

Overlapping urban processes: Research by design experiences in a Sarajevo city central military campus

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Abstract

This paper investigates the interplay of urban cultures, heritage, and spatial transformation through the case of the former Marsala Tito Barracks in Sarajevo, now redeveloped as the University of Sarajevo Campus. Developed within a research collaboration between the Universities of Ferrara and Sarajevo, it frames urban design as a critical lens for examining tensions between global urbanisation and local cultural identities. Challenging static conceptions of heritage, the study advocates for a dynamic, negotiated understanding shaped by evolving social relations. It highlights the complexities of reconciling heritage preservation with contemporary development in a post-conflict, multicultural city. The transformation of the Marsala Tito site exemplifies how urban interventions become contested arenas of memory and identity, calling for more inclusive, context-sensitive strategies that respond to both local narratives and global urban pressures.

Keywords: Post-Conflict Urbanism, Multicultural City, Urban Transformation Processes, Overlapping Urban Narratives

1.Theoretical and Methodological Framework

1.1 Introduction

The city of Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, stands as a deeply stratified urban environment shaped by centuries of imperial, socialist, and post-conflict transformation. As a city at the crossroads of East and West and the *locus* of multiple modern conflicts — including the 1992–1996 siege during the Bosnian War — Sarajevo is more than a post-conflict city: it is a complex and unique urban palimpsest (Machado,1976). Each layer of its history remains legible, yet overlaid with subsequent uses, narratives, and ideologies. The city's contemporary condition is emblematic of the intersection of trauma, resilience, and re-imagination in the context of cultural heritage and urban regeneration.

In such a context, heritage is not simply an object of conservation: it is a medium of contested meanings. In Sarajevo's post-Dayton configuration, the politicization of urban planning and memory practices is embedded in fragmented governance and ethnic territorialization (Pickering, 2007). Projects like the transformation of the Marsala Tito Barracks into the University of Sarajevo Campus must be understood within this matrix of spatial symbolism and institutional negotiation.

Originally constructed in the Austro-Hungarian period and serving military functions through the Yugoslav era, the Marsala Tito Barracks were abandoned in the post-war years. They were later appropriated as the site for a civic and educational transformation — a shift from closed, military urbanism to an open, knowledge-driven environment. This evolution is the focus of a collaborative academic research effort between the University of Ferrara and the University of Sarajevo, initiated through the Erasmus+ program (2019-1-IT02-KA107-061336), which framed architectural design as a research tool and critical medium for understanding spatial transformation in complex, multicultural contexts.

This paper investigates three core research questions:

- How can urban heritage be understood not as static but as dynamic, particularly in post-conflict urban settings?
- What methodologies are suitable for reading and intervening in sites marked by overlapping historical, social, and architectural layers?
- How can transnational academic collaborations contribute to more inclusive and culturally sensitive urban development practices?

1.2 Conceptualizing Urban Heritage

Conventional approaches to heritage — especially those aligned with conservation charters and institutional frameworks — tend to prioritize tangible assets and monumental structures. These “authorized heritage discourses,” as defined by Laurajane Smith, risk reifying the past and detaching it from lived experience. In contrast, critical heritage studies emphasize heritage as a dynamic, processual phenomenon, continuously constructed and reconstructed through social practices and spatial interventions (Harrison, 2013).

This shift is particularly relevant in cities like Sarajevo, where memory is politically charged and layered across ethnic, religious, and temporal axes. (Haidar, 2006). The Marsala Tito Barracks, for example, symbolize different things to different actors: to some, a relic of Yugoslav unity and military order; to others, a void awaiting reinvention. The act of transforming this site into a university campus involves not only physical redevelopment but also symbolic reinterpretation.

The concept of the urban palimpsest is instrumental here. As Rodolfo Machado (1976) argued in his seminal essay, the palimpsest represents a city where successive layers coexist, interfere, and reveal traces of prior occupations. Such layering does not imply a neat historical chronology but a complex, often conflictual assemblage of spatial meanings. In Sarajevo, the palimpsest condition includes Ottoman mosques, Austro-Hungarian boulevards, socialist apartment blocks, war ruins, and emergent neoliberal enclaves.

Solà-Morales further elaborates on this concept through his notion of “terrain vague,” referring to ambiguous, residual urban spaces that resist definitive categorization. These spaces, often overlooked, hold the potential for new interpretations and interventions that acknowledge their layered histories. Engaging with these spaces thoughtfully, and avoiding aggressive impositions that erase their inherent complexities, is fundamental to promoting an effective and sensitive approach to urban and architectural design. (Solà-Morales, 1995).

Moreover, the importance of acknowledging the fragmented and layered nature of urban memory, advocating for interventions that respect and engage with the existing historical and cultural contexts rather than overwriting them, erasing them somehow (Haidar, 2006)

At the scale of the Marsala Tito Barracks, this palimpsest condition is especially visible. The barracks’ architecture, planning geometry, and residual militarized landscape stand in tension with the civic and educational programs being projected onto them. The transformation project, as explored 3 years in a row by architectural and urban design students, does not seek to erase these traces but to integrate them critically within new urban narratives.

