Journey Through Time: Preserving Cultural Heritage in the Process of Reconstruction and Repurposing – – A Case Study

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Abstract: This paper will analyze the reconstruction of a residential building in an old pre-war building located in the heart of Belgrade. The building is the work of our renowned architect Aleksandar Đorđević, whose facade is protected as a cultural monument. The project's goal was to preserve historical heritage while simultaneously adapting the building to contemporary functional requirements, in line with the specifics of repurposing the entire ground floor from residential to commercial use.
The reconstruction process was carried out with special attention to the techniques and materials used at the time of the original construction, while simultaneously considering modern building standards and functionality of space. The paper will thoroughly examine all interior elements, analyzing original sources and comparing the reconstructed elements executed according to the requirements of the period from which the building originates, to achieve complete fidelity to the original design.
Special emphasis will be placed on the analysis of the previous era and the value of cultural heritage, providing a deeper insight into the methodology of preserving cultural heritage in urban environments and enabling the integration of these objects into the modern era. Through this transformation from a residential to a commercial space for a contemporary polyclinic, the building not only retain its historical and cultural significance, but will also meet contemporary societal needs. Thus, we can conclude that the result is a building that successfully merges rich historical tradition with the functionality and demands of modern commercial space, offering significant scholarly contributions in the field of cultural heritage preservation and adaptation.

Keywords: Interior design, cultural heritage, adaptation, revitalization, aesthetics, tradition

1. Introduction

The architecture of modern-day Serbia has been shaped by the developmental trajectories of contemporary society, and as such, its study has often focused on the segment of our architectural heritage from the period immediately following World War II, a time considered ideologically favorable, full of freshness and dynamic energy. Despite the strong influence of Serbian modernism, there were also architectural achievements outside this trend that significantly reflected the taste of the local environment.
Numerous villas and urban palaces erected in the third and fourth decades of the 20th century today offer the best representation of this progressive and educated society, which was formed based on European models.
Among these accomplishments of the interwar architectural scene, a prominent place belongs to architect Aleksandar Đorđević. Working for the pre-war elite of the capital, Đorđević influenced the shaping of the taste of the upper class of the city's population, creating a visual reflection of their demands and marking an era of bourgeois cultural ascendancy. The analysis of his oeuvre is challenging due to the absence of a preserved complete family legacy. However, a few surviving projects testify to the author's drawing talent and artistic sensibility.
The sophistication and artistic emancipation of Aleksandar Đorđević's architectural oeuvre, as well as the refinement of his works, continue to captivate observers and researchers of Serbian architecture, placing this architect among the most prominent builders of Serbian architecture in the 20th century.

