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FROM CHAPEL TO CONVENT: UNVEILING TOLISA'S FRANCISCAN ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

Abstract

This article examines the establishment and architectural evolution of the Convent and Parish Church of the Assumption of Mary in Tolisa, Bosnia and Herzegovina, from its medieval origins to its status as a National Monument and important convent in Bosna Argentina. Along with the development process from the first chapel that led to the full-size convent, it traces its history through the Hungarian, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian periods, highlighting the pivotal role of Josip Vancaš in the church renovation, blending historicism with contemporary trends. The ensemble, emblematic of Franciscan legacy and cultural significance, attests to the endurance of faith amidst historical flux. This study offers insights into Tolisa's broader cultural milieu and architectural heritage through meticulous analysis of architectural elements and historical narratives.

Keywords: Tolisa, Franciscan architecture, church, convent, Josip Vancaš

ОД КАПЕЛЕ ДО САМОСТАНА: ФРАЊЕВАЧКО АРХИТЕКТОНСКО НАСЉЕЂЕ ТОЛИСЕ

Сажетак

Рад се бави истраживањем о успостави и архитектонском развоју самостана и жупе Узнесења Блажене Дјеве Марије у Толиси, Босна и Херцеговина, од њених средњовијековних почетака до њеног статуса као Националног споменика и значајног самостана у Босни Сребреној. Уз развојни процес од прве капеле која се развила до самостана у пуној размјери, рад прати историју кроз мађарски, османски и аустроугарски период. Посебно се истиче одлучујућа улогу Јосипа Вансаша у реконструкцији цркве, спајајући историцизам са савременим тековинама. Ансамбл објеката у Толиси је симбол фрањевачког насљеђа и културног значаја, те свједочи о издржљивости вјере усред историјских промјена. Кроз темељну анализу архитектонских елемената и историјских наратива, овај рад пружа увиде у шире културно окружење и архитектонско насљеђе Толисе.

Кључне ријечи: Толиса, фрањевачка архитектура, црква, самостан, Јосип Вансаш

1. INTRODUCTION

Tolisa is situated in Posavina on the right bank of the Sava River, near Orašje in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is connected by road to other surrounding places, including Brčko, Šamac, and Županja [1].

Tolisa was first mentioned in the Medieval era, during the time of Béla IV, King of Hungary, Croatia, and Duke of Styria, on July 20, 1244. In one of his Charters, he affirmed to the Bosnian Diocese, besides others, land Tolisa - *terra Tolycha* lat., received as a present from Matej Ninoslav, the Bosnian Ban at the time. During the time of Stephen II, Ban of Bosnia, this part of Posavina entered the Bosnian territory, where it remained until the XV century when it was returned to Hungary. After the Battle of Mohács in 1526, Posavina, like all other Hungarian territories, entered the Ottoman Empire.

Posavina existed formally as an Austrian territory briefly between the Treaty of Passarowitz in 1718 and the Treaty of Belgrade in 1739. Later, after 1878 and the Austro-Hungarian occupation, Posavina entered the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it has remained until today [2].

Tolisa is the seat of the Convent of the Assumption of Mary, which is part of the Bosna Argentina Franciscan province, the oldest province in the region. By the late 13th century, Bosnian Franciscans had acquired full clerical power among Roman Catholics in the area, leading to the establishment of the Bosnian Vicariate in 1340. In 1349, the Vicariate comprised two custodies, and over the next 40 years, it expanded to include seven custodies in 35 convents that covered Slavonia, Serbia, Croatia, Dalmatia, southern Hungary and Wallachia. In 1514, the Vicariate was split into *Bosna Argentina*, lat. (Bosna Srebrena) and *Bosna Croatia*, lat. (Bosna Hrvatska), which later became provinces in the Franciscan order – OFM, *Ordo fratrum minorum*, lat. Following the Ottoman conquests, many of the Bosnian Franciscan sites were destroyed and desecrated. Reconstruction and re-establishment of these sites only began during the Tanzimat era (1839-1876) and were completed with the arrival of the Austro-Hungarian authorities in 1878.

Located on the far northern border of the Bosnian province and the Bosnian territory under Ottoman rule, Tolisa played a crucial role in Christianization, education, and gathering of Roman Catholics, primarily Croats. This research paper examines the historical background and environment in which the Convent was established and developed up until the present day. The paper focuses on the architectural evaluation of the convent buildings and the church, the biggest Roman Catholic church in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The primary research sources used in this study are original projects found in the Convent's archive, a few published scientific studies, and thorough on-site field research. This research includes a critical evaluation, historical architectural analysis, narrative, and accompanying rich graphics.

