija [4].

The architectural heritage of Vlasotince was identified and mapped, while numerous buildings were subject to architectural surveying and technical recording. All available archival and supplementary documentation was collected. A process of valorization was carried out, during which buildings were categorized within the spatial unit as follows:

- I. Buildings of exceptional value
- II. Buildings of value
- III. Buildings that do not disrupt the ambient character
- IV. Buildings without value
- V. Buildings that are in discord with the environment
- VI. Modernist buildings constructed after World War II

For each individual building, appropriate protection measures were proposed in accordance with its assigned category. All of these measures have been consolidated into the Study for the Protection of Immovable Cultural Heritage of Vlasotince. By recognizing and valorizing the spatial cultural-historical entity of the Old Čaršija, an opportunity has been created to improve the condition and appearance of the town while preserving its authentic values.

However, the research revealed that this ensemble is undergoing rapid degradation due to inappropriate construction interventions and interpolations that are incompatible with the character of the environment. Such changes are leading to a gradual loss of heritage value, disruption of the visual structure, and erosion of the town's identity. Degradation is present across nearly the entire area of the Old Čaršija, but it is most pronounced along Nemanjina Street, which once represented the urban and social axis of the town.

4. NEMANJINA STREET IN VLASOTINCE

Nemanjina Street represents one of the most significant sub-units within the urban fabric of Vlasotince. This area is formed by a series of mixed-use residential and commercial buildings, mostly housing, craft workshops and shops, characterized by prominent street fronts and deep, narrow plots. Residential spaces are most often located above the commercial and production areas, predominantly on the first floor, while some residential units are also situated within the inner courtyards.

Nemanjina Street occasionally takes on the role of a city promenade. During the evening hours, between 6 and 10 PM, it is closed to motor traffic and functions as a pedestrian zone. During this time, it becomes a tool for revitalizing and stimulating urban life, combining traditional forms of public space—such as the korzo, promenade, and bazaar—with contemporary modes of social interaction. This temporary functional shift contributes to preserving the street's identity and affirms its cultural and social value.

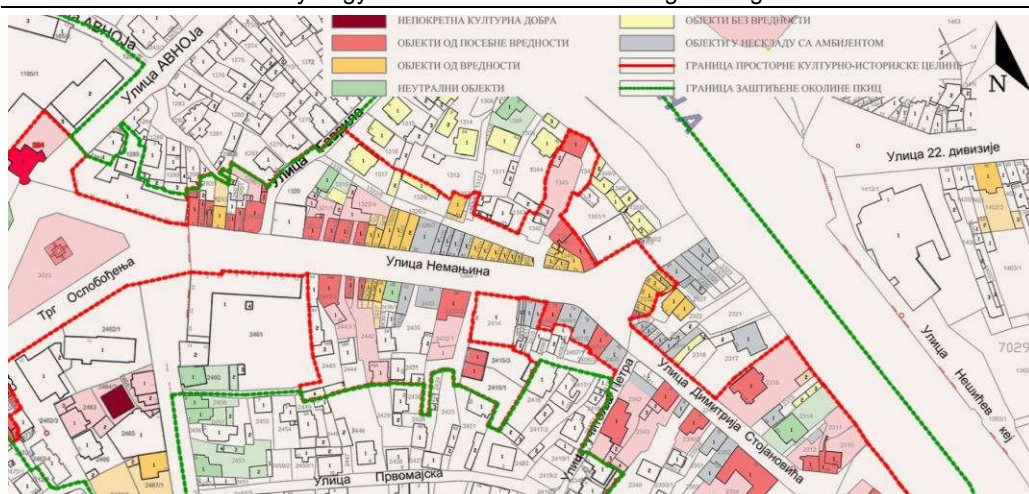


Figure 1. Part of the Old Bazaar in Vlasotince with Nemanjina Street highlighted, drawing by ICHP Niš

The **odd-numbered side** of Nemanjina Street today consists of a rather inharmonious sequence of buildings, due to uncoordinated building heights and diverse architectural styles resulting from different periods of construction. The sequence begins with two-story houses of fairly uniform appearance: the house of Sotir Valčić and the house of Vojislav Popović. This sequence is interrupted by the low, single-story shop of Blagoje Karuović. Next comes the two-story house of Krsta Bošković, one of the more prominent and valuable buildings in this section. After the intersection of Nemanjina Street with Gavriilo Princip Street, there is a three-story residential building whose height exceeds the ridge of the Bošković house, as well as that of the next, perhaps most representative building in the row—the house of Golub Arandelović.



