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CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN AS A FRAMEWORK FOR URBAN IDENTITY PRESERVATION: THE CASE OF NOVI PAZAR

Abstract

Contemporary urban transformations in smaller historic cities often threaten spatial and cultural identity due to context-insensitive design. This paper explores the role of contemporary architecture in preserving and reinterpreting urban identity, using Novi Pazar and Prvomajska Street as a case study. The research combines theoretical concepts of place and identity with spatial analysis, historical review, and a user survey. The results indicate that context-sensitive design integrating historical continuity, functional adaptation, and visual coherence can sustain urban identity, which is understood as an active design resource.

Keywords: urban identity, contemporary architecture, public space, cultural context

САВРЕМЕНО АРХИТЕКТОНСКО ПРОЈЕКТОВАЊЕ КАО ОКВИР ОЧУВАЊА УРБАНОГ ИДЕНТИТЕТА: ПРИМЕР НОВОГ ПАЗАРА

Сажетак:

Савремене урбане трансформације у мањим историјским градовима често угрожавају просторни и културни идентитет услед контекстуално неосетљивог пројектовања. Рад истражује улогу савремене архитектуре у очувању и реинтерпретацији урбаног идентитета, на примеру Новог Пазара и Првомајске улице као студије случаја. Истраживање повезује теоријске концепте места и идентитета са просторном анализом, прегледом историјских слојева и анкетом корисника. Резултати указују да контекстуално осетљиво пројектовање, које интегрише историјски континуитет, функционалну адаптацију и визуелну кохерентност, може одржати урбани идентитет, схваћен као активан пројектантски ресурс.

Кључне речи: урбани идентитет, савремена архитектура, јавни простор, културни контекст

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary architectural practice in historic urban environments increasingly faces the challenge of balancing modernization with the preservation of local identity. In many smaller cities with layered cultural histories, recent urban interventions often prioritize short-term functional or commercial goals, resulting in the gradual erosion of spatial coherence and cultural meaning. Architecture in such contexts is not merely a formal discipline, but a mediator between historical continuity, social practices, and contemporary needs.

Urban identity is approached in this paper as a dynamic construct shaped by spatial form, material expression, social interaction, and collective memory, and interpreted not as a static heritage value but as an active design resource guiding contemporary architectural interventions. This perspective aligns with theoretical contributions that emphasize the role of place, lived experience, and cultural context in architectural and urban design [1], [2], [3].

Novi Pazar is a medium-sized city in southwestern Serbia, situated in the Raška region of Southeast Europe. Historically positioned at the crossroads of medieval Serbian and Ottoman cultural spheres, the city developed as a layered urban structure reflecting multiple historical epochs and socio-cultural transformations. The city of Novi Pazar therefore represents a particularly relevant case due to its complex historical development and multicultural character. Positioned at the intersection of different cultural and architectural influences, the city has developed a distinctive urban identity shaped by medieval, Ottoman, and modern layers. However, recent transformations of public spaces and streets have often occurred without a coherent architectural framework, leading to visual fragmentation and functional imbalance.

This paper aims to examine how contemporary architectural design can contribute to the preservation and reinterpretation of urban identity through context-sensitive principles. By combining theoretical insights with an empirical case study of Prvomajska Street, the research seeks to identify design strategies that support historical continuity while responding to present-day urban life.

The research is guided by the following question: How can context-sensitive architectural interventions contribute to the preservation and reinterpretation of urban identity in historically layered urban streets, such as Prvomajska Street in Novi Pazar?

2. URBAN IDENTITY AND ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXT

2.1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: PLACE, IDENTITY, AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

In contemporary architectural theory, space is conceptualized not solely as a physical construct but as a socio-cultural product shaped by social practices, symbolic meanings, and collective memory. The concept of place extends beyond geometry and function, encompassing experiential, cultural, and emotional dimensions that shape how space is perceived and used [2], [3]. Architectural and public spaces therefore function as spatial frameworks through which urban identity is articulated and experienced.

