A Shifting Symbolism: the Vijećnica of Sarajevo

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In the past two hundred years, the city of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, has gone through major changes politically, socially, and physically. After centuries of occupation by the Ottoman Empire, the city became part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the late 19th century. With the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the city sparked World War I, eventually leading to the end of Austro-Hungarian rule and establishment of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The Kingdom fell during World War II, and led to the creation of Socialist Federal Republic Yugoslavia. Socialist Yugoslavia disintegrated in the 1990s, enveloping Sarajevo into a three and a half-year long violent siege. Through these changes, the physical presence of the city has been significantly altered. One building in particular, known as Vijećnica, meaning town hall, has been at the forefront of these changes both physically and symbolically. First built under the Austro-Hungarian occupation, the building became a library during the Socialist period, until its destruction during the war in 1992. As of 2014, the building has been rebuilt and stands as it once did on the banks of the Miljačka River. By studying Vijećnica's position within the political context of Sarajevo, we can better understand how the meaning of symbolic buildings go through changes in relation to the political environment.

In this paper, I will argue that the political elites of Bosnia and Herzegovina have used Vijećnica to implement their own political goals

and motivations, resulting in a shifting of the building's symbolism between each political regime. By analyzing how one building can take on various meanings in relation to the political system, we can better understand how public space is utilized to serve the agendas of the political elite. First, I will discuss the original construction of Vijećnica under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which sought to use the building as a colonial symbol of Austro-Hungarian power and a mechanism of the empire's political goals. Second, I will discuss the building's transition to a library under Socialist Yugoslavia, which putt it in line with the political goals of the Communist Party by opening the building for public use. Finally, I will conclude with the destruction of the building by Serb forces in 1992, which was a targeted assault on the history and cultural heritage of Bosnia. Through these changes, Vijećnica has endured and remains an example of the symbolism of architecture throughout different political, social, and physical changes, reflecting the country's elite influence on public space.

CONSTRUCTION OF VIJEĆNICA

The process of building Vijećnica was tightly controlled by the Austro-Hungarians who had a certain vision for the project. Construction of the building began in 1892 and was completed four years later on April 20, 1896. The project was sponsored and financed by the Austro-Hungarian government which occupied the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Ottomans in the aftermath of the 1878 Treaty of Berlin. The occupation became rather ambiguous in nature as nominally the country still belonged to the Ottomans, while its occupation and administration were left to the Austro-Hungarians. Originally the architect was Karl Pařik, but he was replaced after the provincial governor, Benjámin von Kállay, saw his Byzantine-style designs. According to Maximilian Hartmuth, Kallay preferred the Neo-Islamic work of Alexander Wittek, who was replaced on his death by Croat architect, Ćiril Iveković (Figure 1).

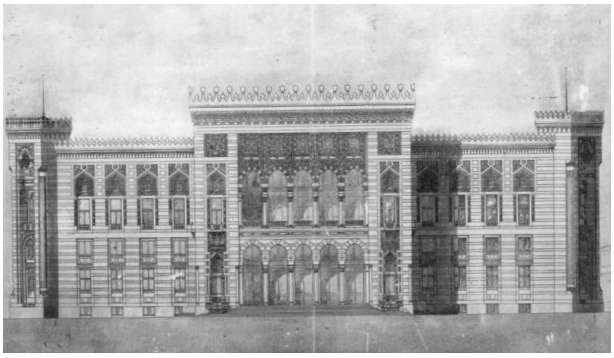


Photo courtesy of Valerijan Žujo, Ferhad Mulabegović, and Smajo Mulaomerović, *The Vijećnica of Sarajevo: Construction, Destruction, Reconstruction*: 46.

Figure 1. Iveković's design of Vijećnica

One of the most prominent features of Vijećnica is the striped façade

which encompasses the whole building. Unclear from where the exact features of the building originated from, the striped façade seems to have been influenced by the Sultan Qaytbay Funerary Complex and Sultan Hassan Mosque in Cairo. According to Maxiliam Hartmuth, Wittek took several trips to Cairo during the period in which he was designing Vjiećnica. Comparing the two mosques and Vijećnica, one can see the similarities in the façade, however the Islamic religious elements like the minaret as well as the funerary domes are not present in Vijećnica (Figures 2 and 3). These various Islamic-esque elements, including the striped façade, striped arches, and geometric elements, are what have led to the labeling of Vijećnica as "Pseudo-Moorish," "Neo-Islamic," or "Oriental."

