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Reversing DAMNATIO MEMORIAE: Reconstructing urban memory in the Palilula center of Niš

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Abstract: The historical center of Palilula in Niš experienced profound spatial and symbolic change after World War II. Socialist-era policies led to the removal or alteration of much of the pre-war urban fabric, erasing historical layers and severing connections between built and natural environments. This research analyzes post-war redevelopment through historical records, urban morphology, and planning documents, assessing its long-term effects on the area and residents' perception. A contemporary architectural-urban intervention is presented as a response, addressing tensions between historical memory, urban form, and public space. The study frames these changes within the concept of urban DAMNATIO MEMORIAE, showing how political regimes reshape urban spaces to redefine collective memory and identity.

Key words: urban reconstruction; urban memory; urban identity; DAMNATIO MEMORIAE

Obrnut DAMNATIO MEMORIAE: Rekonstrukcija urbanog pamćenja u centru Palilule u Nišu

Sažetak: Povijesno središte Palilule u Nišu doživjelo je duboke prostorne i simboličke promjene nakon Drugog svjetskog rata. Politike socijalističkog razdoblja dovele su do uklanjanja ili izmjene velikog dijela predratne urbane strukture, brišući povijesne slojeve i prekidajući veze između izgrađenog i prirodnog okruženja.

Ovo istraživanje analizira poslijeratni razvoj kroz povijesne izvore, urbanomorfološke studije i planersku dokumentaciju, procjenjujući dugoročne učinke na područje i percepciju stanovnika. Predstavljen je i suvremeni arhitektonsko-urbani zahvat koji reagira na napetosti između povijesnog sjećanja, urbane forme i javnog prostora.

Studija postavlja ove promjene unutar koncepta urbane DAMNATIO MEMORIAE, pokazujući kako politički režimi oblikuju urbani prostor kako bi redefinirali kolektivno sjećanje i identitet.

Ključne riječi: urbana rekonstrukcija; urbano pamćenje; urbani identitet; DAMNATIO MEMORIAE



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1. INTRODUCTION

Urban centers represent the most visible physical expression of a city's historical continuity, cultural identity, and social memory (Rossi, 1982; Huyssen, 2003; Till, 2022; Pendlebury, 2013). Throughout history, political regimes have frequently used urban planning and architectural interventions as instruments for reshaping not only the physical environment but also the symbolic meanings embedded in urban space (Light & Young, 2014; Stanek, 2011; Bodnar, 2023).

Such processes were particularly pronounced in many cities of post-war Eastern and Southeastern Europe after 1945, when socialist governments implemented large-scale urban reconstruction programs (Hirt, 2013; Stanek, 2011; Kovács, 2021; Bodnar, 2023). Within the context of the newly established Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, modernization policies frequently promoted the construction of new civic and administrative centers, broad traffic corridors, and monumental public spaces intended to embody the ideals of the new political order (Živaljević-Luxor & Kurtović-Folić, 2020). These interventions often resulted in the removal or radical transformation of pre-war urban structures, leading to a significant rupture in the spatial continuity of historic environments (Huyssen, 2003; Light & Young, 2014).

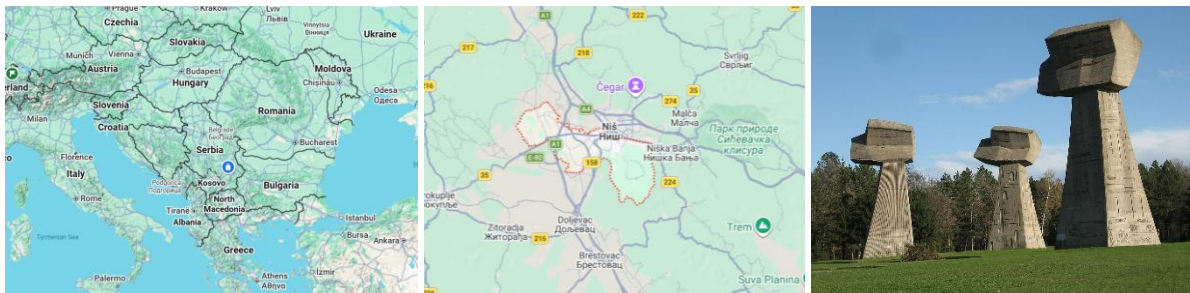


Figure. 1. Disposition of Niš (left), municipality of Palilula (middle) and symbol of Palilula—memorial complex (Google Maps, 2026)