The concept of cultural landscape provides an analytical framework for interpreting historic urban environments. It emphasizes the interdependence between material form and intangible cultural values, indicating that architectural interventions need to respond not only to visual characteristics but also to embedded social practices and historical narratives. In this sense, contemporary design in historic contexts requires interpretation rather than imitation of traditional forms.

Recent studies in post-socialist urban contexts highlight that urban identity develops through both physical morphology and social perception, particularly where layered historical fabrics interact with contemporary transformations [22], [23]. Conceptual research further distinguishes between *identity of urban*, *identity in urban*, and *identity for urban*, unpacking how identity is constructed, experienced, and instrumentalized in planning and design processes [24]. Empirical metropolitan analyses demonstrate that urban identity transitions are shaped by historical epochs and socio-spatial changes, suggesting that integrated methodological frameworks can capture these complex dynamics [25]. Moreover, recent discussions in post-socialist Balkan cities emphasize the roles of memory, nostalgia, and cultural legacy in urban transformation [26].

For cities such as Novi Pazar, where multiple historical layers coexist within a compact urban fabric, the cultural landscape approach allows for a critical reading of continuity and change. Architecture functions as a mediating framework between inherited spatial patterns and evolving urban needs.

2.2. HISTORICAL LAYERS AND URBAN FORMATION OF NOVI PAZAR

The urban structure of Novi Pazar has developed through successive historical periods, each contributing distinct spatial, material, and symbolic elements. From the medieval settlement of Ras, through the Ottoman urban matrix characterized by the bazaar and residential mahallas, to modern interventions of the twentieth century, the city's morphology reflects a continuous process of transformation. These layers collectively shape the morphological and cultural structure of the city's urban identity.

Despite this complex historical background, contemporary urban development in Novi Pazar is often marked by fragmented and uncoordinated interventions. The absence of comprehensive architectural guidelines has resulted in the use of incompatible materials, disproportionate building volumes, and the disruption of established visual rhythms. Such practices disrupt spatial continuity and reduce the legibility of historical layers within the urban fabric.

Rather than replicating historical forms, contemporary architectural design in Novi Pazar can be grounded in an understanding of scale, proportion, material logic, and spatial relationships inherited from earlier periods. This approach enables continuity without resorting to superficial historicism.

2.3. SPACE, MATERIAL, AND VISUAL IDENTITY

The visual identity of Novi Pazar is strongly influenced by the material and spatial characteristics of its historic urban fabric. Traditional construction materials such as stone, wood, and brick, combined with compact street profiles and human-scale proportions, have historically defined the character of public spaces. These elements contribute not only to the visual coherence of the city, but also to its sensory and experiential qualities (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. *Historical urban fabric of Novi Pazar forming the cultural context of Prvomajska Street. Source: Author's photograph*

Public spaces such as streets, squares, and the bazaar represent key spatial structures through which urban identity is expressed. Their spatial organization supports social interaction, commercial activity, and everyday urban life. In this context, material consistency and façade continuity contribute significantly to the legibility of space. Disruptions caused by incompatible materials, excessive glazing, or visually dominant advertisements weaken the spatial narrative and reduce the recognizability of place.

Contemporary architectural interventions should therefore be based on a critical interpretation of local material logic rather than direct replication of traditional forms. The use of modern construction techniques can coexist with contextual sensitivity if scale, proportion, texture, and color are carefully considered. This approach avoids superficial historicism while reinforcing the continuity of urban identity.

2.4. PRINCIPLES OF CONTEMPORARY DESIGN BASED ON LOCAL IDENTITY

Based on theoretical insights and the analysis of the local context, the following principles for shaping public spaces in Novi Pazar can be identified:

- Respect for morphology – preserving the main spatial axes of the bazaar and maintaining visual corridors toward key landmarks.
- Material coherence – using local materials and their contemporary interpretations.

- Scale and proportion – respecting the existing human scale and established spatial relationships.
- Functional flexibility – planning public spaces capable of accommodating market stalls, public events, and everyday use.
- Participatory process – involving the local community in the planning and design phases [8], [3].