The Austro-Hungarian policy towards ethnicity in Bosnia has often been connected with the construction of Vijećnica. When the Austro-Hungarians took control of Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Ottomans, they found a multi-ethno-religious land with a large land-owning Muslim population, with the majority being free peasants and tenant farmers who were largely Serb Orthodox or Catholic. While the Catholics were more sympathetic to the seizing of power by the Catholic Austro-Hungarians, both Muslim and Orthodox populations were largely dissatisfied by the Austro-Hungarian occupation. In Sarajevo, the Austro-Hungarians were met with staunch resistance by Bosnian Muslims who briefly led a guerrilla movement against the occupiers. Worried about the potential for South Slav unity against the occupation, the Austro-Hungarians looked to play off the various ethno-religious groups and gave consistent preferential treatment to Catholics while also seeking to appease Bosnian-Muslim elite. However, at the same time, almost adversely, von Kállay during his governorship sought to counter the growing Serb Orthodox and Catholic Croat nationalism, by creating bošnjaštvo, "a multiconfessional Bosnian nationalism" created by the Austro-Hungarians. The Empire took a contradictory approach supporting both ethnic divisions and unequal treatment of ethno-religious groups, while also pushing for a unified multi-confessional Bosnian nationalism.

Within this contradiction of ethnic division and unification lives the motivations of the creation of Vijećnica. Scholars have often attributed Vijećnica's "Oriental" style to the Austro-Hungarian's desire to cater to the Ottoman Muslim elite, by invoking this "Oriental" architectural style. However, Hartmuth points out that this analysis is flawed, as it ignores the similar "Pseudo-Moorish" style used elsewhere in Europe during that period, like in Sephardic mosques in Germany. Instead, Hartmuth posits that the building can be better understood as an attempt by Austro-Hungarians to establish their political dominance over the Ottomans. Hartmuth argues the Vijećnica was



Photo by Frances Frith, 1858

Figure 2. Sultan Qaytbay Funerary Complex in Cairo



Photo courtesy of the New York Public Library Digital Collections

Figure 3. Print of the Sultan Hassan Mosque

an attempt of the Autro-Hungarians to "create a visual argument for legitimacy" for their rule in Bosnia. According to Hartmuth, the use of "Oriental" architectural styles in Vijećnica could have been motivated by the Austro-Hungarian desire to "lay claim to a direct line of descent" from the Ottomans and Muslims of Bosnia to themselves as part of a path of political evolution. Hartmuth compares the use of "visual argument for legitimacy" to British architecture which sought to replicate Indian architecture in an attempt to draw descendancy and legitimacy from the Rajputs and Mughals. While it is hard to know whether the Austro-Hungarians were trying to "lay claim to a direct line of descent" it is clear they looked to establish themselves as the new leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who wanted to ensure that their rule would be unchallenged by any ethno-religious group. While I would caution against glossing over the desire of the Austro-Hungarians to cater to the Muslim elite in their motivations of Vijećnica's "Oriental" style, Hartmuth's argument can be elaborated by looking at how the physical construction of Vijećnica also reflected the desire of the Austro-Hungarians to establish their dominance over the Ottomans.

Taking over from the Ottomans, the Austro-Hungarians saw themselves as the "carriers of civilization" and wanted to highlight their supremacy over the Ottoman Dynasty, especially given the dubious nature of their occupation. The Treaty of Berlin left many ambiguities as to how the Austro-Hungarians would occupy and administer Bosnia and Herzegovina to take power from the Ottomans which the Ottomans had little choice other than to accept the gradual occupation of their former territory. Although they were able to take the country with minimal bloodshed, the political situation was still extremely ambiguous. Scholars have debated on a myriad of reasons which motivated the Austro-Hungarians to annex the territory, including geopolitical competition with Russia, economic incentives and territorial expansion. However, it is clear that colonial motivations also played a role, as Austro-Hungarians perceived themselves to be undertaking a "civilizing mission" in Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to Clemens Ruthner, Austro-Hungarian Joint Finance Minister Benjamin von Kállay, who



Photo courtesy of Valerijan Žujo, Ferhad Mulabegović, and Smajo Mulaomerović, *The Vijećnica of Sarajevo: Construction, Destruction, Reconstruction*: 35.