The city of Niš represents an illustrative example of this phenomenon. Following the end of the Second World War, extensive urban restructuring transformed the traditional center of Palilula (Fig. 1). Palilula is one of the five municipalities of the city of Niš. Similar to Palilula in Belgrade, it is a historic urban area located near the city center, whose morphology had largely been defined by the end of the nineteenth century. Today, the municipality encompasses the southern part of the city, together with its eastern and southern suburban zones, covering an area of 117.37 km². Some of the most prominent symbols of socialist rule established after the Second World War, commemorating victory and the new political order, are situated within the urban area of Palilula (Fig. 1).

Large sections of the historical urban fabric of Palilula center were demolished or replaced, fundamentally altering the relationship between the built environment, the natural landscape, and the historical spatial structure that had developed over centuries. These changes were not only primarily physical but symbolic, as they contributed to the gradual erasure of certain layers of urban memory associated with earlier political and cultural contexts.

The consequences of these interventions have continued to shape the development of the central urban area for decades. The loss of historical spatial references and the introduction of new urban forms produced a fragmented urban identity, which has generated long-standing debates about the adequacy of the post-war planning approach. In recent years, renewed attention has been directed

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toward reassessing these transformations and exploring possibilities for restoring spatial coherence and reconnecting the contemporary city with its historical foundations.

Urban morphological analysis compared historical and contemporary layouts revealing importance of genuine spatial patterns (Moudon, 1997). Urban morphology provides an analytical framework for understanding how historical layers shape the spatial logic of cities (Conzen, 2004; Oliveira, 2021). The transformations were interpreted through the concept of DAMNATIO MEMORIAE, highlighting how political regimes reshape urban environments in order to influence collective memory and identity (Huyssen, 2003; Light & Young, 2014). A contemporary architectural intervention was then analyzed as a case study, examining design documentation, spatial strategies, and its alignment with historical patterns. This case study demonstrates how informed urban design can reconstruct spatial memory.

DAMNATIO MEMORIAE is a Latin term that did not enter scholarly usage before the seventeenth century in Germany; nevertheless, it is now widely accepted as a designation for the practice of erasing the memory of defeated or condemned individuals as an act of political vengeance (Varner, 2004). Earlier expressions such as *abolitio nominis* and *memoria damnata* were more commonly used to describe the same phenomenon (Flower, 2006). The earliest documented examples are believed to date back to the third millennium BC in Mesopotamia (Bahrani, 2003). The practice appeared repeatedly throughout the Mediterranean world, including in ancient Egypt, Rome, and during the Middle Ages (Varner, 2004). One of the most notable later examples associated with a form of DAMNATIO MEMORIAE concerns a Doge of Venice who unsuccessfully attempted a coup d'état against the Venetian Republic in 1355. In the Great Council Hall of the Doge's Palace, his portrait has been covered with a black veil bearing an inscription commemorating his betrayal (Norwich, 1982) until today. The concept of DAMNATIO MEMORIAE is, therefore, well known and deeply rooted in the historical mentality of the region examined in this paper.

2. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CENTER OF PALILULA BEFORE 1945

The area known today as Tutunović Podrum is closely connected with the economic and urban expansion of the city in the period following the liberation of Niš from Ottoman rule in 1878 (Živaljević-Luxor & Kurtović-Folić, 2018; Živaljević-Luxor, 2019; Živaljević-Luxor et al., 2020). During this time, the city experienced rapid modernization and the formation of new residential and productive districts on its periphery.

The name of the locality derives from the wine cellar built by the prominent Niš lawyer and entrepreneur Svetozar Tutunović. According to historical accounts, Tutunović accumulated considerable wealth while practicing law and with these resources he purchased a large estate with vineyards on the slopes of Gorica hill, south of the historical city center, towards Leskovac valley, in 1884. On this property he constructed a large wine cellar and storage facility that soon became known as Tutunović's cellar, or Tutunović Podrum.

