

Jasna Guzijan, University of Banja Luka, jasna.guzijan@aggf.unibl.org

Siniša Cvijić, University of Banja Luka, sinisa.cvijic@aggf.unibl.org

Miroslav Malinović, University of Banja Luka, miroslav.malinovic@aggf.unibl.org

THE MODERNIST HOUSE ON THE CORNER IN THE INTERWAR ERA: ARCHITECTURAL EXAMPLES IN BANJA LUKA

Abstract:

The paper explores the impact of location on the architectural form of family corner houses built during the interwar period and designed in the spirit of modernism. The specificity of a corner house's design lies in its conditioning by its urban position; on the other hand, a corner location demands that the house stands out as a landmark within the urban fabric and visual corridors. The research takes into account houses situated on the street regulation line. Based on analyzed examples of single-family corner houses in Banja Luka, the study investigates how the architectural solution is conditioned by the building's position, as well as the relationship between function and form.

Keywords: corner house, modern architecture, function, form, Banja Luka

УГАОНА КУЋА МОДЕРНЕ У МЕЂУРАТНОМ ПЕРИОДУ: АРХИТЕКТОНСКИ ПРИМЕРИ У БАЊА ЛУЦИ

Сажетак:

Рад се бави истраживањем утицајем положаја на архитектонску форму индивидуалних стамбених кућа на углу насталих у периоду између два светска рата, а дизајнираних у духу модерне. Специфичност дизајна куће на углу је његова условљеност урбанистичким положајем, с друге стране положај куће на углу намеће њену маркирају у урбаном ткиву и визурама. Приликом истраживања узете су у обзир куће које се налазе на уличној регулацији. На основу анализираних примера индивидуалних кућа на углу у Бања Луци истражена је условљеност архитектонског решења положајем објекта, као и однос функције и форме.

Кључне ријечи: кућа на углу, модерна архитектура, функција, форма, Бања Лука

1. INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the architectural articulation of corner houses in Banja Luka, utilizing representative case studies designed within the Modernist architectural paradigm. By examining residential dwellings raised during the interwar period, the study investigates the planimetric configurations, structural organization, and overall architectural solutions as determined by their specific corner-block positioning.

In stark contrast to the spatial congestion and deficient sanitary conditions defining late 19th-century urban centers, interwar architectural practice was fundamentally driven by the imperative to elevate residential living standards. Modern architecture represented a sophisticated intellectual endeavor to articulate contemporary life through spatial functionality and material honesty [1], [2]. The Modernist paradigm advocated for a volumetric conceptualization of space, strict adherence to functionalism, and formal purity. This architectural language was synthesized through the decisive rejection of applied ornamentation, prioritizing instead spatial ergonomics and the implementation of high-performance, durable building materials [3]. Consequently, Modernist residential typologies manifested the new *Zeitgeist*, substantially enhancing the habitability of urban dwellings. Furthermore, the global economic depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s acted as a critical catalyst, necessitating rigorous rationalization and structural austerity, which fundamentally dictated material selection and the restrained articulation of facades [4]. Ultimately, the vanguard's most profound contribution to the constitution of a modern urban and socio-cultural identity materialized within the domain of housing [5]. Architectural theorists extensively corroborate that Modernist residential design precipitated a global paradigm shift, permanently reconfiguring both construction methodologies and urban morphology.

