

Research paper

## PRESERVING THE ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE OF SMALL TOWNS IN SERBIA: VLASOTINCE

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### Abstract

*Due to a lack of understanding of monumental and other values, and an inappropriate approach to heritage, Vlasotince, as well as other numerous small towns in Serbia, are at risk of completely losing their identity. The level of threat to architectural heritage in cities across our country highlights the need for defining a clear strategy for the preservation of historical cores. Architectural heritage represents one of the most important categories of cultural heritage, and as such, it is an integral part of the spatial and cultural identity of the country. Its sustainable use and restoration represent an economic potential that significantly impacts spatial development and the preservation of the place's identity. This paper aims to draw the attention of the scientific public to the valuable architectural heritage found in small towns in southern Serbia, using Vlasotince as an example, and to offer basic guidelines for future planning documents based on inherited values.*

**Key words:** architectural heritage, heritage preservation, sustainable development

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In order to assess the overall condition of cultural heritage and to develop clear guidelines for its protection within historic urban areas, the Institute for the Cultural Heritage Preservation Niš (IČHP Niš) conducted systematic field research across selected areas of several small towns. Comprehensive studies have been prepared for Knjaževac, Dimitrovgrad, Surdulica, Vučje, Leskovac, Vlasotince, Vranje, Niš, Aleksinac, Sokobanja, and Bor. Heritage assets were mapped, identified, and evaluated, and proposals for spatial organization, protection measures, and guidelines for incorporation into planning documents were provided. Through these efforts, attention has been directed toward the valuable architectural heritage preserved within the small towns of southern Serbia.

Meanwhile, a new Law on Cultural Heritage (Zakon o kulturnom nasleđu: 129/2021-120, "Službeni glasnik RS", broj 129/2021) was adopted and came into force in 2023, introducing minor improvements to the heritage protection system. This law recognizes cultural heritage in a broader sense, encompassing not only formally protected assets but also those of potential heritage value. That same year, the Republic of Serbia adopted the National Architectural Strategy (Nacionalna arhitektonska strategija, 2023-2035, "Službeni glasnik RS", br. 48/2023), which places particular emphasis on the preservation of built heritage. The Strategy acknowledges built heritage as one of the most significant categories of cultural heritage, recognizing its essential role in shaping the spatial and cultural identity of the country. Furthermore, the 2023 amendments to the Law on Planning and Construction (Zakon o planiranju i izgradnji, "Službeni glasnik RS", br. 72/2009, 81/2009 - ispr., 64/2010 - odluka US, 24/2011, 121/2012, 42/2013 - odluka US, 50/2013 - odluka US, 98/2013 - odluka US, 132/2014, 145/2014, 83/2018, 31/2019, 37/2019 - dr. zakon, 9/2020, 52/2021 i 62/2023) mandated the preparation of Heritage Protection Studies as an obligatory component of urban planning documents. Collectively, these developments have provided a stronger legal framework for the protection and strategic management of heritage, while granting heritage protection services enhanced legal instruments for more effective action.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The researchers conducted several studies based on core conservation principles: documenting before any intervention, conducting preliminary research and evaluation, making professionally grounded decisions, proposing sustainable restoration while preserving authenticity, maintaining spatial integrity, considering the broader environmental context, and raising public awareness of cultural heritage value.

Fieldwork and research activities facilitated the direct collection of empirical data, which is essential for developing a comprehensive understanding of the town and its historical evolution. The documentation gathered for the most significant individual structures—comprising historical data, textual descriptions, graphic representations, archival records, and historical photographs—forms the foundational material for the entire research. Through the systematic organization, analysis, and synthesis of this data, a deeper understanding of the town's historical and spatial context is achieved. This process also reveals the urban and architectural transformations that have occurred over time. The interrelationships of the preserved material remains are carefully defined and mapped. Such a holistic approach not only offers insights into the processes and nature of heritage degradation but also leads to

professionally grounded proposals for improving the condition of the heritage and its integration into future planning.

### 3. KEY STUDY - VLASOTINCE

Vlasotince is a small town in southeastern Serbia, located in the Jablanica District. It lies at the point where the Vlasina River emerges from mountainous gorges into the wide Leskovac Field, gradually changing from a swift mountain stream into a calm and slow-moving river.

The architectural and urban morphology of Vlasotince developed spontaneously during the 18th and 19th centuries. The town center, or *čaršija* (bazaar), evolved around old inns and caravanserais, which functioned as important places of trade and were strategically located along caravan routes.