The cellar represented one of the earliest organized wine-production facilities in the region of Niš. Tutunović became known as a passionate and successful wine producer already in the late nineteenth century, benefiting from the favorable climatic conditions and fertile land in the area. Wines produced in the area were highly regarded, while commercial networks and trade connections extended beyond the local context to foreign markets.

Tutunović's wine cellar soon became an important social and economic point in the expanding city. Historical sources suggest that the site was visited by prominent figures of the time, including prince and king Milan Obrenović himself, reflecting the significance of the place in the social life of the city during the period of the Obrenović dynasty. The facility functioned as a production site and as a gathering place associated with wine culture and hospitality.

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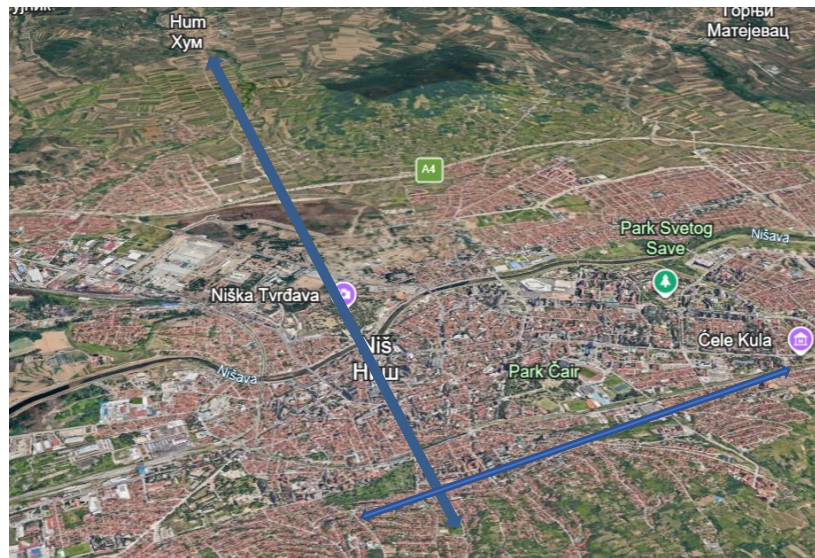


Figure. 2. The complex Tutunović Podrum is located at the intersection of the extended axis Humska Čuka-Stambol Gate of the Nish Fortress and the imaginary east-west axis passing through the Skull Tower (Google Earth, 2026 with author's alterations)

The surrounding area gradually developed into a semi-rural zone and, over time, urban expansion led to the progressive incorporation of this landscape into the growing urban fabric of Niš. As the city expanded during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new neighborhoods emerged in the vicinity, following the spatial features established by Tutunović. The cellar location appears to have been deliberately selected within the broader spatial structure of the area. The site occupies the intersection of two major territorial axes that historically organized the surrounding landscape (Fig. 2). The first follows the north–northeast extension of the principal orientation of the Niš Fortress and visually aligns with the prehistoric site of Humska Čuka. The second axis extends in an east–west direction and aligns with the position of the Skull Tower, another prominent historical landmark. In the largely undeveloped landscape of the late nineteenth century, these sites constituted the practically only relevant spatial reference points in the wider territory. Positioned at the intersection of these axes, the Tutunović Podrum complex effectively occupied a central role within the emerging settlement that would later develop into the municipality of Palilula.

The architectural composition of the complex further reinforced this relationship with the broader urban landscape. The tower of Tutunović Podrum was designed to create a deliberate visual dialogue between the two landmarks. The complex incorporated four entrance gates, a compositional feature that appears to have been conceived as a symbolic reference to the fortified structure of the fortress itself. Through these architectural elements, the complex can be interpreted as a civil counterpart—or civic pendant—to the fortress, translating the symbolic language of military architecture into a productive and entrepreneurial setting. However, the crucial was the tower with excellent view to the interior of the fortress. Such spatial and visual relationships contributed to the formation of an early territorial identity in this part of the city, embedding the complex within a network of other historical references that shaped the collective memory of the place.