The house on the corner is intrinsically linked to closed perimeter block development, wherein a continuous built frontage terminates at a block intersection [6]. By virtue of their prominent urban positioning, these structures function as spatial landmarks; consequently, their architectural expression has historically necessitated a heightened aesthetic articulation. Nevertheless, buildings situated within mixed-use or open morphological systems are expected to satisfy analogous spatial and semantic imperatives [6]. Modernism, as a vanguard movement, sought to dismantle historical paradigms, specifically breaking away from traditional European architectural and urban conventions [7]. The morphological articulation of these structures is dictated by their placement at block intersections; specific architectural interventions—such as chamfering, rounding, volumetric subtraction, or addition—generate a multiplicity of corner typologies and, by extension, dictate the overall form of the dwelling [6], [8]. According to Kahle, the corner house systematics comprises two primary variants: the interpolated infill structure with a single street-facing facade, and the true corner edifice characterized by two orthogonally intersecting facades [8]. Within the Modernist paradigm, the building corner emerged as a paramount compositional nexus, frequently functioning as the definitive hallmark of regional modernist expression [4]. Corner articulation evolved from rigid, orthogonal geometries toward dynamic, curvilinear sweeps, frequently employing cantilevered balconies to emphasize the intersection, while entrance portals and communication cores were elevated to serve as the primary representative elements of the architectural composition.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs descriptive and analytical methodologies, applying them to representative case studies of family dwellings constructed in Banja Luka during the 1930s and early 1940s. Particular emphasis is placed on a comparative analysis of European architectural influences, examined through the educational backgrounds of the architects from prominent technical universities in the interwar period. The research sample comprises structures that have preserved their authentic morphological articulation and spatial integrity. This selection criterion facilitates a rigorous analysis of volumetric geometry, design principles, and material application, corroborated by original documentation illustrating the initial architectural intent. The primary data sources encompass original architectural plans (archival records) and contemporary photographic documentation detailing the *in situ* condition. Furthermore, the methodology integrates previous scholarly research, which is re-evaluated and contextualized through a novel analytical framework in this study.

3. EVOLUTION OF MODERNIST RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

The interwar period constituted a unique historical epoch during which Modernism matured as a pan-European movement, operating as an integral component of a widely embraced cultural paradigm directed toward a profound renaissance of cultural, social, and political values. Escalating urban density compelled architects to design modern residential structures ensuring that every inhabitant had adequate access to natural light, ventilation, and green spaces [9]. Concurrently, the accelerated urbanization of specific urban centers within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia precipitated the advancement of modern architecture in the region. The authentic origins of Modernism in residential design are inextricably linked to the emergence of progressive attitudes toward contemporary habitation. These perspectives prioritized the provision of essential conditions for healthy living in alignment with technological advancements, consciously rejecting elaborate, heavily ornamented facades that historically functioned as a veneer masking underlying poverty [10]. Only with the advent of the Modernist movement was the contemporary human living space accorded the profound significance that had been largely marginalized in architectural theoretical discourse over preceding centuries [10]. In stark contrast to the architectural paradigms of previous epochs, Modern architecture is intrinsically characterized by its endeavor to achieve an optimal synthesis of function and form, employing innovative structural solutions facilitated by the application of novel building materials. Moreover, the dialectical relationship established between interior and exterior spaces constitutes a fundamental hallmark of Modernism, alongside the sophisticated interplay of solid and void volumes. As posited by Kenneth Frampton, modern architecture ought to act as a mediator between the universal trajectory of technological progress and the idiosyncratic nuances of local culture derived from specific landscape conditions [1]. As emphasized by Šobot, while the construction of corner buildings was not strictly dictated by statutory regulations, both local authorities and architectural practitioners inherently recognized their spatial prominence and urban allure. Consequently, the ground floors of such edifices frequently accommodated commercial programs [6].

Furthermore, Kahle characterizes the corner edifice—distinguished from standard interpolated infill housing by its dual street-facing facades—as a typology that affords heightened representational prominence and increased economic viability [8]. Consequently, examining the corner house is tantamount to analyzing the most representative iteration of Modernist architecture, as its strategic positioning at street intersections profoundly influenced urban aesthetics and the modernization of the urban matrix. Corner plot development fundamentally altered the methodological approach to architectural design: planimetric configurations gained complexity, while facade articulation became more demanding due to the necessity for expanded fenestration. Accentuated entrance portals and specific spatial orientations generated distinctive architectural solutions that diverge significantly from standard residential typologies erected on open, freestanding plots. Based on the mentioned observations, it can be deduced that corner structures were instrumental in forging an authentic and irreproducible architectural expression. Every such site necessitated a highly site-specific design strategy, thereby precluding the direct replication of typological models from alternative topographies and endowing each corner dwelling with a singular architectural identity.