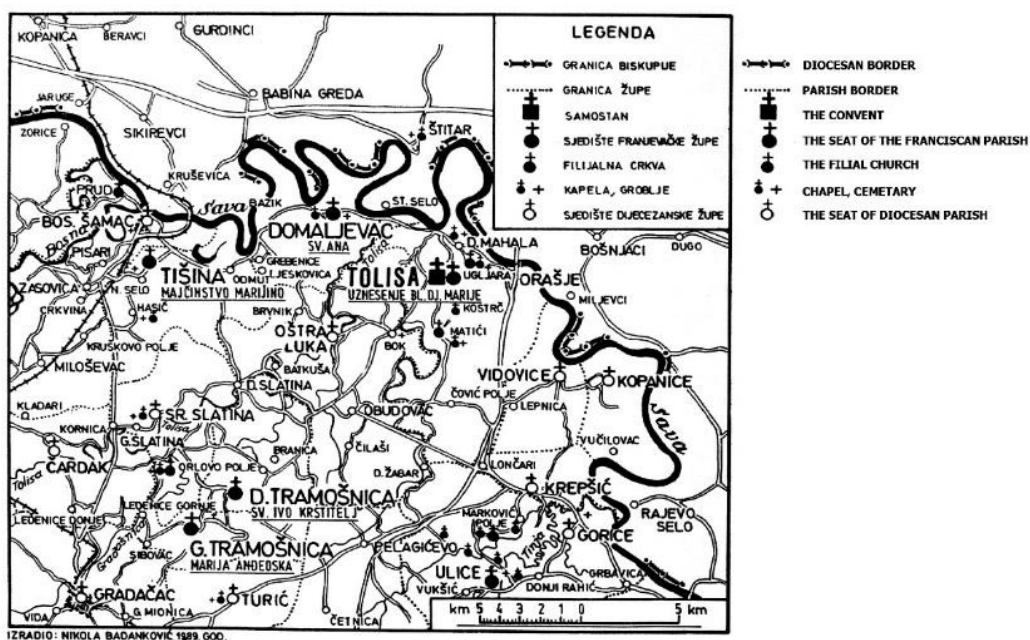


Figure 1. Convent area Tolisa with belonging parishes. Adapted map done by Nikola Badanković 1989 [1]

2. PARISH HOUSE, FIRST CHAPELS, AND THE CONVENT

The history of Christianity in Posavina is a topic that still needs to be fully understood. It is linked to the time when Posavina was part of the Roman province of Pannonia in the early centuries after Christ. During the 7th and 8th centuries, the Avars and Slavs who settled there were Christianized. The Franciscans were present in Posavina earlier in history, with convents in Modriča, Skakava, Polje, and others. However, all of these were torn down in the 15th century during the Ottoman conquests. Afterwards, the region of Posavina was under continuous pressure, with many convents being demolished and many Catholics migrating to Slavonia, an area north of the Sava River.

In the 18th century, Tolisa was part of the Ravne parish, later becoming an independent chaplaincy in 1784. The first parish house in Tolisa was mentioned in Bishop Marijan Bogdanović's (1720-1772) chrim shortly after 1768 and served as a chapel. However, it was destroyed during the migrations of 1788-1792. The new parish house, where Friar Ilija Starčević (1794-1845), the famous founder of the first public elementary school in Bosnia and Herzegovina [3], lived, was constructed in 1792 by Friar Ambroža Vučković. The chapel was built in the same house and served its initial function until 1820.

Tolisa finally got the status of a parish in 1802, according to the decision of the Sacred Congregation and its confirmation by the Provincial Definitorium [4]. In 1819, Friar Ilija Starčević built the second parish house. In 1820, Friar Blaž Pejić built a separate chapel, which was later moved to Raščica, where it still stands today.

In Raščica, a new third parish house was built according to plans by Georg Eichorn from Osijek. Construction began in 1855 and was completed on July 18, 1856. Since it is not preserved, the analysis is founded on a few remaining paintings and descriptive archival records. The third parish house. Its main façade remained displaced for around 9 meters in front of the newly built church at the time. It was a modest mansion with ten living rooms, a big dining room, and auxiliary facilities, without any particular architectural values, given the historical and social context - as seen in Figure 8.



Figure 2. The historical timeline of Tolisa development, from the first mentioning to the construction of the third Convent building

3. THE CONVENT OF THE ASSUMPTION OF MARY

In 1861, Friar Martin Nedić (1810-1895) arrived in Tolisa and started the construction of a convent. However, there were some initial problems with the church's erection. The foundations of the first convent building were laid down in 1862 beside the parish house. Construction was completed in 1865, and in 1866, it was granted the status of a Franciscan residence. This status was later confirmed on March 3 1869, by the General Definitorium. In the meantime, Friar Martin Nedić sent an appeal

to the Apostolic Vicar, Friar Paškal Vujičić (1826-1888), on August 23 1873, requesting the declaration of the residence in Tolisa as an official Convent. On September 24 1874, Provincial Superior Friar Mato Čondrić sent an official request for the same purpose, which was later accepted, even though earlier requests were made, such as the one dated March 3 1874. Finally, on January 12 1876, Tolisa was canonically established as a convent belonging to the hierarchy of OFM Bosna Argentina.



Figure 3. The Church and the Second Convent of the Assumption of Mary: view from the west; photograph taken in 1930 [5]

Over 60 years later, Dr Julijan Jelenić (1877-1931) proposed constructing a second convent building during the Convent Chapter.