3. POST-WAR IDEOLOGICAL RECONSTRUCTION AND DESTRUCTION OF THE HISTORIC CORE

The post-war transformation of the site can be interpreted within a framework of socialist urban modernization, in which pre-war urban landscapes associated with bourgeois culture were frequently removed or reinterpreted (Stanek, 2011; Hirt, 2013). After the end of World War II, the newly established socialist government in the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia introduced a new ideological and cultural context that profoundly influenced urban space and heritage (Hirt, 2013; Stanek, 2011; Bodnar, 2023). Precisely those elements that had made the Tutunović Podrum complex distinctive—its association with bourgeois culture, civic social life, and the memory of the monarchy—became incompatible with the values promoted by the new political system. As a result, the site became the target of systematic transformation aimed at erasing these symbolic references.

Following the Second World War, the socialist political regime in Serbia, as part of socialist Yugoslavia, promoted values centered on collectivism, social equality, industrial progress, and the construction of a new socialist society (Ramet, 2006). The state emphasized workers' rights, public ownership, solidarity, secularism, and the ideology of "brotherhood and unity" among the peoples of Yugoslavia (Djilas, 1957). Urban development, modernization, and large-scale industrialization were presented as symbols of progress and emancipation from pre-war social and economic inequalities (Hirt, 2013). At the same time, political narratives and cultural policies often marginalized or suppressed elements associated with the former monarchy, capitalism, religion, and other ideologies perceived as incompatible with socialist modernization (Perović, 2013).

Since the location itself could not be physically removed, the intervention focused on altering its architectural and spatial characteristics. All above-ground structures of the complex were demolished but one – the small building with the tower, effectively eliminating the visible traces of its former function and identity (Fig. 3, 4). As another defining feature of the site had been the remarkable panoramic view toward the Niš Fortress and the surrounding landscape, and in order to neutralize this spatial relationship, the authorities constructed sports facilities, a basketball/handball court with spectator stands deliberately oriented away from the historic view corridor. In this way, the original visual and symbolic connections embedded in the site were intentionally disregarded.

The sensitivity of the location within the political climate of the time further contributed to the suppression of its historical narrative. The subject became so politically charged that professionals involved in heritage protection, archival work, and historical research were largely discouraged from addressing it. Consequently, official documentation related to the site does not exist in public archives. The surviving evidence has been preserved only in private collections, while institutional repositories—including those of heritage protection authorities—contain little or no material concerning the complex. As a result, all of the above-described characteristics of Tutunović Podrum gradually faded from collective memory, and its facilities fell into ruin. The urban morphology of Niš has not yet been scientifically examined within such a context; consequently, the significance of Tutunović Podrum remained obscured until external manifestations of decay reopened the issue.

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Figure. 3. Sports court with counter-orientated spectator stands and last remaining historic building with tower (Google Earth, 2026)

The circumstances above indicate a deliberate process of historical and spatial erasure. In this sense, the transformation of the Tutunović Podrum site represents a clear example of urban DAMNATIO MEMORIAE—a process through which political regimes attempt to erase undesirable layers of collective memory from the urban landscape (Huysen, 2003; Light & Young, 2014)—or a systematic attempt to remove a significant chapter of local history and suppress more than half a century of cultural and social memory associated with the place.

4. URBAN AND IDENTITY CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIALIST PLANNING

The interventions implemented by the socialist authorities after the end of World War II produced significant and long-term consequences for the site of the former Tutunović Podrum complex. In the first decades following the transformation of the area, the newly constructed sports facilities—primarily basketball and handball courts—became relatively popular among local youth and functioned as gathering spaces for the younger population. However, this period of social activity proved to be temporary. Over time, with the gradual change of generations, the site began to lose its social relevance. New generations increasingly failed to recognize the location as a meaningful or attractive public space, which led to its gradual neglect and deterioration. The sports facilities were not systematically maintained or renewed, accelerating the physical and social degradation of the area.

The problem, however, was more complex and deeply embedded in the urban structure. Subsequent residential blocks and street patterns developed in relation to the complex as a primary spatial reference point. When the urban matrix of Tutunović Podrum was destroyed—through the demolition of the above-ground structures and the burial of the underground cellars—the fundamental morphological logic of the area was disrupted (Conzen, 2004; Oliveira, 2021). As a result, the site gradually acquired the character of a spatial and symbolic void, a phenomenon often associated with the loss of historical spatial references in transformed urban landscapes (Huysen, 2003; Till, 2022). Although the location was not physically empty, in urban and perceptual terms there was a persistent sense that a key element defining the identity of the place was missing. This absence became increasingly evident in the collective perception of the neighborhood over time.