3.1. THE URBAN METAMORPHOSIS OF BANJA LUKA DURING THE VRBAS BANOVINA ERA

The establishment of the Vrbas Banovina within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was of paramount historical significance for Banja Luka. Its designation as the provincial administrative headquarters precipitated the city's accelerated development. This elevation in civic status—functioning as the epicenter of regional administration—catalyzed its comprehensive urbanization and profound structural metamorphosis. Consequently, a multi-decade epoch of urban stagnation was abruptly terminated, initiating a series of extensive public and civic interventions that fundamentally reconfigured Banja Luka's urban landscape, thereby elevating it to the status of a preeminent urban center within the Kingdom.

The architectural lexicon of Banja Luka that emerged during the 1920s and 1930s, firmly rooted in Modernist paradigms, was introduced by architects educated at prominent European technical universities. They were joined by a younger generation of practitioners trained in Belgrade and Zagreb, who drew direct conceptual inspiration from the principal epicenters of Central European Modernism. During this exceptionally prolific period of construction, the affluent social strata commissioned highly representative residential structures tailored to their specific requirements. Within this evolutionary process, alongside the persistence of historicist styles, there was a progressive assimilation of Modernist architectural principles—initially manifesting within the

residential sector before subsequently permeating public building typologies. Thus, during this era, Banja Luka witnessed the realization of numerous residential architectural projects that distinctly embody the formal and functional tenets of Modernism. The architectural practice of both Belgrade and Zagreb architects, although quite distinct in ideology and concepts, had a great impact on the development of architectural modernism in Banja Luka, especially of its residential architecture.

What must be borne in mind, however, is that these two schools concurrently arrived in Banja Luka, and that their influences did not merge in the interwar period [10].

The earliest iterations of all residential typologies in Banja Luka exhibit a conspicuous absence of stylistic ornamentation, a characteristic deeply rooted in pre-modern local traditions. For centuries, the vernacular Bosnian house was defined by stark, unornamented white facades; consequently, the assimilation of Modernism represented a logical evolutionary progression in residential architecture. Echoes of this vernacular heritage remain discernible within the minimalist, cubic volumes of unadorned Modernist architecture [10]. However, the implementation of austere, unornamented facades was frequently driven by economic imperatives rather than deliberate compositional intent, particularly in the context of speculative rental housing. The underlying principle of surface articulation sought to accentuate specific volumetric components and highlight distinct architectural elements—a Modernist stratagem highly characteristic of the architectural discourse within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. This era witnessed the emergence of aerodynamic, curvilinear facades, an articulation that became particularly pronounced when applied to corner edifices. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for cornices and window surrounds to be delineated by simplified geometric profiling. Such decorative methodologies denote a distinct resonance of the Art Deco style, which enjoyed considerable popularity among the affluent social echelons during the 1930s [10].

3.2. SPACE DISPOSITION OF THE HOUSES ON THE CORNER

The family house, situated on an independent parcel, epitomizes the zenith of urban residential standards. Characterized by its highly individualized nature, this typology functions as an autonomous spatial, organizational, and socio-demographic entity accommodating a single household [6]. A defining attribute of such structures is their bespoke nature, as they were typically commissioned by a specific client whose direct input significantly informed the design process. The morphological manifestations of single-family dwellings exhibit considerable typological variance. This overarching category encompasses urban villas, which retain the fundamental attributes of the family house while being defined by an elevated standard of residential luxury and spatial amplitude. Across virtually all analyzed case studies—irrespective of whether the structure comprises a singular residential unit or is subdivided into multiple apartments—the spatial configuration of the dwelling is predicated on a tripartite functional zoning:

The public/representative zone (serviced spaces): Encompassing the primary living areas, including the vestibule, formal living room (salon), dining room, and occasionally a study or library.

The service/auxiliary zone (servant spaces): Comprising the utilitarian sectors of the dwelling, such as the basement, storage pantries, kitchen, lavatory, maid's quarters, and other secondary facilities.

The private zone: Consisting of the intimate family spaces, specifically the master and children's bedrooms, alongside primary bathroom facilities [10].