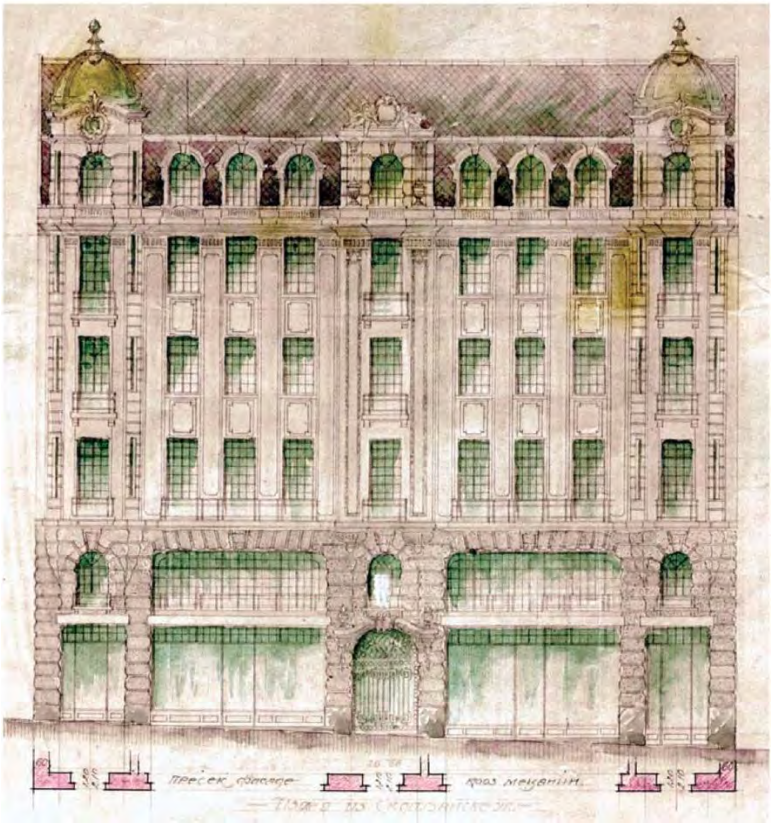

Fig.1. Nušićeva 25, Facade Drawing

2. Analysis of the Original Building by Aleksandar Đorđević

Aleksandar Đorđević was born in Belgrade in 1890 into a high-ranking civil servant family. After completing his secondary education at the Second Belgrade Gymnasium, he went to study in Germany, where he graduated with high honors from the "Fridericiana" Technical University. Upon returning to Serbia in 1914, he volunteered for the army. After the fall of Serbia and the retreat through Albania to Thessaloniki, he reached Paris, where he was employed as an architect with the French State Railways in 1916. Later, he became an associate at the École Nationale Supérieure de Beaux-Arts, where he remained until the end of the war, returning to Serbia in 1918. This marked the beginning of his rise in Serbian architecture, from winning first place in the competition for the design of the Belgrade Stock Exchange to the 1934 competition by the Royal Court Administration for the "New Court," which led to numerous projects personally commissioned by the king.

Given his time in Paris and the experience he gained in France, Aleksandar Đorđević quickly became one of the most prominent proponents of the French academic style.

The clarity of the facades, the logical arrangement of openings, and the somewhat restrained decoration—along with mansard roofs and French balconies—are some of the elements considered characteristic of this style, which was reflected in contemporary Belgrade architecture. In Đorđević's work from the 1920s, this stylistic influence was most successfully implemented in the buildings at Nušićeva 25 (1922), Kneza Miloša 70 (1926), Svetozara Markovića 58 (1926), and Resavska 65 (1929).

Fig.2. Nušićeva 25

Fig.3. Kneza Miloša 70

Fig.4. Svetozara Markovića 58

Fig.5. Resavska 65

The house of Dr Mihajlo Glušćević, which is the subject of this analysis, was built in 1929 at Resavska 65 and represents a classic work of Đorđević in the spirit of French academicism. This house was designed as a one-story building with a mansard, closely resembling a hôtel particulier, a type of family residence characteristic of this style, derived from 18th-century French architecture.

A harmonious and balanced arrangement of facade elements, along with well-proportioned and distributed openings, as well as the sophisticated placement of decorative elements, characterize Đorđević's approach to composition, which he refined during his further studies in Paris.

The combination of neoclassical and modernist elements, typical of the interwar period, the symmetry of the facade, and the rich decorative elements such as pilasters, portals, and balconies reflect the luxury and social status of the owner.

The materials used in the construction were of high quality, including natural stone, marble, and high-grade wooden elements, which contributed to the building's longevity and prestige.

The building had two separate entrances, both on the side of the structure: one for the main apartment occupying the entire ground floor and another separate entrance leading to the upper floors. The primary residential unit on the ground floor also had an additional service entrance accessible from the corridor of the second entrance, serving as an operational entry for the staff. This entrance arrangement and the overall concept have been preserved to this day.

Fig.6. Canopy of the main entrance before adaptation

Fig.7. Entrance portal before adaptation

The interiors of all the spaces within the building reflected a high level of sophistication and luxury, with every detail carefully designed to convey a sense of elegance and opulence. The rooms were spacious, with high ceilings, decorative ceilings, and details such as stucco work and wooden paneling. They were designed not only to provide comfort but also to impress visitors.

The ground floor, which is the subject of detailed analysis in this study, was found in its original state, neglected in maintenance, with doors that had not been opened for over twenty years. It contained all the original and authentic details and finishes from that era, with no subsequent interventions in the space, offering a unique opportunity for thorough analysis.