The local identity of Novi Pazar extends beyond a purely formal or aesthetic category and represents a complex system of historical, visual, and cultural layers embedded within the urban environment. The coexistence of multiple historical periods—from medieval heritage, through Ottoman urbanism, to contemporary interventions—results in a dynamic and layered urban identity. Architectural elements, materials, and spatial proportions developed over time define not only the visual character of the urban core but also influence the perception and everyday use of public spaces.

In addition to material and formal attributes, the cultural pluralism of the city—reflected in the presence of diverse religious and social communities—introduces specific requirements for inclusive and socially responsive public space design. When contemporary architectural interventions address these dimensions, it becomes possible to create spaces that are contextually grounded, socially inclusive, and functionally effective, without compromising the historical environment.

This analysis demonstrates that local identity should not be treated as a static category, but as an active design resource that informs architectural intervention. A systematic understanding of historical, visual, and cultural layers enables the formulation of design principles that respect inherited spatial values while responding to contemporary user needs, thereby supporting a sustainable balance between heritage and modernity.

3. CONTEMPORARY DESIGN PRINCIPLES

3.1. HISTORICAL CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

The historical development of Novi Pazar reveals both continuity and disruption in the treatment of urban space. While certain spatial patterns and symbolic landmarks have persisted over time (Fig.2), periods of rapid transformation have often resulted in the loss of architectural coherence. As noted in architectural phenomenology, place is not defined solely by physical form, but by the continuity of meaning attached to space [7].

Comparative examples from cities such as Sarajevo and Mostar demonstrate that successful interventions do not replicate historical forms but reinterpret them through contemporary architectural language. These cases highlight the importance of defining clear design guidelines that protect spatial logic, proportions, and material relationships while allowing architectural evolution. In Novi Pazar, many recent interventions remain isolated and lack a shared conceptual framework. The absence of coordinated planning has led to fragmented spatial outcomes, where individual buildings or renovations fail to contribute to a coherent urban narrative. Addressing this issue requires recognizing historical continuity as a design parameter rather than a constraint.

3.2. FUNCTIONAL LAYER: PUBLIC SPACE AS A MEASURE OF URBAN QUALITY

The functional performance of public space represents a critical indicator of successful contemporary design. Urban theorists emphasize that streets and squares should be designed primarily for people, supporting movement, interaction, and everyday activities [6], [5]. In historic city centers, functional adaptation is essential to prevent the transformation of public space into static or purely representational environments.

In Novi Pazar, the functional layer of public space has been significantly affected by unregulated commercial expansion and traffic pressure. Streets originally conceived as pedestrian-oriented environments have gradually become shared zones dominated by vehicles, informal parking, and temporary structures. This situation reduces pedestrian safety and limits the potential for social interaction.

Functional redesign should prioritize pedestrian movement, accessibility, and comfort. Measures such as traffic calming, partial pedestrianization, and the introduction of urban furniture can significantly improve spatial usability. Importantly, functional improvements must be coordinated with historical and visual considerations to avoid conflicts between use and identity.

3.3. VISUAL COHERENCE AND SPATIAL LEGIBILITY

The visual identity of Novi Pazar was once based on modest yet harmonious architectural structures. In the contemporary urban landscape, however, there is an increasing presence of what Zukin defines as the “aesthetics of simulation,” in which traditional motifs are employed as superficial decoration, detached from their original function and contextual meaning [16].

A clear disproportion between older and newer buildings is evident. A significant number of recently constructed structures lack appropriate scale and material consistency in relation to their surroundings. The spatial continuity of façades within the Old Bazaar has been disrupted by contemporary commercial premises characterized by extensive glass storefronts and illuminated signage (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Urban structure of the Old Bazaar area where Prvomajska Street is located. Source: Author's photograph

Such interventions significantly impair the visual legibility of the city. Instead of extending traditional lines, proportions, and material logic, new architectural interventions often suppress them, producing a sense of visual disorder. This condition underscores the necessity of establishing a system of guidelines for materials, colors, and proportions that respond to the local context, as emphasized in the works of Gospodini and Carmona [21], [22].