Figure 2. Odd-numbered side of Nemanjina Street, documentation by ICHP Niš

The insertion of the taller residential building between these two significant structures diminishes the architectural value of the entire composition. Next is the house of Ilija Krainčanić, currently under reconstruction and lacking a roof structure. Upon completion, the building is expected to regain its original appearance and reestablish harmony with the Arandelović house.



Figure 3. Odd-numbered side of Nemanjina Street, documentation by ICHP Niš

This is followed by a row of shops, along with more recent single-story structures forming a marginal block. However, these newer buildings differ significantly in scale, height, and façade treatment from the established context. The row is interrupted by Krnjino alley (Krnjino sokače), which once featured notable examples of Ottoman-Balkan architecture, and leads to the Spaska House (Spaskina kuća), which, along with the Giga House, represents an exceptionally valuable example of traditional Ottoman-Balkan residential architecture. The house was built around 1880 by Stavra Spaska Krainčanić, a merchant and the first president of the Vlasotince municipality after liberation from the Ottomans. Taking advantage of the terrain, the shops on the odd side of Nemanjina Street have large wine cellars accessed via Krnjino alley, while the storefronts are entered directly from Nemanjina Street. Although the architecture of these shops has been altered and adapted to Western European models over time, the façades facing Krnjino alley still bear the imprint of Ottoman-Balkan design. Unfortunately, this part of the ensemble has undergone drastic changes in recent years.

Further down Nemanjina Street, there are several more shops and the two-story house of Vlado Takić, whose height stands out in contrast to the surrounding one-story buildings. Its form may be related to that of the Bošković and Arandelović houses.

Among the notable buildings on the odd side is the house of Krsta Bošković, built in 1925. It is a one-story corner building featuring classical architectural elements associated with

newer trends in architecture. The ground floor is characterized by exceptionally tall storefronts and pronounced pilasters with vertical fluting that continue to the upper floor and flank the corner section of the building. The corner is further emphasized by flat attic walls with inscriptions reading “House of Krsta Bošković” (Dom Krste Boškovića), as well as a semicircular pediment above the corner façade bearing the year of construction.



Figure 4. Façades of the Bošković and Arandžević houses, drawings from ICHP Niš documentation

The house of Golub Arandžević Belja is a one-story structure with a richly decorated façade. It features neo-Renaissance elements on the upper floor and classical details on the ground floor. With its dominant rusticated segmental archway at ground level, an iron-wrought balcony above, and an upper floor richly ornamented with stucco decoration, this house stands as the most striking feature of the street.



Figure 5. Ilija Krainčanić House, drawing and photo from ICHP Niš documentation

The house of Ilija Krainčanić is a tangible witness to the urban development of the old bazaar. Built in 1907 in the spirit of neoclassicism and academicism, it features distinct window decorations, prominent architraves above the openings, and articulated string and cornice moldings [4]. The structure is largely preserved in its original form.

The architectural heritage on the even-numbered (eastern) side of Nemanjina Street begins with the repurposed buildings that once housed the shops of Gavriilo Popović. These are followed by the two-story house of Uroš Valčić and several more recent, smaller-scale buildings. Next is a multi-story building constructed after the Second World War. Behind it stands the house of Đorđe Popović Krčimirac, a two-story building dating from the late 19th century. Unfortunately, adjacent to this valuable historical structure, a new building has been

erected that is entirely out of harmony with its surroundings—in terms of design, materials, and cornice height—significantly diminishing the overall character of the area.

A row of shops with gabled roofs characterizes the central part of this section and represents remnants of the former urban matrix, while the tavern of Ilija Krainčanić, located near the end of the row, is of architectural, historical, and social significance for the local community.



Figure 6. Even-numbered side of Nemanjina Street, documentation by ICHP Niš

One of the most representative buildings on this side of the street is the house of Đorđe Popović Krčimirac, with a basement, ground floor, and one upper floor. The ground floor is designed in the academicist style, featuring horizontal fluting and emphasized corners. The upper floor is adorned with rhythmically placed windows topped with triangular pediments and framed by narrow, fluted pilasters.

At the other extreme of this side of the street is perhaps the most egregious example of inappropriate construction in the entire town: a building on the site of the former “Crnatovac” tavern, originally built in the 19th century and used by the local waterworks company. This new building, adjacent to the Popović house, was constructed in direct contradiction to the guidelines provided by the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments in Niš. At that time, since Nemanjina Street was not protected under the Law on Cultural Property, the heritage protection office was unable to intervene [4].