Importantly, this reconceptualization of heritage aligns with broader discourses on planetary urbanization, as theorized by Brenner and Schmid (2015). In an increasingly globalized urban system, local identities and cultural specificities are often subsumed by standardized development logic. Redevelopment projects risk producing homogenized spaces unless they are grounded in situated, culturally sensitive approaches. The work presented in this paper advocates for a model of heritage practice that resists such flattening — one that sees value in complexity, contradiction, and negotiated transformation.

1.3 Methodological Approach

The methodology employed in this research combines architectural design, critical heritage theory, and transdisciplinary pedagogy. At its centre is the overlapping methodology, developed within the design studios and workshops coordinated by the University of Ferrara in Sarajevo. This approach was articulated by Elena Guidetti in the context of LAP3 Architectural Design Studio as a “dual-paced didactic framework” designed to accommodate both synchronic readings of the present city and diachronic interpretations of its historical and cultural layers.

Overlapping refers to the simultaneous engagement with multiple temporal, spatial, and cultural layers in both analysis and design. It is opposed to reductionist models of urban intervention that seek clarity or linear solutions. Instead, it embraces ambiguity and contradiction as inherent qualities of real urban environments. In Sarajevo, this meant working with the existing barracks structures — not as obsolete relics to be replaced, but as active participants in shaping new spatial narratives.

Methodologically, the process was structured into two interconnected phases:

(1) Analytical Layering: students and faculty began with immersive site investigations, including photographic surveys, historical mappings, programmatic inventories, and spatial ethnography. The aim was to generate a multi-dimensional reading of the Marsala Tito site, incorporating both formal properties (geometry, structure, materiality) and informal dynamics (use patterns, social meanings, perceptual layers). These investigations culminated in visual “overlaps” that combined different timeframes and thematic perspectives on the site.

(2) Design as Inquiry: building on this analysis, students developed architectural and urban proposals that did not resolve the site into a single vision but instead allowed for multiple, often conflicting, interpretations. The design strategies — such as graft, box-in-the-box, parasite, and platform — were chosen for their capacity to negotiate between presence and absence, memory and innovation, stasis and transformation.

This iterative process was supported by collaborative critiques, guest lectures from Sarajevo-based scholars and public exhibitions that encouraged feedback from stakeholders. Importantly, the method emphasized pedagogical reciprocity: Italian and Bosnian students worked in mixed teams, producing knowledge across cultural and disciplinary boundaries. This not only enriched the design output but also enacted a model of shared authorship and mutual learning, crucial for operating in contexts of contested heritage (Guidetti, 2020).

The significance of this approach lies not only in its academic merit but also in its capacity to model a more inclusive, culturally grounded form of urban practice. The method produced a form of critical storytelling that respects the multiplicity of voices and spatial histories embedded in the site. Rather than imposing a single narrative, the designs allowed for overlapping meanings to be read, inhabited, and modified over time (Gardini, 2020).

Finally, the application of the overlapping methodology within LAP3 workshops resulted in more than 60 student design proposals and two major exhibitions in Sarajevo. These projects were not intended for direct implementation, but as speculative instruments that could provoke dialogue, critique existing paradigms, and suggest alternative futures for the Marsala Tito Barracks and similar urban sites. In this sense, design was mobilized not only as a tool of production but as a method of thinking-through-making, a way of generating knowledge about the urban condition through material and spatial speculation.

However, this design exercise sees the confrontation with the reality of urban transformation and planning. The project developed for this site and the current situation is still open to future transformations.

2. Case Study – Marsala Tito Barracks Transformation

2.1 Historical Significance of the Site

Overview of the Marsala Tito Barracks' military and political history.
Its symbolic and cultural relevance in the urban fabric of Sarajevo.

2.2 From Military Zone to University Campus

Description of the masterplan by ARUP London.
Phases of physical transformation: demolition, preservation, adaptation.
Integration with city planning and public space networks.

2.3 Actors and Stakeholders

Roles of architects, planners, local communities, and institutions.
Analysis of power dynamics and decision-making processes.
Tensions between preservation, redevelopment, and commercialization.

2.4 Urban Identity and Everyday Use

How the new campus is perceived and used by students, staff, and residents.
Shifts in social practices and spatial meaning.

Figure 3: Historical and current site plans of the Marsala Tito Barracks area?

Figure 4: Project image-other

Critical Reflections and Broader Implications

3.1 Heritage in the Age of Planetary Urbanization

How global urban models (e.g., neoliberal planning, university-driven gentrification) impact local heritage. Homogenization vs. cultural specificity in post-socialist urban spaces.

3.2 Contested Memories and Narratives

Memory politics in Sarajevo and its role in shaping heritage discourses.

The site as a locus of competing narratives: reconciliation vs. erasure.

The role of critical storytelling and urban pedagogy.

3.3 Conclusion

Summary of key insights from the case study.

Reaffirmation of the need for nuanced, dynamic approaches to urban heritage.

Future research directions.

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