Contingent upon their internal spatial configuration, two primary typologies of Modernist corner dwellings can be identified within Banja Luka. The first functional paradigm encompasses single-family residences wherein the spatial disposition is orchestrated as a unified functional entity, predicated on a centralized floor plan. Conversely, the second principle of internal organization manifests in multi-unit residential structures, where the primary circulation core is characteristically relegated to one of the lateral flanks of the edifice.

3.2.1. Space disposition of single-family houses on the corner

Within this spatial paradigm, the public, private, and economic (service) functional zones of the dwelling are strictly segregated. The central circulation core—typically the hall or vestibule—operates as an integral component of the public zone, frequently assuming a highly representative character that incorporates the primary staircase. The fundamental attribute of this vestibule space is its inherent multifunctionality; its generous proportions and geometric configuration permit the accommodation of supplementary programmatic functions beyond mere circulation. Consequently,

it is frequently appropriated as an extension of the primary living area or utilized as a formal dining space. Owing to its centralized positioning and typically square morphological footprint, the hall serves as the pivotal nexus connecting the dwelling both horizontally and vertically, often affording comprehensive visual access across the entire spatial volume. Irrespective of variations in the specific planimetric positioning of the hall dictated by diverse design iterations, its programmatic function as the central circulation and living core invariably remained intact. Furthermore, a defining characteristic of these residences is the rigorous vertical stratification of these zones: the public and service sectors are predominantly situated on the ground floor, whereas the private quarters are elevated to the upper level.

The integration of a central living space within the domestic interior is deeply rooted in the vernacular architecture of the Balkans. "The Modernist exploration of the central room concept within vernacular architecture was stimulated by Le Corbusier's broader studies of traditional architecture; for our specific context, it is directly correlated with his analytical engagement with the Balkan house" [11]. This spatial archetype was similarly pronounced in the traditional Bosnian house in Banja Luka, where the central room—known as the *divanhana*—functioned simultaneously as a primary circulation node and a representative living area [12]. Consequently, the widespread adoption of Modernist residential typologies centered around a primary hall in Banja Luka is contextually coherent. A chronological analysis of the case studies reveals an evolutionary trajectory of the hall concept: originating from the traditional role of a central room, it progressively transformed into a spatial device that facilitated total visual permeability across the domestic interior. Its specific positioning and morphological configuration occasionally served as focal points for spatial experimentation within the structural and formal composition of the dwelling. This organizational principle permits the unhindered horizontal and vertical expansion of architectural volumes, while the articulation of the corner itself remains strictly dictated by the functional imperatives of the interior space [13]. Ultimately, the corner disposition affords this spatial organization the capacity to orient living spaces across two or three distinct facades, thereby elevating the corner to the primary focal point of the architectural articulation.

Exemplifying this spatial paradigm is the Villa of **Dr. Branko Petrović**, a single-story residence situated at the intersection of Vuk Karadžić and Gajeva streets. The structure aligns strictly with the street regulation line, a deliberate urban gesture that maximizes the unencumbered spatial footprint within the rear courtyard. The ancillary courtyard structures, encompassing the garage, were executed concurrently with the primary residence in 1939. While the official architectural documentation bears the signature of Stojan Borovnica, contemporary architectural historiography posits that the authentic authorship belongs to architect Bogdan Petrović, the client's brother [13].

The Villa of Dr. Branko Petrović is distinguished by a sophisticated synthesis of architectural form and topographical context. Its angular morphology is a direct corollary of its specific site positioning, a design strategy that imbues the structure with a unique visual potency and clearly delineates it from the surrounding urban fabric.

The interior of the villa is organized around a centralized hall featuring a primary staircase. Positioned opposite the entrance, the dining room and living area coalesce with the hall to form the building's representative core. The service block is discreetly situated behind the staircase, accessible directly from the vestibule, while a functional circular circulation pattern on the ground floor is established through the interconnection of the kitchen and dining area. Accessible from the windbreak on the left side is a medical office with a dedicated waiting room, organized as an autonomous functional unit [14].