Figure 7. House of Đorđe Popović Krčimirac, current and original condition, documentation by ICHP Niš

4.1. State of Architectural Heritage

The greatest threat to the survival of built heritage is posed by humans themselves, due to economic and ideological motives, inappropriate interventions, vandalism, war, negligence, and other factors [7]. In the urban core of Vlasotince, significantly more buildings and ensembles could and should have been preserved than is currently the case. First due to wartime destruction, but even more so because of aggressive urban policy, many important structures — even entire neighborhoods — were demolished. These could today represent valuable cultural heritage. Urban planning up to now has largely neglected the existing urban matrix and heritage, while the construction of inappropriate architectural structures has further contributed to the city center's lack of spatial coherence.

When assessing the overall condition of Vlasotince's architectural heritage and the interventions that have endangered the preservation of its monumental value — both of individual buildings and of entire urban ensembles — it becomes evident that the current state of the *čaršija* (old town) is stylistically and morphologically distressing. Most buildings have lost much of their aesthetic value due to partial and often unprofessional façade interventions.

Based on the degree of degradation, several categories have been identified:

1. Façades preserved with almost no damage, aside from changes in color, dirt, graffiti, and biological degradation;
2. Façades preserved but disfigured by inappropriate partial interventions (advertising panels, air conditioning units, etc.);
3. Façades from which ornamental plaster elements have been partially removed;
4. Complete removal of ornamental plasterwork and its replacement with inadequate surface treatments;
5. Change in materiality and original appearance of portals, with dimensions retained;
6. Changes to the shape, material, size, and original appearance of openings;
7. Change of roofing material;
8. Additions or vertical extensions of buildings, i.e., change of dimensions in horizontal or vertical sense;

9. Complete replacement of buildings with new ones of similar scale but inappropriate architectural articulation;

10. Construction of new buildings with inappropriate scale, architectural expression, and materials.

An analysis of buildings on the odd-numbered side of Nemanjina Street, based on the above criteria, has identified the type of degradation present in each individual building.

Table 1. Types of Building Degradation on the Odd-Numbered Side of Nemanjina Street

Object number	1	3	5	7-11	11a	13-17	19-23	25	27-33	35-39	41-45	47-49
Object value	I	I	II	I	VI	I	I	II	II	V	V	II
Type of degradation	1, 5	1, 5, 7	1, 5, 7	1, 2, 6, 7	10	1, 5, 7	1, 2, 5	3, 5, 7	2, 3, 46, 7	10	10	4, 6, 7
Object number	51	53-57	59	69	71	73	75					
Object value	II	II	II	II	II	II	I					
Type of degradation	4, 6, 7	3, 6, 7	3, 5, 7	3, 5, 7	3, 5	3, 6, 7	2, 6, 7					

Table 2. Types of Building Degradation on the Even-Numbered Side of Nemanjina Street

Object number	76	74	72	70	68	66	64-56	38	36	32	28-26	24-22	20-18	14 ^v
Object value	V	V	I	V	V	V	VI	I	III	V	V	II	I	I
Type of degradation	9	9	2, 6, 7	9	9	9	10	1, 6	10	3, 6	9	3, 6, 7	3, 6, 7, 9	4, 6, 7

4.2. Proposals for Improving the State of Heritage

In historic urban and rural areas, it is not enough to simply preserve buildings and physical structures. It is also necessary to identify what type of development is appropriate for such an environment. Any transformation within the urban core should occur gradually, ensuring the preservation of the essential characteristics of the place [8].

With the aim of deepening the understanding of potential development directions for this part of Vlasotince čaršija, a student architectural workshop titled "Preservation of Architectural Heritage: The Old Čaršija of Vlasotince" was conceived and implemented [9]. The workshop was organized with the aim of exploring ways to integrate the topic of cultural heritage protection and preservation into the master's study program at the Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture, University of Niš. As the field of heritage preservation in Serbia faces challenges due to a lack of specialized personnel, it is essential to involve the academic community in decision-making processes and in planning the future development of small towns [10]. Its goal was to introduce architecture students to the fundamental principles of conservation practice and the heritage values of Vlasotince, as well as to place them in the role of designers working within a protected urban ensemble.

Students received drawings of the current condition of the street fronts, a detailed assessment of the present state, and analyses of inappropriate interventions that have degraded the value of buildings and ensembles. They also received design guidelines developed by the Institute for Cultural Heritage Preservation, which served as a basis for further project development [9].