The building was constructed with massive brick walls, combining classic construction techniques with the modern technologies of the time, such as reinforced concrete for the structure. Craftsmen used hand tools and traditional methods to create decorations and paneling, while modern methods were applied in the construction of glass, metal, and ceramics.

In the hallway and entrance section, the floors were covered with marble slabs, while the rest of the floors were covered with high-quality parquet, laid on a substructure of planks, with the final layer of parquet arranged in smaller geometric patterns. The installation of such wooden flooring required high precision and skill, and the surfaces were carefully polished and lacquered to achieve a shiny and long-lasting effect.

Stucco work was one of the key decorative elements, used to adorn both ceilings and walls, with classic and richly detailed floral motifs.

Fig. 8,9,10,11. Interior before adaptation

Fig.12,13. Interior before adaptation

Fig.14,15. Interior details before adaptation

4. Adaptation and Repurposing of the Space

The project task presented a significant challenge, given the fact that the ground floor of this building, constructed during the interwar period and once used as a residential space, needed to be aligned with the requirements of modern medical standards while preserving the architectural spirit of the past. The space, approximately 180 square meters in size, which was once a refined urban residence, had to be transformed into a functional polyclinic, incorporating all the characteristics and needs of contemporary diagnostics, while considering both hygienic and technological demands.

The original condition of the building was not functional, regardless of the repurposing of the space, and considering that the residential function and organization of the original space did not meet the needs of the

planned facility, a complete reconstruction of the interior was necessary. However, to preserve the authenticity of the space, every interior detail was carefully reproduced according to the original patterns, as the poor quality of the original details made repair and restoration impossible. All work was carried out with the aim of maintaining aesthetic and spiritual continuity with the past, despite the need to modernize the space.

The first step in the adaptation involved dismantling the existing interior paneling and installations to prepare the space for new wall and floor structures. Given the traditional construction methods, changes to the functional layout of the space were limited, as most walls were structurally important, and the building's stability could not be compromised. Therefore, apart from removing a few smaller partition walls, there were no major changes to the functional plan of the space.

As a second step in the necessary repair, the plumbing and electrical installations were replaced. To adapt the space to its new purpose, each examination room had to be equipped with a newly installed wet area, as well as carefully positioned power and data installations, considering the type of equipment required for the specific diagnostic functions of each room.

The floors had to be adapted to meet the requirements for hygiene and durability, so the original wooden floors were replaced with high-quality, large-format ceramic tiles in neutral tones, reflecting the former character of the space and evoking the marble finishes that were once present in the entrance area.

Special emphasis was placed on the restoration of plaster moldings, stucco, and decorative elements on the walls and ceilings. The original details, which were unrestorable due to damage, were carefully reconstructed using molds and impressions taken from the remaining fragments. Plaster ornaments, such as corners and joints of wall moldings and ceiling rosettes, were handcrafted according to patterns from the interwar period, preserving the spirit of the original design.

The interior and exterior woodwork, including doors and windows, was also reconstructed according to original patterns. The new doors were made from high-quality wood, with profiled frames and handcrafted details, faithfully replicating the original pieces, maintaining the elegant lining and refinement of the originals. The main entrance from the building's hallway to the foyer was the only portal that had to be designed according to the modern needs of the polyclinic, made entirely of glass with automatic opening, in order to facilitate patient access and accommodate high foot traffic.

Considering the functional needs of a medical facility, the space was divided into several functional units, including a reception area with a waiting room, from which there is access to examination rooms and restrooms. There is also an additional, smaller waiting room, necessary for the uninterrupted conduct of activities, as well as a kitchen and dining area for staff, a wardrobe area with lockers for medical personnel, and a mandatory room for housing technical equipment and computer servers.