The proposed principles of visual order include:

- Preservation of façade rhythm,
- Limitation of the height of new buildings,
- Use of natural materials,
- Integration of green belts,
- Elimination of visual “noise” caused by advertising.

The three layers—historical, functional, and visual—are mutually interdependent. Historical continuity without functional adaptation leads to the museumification of space; functional modernization without visual control results in spatial chaos; and visual reconstruction without social dynamics becomes an empty form.

The key thesis of this paper is that sustainable urban identity can be achieved only when all three layers are considered integrally—as a unified structure in which cultural heritage does not represent an obstacle to development, but rather its foundation.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research is structured as a qualitative case study integrating theoretical inquiry with applied spatial analysis. The aim is to examine how contemporary architectural interventions influence urban identity within historically layered urban environments, using Prvomajska Street in Novi Pazar, Serbia, as an empirical case.

The methodological framework consists of four interconnected components:

4.1. RESEARCH APPROACH

The study adopts an interpretative and analytical research approach. Urban identity is understood as a dynamic and context-dependent construct shaped by historical continuity, spatial morphology, functional organization, and user perception. The research combines theoretical grounding with empirical observation in order to bridge conceptual discourse and site-specific analysis.

4.2. ANALYTICAL TOOLS

The spatial investigation is structured through a three-layer analytical model:

Historical layer – examination of urban development phases, regulatory transformations, and morphological continuity.

Functional layer – mapping of land use, program distribution, pedestrian–vehicular interaction, and public space utilization.

Visual layer – assessment of façade rhythm, signage, materiality, scale, and spatial coherence.

These layers enable a multi-scalar reading of Prvomajska Street, identifying both structural and perceptual dimensions of spatial transformation.

Spatial analysis was conducted through field observation, photographic documentation, cartographic review, and interpretative mapping. The findings were synthesized through comparative evaluation of historical patterns and contemporary spatial conditions.

4.3. USER SURVEY

In order to incorporate experiential dimensions of urban identity, a small-scale user perception survey was conducted. The sample consisted of 10 respondents including residents, shop owners, and daily users of Prvomajska Street. The questionnaire addressed perceptions of safety, spatial quality, identity representation, and perceived needs for spatial improvement.

The survey provides useful insights into user perception of spatial quality and identity representation. However, due to the limited sample size (10 respondents), the results should be interpreted as indicative rather than statistically representative. The survey therefore serves as a qualitative supplement to the spatial analysis.

4.4. INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORK

The synthesis of findings is guided by theories of place and identity (Lefebvre, Relph, Tuan), urban morphology (Lynch, Jacobs), and phenomenological approaches to architecture (Norberg-Schulz). The interpretative framework enables the integration of spatial diagnosis and user perception into context-sensitive design recommendations.

Through this methodological structure, the research generates case-based insights that may be transferable to other small and medium-sized historic urban environments facing similar challenges of modernization and identity transformation.

4.5. RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

By integrating historical analysis, spatial diagnostics, and user perception within a unified interpretative framework, this study produces original empirical findings concerning the relationship between contemporary architectural interventions and urban identity in small historic cities. The research does not merely review theoretical positions but applies them to a specific spatial context, generating site-based insights and context-sensitive design recommendations. The proposed three-layer analytical model (historical-functional-visual) represents a transferable methodological structure that may be adapted to similar urban environments undergoing processes of modernization and identity transformation.

5. CASE STUDY: PRVOMAJSKA STREET IN NOVI PAZAR

The case study focuses on Prvomajska Street, one of the oldest and most significant urban corridors in Novi Pazar. Historically functioning as a connective axis between the bazaar and surrounding residential areas, the street represents a condensed manifestation of the city's urban identity. Its spatial configuration, architectural typology, and everyday use provide valuable insight into the broader challenges of contemporary design in historic urban environments.