Throughout the 19th century, the town experienced several peasant uprisings, during which the settlement suffered considerable damage [1]. The Ottomans set fire to Vlasotince in 1809, during the First Serbian Uprising; again in 1821; a third time in 1841, during the so-called Bojadži Revolt (Bojadžijska buna); and once more in 1860, during the event known as the Sadrazam Plunder (Sadrazam Pljačka) [2]. The period between 1850 and 1890 was marked by lively and flourishing trade, craftsmanship, agriculture, and viticulture [3]. From 1847 onwards, the development of the *čaršija* intensified, assuming the form of an elongated linear structure, with a mixed commercial-craft and residential function. The town's central place was occupied by a spacious marketplace, located at the site of today's triangular main town square stands [4]. Vlasotince was declared a *varošica* (small town) in 1878, following the liberation of southern Serbia from Ottoman rule. By then, it had already achieved the appearance of a developed town, as described by Mita Rakić: "...when I entered the town, which was so clean, white, polite, and orderly, it seemed as if it had been under Serbia for thirty years. There are no Turkish walls here, houses face the streets, they are beautiful and clean, many of them two-storied, looking like villas" [5]. Following liberation, Vlasotince's growth slowed somewhat due to disrupted trade routes after the Berlin Congress and the establishment of the border between Serbia and Bulgaria. Nevertheless, certain branches of industry soon developed in the region, particularly textile, milling, and viticulture industries, in which the people of Vlasotince played a significant role. Brick and tile production, as well as ceramics manufacturing, also became prominent [6].

At the turn of the 20th century, Vlasotince developed under Western European influences, with architecture modeled on European urban styles, shaping the town's present-day identity. Architectural activity significantly increased, resulting in a greater diversity of styles. Its urban form evolved spontaneously, with more structured regulation beginning in 1912, based on Franc Bartoš's 1893 plan, which was fully implemented by 1923 [7]. Architectural heritage is evident in the densely built houses along the old bazaar (*čaršija*), marked by narrow façades on deep, narrow lots combining residential and commercial functions. Though altered, parts of this core still retain their original character. Another distinctive element of Vlasotince's architectural heritage is the presence of elegant family residences situated on side streets with spacious green courtyards.

After World War II, changes in the political system, the structure of authority, and the functioning of the local community influenced the spatial development of the town. The inherited condition during this period consisted of a dense lineary formed market area with

single-story or multi-story buildings and streets radiating from the central town square [8], a layout that is still recognizable today. By the late 1950s, urban planning and development in Vlasotince took on a revolutionary and destructive character. These tendencies resulted in the construction of several multi-story buildings, which continue to shape the town's residential core, particularly around the Liberation Square and Dušanova Street [9].



*Figure 1. Libération Square, before World War II, Vlasotince that I love, 2010.*



*Figure 2. Liberation Square, in the 1960s (left) and in 2023 (right), National Library of Vlasotince and the ICHP Niš, A. Nikšić, 2023.*

The development of Vlasotince after World War II, particularly during the 1970s, was subject to a "destructive" influence on the inherited urban fabric. New construction was carried out under the influence of the urban doctrine of "total reconstruction" of city cores, which had a profoundly negative effect on the architectural heritage. Regulatory plans failed to recognize the existing values and preserved architectural heritage, treating buildings in these parts of the town as "structures of poor quality, with inadequate access routes" [10]. The 1977 plan concluded that additional interventions were necessary to achieve the structure of a "modern" city, in line with the ideals of urban industrial society. This process involved the transformation of the Vlasotince market core area, particularly in Nemanjina Street, through the demolition of old shops and the construction of multi-story buildings [11]



Decisions made by spatial and urban planners and the local authorities, which overlooked the town's inherited values, led to the gradual loss and degradation of the old čaršija's identity, once known for its unique architecture and authenticity. These decisions had serious and largely irreversible consequences.

Although severely affected by post-war urban planning policies and inappropriate construction interventions, the čaršija of Vlasotince has been preserved as a significant part of the town's identity and urban landscape. During the comprehensive research conducted in 2023–2024, over 50 valuable buildings, two significant historic zones, and one war memorial complex were mapped within the historic center of the town. The cultural and historical significance of the identified heritage assets was established through historical and scientific evaluation [12].