Because the former Tutunović Podrum complex occupied the geometric center of the Palilula district, the socialist planning authorities attempted in various ways to compensate for the loss of this central element without reactivating the original site itself. Instead of restoring the historical spatial core, new functional centers were distributed across the surrounding area. Cultural facilities were placed several blocks to the east of the former complex, while the municipal administrative center was located several blocks to the west. However, these elements were not connected through coherent

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pedestrian routes or spatially comfortable pathways that could have established a functional relationship between them.

Moreover, there was no historical or morphological continuity that could justify the selection of these locations for their respective functions. The placement of cultural and administrative facilities was therefore largely detached from the historical spatial logic. As a result, the urban structure that emerged during the socialist period failed to generate a recognizable and functional center for the Palilula municipality, as proved by a survey conducted on 710 respondents (1% of Palilula population).

Consequently, the center of Palilula, as conceived in the socialist period, never fully developed into a coherent urban space. It remains spatially fragmented and poorly articulated. In practical terms, when residents of Palilula were asked to identify the location of the district's center, many struggled to provide a clear answer, precisely because such a center does not exist in a meaningful urban sense.

5. CASE STUDY OF A CONTEMPORARY INTERVENTION RESOLVING THE SPATIAL CONFLICT

Although the original economic function of the cellar declined already in the first half of the twentieth century, the structure remained an important landmark within the Palilula area. Today, the remains of Tutunović Podrum—often referred to locally as the “Kula” (the tower)—still testify to the historical importance that once shaped this part of the city. The site therefore represents a physical remnant of Niš's late nineteenth-century economic development and a significant element of the city's urban memory that surprisingly survived (Fig. 4).

The intervention initiated approximately at the beginning of 2025 initially focused on the reconstruction site. At the outset, the intention was relatively modest: the project aimed primarily to restore the few remaining physical elements on the location, including the small surviving building with the tower, as well as the sports field and its spectator stands. The original plan was limited to the rehabilitation of these existing structures and did not initially envision a broader urban intervention.

However, during the course of detailed urban and morphological analyses, it became evident that the site possessed a far greater spatial and historical significance than had previously been assumed. The analyses revealed that the location retained important structural relationships with the surrounding urban fabric and with the historical spatial logic of Palilula. As a result, the site regained the attention of city authorities and became the subject of renewed research and evidence-based planning.



Figure. 4. Void, identity loss, abandonment and devastation (photographs by the author on the left and middle; (Google Maps, 2026) on the right)

Following these findings, the morphological and urban studies demonstrated the justification for a more comprehensive approach to the revitalization of the area. Consequently, the current municipal authorities accepted the proposal for the renewal and reinterpretation of the site. The revitalization project was therefore initiated under the leadership of the author of this study, based on the field and

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theoretical research underlying this paper, with the objective of restoring the spatial significance of the location and re-establishing its role within the urban structure of the Palilula district in Niš.

The reconstruction methodology combined historical documentation, photogrammetric analysis (Fig. 5), and urban morphological study. Historical photographs from private collections were systematically examined to recover the architectural proportions, spatial relationships, and façade composition of the Tutunović Podrum complex. By comparing images from different viewpoints and periods, the team reconstructed the volumetric configuration of the buildings. These visual sources were complemented by a comparative analysis of cadastral plans, and aerial imagery, identifying pre-war spatial axes, urban hierarchies, and the site's role as the geometric and symbolic center of the Palilula district in Niš.