The private residential quarters are situated on the upper floor, comprising the master bedroom, children's room, and maid's room, along with a dressing room and bathroom clustered within a private hallway (*degagement*). By omitting a segment of the inter-storey structure a vertical visual dialogue was established between the floors, achieving a unified spatial volume within the hall. The implementation of a reinforced concrete slab above the ground floor facilitated a "free plan" (*plan libre*) on the first floor, rendering it structurally independent of the lower layout. The free plan refers to the spatial flexibility made possible by structural systems in which interior walls are not required to be load-bearing and it was important for modern architecture.

The dynamism of the courtyard elevation is accentuated by the subtraction of volumetric mass on the upper floor, complemented by a concrete counterfort above the entrance. Simultaneously, the specific architectural treatment of the street-facing terrace canopy serves to emphasize the building's corner orientation. Although the facade remains unadorned (non-ornamental), its tectonic character is defined by fenestration patterns highlighted by variations in masonry bonding, as well as horizontal and vertical incisions in the plaster that demarcate distinct surface treatments [13].



Figure 1. Ground and first floor plans of the Dr. Branko Petrović Villa (Drawing by S. Cvijić)



Figure 2. External view of the Dr. Branko Petrović Villa in the 1980s (Photograph by Srećko Bajić)

3.2.2. Space disposition of single-family houses on the corner

In addition to residences organized as unified functional entities, the construction of multi-unit family dwellings was the predominant typology in Banja Luka during the interwar period. Despite their outward formal and positional resemblance to single-family houses, their internal spatial configurations explicitly define them as residential structures composed of functionally autonomous units.

The multi-unit residential concept facilitated the accommodation of several households—frequently interconnected by kinship—under a single roof. The ubiquity of this model was derived from its inherent functional adaptability: owners typically occupied one apartment while leasing the remaining units for supplemental income or reserving them for the future independence of family members. Although less frequent, certain edifices were commissioned exclusively as speculative rental properties [13].

In this residential typology, the sanctity and privacy of domestic life are meticulously preserved. The staircase is typically positioned laterally, a strategic placement that facilitates the uninterrupted and comprehensive expansion of the residential unit across the entire floor plate. The internal organization consistently maintains a rigorous demarcation between public, private, and service zones. Furthermore, the corner disposition of the parcel offers a distinct advantage, enabling a tripartite orientation of rooms and the optimal utilization of the building's footprint.

The Georges Pascolo House is a two-story residential edifice situated at the intersection of Grčka Street and Jovan Dučić Avenue. Constructed in 1939, this residence stood as one of the most prominent exemplars of Modernist residential architecture in Banja Luka until its original aesthetic integrity was compromised by inappropriate subsequent additions. Positioned directly on the street

regulation line, the house maintains its formal compactness by adhering to the orthogonal geometry of the street corner. Based on the spatial logic of the interior and the specific architectural vocabulary of the exterior, the authorship is highly attributed to Ibrahim Salihagić, despite the absence of definitive archival documentation.

The building comprised three independent apartments organized around a central hall. Each unit featured a three-bedroom layout with a segregated service wing encompassing the kitchen and maid's quarters [15]. The planimetric variations between the floors were minimal. The dynamic architectural expression of the house was achieved through a sophisticated manipulation of volumetric masses—utilizing recessed facade segments and cantilevered semicircular balconies at the corners. Although the footprint remains compact, the distinct treatment of each floor contributes to the building's rhythmic complexity. The austere, unadorned white facade is complemented by balustrades composed of either solid masonry or horizontal iron profiles [13]



Figure 3. *Exterior view of the Pascolo Villa (Photograph by the Institute for the Protection of Cultural, Historical and Natural Heritage of the Republic of Srpska)*

The Drage Milošević House is a corner residential edifice featuring three apartments, designed to accentuate its specific site orientation. Constructed in 1940 as a two-story structure with a mansard roof, it was executed according to the design of the building contractor Evgenij Bubik. The morphological form of the house strictly adheres to the established street regulation lines.