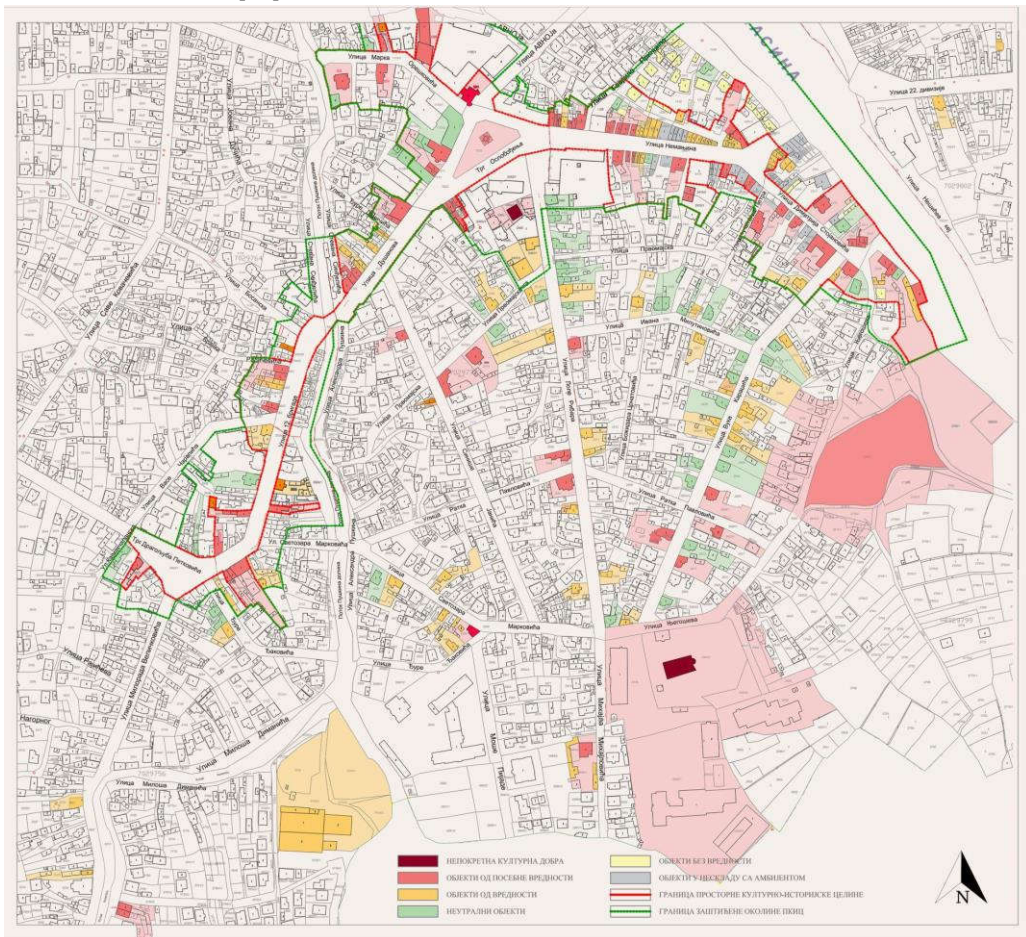


Figure 3. Architectural heritage of Vlasotince, ICHP Niš, drawing by I. Cvetković, 2024.



Figure 4. The surroundings of the Old Mill, ICHP Niš, photogrammetry by A. Nikšić, 2023.

In recent decades, however, this landscape has been increasingly disrupted by individual developments that have compromised the architectural character of the area. There has been a lack of thoughtful adaptation to the local architectural context, the typology of the inherited structure, and the existing conditions. Whether through the reconstruction and extension of modernist or classical buildings, or through new construction within the now recognized historical ensemble, there is a noticeable absence of contextual design that respects the architectural and stylistic qualities of the built environment.



Figure 5-6. Municipal building, appearance in the 1980s and after extension in the late 20th century, <https://www.vlasotince.info/> and <https://toovlasotince.rs/>

#### 4. DISCUSION

In the town center, by modern principles of heritage protection, significantly more buildings and urban units should have been preserved than is the case today. While some structures were lost due to war and natural disasters, a far greater number were destroyed by aggressive and indifferent urban policies. Numerous important buildings, or even entire blocks, that would today constitute the town's cultural heritage were demolished. Post-war urban planning largely distanced itself from the inherited urban structure and legacy. The construction of buildings with inappropriate scale in the heart of the town has led to a town center whose balanced and harmonious character has been compromised.