Through the proposed student solutions—based on prior analyses and consideration of the broader context rather than fragmentary designs for individual buildings—the potential for improving the condition of the area in question becomes evident.

Through detailed analysis, long-term planning, and the establishment of precise guidelines, it is possible to steer architectural development in harmony with cultural heritage. This would encourage the emergence of a positive architectural identity in towns and settlements.

The architectural heritage of Vlasotince is a key factor in preserving local identity, not only because of its aesthetic or historical value, but also as a symbol of endurance, the safeguarding of tradition, and local uniqueness. This heritage provides residents with a sense of belonging, collective identity, and pride. Through the study of historic buildings and the development of the urban environment, we can better understand how the people of Vlasotince once lived, how social and cultural customs were shaped, and what values they held.



Figure 8. Odd-numbered side of Nemanjina Street, proposal for improvement by Ilija Ilić, Teodora Dragojević, and Maša Milošević

It is therefore essential to restore a sense of responsibility and seriousness to spatial and urban planning in any settlement. It is unacceptable to continue allowing spontaneous and poorly considered urbanization, which leads to a neglect of overall quality of life, a decline in the quality of the built environment, and the degradation of the entire urban landscape.

5. CONCLUSION

Contemporary principles of cultural heritage preservation are based on the evolving relationship with the environment and the understanding that historical heritage is an essential component of a meaningful life for present and future generations [7]. Consequently, heritage becomes more accessible to people, whose active involvement in its preservation becomes a responsibility, as does their education about its value and the need for its safeguarding [11]. Since the 1980s, international expert communities have cautioned that conventional approaches to the management of historic urban areas yield insufficient outcomes unless spatial planning is conducted through an integrative and sustainable framework [12]. Nonetheless, numerous towns in our country, particularly smaller ones, have not yet been examined from this comprehensive perspective.

Conservation professionals in heritage protection encounter the challenge of evaluating architectural heritage—specifically, determining what is truly being preserved when only fragments of historic urban cores survive. The current situation is such that coherent historical ensembles are nearly non-existent. Over the previous decades, uncritical spatial interventions, piecemeal and illegal construction have disrupted the balance and devalued the heritage landscape. In practice, it is essential not only to preserve the surviving fragments—which, if lost, could lead to the irreversible and total loss of a city's identity—but also to plan for the regeneration and restoration of entire urban ensembles. Historic urban ambiances have been disrupted by post-war construction of high-rise buildings with inappropriate architectural expression, which has destroyed the existing harmony and scale. Furthermore, valuable buildings and entire settings have been disfigured by added elements and a fundamental disregard for the architectural characteristics of the built environment, while open spaces have been stripped of greenery and essential functions.

The protection of architectural heritage is currently in an unfavorable position due to widespread misunderstanding of the value of preservation, a lack of understanding of basic conservation principles, poorly defined procedures and legal frameworks, and an inadequately regulated system for supervising interventions on heritage buildings.

Nevertheless, all international charters emphasize the importance of an integrative approach to urban and spatial conservation in order to view historic towns from a holistic perspective [12]. Understanding and managing any historic urban environment requires recognizing that a city is not a static monument or a mere collection of buildings, but a living entity shaped, and continually reshaped, by dynamic economic, social, and cultural forces [13].

This generation of conservators is tasked not only with preserving individual buildings of monumental value and restoring them to a suitable condition, but also with developing comprehensive guidelines for the regeneration and revitalization of severely deteriorated urban areas. This includes addressing damage caused by past interventions. To achieve such remediation, it is not enough to focus on isolated buildings or groups of structures. Instead, it is essential to consider the specific urban layout and architectural characteristics of entire blocks and city sections [14]. It is essential to consistently conduct prior studies on the origin and functioning of the city in order to demonstrate that interventions and adaptations to contemporary needs will not compromise its values. Planning documents should define and recommend appropriate methods for the use of historic architectural complexes, ensuring that the original urban fabric remains intact. Rather than altering it, efforts should focus on the renewal of entire urban sections. The planning process must

establish optimal conditions for active participation of the local community, followed by the implementation of proposed interventions, designated uses and functions, and spatial development strategies [14].

In this regard, it is necessary to conduct detailed and comprehensive analyses and to develop the required documentation (studies, reports, design guidelines, etc.), which would then form the basis for further planning, defining land use, construction rules, and urban parameters.

Raising awareness of the importance of heritage preservation at all levels is essential in order to foster a favorable social climate for protecting and enhancing cultural heritage.

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