The structure is flanked on one side by the adjacent property, while the opposite, recessed side provides access to the ground-floor apartment and the interior courtyard. Access to the upper floors is facilitated via a double-flight staircase with a street-level entrance. All residential units follow a consistent functional layout, centered around a spacious hall that serves both as a formal dining area and the primary circulation node. Notably, the usable floor area of the apartments diminishes toward the upper levels, creating a dynamic volumetric interplay in the building's exterior expression, further emphasized by a semicircular cut-out above the ground-floor corner.

The facade exhibits characteristics of a provincial variant of Art Deco, featuring a base course (plinth) accentuated by horizontal fluting in artificial stone. Although the original design specified horizontal striations across the floors and shallow moldings around the windows, the final execution retained only the deep profile separating the uppermost story. Unfortunately, due to numerous subsequent additions and structural alterations, the building's original architectural identity has been altered beyond recognition today [13].



Figure 4. Floor plans and street elevation of the Draga Milošević House
(Drawing by S. Cvijić)

The Dr. Franz Kleinhappel House was constructed in 1940 at the intersection of Nikola Tesla and Sava Mrkalj streets. Although originally conceived as a single-story residence, the design was subsequently amended, resulting in a two-story structure where the uppermost floor features a slightly reduced footprint relative to the first floor.

The building's morphology strictly adheres to the street regulation of the corner lot. One elevation is positioned flush against the boundary of the adjacent parcel (party wall), while the opposite side is oriented toward the interior courtyard. The programmatic structure of the edifice encompasses three residential units and a medical office. While the ground-floor apartment is accessed via a courtyard terrace, the medical office and the upper-floor apartments are linked by a double-flight staircase, positioned along the blind wall on the property boundary.

All residential units are organized around a centralized hall. On the ground and first floors, the service block is entirely segregated and accessible through a private hallway (degagement). On the second floor, the service wing is replaced by a terrace, while the kitchen and bathroom are relocated to the core of the apartment [13]. The compositional dynamism is achieved through the integration of recessed niches on the terraces and the volumetric reduction of the final story relative to the ground-floor footprint. The primary architectural motif—a semicircular rounded corner—is accentuated by specific fenestration, echoing the design solution of the Dr. Branko Petrović Villa. Although the original blueprints specified decorative horizontal and square incisions in the plaster, these were omitted during construction; consequently, the house today features a strictly minimalist, unadorned facade.



Figure 5. External view of the Dr. Kleinhappel Villa in the 1980s (Photograph by Srećko Bajić)

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Modernist residential architecture fundamentally transformed the urban landscape, definitively breaking with the tradition of overcrowded perimeter blocks. The acceptance of modern residential architecture in Banja Luka was arbitrary and unsystematic. It was building façades that changed first, after which came the layout of flats and interior space organisation, followed by the acceptance of new structural materials and the frames they permitted as the last. This acceptance occurred in mainly chronological order [10]. New construction standards were introduced, while the implementation of contemporary materials facilitated enhanced spatial flexibility, catering to the evolving needs of the occupants. A particular focus of the architects was directed toward corner edifices, which, due to their pronounced geometry, offered opportunities for the most compelling design solutions. Although the majority of the analyzed structures have retained their original residential function—with the notable exception of the Georges Pascolo House, currently repurposed as a commercial building—they remain pivotal symbols of modernity and indispensable components of Banja Luka's urbanization. Even today, these structures serve as archetypes of aesthetically harmonious and human-centric architecture.

In all examined cases, the corner is treated volumetrically through the interplay of horizontal and vertical planes, whether through the addition or subtraction of architectural masses. These volumetric configurations are the direct manifestation of the internal functional organization.

The analysis of Banja Luka's corner buildings indicates a profound influence of European Modernism, adapted to specific local exigencies. Given that the form and positioning of these houses are directly dictated by the geometry of thoroughfares and parcels, designers were compelled to devise inventive solutions that transcended standardized projects. Consequently, corner structures emerge as the most representative catalysts of urban change; through their heightened exposure, they are the first to herald stylistic shifts and the aesthetic transformations of the city. For this reason, corner development demands the highest degree of professional responsibility from both architects and administrative authorities.

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