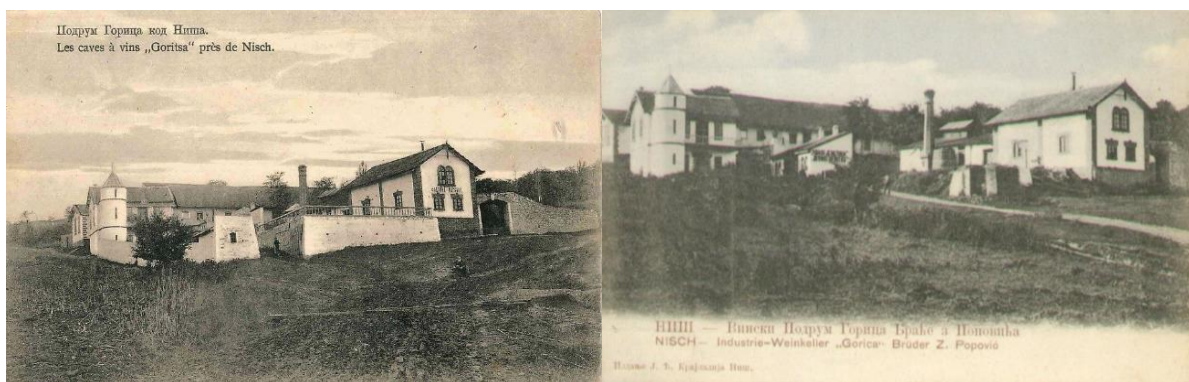


Figure 5. Excerpt from archival documentation (PE Institute for Urban Planning Niš, 2025)

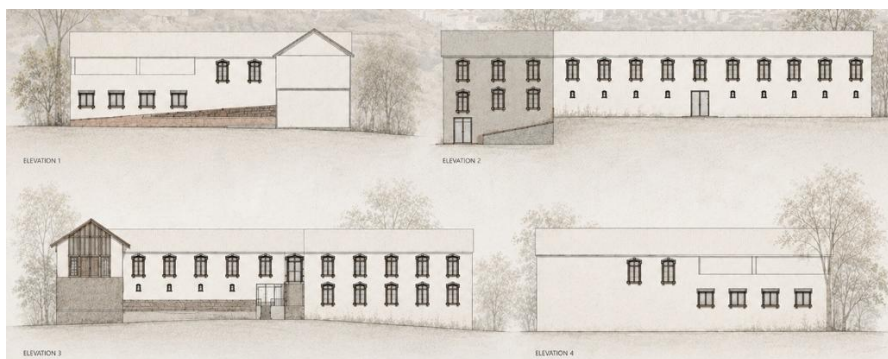


Figure 6. Excerpt from the revitalization project proposal (Živaljević-Luxor, 2025)

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6. DISCUSSION: URBAN DAMNATIO MEMORIAE IN A BROADER CONTEXT

The methodological approach emphasized interpretative urban restoration (Fig. 6, 7), not a literal replication. Guided by these findings from morphological analysis of the pre-war, socialist, and present-day urban layers, the intervention reintroduced spatial relationships and visual alignments while incorporating museal functions to communicate the historical narrative of the site. Through this approach, the project restored architectural elements and reactivated the historical and cultural memory embedded in the heritage layers, effectively reconnecting the location to its original role as the center of the Palilula district.

The reconstruction of the Tutunović Podrum site can be interpreted as a deliberate process of reversing urban DAMNATIO MEMORIAE, a phenomenon addressing the relationship between political power, collective memory, and urban space (Huysen, 2003; Light & Young, 2014; Bodnar, 2023). By restoring key architectural elements, re-establishing visual corridors toward the Niš Fortress and surrounding landmarks, and reintroducing spatial relationships within the local urban matrix, the intervention reconnects the site to its historical and symbolic significance. The project aims not to replicate the past but to reconstruct the urban memory embedded in the location (Huysen, 2003; Pendlebury, 2013; Till, 2022), reactivating its former role as the geometric and civic center of the Palilula district.

Moreover, the integration of museal functions and interpretative design transforms the site into a center of cultural awareness and public engagement. Conference rooms and temporary exhibition galleries ensure its continuous use, while permanent exhibitions dedicated to the wartime and post-war periods provide historical context directly on site. This approach represents an important shift in perspective, acknowledging the complex historical layers of the location and deliberately avoiding a new form of DAMNATIO MEMORIAE.