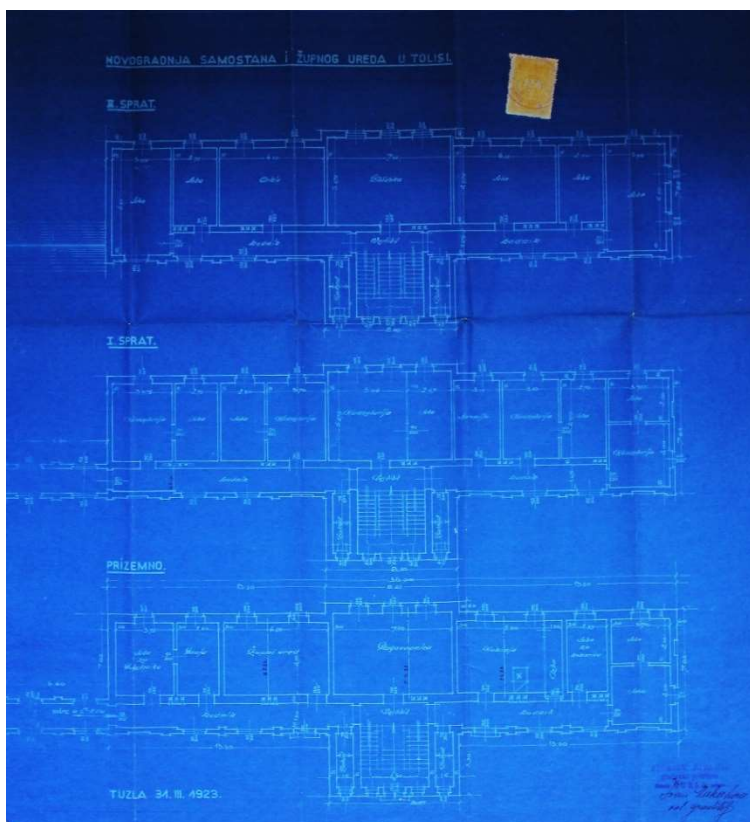


Figure 4. The Convent of the Assumption of Mary: floor plans of the ground floor and 1st and 2nd story, a segment of the project „New construction of the convent and parish office in Tolisa” done by architect Florian Strauss, dated 31st March 1923 [7]

The new building, which was slightly detached and aligned to the *Westwerk ger.*, was designed similarly to the first building. The project was created by Florian Strauss from Tuzla in March 1923, and construction works were carried out by Johan Bernhardt from Novi Sad, concluding on November 15, 1923 [6]. A small building housed the old electrical power plant between the church hall and the new convent building. This structure was later destroyed during one of the reconstructions, and the convent was extended in its place while maintaining the symmetrical design. The convent was designed in the late Renaissance Revival style without undersized decorative elements. The main façade is symmetrical, with a large Avant corps emphasising the entrance. The pilasters are displaced along the façade, and the Avant Corps completes the design of a complex hipped roof covered with traditional clay tiles. Floor plans are structured according to typical designs, with a vertical communication core in the aforementioned Avant Corps linked to a long hallway. The hallway leads to rooms oriented towards the south-eastern garden. This same situation is found in all three above-ground storeys, while the cellar is located only in the central part of the building, within the width of the Avant-corps. Symmetrical design is also found on the garden façade, oriented towards the southeast, with the difference being that the Avant-corps is relatively shallow.

Considering the vast wooden resources nearby, the building's structural properties are outdated but understandable. All walls are made of traditional bricks, and all floors and roofs are made of massive wood.