Fig.16. Installation of underfloor heating

Fig.17. Execution of plaster work

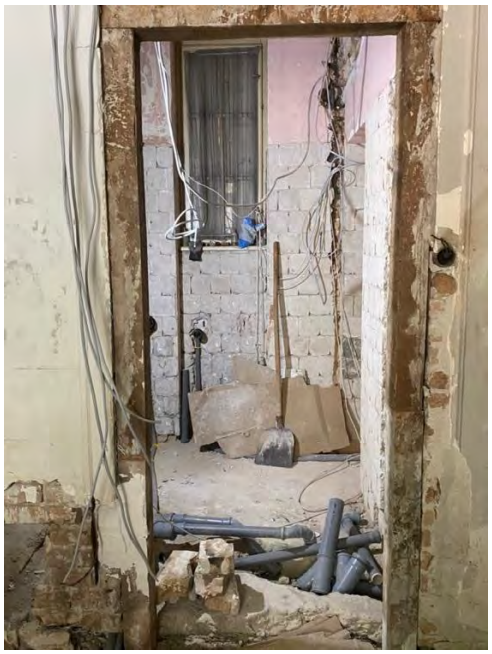

Fig.18. Replacement of electrical installations

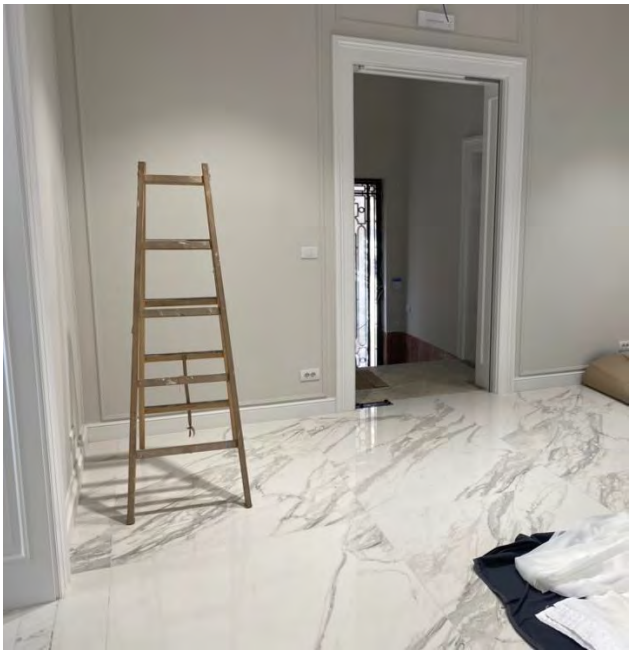

Fig.19. Final interior works

5. Comparison of the Original and Reconstructed State: A Display of Transformation

Comparing photographs of the original state of the space with those taken after the adaptation clearly demonstrates the effort to preserve the spirit of the past, while taking into account the necessary modernization.

In the photographs depicting the original state, taken before any interventions, the ravages of time are evident: damaged floors, cracked stucco, deteriorated woodwork, non-functional heating units, and moisture caused by damaged insulation. It is clear that this space, which was once a luxurious residence, could no longer serve any purpose without significant intervention.

On the other hand, the photo-documented newly completed state shows the detailed and careful reconstruction of every interior detail. Even though the space has been completely renovated, with every element replaced, it still gives the impression of having preserved its historical authenticity at first glance. The fully restored walls, floors, and ceilings have not lost their character, as every stucco detail, every decorative element, and every functional component has been renewed with precision and respect to the original. The new woodwork is a faithful replica of the one from the past, but it has been crafted in accordance with modern standards of high quality, ensuring that it will reflect the old splendor for as long as possible.

These comparative photographs visually communicate the concept of revitalization, the idea of creating new value from old foundations, demonstrating that it is possible to retain the historical character of a space even when it is given an entirely new purpose through reconstruction. The differences between the space before and after reconstruction are easily discernible, yet it is also apparent that the spirit of the space has not changed; it has been carefully preserved and carried into the new era.

Every detail observed in the photographs equally conveys the story of the time in which the building was created, leading us to conclude that the merging of past and present is possible by applying detailed analysis and careful treatment of historical values, while also respecting the values of traditional craftsmanship and their efforts in execution.