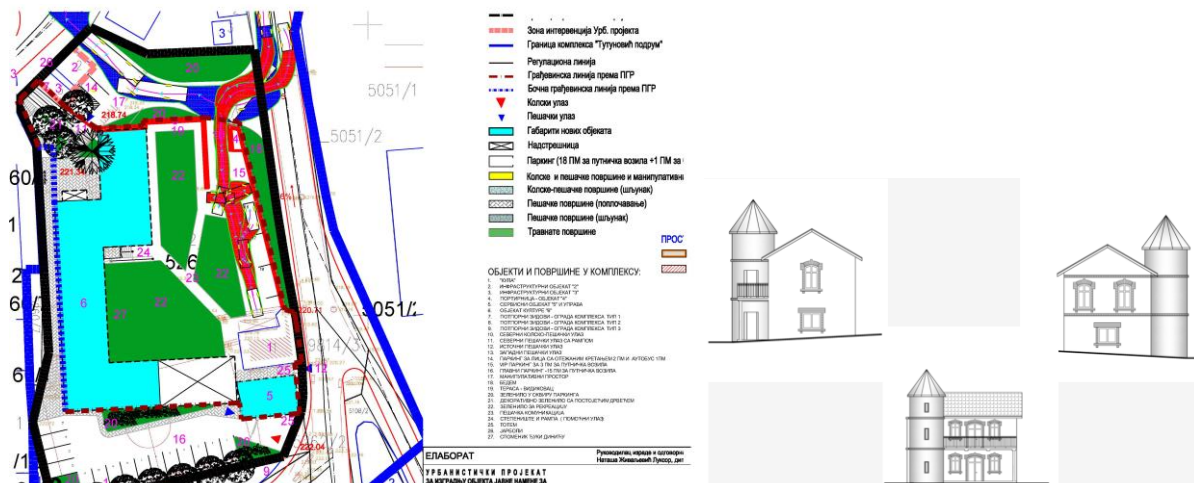


Figure 7. The research and the project were executed under the PE Institute for Urban Planning Niš (Živaljević-Luxor, 2025)

Through these measures, the intervention addresses physical and symbolic voids left by the socialist-era demolitions, counteracting decades of spatial fragmentation and social disconnection while providing a model for addressing similar cases of politically motivated urban erasure.

This case offers a rare opportunity to observe a process that has often been discussed theoretically in the literature: the formation, consolidation, and gradual devaluation of urban identity.

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Unlike most theoretical studies, here we can trace the development of a specific part of the city over a period of more than 130 years, from its emergence and peak vitality to its decline.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This historical trajectory clearly demonstrates that urban interventions disconnected from existing social and spatial dynamics are unlikely to succeed. When planning ignores the natural development of local communities and their collective memory, it risks resistance, disengagement, and long-term degradation of the urban fabric. In the case of Palilula, the erasure of Tutunović Podrum contributed directly to the gradual fragmentation and decline of the surrounding neighborhood. The recent reconstruction, grounded in scientific analysis and historical research, represents an attempt to reverse this process of DAMNATIO MEMORIAE, restoring both the spatial coherence and cultural identity of the area while reconnecting it to its historical role as the center of the district.

Palilula is not the only example of reversed DAMNATIO MEMORIAE. Vršac, located northeast of Niš, also experienced substantial urban transformations; however, its center has been remodeled in accordance with its earlier historical layout. In this way, another form of DAMNATIO MEMORIAE emerged—namely, the erasure of the continuity represented by the socialist period between the Second World War and the subsequent reconstruction. The case of the Palilula center therefore remains an exception.

Further research may be directed toward other cases of DAMNATIO MEMORIAE in the region during and after the period of socialist rule. Alternatively, future studies could examine the peculiarities of the urban morphology of Niš, including particularly the unusual slight rotation of the main axis of the seventeenth-century Niš Fortress toward the natural heritage site Humska Čuka, as well as other unexplored historical and spatial layers embedded within the urban fabric.

This paper is based on the author's own research conducted while serving as the team leader responsible for the preparation of the urban–architectural design commissioned by the City of Niš, and additionally shaped by a lecture delivered at the University of Mostar on October 17, 2025. The work was carried out under the auspices of the Public Enterprise Institute for Urban Planning Niš, authorized for the preparation of the planning documentation in 2025.

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