By analyzing Prvomajska Street through historical, functional, and perceptual perspectives, this case study illustrates how urban identity is shaped, transformed, and potentially restored through architectural and urban design interventions. The spatial position of Prvomajska Street within the

urban structure of Novi Pazar and the proximity of major educational facilities significantly influence pedestrian movement and spatial pressure along the street (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. *Spatial context of Prvomajska Street and critical pedestrian zone influenced by the proximity of educational facilities. Source: Author's analysis based on orthophoto imagery (GeoSrbija).*

5.1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Prvomajska Street originated during the Ottoman period as part of a wider urban system that connected the commercial core of the city with residential mahallas. Its early development was characterized by a continuous sequence of small-scale buildings, workshops, and shops, forming a narrow yet vibrant street profile (Fig. 4). Architectural elements such as wooden columns, overhangs, and shaded walkways contributed to both functional efficiency and spatial rhythm [14], [15].



Figure 4. *Istanbulska Street in Novi Pazar, 1918, Source: Historical archive of Novi Pazar*



Figure 5. *Prvomajska Street in Novi Pazar, 1960, Source: Historical archive of Novi Pazar*

Throughout the twentieth century, the street retained its commercial role while undergoing gradual physical transformation. Traditional construction techniques and materials were progressively replaced by concrete, metal, and glass, altering the original architectural character. Despite these changes, traces of the historic urban logic remain visible in the street's proportions, building alignment, and intensity of use (Fig. 5 and 6).



Figure 6. *Prvomajska Street in Novi Pazar, 1980, Source: Historical archive of Novi Pazar*



Figure 7. *Prvomajska Street, Present-Day Conditions, Source: Author's photograph*

The historical significance of Prvomajska Street lies not only in its architecture, but also in its role as a social space. As a place of everyday encounters, trade, and informal interaction, the street has long functioned as a key component of Novi Pazar's urban life.

5.2. CURRENT SPATIAL CONDITIONS

Today, Prvomajska Street is one of the most intensively used streets in Novi Pazar, yet its spatial conditions do not support this level of activity. The street profile is narrow and lacks a clear separation between pedestrian and vehicular movement. As a result, pedestrians, vehicles, and informal commercial activities compete for limited space, generating safety risks and visual disorder.

Commercial functions dominate the ground floors, with a dense concentration of small shops, cafés, and service facilities. Over time, shopfronts, signage, air-conditioning units, and temporary extensions have increasingly occupied public space, further reducing pedestrian comfort. The absence of coordinated design regulation has led to an accumulation of visually intrusive elements along the street (Fig. 8).

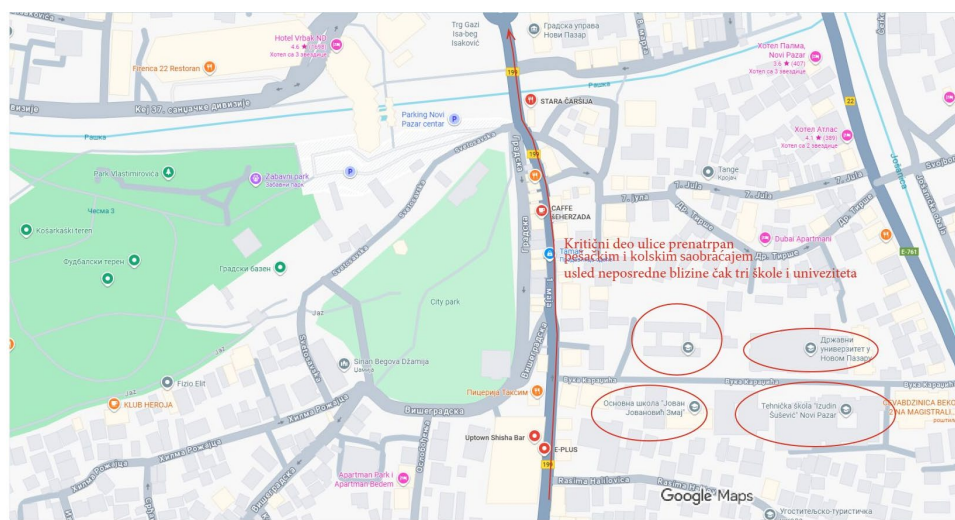


Figure 8. Spatial context and critical pedestrian zone of Prvomajska Street influenced by the proximity of educational facilities. Source: Author's analysis based on Google Maps.