Figure 4. Part of Mustaj-Pasha Square Before it's Destruction to build Vijećnica

would later become the Provincial Governor in Bosnia, was quoted in the Daily Chronicle saying, "Austria is a great Occidental Empire [...] charged with the mission of carrying civilization to Oriental peoples..." The Vijećnica was built within a larger modernizing project undertaken by the Austro-Hungarians in order to bring "modernity" to Sarajevo and Bosnia in general.

Vijećnica, as a monument, sought to exemplify Austro-Hungarian supremacy and legitimacy. The building's physical presence reflects how Austro-Hungarians looked to establish dominance over the physical spaces of Ottoman Sarajevo. According to Valerijan Žujo, Ferhad Mulabegović, and Smajo Mulaomerović, Vijećnica was built in Mustaj-Pasha square which was one of the oldest urban sections of Ottoman Sarajevo (Figure 4).

The demolishing of Mustaj-Pasha square and the replacement of a traditional urban area with an Austro-Hungarian structure, established spacial dominance of the Austro-Hungarians as they were able to destroy and reshape the former Ottoman urban areas to their own liking. The structure and size of Vijećnica also makes clear the dominant position that the Austro-Hungarians sought to establish over the Ottomans. Vijećnica stands tall over the rest of the Baščaršija neighborhood of Ottoman Sarajevo, structurally dominating the cityscape (Figure 5). Through the construction and creation of Vijećnica it is clear that Austro-Hungarians sought to prove themselves as the new and dominant rulers of Sarajevo compared to the Ottomans.



Photo courtesy of Valerijan Žujo, Ferhad Mulabegović, and Smajo Mulaomerović, *The Vijećnica of Sarajevo: Construction, Destruction, Reconstruction*: 65.

Figure 5. Vijećnica in 1901



Photo courtesy of Valerijan Žujo, Ferhad Mulabegović, and Smajo Mulaomerović, *The Vijećnica of Sarajevo: Construction, Destruction, Reconstruction*: 75.

Figure 6. A reading room in the National and University Library.

Vijećnica in its inception was a

result of colonial power and desires as the Austro-Hungarians sought to create the building for their own political goals to establish their dominance and colonial legitimacy in the newly occupied Bosnia while also bringing about "modernity" to Bosnia. In a new political environment, however, the symbolism of Vijećnica changed along with the status of the building. As Josip Broz Tito, leader of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ), and his Partisans took power in 1945 after a long and bloody conflict in World War II, Vijećnica began to take on a new meaning, revolutionizing from its position as a colonial symbol.

VIJEĆNICA AS A PUBLIC USE LIBRARY

With the end of World War II, Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina as whole began another major transition, with the establishment of socialist Yugoslavia under Tito and the KPJ. Vijećnica also experienced a transformation, as the building became the host of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Figure 6).

Vijećnica's transition into a library was reflective of the anti-nationalism, multi-ethnic, and socialist goals of the KPJ regime, as the party adapted the building to fit their own ideology. This period for Vijećnica, marked the building's transformation into another important symbol for Sarajevo, although this time different from its colonial and perceived "Oriental" past.

Tito and the KPJ came to power after a brutal and bloody conflict within the former Kingdom of Yugoslavia during World War II. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was invaded by Nazi Germany on April 6, 1941, and the cities of Sarajevo and Belgrade were the first attacked. The control of Sarajevo and a large portion of interwar Yugoslavia was ceded to the Nazi puppet-state, the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), which was controlled by a nationalist, fascist Croatian paramilitary called the Ustaša. In response to the partition and occupation of the country, many resistance groups were born, including the Communist Party's militia wing known as the Partisans, led by Tito. The Partisans fought for a multi-ethnic, communist nation, in contrast to the other nationalist groups like the Croat Ustaša or Serb Četniks, who fought for the supremacy of their own ethnic groups. Eventually, the Partisans emerged victorious and took power at the end of the war, establishing the new Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia.

Coming out of a war where ethnic-hatred was encouraged and acted upon by political leaders, the KPJ pushed another narrative instead, focusing on a united, communist, secular, Yugoslav identity rather than ethno-religious groups. A main pillar of this new Yugoslav identity was the phrase, "brotherhood and unity," which argued the importance of Yugoslav belonging over ethno-religious national identity. In this unified, communist, secular push, architecture in Bosnia and Herzegovina