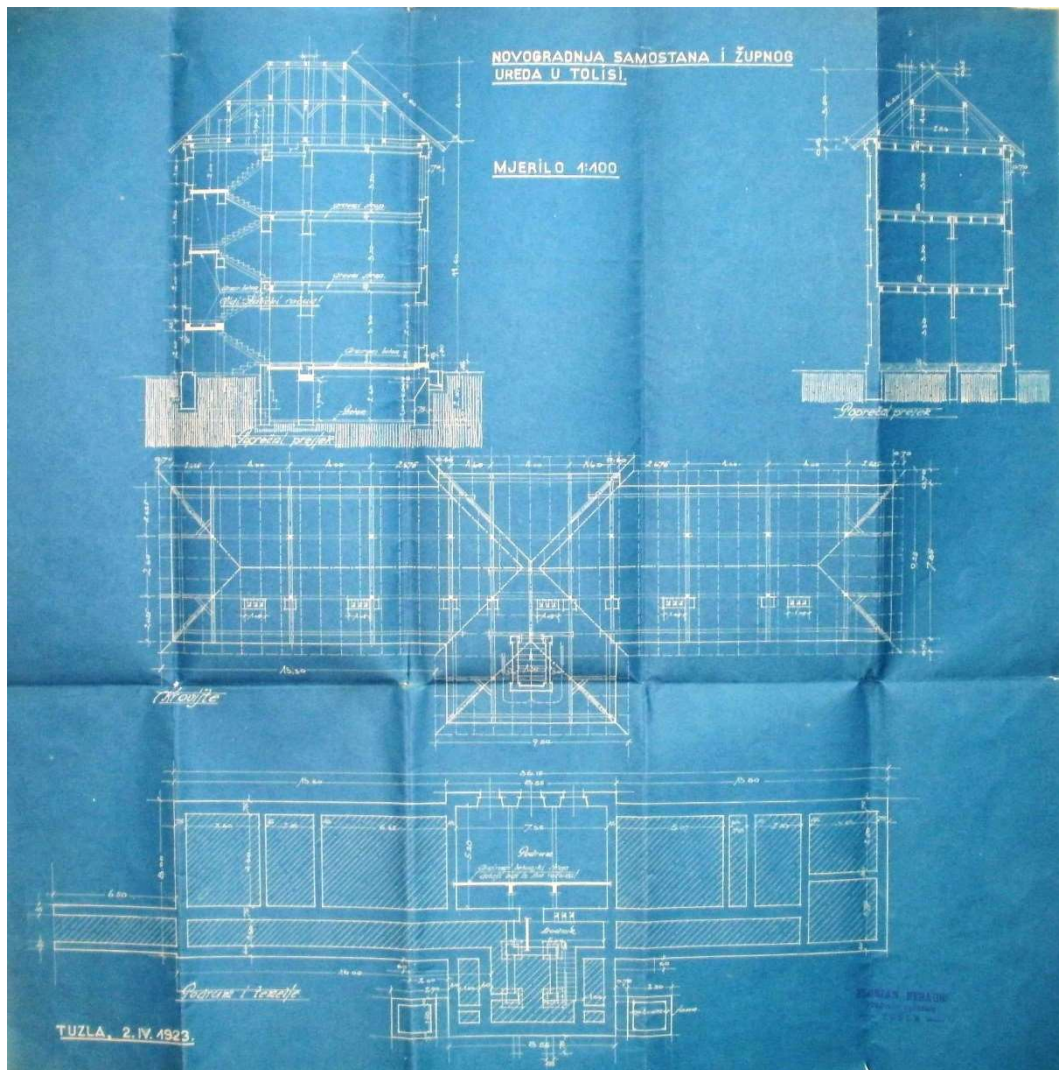


Figure 5. The Convent of the Assumption of Mary: floor plans of foundations and roof plan, and cross sections, a segment of the project „New construction of the convent and parish office in Tolisa“ done by architect Florian Strauss, dated April 2, 1923 [7]



Figure 6. The Convent of the Assumption of Mary: elevation views from south-east and north-west: garden and entrance façade, a segment of the project „New construction of the convent and parish office in Tolisa“ done by architect Florian Strauss, dated March 31, 1923 [7]

During the last reconstruction, the façade colours and elements in the foreground and background harmonised with the church's design, making them appear cohesive. Additionally, with the construction of the third convent, this old convent was repurposed, with the ground floor serving as a parish house and the first and second floors becoming home to the "Vrata Bosne - Door to Bosnia" museum, archive, and library. The primary project was conducted by architect Nada Džankić and civil engineer Željko Curić, following the previously accepted design.

As the convent expanded over time, the need for more space grew. The parish house was required because the convent was also the parish seat. The library's catalogue was enriched, as was the museum and archive. Therefore, in 1986, the construction of a new third convent began to provide a decent home for its initial function: friars' housing. Among several proposed projects, the work was assigned to architect Branko Tadić, with interior design done by architect Ivo Boras.

Unfortunately, moving to new facilities was prolonged until after the war due to war-caused circumstances [1] [6] [8].



Figure 7. The Convent of the Assumption of Mary: ground floor plan of the third convent; a segment of the project „Residential building in Tolisa, a project of interior design“ done by architect Ivo Boras, dated in August 1987 [9]

The main building volume is rectangular and is perpendicular to the old convent building on its south-western façade. The building comprises apartment rooms for friars, auxiliary service areas, as well as other rooms needed for regular life in a convent: chapel, speaking room, living room, dining room, etc. [10]

The building has a typical massive structural system with a cellar, ground floor, and two storeys. The façade is made of yellow bricks, while the roof is a traditional gable with wooden construction covered with clay tiles. Similar designs can be found in other Bosnian Franciscan Brestovsko, Visoko, and Rama facilities. The rectangular shape of the building is covered with a gabled roof, which extends with one of the ridges to the roof of a second convent. The architect tried to emphasise both horizontal and vertical outlines of the design. Horizontal stripes of façade bricks are underlined with dark brown lines at the level of floor construction, while vertical stripes of windows are an adjustment to the old building. The building is not a very expressive piece of architecture, especially when compared to the second convent and the church.



Figure 8. The Convent of the Assumption of Mary, Tolisa: second and third convent, view from the north; photograph taken in 2013

Some exciting projects have been done but have not been implemented in Tolisa. The inner courtyard does not exist in physical borders. Still, foundations and ground concrete outline are visible on the far southern side of what is supposed to be a cloister connected to the apse. After the initial extension project was done in the 1970s, another project proposal for a multi-purpose hall with sacred, cultural, social, and other activities of the parish members was made in 2001 by architect Ivan Štraus. However, the latter was not undertaken.

4. PARISH CHURCH OF THE ASSUMPTION OF MARY

The history of the parish church in Tolisa, which is the largest church in Bosnia [5] [11], dates back to the Provincial Chapter in 1855 held in Kraljeva Sutjeska, where it was decided to start the construction of a parish church in Tolisa. Despite the efforts of Bishop Marijan Šunjić (1798-1860), the Ottoman authorities did not allow the construction. Fortunately, after the arrival of Friar Martin Nedić in 1861, new attempts to build the church were recorded [6]. New obstacles followed but with the great help of Austro-Hungarian consul in Bosnia, Baron Stjepan Jovanović (1828-1885), a permit - firman, Ferman tur. - was finally signed in Istanbul in December 1863. Friar Martin received it on February 24 1864.