Despite its central location and high pedestrian flow, Prvomajska Street offers minimal opportunities for rest, social interaction, or prolonged stay. The lack of urban furniture, greenery, and shaded areas limits the street's potential as a public space and reinforces its perception as a congested transit corridor rather than a place of urban life.

The current spatial conditions of Prvomajska Street reveal several conflicts between pedestrian movement and vehicular traffic, as well as visual fragmentation caused by commercial signage and narrow pedestrian zones (Fig. 9).

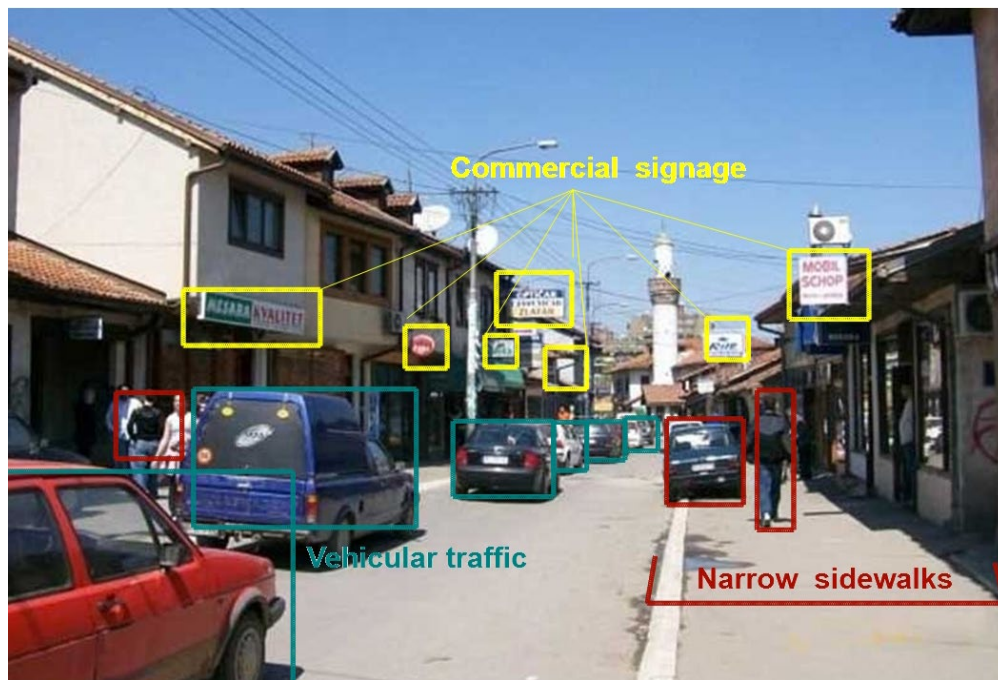


Figure 9. Characteristic spatial conditions of Prvomajska Street showing narrow sidewalks, commercial signage, and pedestrian-vehicle interaction. Source: Author's photograph and analysis.

5.3. USER SURVEY AND PERCEPTION OF SPACE

Table 1. Survey of Local Residents

No.	Question	Yes (%)	No (%)	Comment
1	Do you consider Prvomajska Street safe for pedestrians?	20	80	The sidewalks are narrow, and vehicular traffic passes in close proximity to pedestrians.
2	Do you believe that the space reflects the city's cultural identity?	30	70	Commercial premises and advertising elements disrupt the spatial ambience.
3	Would you support the conversion of the street into a pedestrian zone?	90	10	The majority of respondents support traffic reduction.
4	Is there sufficient public space for rest and social interaction?	10	90	The street lacks benches, green areas, and shaded spaces.
5	Do you think that local materials and traditional elements would improve the street's appearance?	100	0	A strong consensus regarding the need to preserve local identity.

✓ Sample: 10 respondents – residents, students, and shop owners who use Prvomajska Street on a daily basis.

✓ Summary: The majority perceive the street as unsafe for pedestrians, not representative of urban identity, and in need of humanization of public space.