A careful assessment of Vlasotince's urban transformations reveals that most multi-family residential buildings, built at an inappropriate scale, were constructed in a short post-World War II wave. This was driven by the ambition to transform Vlasotince into a "modern" town, an approach that is no longer pursued today. In recent decades, new constructions have emerged that, in terms of scale, could potentially integrate with the surrounding area and



existing structures. However, these buildings are in significant stylistic and material discord with their context. Today, the remaining architectural heritage is increasingly vulnerable to disappearance due to pressures from new construction, small changes, the use of inappropriate materials, and poorly designed additions, all of which undermine the architectural integrity, authenticity, and overall coherence of the environment.



*Figure 7. Odd side of Nemanjina Street, ICHP Niš, photogrammetry by A. Nikšić, 2023.*

The first form of degradation is the neglect of buildings, leaving them to deteriorate. Degradation then progresses from the mildest forms, where facades are preserved but show signs of damage due to decay, color changes, or dirt. The second degree involves facades that are preserved with only minor changes but have significantly diminished aesthetic value due to inappropriate (partial) interventions and the way advertising signs are displayed. Next, we find facades from which facade details have been partially or completely removed, the appearance of portals, windows, and shop windows has been altered, yet their original shape and dimensions have been preserved. The following level of degradation involves changes in the shape and size of openings, as well as modifications in materials and original finishes. In the next stage, the type of roof covering has been changed, or extensions or modifications have been made to the building, changing its volume both horizontally or vertically. The most drastic forms of degradation involve complete replacement of buildings with new ones that have inappropriate architectural finishes or unsuitable dimensions [13].



*Figure 8-9. Dušanova Street No. 8, before and after replacement, National Library of Vlasotince and ICHP Niš, photo by I. Cvetković, 2023.*

The historic čaršija has been subjected to the inconsiderate forces of investor-driven urban development and construction practices, which fail to contribute to the cohesive layout and compliance with the area's original architectural and urban principle. From both an urbanistic and architectural standpoint, "modern" investors and architects design and implement buildings that are introducing disharmony and degradation of the environment and the existing architectural heritage. Consequently, it is imperative to plan the restoration of the built heritage based on expert decisions, supported by thorough analyses, and accompanied

by clearly defined protective measures, building regulations, and guidelines for the overall urban development.

Construction activities within the historic spatial unit of the Vlasotince old bazaar should be carried out based on professionally grounded proposals aimed at improving the condition of the built heritage. Urban planning and design guidelines primarily address the use of appropriate finishing materials, architectural design, and the maintenance of horizontal and vertical regulation. The prescribed protection measures encompass the preservation, maintenance, and use of buildings and spaces in accordance with established conservation principles, with the goal of safeguarding the authenticity, identity, and visual integrity of the historic area. These measures are defined individually for each building. Structures of particular cultural value must be subject to conservation-based interventions. Controlled new construction may be allowed on vacant lots or parcels containing structures without heritage value, provided that the new development is stylistically and volumetrically compatible with the surrounding context and architectural typology. Special attention should be given to the planning and improvement of public spaces, greenery, and transportation infrastructure to enhance the overall quality of the urban environment. This includes the integration of pedestrian-friendly streets, small plazas, parks, tree-lined avenues, and outdoor café gardens.

Consistent implementation of the proposed measures and devotion to the professional recommendations of the competent heritage institutions can ensure the long-term protection and affirmation of Vlasotince's unique identity recognized for its cultural and architectural heritage. The restoration and preservation of valuable buildings would not only contribute to improving the quality of life but also enhance the character and atmosphere of the place, making it attractive for living, working, and visiting. In order to integrate the protection of the historic core into contemporary development processes, it is essential that the old town center be reestablished as a recognizable and integral part of the town's identity. A key step in this direction is restoring the trust of the local population and encouraging their willingness to actively participate in the preservation and valorization of cultural heritage. With the aim of expanding knowledge and raising awareness of heritage values, the Institute for Cultural Heritage Preservation Niš, in collaboration with the Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture at the University of Niš, organized the student architectural workshop *Preservation of Architectural Heritage: Old Bazaar of Vlasotince* [14]. Also the exhibition *Architectural Heritage of Vlasotince*, as well as a roundtable discussion titled *The Disappearance of Small Towns — Challenges of Preserving Identity and Cultural Heritage*, were organized as part of a broader cultural heritage promotion program.



Figure 10. Even side of Dimitrije Stojanović Street, ICHP Niš, photogrammetry by A. Nikšić, 2023.