The construction works started on the feast day of the Assumption of Mary, July 11 1864. The foundation stone was set on July 17 1864, and Georg Eichorn, the author of the project for the parish house, led the construction [13]. However, it is less known that the actual model for this church was an old Jesuit church of Saint Michael in Osijek, Croatia, built between 1725 and 1766 [12] [14]. From that perspective, it is essential to emphasise that the similarity is linked to the approach to the *Westwerk*: the entrance façade oriented towards the northwest with characteristic bell towers, and not to the internal structural and architectural disposition. Moreover, the bell tower projects were done by two other architects: Dausch did the northern and Pietro Rimaldi did the southern tower, and they are unique in the whole Province [1] [2] [13].



Figure 9. The Parish Church and the first Convent of the Assumption of Mary, Tolisa, painting; view from the north [15]

Eichorn pioneered the project for the traditional basilica, with arches and oval vaults. This project gave an outline for the present church that emerged after the reconstruction. Although masses were held from December 5, 1873, construction works were only completed in August 1881 [13]. The church was constructed using simple clay bricks that were later plastered. A wooden structure covered with clay tiles was used for roofing. Only the bell towers were covered with sheets of metal tin.

Inside, the church has a simple, straightforward, linear communication between the congregation and the presbytery in the southeast apse. Five side altars or chapels are located in the side aisles, separated from the central nave with two rows of five solid square columns. The columns were connected with side walls belonging to the aisle with corresponding arches and pilasters. In addition, arches spanning over the central nave connected the columns, creating five arches that created four oval vaults. The apse and the entrance zone below the choir had flat ceilings.

Ivan Tordinac, an artist from Đakovo, Croatia, was responsible for designing furnishings and liturgical equipment at the Đakovo Cathedral of Saint Peter and Paul. He was also engaged in the design of equipment in Tolisa, where he created the main altar and one side altar, windows, confessionals, altar screen, and the choir. Ivan Rendić (1849-1932) made significant furnishings, including two side altars and *The Crucifixion*, which Bishop Josip Juraj Strossmayer gifted from Đakovo. These items were originally part of the old Cathedral in Đakovo. [8]

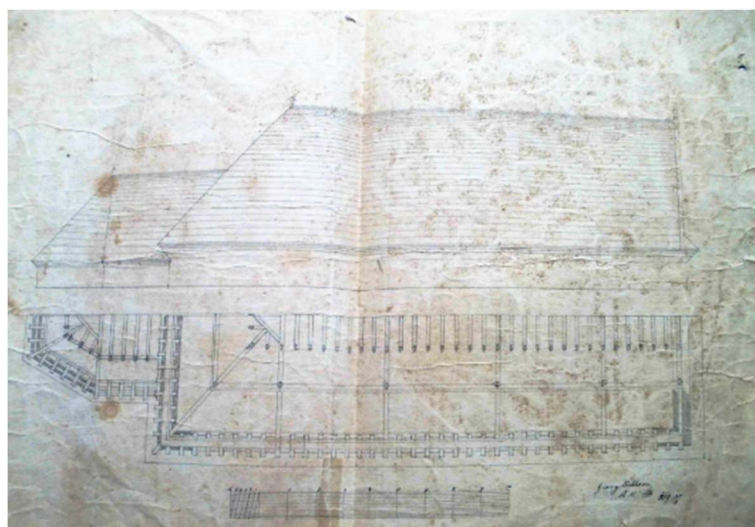


Figure 10. The Parish Church of the Assumption of Mary, Tolisa: Segment of the roof plan and elevation view from the north-east, part of the project done by Georg Eichorn [16]

Several parish priests and guardians were interchanged during the construction of a building. Friar Martin Nedić was initially in charge in 1873, but Friar Bono Nedić (1841-1903) later replaced him. From 1879 onwards, the first Guardian, Friar Mato Oršolić, was engaged in the construction works. [6]

The façades of the building were utterly devoid of decorations, similar to the current situation. Many defects, some of which were present since the initial construction and some of which occurred during regular use, were removed during a major reconstruction project. The decision to undertake this project was made in the spring of 1909 by the Guardian, Friar Grgo Došen. The responsibility of overseeing the project was assigned to architect Josip pl. Vancaš (1859-1932), at the time already established architect in Bosnia and Herzegovina with numerous engagements for Bosna Argentina. Vancaš visited Tolisa for the first time in July 1909 and completed the project in the spring of 1910, with some later alterations as defined in the first [17] [18] and second project for reconstruction.

Vancaš presented a radical proposal for the renovation of the interior of the convent and parish church in Tolisa. This proposal involved demolishing everything except the exterior walls. The columns with a vast square section of 190/190 cm were replaced with slim columns with a square section of 120/120 cm. The entire structure was covered with reinforced concrete arches and barrel vaults. This proposal was considered extreme, with a less radical renovation being made earlier. Construction works were entrusted to Johann Pimperl from Zavidovići, Bosnia, which began on February 21, 1911. After the reconstruction, the church was consecrated on the Feast of the Assumption in 1912, having been only blessed. [2] The costs of the construction were estimated to 119.000 Austrian krone.