To complement the spatial analysis, a small-scale user survey was conducted among residents, shop owners, and daily users of Prvomajska Street. The survey results indicate that 80% of respondents perceive the street as unsafe for pedestrians, primarily due to narrow sidewalks and intensive vehicular traffic. At the same time, 90% of respondents support the introduction of partial pedestrianization, particularly in sections of the street characterized by higher pedestrian activity. Furthermore, all respondents (100%) expressed support for the integration of local materials and traditional architectural elements, considering them important for strengthening the cultural identity of the street.

5.4. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The identified problems of Prvomajska Street are not solely the result of physical deterioration, but primarily of insufficient urban governance and the absence of a coherent architectural vision. Over time, public space has been progressively appropriated by individual commercial interests, leading to spatial fragmentation and the erosion of collective urban values.

Architectural interventions along the street are characterized by formal inconsistency and a lack of contextual awareness. Individual design decisions prioritize visibility and short-term functionality over spatial harmony, resulting in visual chaos and reduced legibility of the historic urban structure. Such practices weaken the relationship between architecture and public space, transforming the street into a series of isolated commercial fronts rather than a coherent urban corridor.

This condition reflects a broader pattern of urban development in Novi Pazar, where modernization is often pursued without a clear understanding of cultural continuity. The absence of regulatory frameworks and design guidelines allows arbitrary interventions that undermine both architectural quality and urban identity.

5.5. DESIGN PROPOSAL

- ✓ Partial introduction of a pedestrian zone in the section adjacent to schools and the university.

- ✓ Unified regulations for facades and advertising elements.

- ✓ Integration of local materials (stone, wood).

- ✓ Introduction of tree-lined elements and urban furniture.

- ✓ Provision of space for small public events, exhibitions, and seasonal markets.

Through this approach, Prvomajska Street could become a model for the renewal of the urban identity of Novi Pazar.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this research demonstrate that urban identity in historic cities is sustained not through the replication of traditional architectural forms, but through contextually grounded architectural strategies that integrate spatial continuity, functional adaptability, and visual coherence. The case of Prvomajska Street illustrates how the absence of coordinated architectural guidelines and regulatory frameworks produces spatial fragmentation and weakens the legibility of urban space.

The analysis further indicates that public space represents a central structural component of urban identity. Streets that prioritize vehicular circulation and uncontrolled commercial expansion tend to lose their social and cultural functions, gradually becoming transitional corridors rather than places of everyday urban interaction. However, when pedestrian comfort, material coherence, and visual legibility are addressed simultaneously, public spaces regain their role as settings for social exchange and collective urban life.

By positioning urban identity as an active design resource, this research contributes to contemporary discussions on architectural practice in historic urban environments [22], [24]. The proposed principles therefore extend beyond the specific case of Novi Pazar and may inform heritage-responsive urban strategies in other cities with layered cultural histories facing similar pressures of modernization and identity transformation.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the role of contemporary architectural design in preserving and reinterpreting urban identity through the case study of Novi Pazar. The research demonstrates that urban identity should be understood as a dynamic process shaped by historical layers, spatial practices, and social interaction, rather than as a static heritage category.

The analysis of Prvomajska Street reveals a significant imbalance between contemporary urban pressures and inherited spatial structures. Uncoordinated architectural interventions, functional overload, and visual inconsistency have weakened the legibility and spatial coherence of the street. Nevertheless, the research also identifies clear potential for regeneration through incremental and contextually grounded architectural interventions.

The proposed design principles emphasize respect for urban morphology, material coherence, human-scale proportions, and functional flexibility. When applied in an integrated manner, these principles enable contemporary architecture to support spatial continuity without resorting to imitation or superficial historicism. The findings therefore suggest that a renewed culture of

architectural planning-grounded in local context and informed by user perception-is essential for the sustainable development of historic urban environments.

Future research may expand this framework through detailed design proposals, quantitative spatial analysis, and comparative studies across similar urban contexts. Such investigations would further clarify how architecture can mediate between inherited cultural landscapes and the evolving needs of contemporary urban life.

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