*Figure 11. A Student's Proposal for Improving the Appearance of the Historic Area, Kulić Lazar, Šaković Anja, Momirović Miona, 2024.*

An additional incentive for investing in the preservation of Vlasotince's architectural heritage lies in the fact that this region has a centuries-old tradition of master builders who participated in the construction of numerous significant buildings across Serbia and region. This is also illustrated by the exhibition "Crnotravci, the Builders of Belgrade: The Construction Work of Seasonal Builders from the Crna Trava Region in Belgrade During the 19th and First Half of the 20th Century", authored by Tatjana Videnović, senior conservator, and Ognjen Tutić, art historian, held in Belgrade in 2024. This legacy offers a potential basis for the region's economic development. Contemporary craftsmen could be recognized as restorers of historic buildings constructed by their ancestors. Restoring valuable architecture to revive the identity of the old Vlasotince čaršija should go hand in hand with training skilled craftsmen in traditional building techniques. This synergy can help establish a recognizable identity for local artisan workshops and support sustainable economic development. Considering that Vlasotince today has a well-organized technical high school with a developed methodology for both theoretical and practical education, further investment in training related to traditional crafts and construction techniques for conservation and restoration could contribute to the revitalization of the local community. In addition to restoring and highlighting the beauty of individual buildings and the entire urban silhouette, this initiative could serve as a unique platform for preserving and transmitting knowledge of traditional craftsmanship, especially in preparing artisans for work on historic structures. Students from the Technical School could carry out their internships in real-life settings and contribute to the restoration of their hometown, thus gaining a deeper understanding of its history and identity.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Architectural heritage is a key element in preserving local identity, as its value lies not only in its aesthetic and historical qualities, but also in its social function, as a symbol of continuity, the preservation of tradition, and local distinctiveness. It fosters a sense of belonging, collective identity, and pride among local residents, and plays a vital role in safeguarding historical integrity and cultural continuity [15].

The level of endangerment facing architectural heritage as a non-renewable resource in towns across the country underscores the urgent need to define clear strategies for preserving the historical cores of small towns. It is essential to introduce effective mechanisms and detailed guidelines to support heritage conservation. Through careful research, evaluation, and assessment prior to the drafting of planning documents, and by implementing active protection measures, it is possible to contribute meaningfully to the preservation and enhancement of the identity of both the town and the wider region. Architectural heritage must be preserved primarily from an urban planning perspective, not

only through the protection of individual legally safeguarded buildings but also by considering the broader environmental and contextual framework. Urban planners carry a crucial responsibility in this process. They are not only tasked with identifying the typology and respecting cultural values of the built environment but are also accountable for translating these insights into concrete urban planning parameters. This includes establishing urban parameters, construction guidelines, and design regulations that align with and reinforce the cultural character of the urban fabric. Inconsistencies arise when planning documents fail to define parameters consistent with the existing typology of areas. A common issue is the planning of large-scale developments without justification, particularly in towns where population growth is not a factor. Such plans often overlook the unique characteristics of the space, leading to inconsistency, disharmony, and a loss of identity. The degradation of heritage values is also intensified by the lack of detailed guidelines, clear mechanisms, and regulations for municipal and city administrations, which issue permits and oversee inspections of construction works.

Architects and designers responsible for preparing project documentation for investors frequently represent a significant obstacle to the integration of heritage protection measures. Due to a lack of expertise in this field, they often fail to recognize the importance of preserving inherent values of buildings. They are also unfamiliar with the appropriate techniques and methodologies for working on built heritage. Additionally, in their interactions with investors, these professionals do not prioritize the public interest in cultural heritage preservation, instead fostering a degree of animosity that is subsequently transferred to the investors. Although architects, as experts in the field, should be aware of the importance of cultural heritage preservation, their indifference is not surprising, considering that this topic is insufficiently studied within educational systems. For example, the Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture at the University of Niš does not offer specialized courses on the protection and conservation of immovable cultural heritage at the master's level.

The role of the state in the systematic degradation of cultural heritage should not be underestimated. To date, the state has failed to establish an effective and comprehensive framework for heritage preservation. Existing legislation places full responsibility for the care of immovable cultural heritage on property owners. However, once a site is designated as cultural heritage, it is only reasonable to expect corresponding incentives to support its preservation. There is a clear need for mechanisms that offer subvention for restoration and maintenance work, accompanied by strict quality control of the interventions carried out. Such an approach would ensure that heritage assets receive the attention they deserve, property owners would gain material support, and heritage protection authorities would no longer be seen as adversaries or obstacles to development.

While there are several reasons for the poor treatment of heritage, all of them can be traced back to an insufficient understanding of the significance of cultural heritage preservation by all parties involved in the planning and construction process.

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