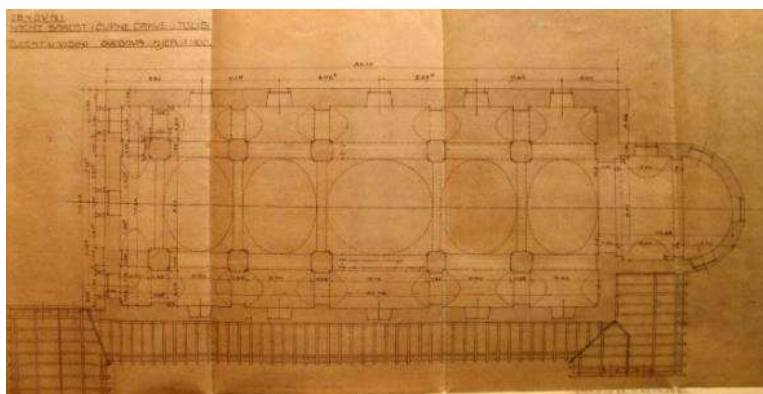


Figure 11. The Parish Church of the Assumption of Mary, Tolisa: floor plan in the vaults' height; a segment of the 1st project for reconstruction of the convent and parish church in Tolisa done by architect Josip pl. Vacaš, dated March 23, 1910 [18]

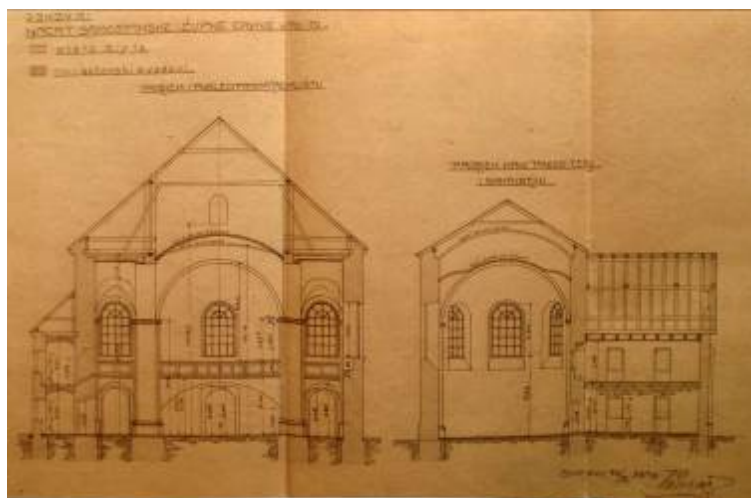


Figure 12. The Parish Church of the Assumption of Mary, Tolisa: section views through central nave viewing the choir, presbytery and sacristy viewing the apse; a segment of the project 1st project for reconstruction of the convent and parish church in Tolisa) done by architect Josip pl. Vacaš dated July 23, 1910 [18]

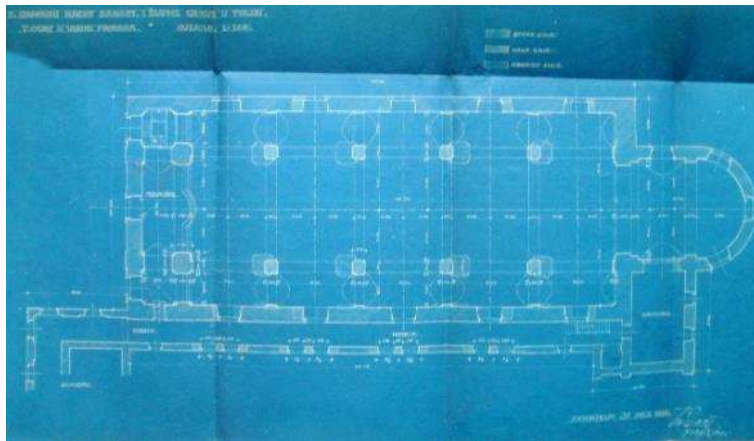


Figure 13. The Parish Church of the Assumption of Mary, Tolisa: floor plan in the window height; a segment of the 2nd project for convent and parish church reconstruction in Tolisa done by architect Josip pl. Vacaš dated July 21, 1910 [19]

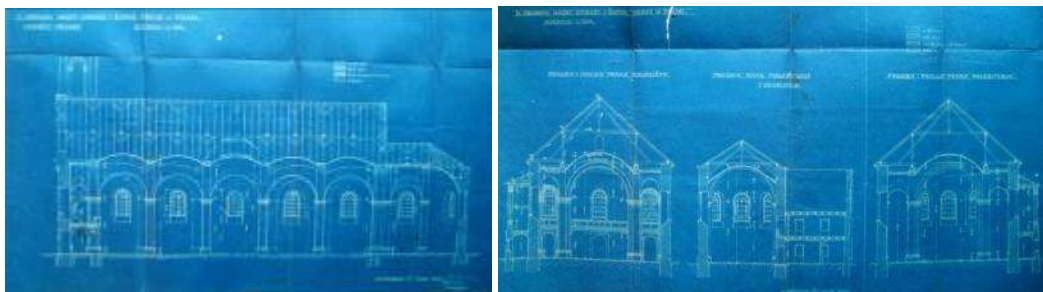


Figure 14. The Parish Church of the Assumption of Mary, Tolisa: section view through central nave viewing the north-eastern aisle and section views through central nave viewing the choir, presbytery and sacristy viewing the apse, and central nave viewing the apse; a segment of the project „II obnovni nacrt samostanske i župne crkve u Tolisi“ (2nd project for reconstruction of the convent and parish church in Tolisa) done by architect Josip pl. Vacaš dated July 21, 1910 [19]