came under the scrutiny of the KPJ. According to historians Dijana Alić and Maryam Gusheh, "the historic links between the Muslims of Bosnia and the Ottoman colonial power, which brought Islam to Bosnia problematized the future of Ottoman architectural heritage in Bosnia." Alić and Gusheh are specifically referring to the old Ottoman economic center of Sarajevo, Baščaršija, which had direct ties to the Ottomans and Bosnian Muslims. Vijećnica, was only influenced by "Oriental" architecture and was built by the Austro-Hungarian colonial power, thus having a unique place in the architectural historiography of Sarajevo. Similar to the Austro-Hungarian's leveling of Mustaj-Pasha Square, the Communist also considered demolishing Baščaršija. It is unknown whether such demolition was considered for Vijećnica, but the structure did not remain as a town hall and instead was transformed into the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1951. This transformation from a space reserved for the colonial political elite, to a public-use space, symbolized the transition from the Austro-Hungarians to a Communist regime. Vijećnica was no longer a marker of the colonial past, but instead a reflection of KPJ-interpreted communist values of a public good that is for all to use. From an article published in the local daily Bosnian newspaper Oslobodjenje discussing the creation of the National Library in 1945, the author writes, "For this purpose, the National Library will acquire all work in our and other languages which are needed by our workers, villagers, farmers, intellectuals, craftsmen and etc." The article highlights the belief that the National Library is for all, not just for academic researchers, but also for workers or villagers or farmers.

As the building transformed symbolism under the Communist regime, so did its symbolism in the greater Sarajevan community. Writing about the library during the Communist period, former librarian Munevera Zećo, writes, "The building itself was a symbol of the city and was the pride of Sarajevans." Zećo's words exemplify how important a symbol Vijećnica had become for Sarajevans, no longer a colonial symbol. In a similar manner to how the KPJ claimed Yugoslavia to be a nation for the "people", Vijećnica was a public good for all. While the KPJ sought to transform usage of the building to its political ideology, the Sarajevan public also came to claim its own symbolism of the building as a representation of the city itself. The elites of Sarajevo did not alone define the public space and Vijećnica in particular, but the broader Sarajevan public also played a key role.

The National Library is for all, not just for academic researchers, but also for workers or villagers or farmers.

Ultimately though, the socialist project of the KPJ failed, resulting in the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

While Tito and the Party sought to push Yugoslav identity and "brotherhood and unity" other political actors within Yugoslavia used nationalist and hateful rhetoric to bring themselves more power and as a result, divide the country. As war broke out in Bosnia in 1992, the public space became a target to those forces looking to tear apart the newly independent country. In this context, Vijećnica's symbolism as a space with a shared Bosnian history made the building a target for destruction. Tragically, as the Vijećnica went up in flames, so did the over 1,500,000 volumes and 600,000 serials in the collection.

DESTRUCTION OF THE LIBRARY

Vijećnica's symbolism as a shared public space for Bosnians and as a historical repository for Bosnian history, resulted in the building being a target for those seeking to destroy the cultural heritage of the country. In June 1991, Yugoslavia fractured as former republics in the country, first Slovenia, then followed by Croatia, declared their independence. War broke out briefly in Slovenia and Croatia fell into a bloody conflict. Bosnia and Herzegovina, had a very ethnically and religiously diverse population, largely composed of Bosnian Muslims, Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs, meaning that war in the country could lead to a long and brutal conflict. On February 29, 1992, Bosnia held an independence referendum with 63.4 percent of the electorate voting for independence, even with calls for boycotts from Bosnian Serbs. On March 3, 1992, Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence from Yugoslavia, leading to a brutal war, as Bosnian Serbs declared the secessionist state of the Republika Srpska and received military support from the Yugoslavia National Army (JNA). As soon as the war began, Serb forces started "carrying out a systematic and well-planned programme of ethnic cleansing of non-Serb populations" in order to create a mono-ethnic state. Sarajevo, the capital of the newly independent Bosnia and Herzegovina came under siege by the Republika Srpska forces, who targeted civilians as well as cultural heri-



Photo courtesy of Valerijan Žujo, Ferhad Mulabegović, and Smajo Mulaomerović, *The Vijećnica of Sarajevo: Construction, Destruction, Reconstruction*: 88.

Figure 7. Vijećnica in flames on August 25, 1992

tage sites throughout the city, including mosques, churches, synagogues. Vijećnica became one of the victims of the siege, as it was hit by artillery fire the night of August 25, 1992, which resulted in the destruction of over 70 percent of the library's holding and the complete destruction of the building (Figure 7).