Fig.20,21. Photographs of the examination room before and after adaptation

Fig.22,23. Photographs of the entrance hall before and after adaptation

Fig.24,25. Photographs of the entrance hall before and after adaptation

6. Conclusion - Preserving Cultural Heritage Through Adaptation and Revitalization

In the process of transforming this primarily residential building into a modern polyclinic, a delicate balance has been achieved between the functional demands of contemporary needs and the preservation of cultural heritage. This project stands out not only for its technical success in reconstruction and adaptation but also as a good example of how the architectural profession must address the issue of heritage in today's world.

Preserving the spirit of the past through the detailed restoration of all elements, such as plaster moldings, interior woodwork, and other features, is not merely a concern of aesthetics but also an act of respect towards architectural heritage, contributing to the preservation of cultural identity. In a world of constant and rapid change, it is crucial to recognize the value of these historic buildings and their ability to adapt to modern needs without losing their authenticity.

Responsibility towards heritage is something that the architectural profession must acknowledge in contemporary times. There is equal importance in moving beyond conservation as a passive act and entering the realm of revitalization, with the aim of breathing new life into old buildings by adapting them to modern functional requirements. This project demonstrates that revitalization is a creative process involving an understanding of the past and a vision for the future. It is also vital for maintaining the historical and cultural value of cities. Art and science should aim to create spaces that, while serving the needs of contemporary users, also convey the story of the time in which they were created.

This is a call to the profession to embrace the challenge of preservation through transformation, where each element can be reinvigorated in a new context, serving both the past and the present simultaneously but in a new arrangement, in full splendor, carrying with it the patina of tradition.


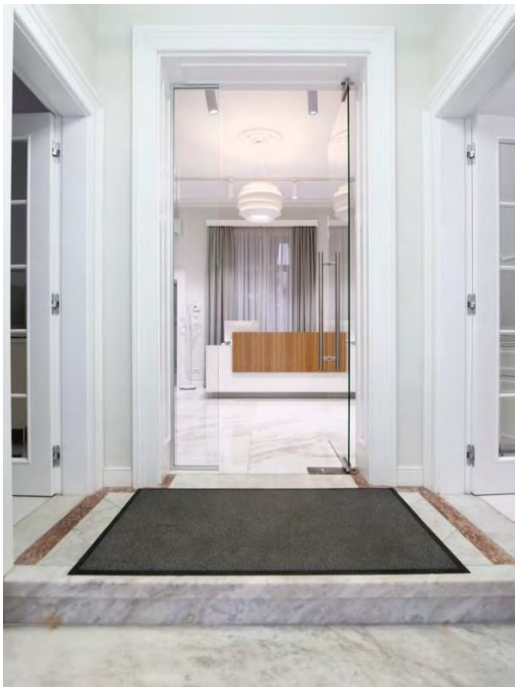

Fig.26,27. Photographs of the space after adaptation

Fig.28. Display of the space after adaptation

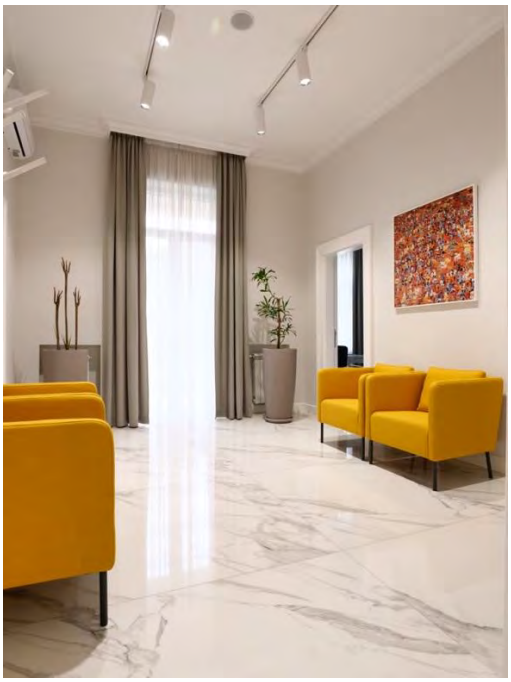

Fig.29,30,31. Photographs of the space after adaptation

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