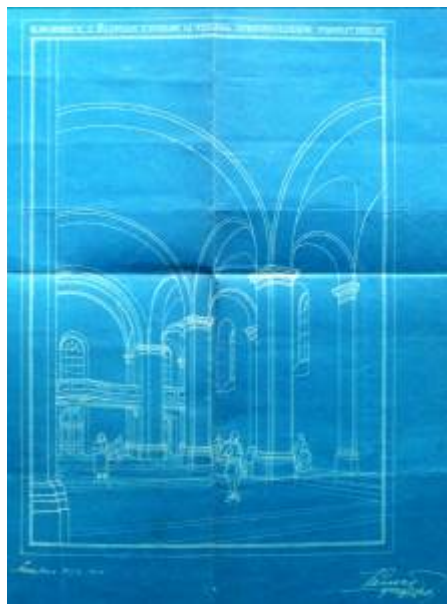


Figure 15. The Parish Church of the Assumption of Mary, Tolisa: interior view of the central nave, side aisle and chorus; a segment of the 2nd project for reconstruction of the convent and parish church in Tolisa done by architect Josip pl. Vacaš dated July 21, 1910 [19]

The church floor plan retained columns that hold the choir platform below the bell towers. The inner division between the central nave and side aisles is created by two rows of four columns and one additional column below the choir platform. There are five smaller groin vaults in the side aisles and five extensive groin vaults in the central nave; the roof structural system is above. The disposition of the altar and the choir is the same as in the first church, with the addition of the barrel vaults above each. Unique to Vancaš's projects, the floor is covered with small-format ceramic tiles imported from Hungary. Anton Huber painted the newly formed vaults and ceilings from Bruneck, Tirol. [6]



Figure 16. The Parish Church of the Assumption of Mary, Tolisa: interior view from chorus towards the main altar

From the outside, the *Westwerk* has two bell towers corresponding to the width of the side aisles and the outline of the central nave. There is very little decoration, with only impoverished stucco on the bell towers and around the windows. Blind horizontal cornices are on the levels corresponding to the choir, wall peaks, bell tower and façade joints. Hidden pilasters were used to create vertical divisions. The façades are coloured in a dual combination, with elements in the foreground in white and plains and the background in bright beige.



Figure 17. The Parish Church of the Assumption of Mary, Tolisa: interior view towards the choir

On the ground floor, three entrance doors are symmetrically displaced and aligned with windows on the choir platform. They are all completed with a simple arch. There is only one more window at the very top of the central corpus. The bell towers, with onion-shaped domes, are the only elements containing valuable decorations, retaining the original pre-reconstruction aesthetics. They are symmetrically designed with blind windows on all four sides, profiled corner pilasters, and crowning tympanums. Other exterior walls are also attractive. The sidewalls of the aisles are not symmetrical but structurally the same. Each is opened with five arched windows, analogous to inner vaults. However, on the façade, only the northeastern wall is visible, while the opposite is concealed with the small hallway leading to the sacristy, attached to the southern wall of the apse. The apse also holds similar windows; four of them are visible, and the fifth is a portal to the sacristy. The mentioned hallway has a direct entrance from the main façade. At the same time, the corresponding window is the point where total symmetry is lost and interrupted between the church and the convent building. Above it, on the first floor, there is another hallway linking the convent with the oratory, above the sacristy, and the choir platform above the entrance.