Vijećnica was not the only cultural heritage targeted by the Bosnian Serb forces, but its destruction was part of a larger campaign which targeted the culture and existence of Bosnia and Herzegovina. On May 17, 1992, a little over a month after the war broke out, Bosnian Serb forces shelled the Oriental Institute of Sarajevo. According to Helen Walasek "the Institute was intentionally targeted by Bosnian Serb artillery with phosphorus shells which burned and completely destroyed its large and important collection of Islamic and Jewish manuscripts in Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, Hebrew and aljamiado (Bosnian written in Arabic script), as well as the Ottoman provincial archives and cadastral registers - primary sources for Bosnia's history and culture." As Walasek notes, the destruction of the Institute was not just the destruction of a building, but an intentional attack on the heritage and history of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The destruction was an attempt at the erasure of the Bosnian Muslim and Ottoman past by the Serb forces looking to push their nationalist, religious, and ethnic-cleansing filled agenda. Walasek quotes art conservator and member of the Office for the Protection of Cultural Property in Sarajevo, Nihad Čengić, saying "How do you destroy a people if you can't kill them all? You destroy all the materials which proved their existence. That's why mosques are being destroyed. That's why the Oriental Institute was destroyed. They're destroying these things to reconstruct history..."

Not only was the physical structure of Vijećnica ruined, but also the historical and literary importance of the National and University Library was destroyed. Along with the once-famous ruined façade, much of the library's collections were also destroyed. According to Žujo, Mulabegović, and Mulaomerović, "numerous manuscripts, most of the cartographic collection, the musical score holdings, the collection of postcards and graphics, as well as numerous other documents of exceptional importance for our culture were irrevocably lost." It is also essential to mention that during the war, several librarians were killed including 30 year-old Aida Buturović, who was shot returning from work at the library on August 25. Zećo also mentions three other colleagues from the library, Mirko Azinović, Adela Leota, and Anto Kovačić, who were killed during the siege. The human loss during the siege was immense.

The importance of Vijećnica as a shared public space was important in its targeting and destruction. As András Riedlmayer writes, the National Library like many other symbols targeted by Serb forces "symbolized the everyday fact of living

together, of shared cultural space." Riedlmayer elaborates that to nationalists, who wanted to emphasize purity and apartheid, these places of shared culture not only went against but also challenged and disproved their beliefs and thus they were destroyed. Vijećnica's symbolism as a place of shared culture, a public good which all Bosnians, regardless of ethnicity or profession could access, stood contrary to the beliefs of the nationalists who sought to build a mono-ethnic state. While it may not be possible to know the "intentions of the people involved" as Kristen Hartmann writes, placing the destruction of Vijećnica and other cultural sites in the larger campaign against cultural heritage waged by Bosnian Serb forces, can be understood as the symbolism of Vijećnica likely playing an important role in its targeting. The Bosnians Serbs' idea of Vijećnica stood contrary to their goals and perception of a mono-ethnic, Serb state. The public space of Sarajevo became a target to the Serb forces, seeking to destroy, change, and mold their physical reality of the city to fit into their nationalist ideology, reflecting how public spaces can be molded to the ideologies of political elites.

CONCLUSION

In a century, the Vijećnica of Sarajevo saw multiple changes in its symbolic value as interpreted by the political elites within the city. Beginning with the building's construction in 1896, Vijećnica exemplified the political goals of the Austro-Hungarian colonial project, to both project power over the Ottoman past while implementing their civilizing mission. With the eventual rise of the Communist Party, Vijećnica was transformed into a public space, a National Library. Unfortunately, the association with shared-space and Bosnian history led to the structure being targeted by Bosnian Serb forces during the Siege of Sarajevo. With the various political changes within the city and country, Vijećnica has been affected, as elites have shifted its symbolism to fit their own goals and realities. The shifting symbolism of Vijećnica demonstrates how public space is not apolitical but rather has the potential to be mobilized for various ideologies. While the political context around the building may change, the physical structure endures, leaving it open for a new symbolism created under their ambitions of a new system.

Recently, Vijećnica has taken on a new symbolism, as it has been reconstructed, reflecting the rebuilding and resiliency of Bosnia after the destruction of the war, while also dealing with the fallout of extreme violence, economic struggles, a divided political system, and rampant corruption. Vijećnica is a testament to the ability of one building to withstand so many changes. Through construction, transformation, destruction, and rebuilding, Vijećnica has stood as part of the Sarajevo skyline. Much like the city of Sarajevo, and its enduring culture, heritage and traditions, while all others pass, Vijećnica remains.

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