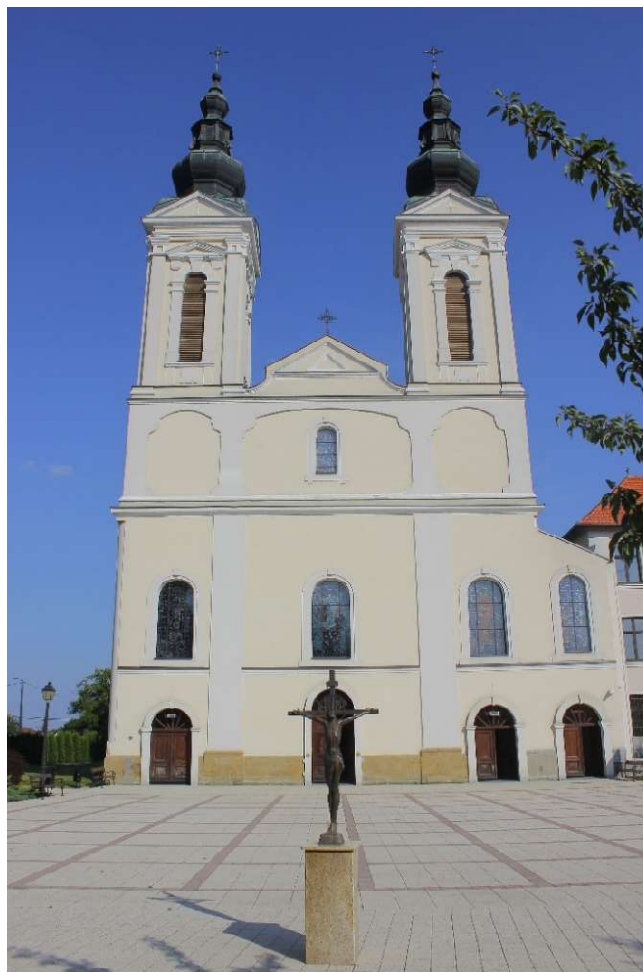


Figure 18. The Parish Church of the Assumption of Mary, Tolisa: view of the north-western entrance façade

Josip Vancaš considered this project as one of the most prominent sacred designs in Bosnia and Herzegovina. [21] The sacred architecture of Bosnia during the Austro-Hungarian rule (1878-1918) represented a complex blend of influences from various fields of art and contemporary trends. This was characteristic not only of Vancaš's production in occupied Bosnia but also of the work of other architects who aimed to combine revival historicism with the current trends in the late Ottoman period in Bosnia. The influence of late-Baroque decorated onion domes, typical of churches belonging to all confessions in the broader area of the Danube Basin under Austro-Hungarian rule, is undeniable. The church was severely damaged in a fire in 1917, particularly the furnishings of altars, windows, and wall paintings. The church underwent reconstruction between 1930 and 1935, and Josip Pellarini restored the paintings from Vinkovci, Croatia [6] [8].



Figure 19. The Convent and The Parish Church of the Assumption of Mary, Tolisa: view of the backyard from the south

Starting with the Guardian, Friar Pero Martinović, various reconstruction and maintenance works were carried out on the church. These included structural repairs, removal of wall moisture, reconstruction of the roof, installation of a new copper cover, and restoration of wall paintings. Friar Blaž Marković is credited with the stained glass decoration done by Vlatko Blažanović. Friar Marijan Živković thoroughly reconstructed the façades of the second convent and the church and landscape decoration around the complex. During the reconstruction period between 1981 and 1985, stone panels were mounted on the walls and columns inside, faking a plinth wall and representing a simple transition from impoverished façades to the surroundings. It is essential to mention the work of painters from Zagreb, Zlatko Modrić and Dubravko Gluhinić, who reconstructed Huber's wall paintings in 2005 and restored their initial designs, partly covered during the 1930-1935 reconstruction. [6]



Figure 20. The Parish Church of the Assumption of Mary, Tolisa: close-up view of the main altar done by Ivan Tordinac, reconstructed by Electo Maruzzi

The church holds many items with great artistic value, including statues and altars. One of the most notable pieces is the altar, created initially by Ivan Tordinac and later reconstructed by Friar Elektro Maruzzi from Zagreb. Another remarkable piece is *The Crucifixion*, created by Ivan Rendić. Tordinac also made a side altar, choir, all doors and windows, the altar fence and the confessionals. The church's organ is the oldest in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was constructed by Caspar Fischer from Apatin, Serbia, in 1800 for the Saint Peter and Paul church in Osijek. When the church in Osijek was set for demolition, Tolisa's guardian, Friar Filip Oršolić, bought the organ for the church in Tolisa in 1890 [20]. Later on, two side altars were acquired as well. In 1896, the organ was reassembled by Ferdinand Heferer from Zagreb, Croatia. The *Via Crucis* stations, created by an unknown author, were installed in 1822. The bells date back to 1923 and 1927 [1] [6] [8].



Figure 21. The Convent and The Parish Church of the Assumption of Mary, Tolisa: complex, view from the north

5. CONCLUSION

The architectural ensemble comprising the Convent and the Parish Church of the Assumption of Mary in Tolisa encapsulates a rich tapestry of historical, religious, and artistic significance within the Posavina region. Across centuries marked by geopolitical upheaval and cultural evolution, this edifice has stood as a steadfast testament to the enduring presence of Franciscan stewardship and communal devotion.

Even though the oldest parts of the complex are not preserved anymore, three existing segments, each from three different eras and with a different story, are strong enough to narrate one exciting chronicle. Central to the narrative of this architectural history is the transformative vision of Josip Vancaš, whose innovative renovation proposals reshaped the church's interior design while respecting its intrinsic historical character. His fusion of revival historicism with contemporary architectural trends not only addressed the practical needs of the parish but also elevated the space into a beacon of artistic expression and spiritual contemplation.

Today, designated as the National Monument of Bosnia and Herzegovina [22], the Convent and the Parish Church of the Assumption of Mary, along with its movable heritage: paintings, archaeological artefacts, numismatic collection, collection of textile items, library, the firman for the church construction, and the organ, stand as custodians of tangible and intangible heritage, ensuring their preservation for posterity. As they continue to serve as focal points of worship and cultural exchange in Posavina, their architectural splendour and enduring significance underscore the timeless resonance of human ingenuity and communal endeavour in shaping the built environment.

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