

Endangered Heritage: Adaptive Reuse of the War-Damaged General Staff in Belgrade

Ana Curk

Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture, University of Niš, Niš, Serbia, anacurk@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper examines how prolonged legal and material indeterminacy reshapes the heritage value of war ruins and explores adaptive reuse strategies capable of reconciling memorial and utilitarian imperatives. Focusing on Nikola Dobrović's General Staff complex (1965), it traces the site's trajectory from a landmark of Yugoslav late modernism, through a locus of difficult heritage after the 1999 NATO bombing, to a contested commodity in contemporary Belgrade. Drawing on archival and legislative analysis, as well as a critical review of expert discourse, this study examines the impact of legal uncertainty and market pressure on this post-war ruin. The urgency and complexity of this case is clearly shown by Serbian Government's decision in November 2024 to revoke the building's heritage status, followed by its inclusion on Europa Nostra's 7 Most Endangered list for 2025. The analysis outlines three discussion-level scenarios – reconstruction according to the original design, adaptive reconstruction with a public program, and full commercial conversion. Each is evaluated for its capacity to reconcile remembrance, urban integration, and economic viability. The paper concludes with recommendations for the critical conservation of war-damaged architecture under increasing privatization pressures. It proposes a design approach in which minimal intervention and reversible insertion allow the building's material scars to be incorporated into a cultural center and museum program.

Keywords: Adaptive Reuse, Difficult Heritage, General Staff Belgrade

Introduction

The Yugoslav Army Headquarters, more commonly known as the General Staff Building, was conceived at a defining juncture in Yugoslavia's architectural and political evolution. In forging its post-war national and architectural identity, directed toward a collective, modern future and devoid of nationalist symbolism, Yugoslavia deliberately positioned itself outside the ideological framework of the Eastern Bloc. Instead, it aligned with the modernist universalism of the International Style that characterized Western democracies. Rising in the heart of Belgrade, the General Staff Building emerged as a monumental articulation of this ambition: a powerful synthesis of architecture and ideology that embodied the authority of the socialist state while projecting its progressive, internationally minded ethos. Designed by the eminent architect and professor Nikola Dobrović and constructed between 1957 and 1965, the complex served its administrative and military functions for over three decades before suffering extensive damage during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. The social and cultural significance of the General Staff building is multifaceted. It is rooted

in its central location, governmental function, and monumental modernist form that stood as a visual emblem of Yugoslav state power. It remains the only realized work by Nikola Dobrović in Belgrade, representing the essential features of his architectural language and inspiring decades of professional interpretation and debate.

Its destruction during the NATO bombing introduced new and often conflicting layers of meaning. Standing as a ruin for twenty-five years, the complex has also become a potent symbol of collective memory. Acknowledging its architectural and historical value, as well as its endangered condition, the building was designated a cultural monument in 2005. Yet its prime location and economic potential have subjected it to the pressures of speculative urban development, where heritage increasingly yields to market interests. This process culminated in the revocation of its protected status in late 2024.

This paper examines how ongoing legal and material uncertainty reshapes the heritage significance of the site and assesses adaptive reuse strategies that mediate between memorial and functional requirements. By analyzing scenarios ranging from complete reconstruction to commercial redevelopment, the study proposes pathways for balancing commemoration, urban continuity, and economic feasibility.

Nikola Dobrović's General

The General Staff complex was built from Nikola Dobrović's winning proposal in the 1953 invited competition for the State Secretariat for National Defense. The competition, which included ten participants, called for a conceptual design of the army headquarters and access plateau at the intersection of Nemanjina and Kneza Miloša Streets, along with a schematic outline of the Ministry of Defense building on the opposite side of the street (Kovačević 2001, 39–46; Matejić 2012, 169–170). Conceived as a dual composition, the two buildings, referred to as Building A and Building B, form a unified ensemble whose mirrored forms and spatial dialogue across Nemanjina Street express Dobrović's modernist synthesis of monumentality, symbolism, and urban context. The two volumes were articulated as terraced forms, cascading toward Nemanjina Street and establishing a distinctive urban motif that served as a symbolic gateway to the city. Each building is accessed through prominent entrance pavilions arranged parallel to Kneza Miloša Street. The entire composition is set back from the street line, accentuating the structure's dynamic silhouette and enabling a full appreciation of its architectural form. A tower positioned at the end of Building B serves as a visual focal point, dominating the skyline of the complex (Fig. 1). The aesthetic character of the façade is defined by the contrast of materials whose interplay enhances the expressiveness of the composition: rough, red Kosjerić stone with a convex texture, arranged in a square grid, juxtaposed with smooth, light marble from the island of Brač (Kovačević 2001, 140–142, 173–174). The spatial gesture of two large blocks and the void between them was intended to embody the philosophical notion of “moving space”. In an essay entitled “Moving Space—Bergson's Dynamic Schemes—A New Art Environment”, Dobrović (1960) described his ambition to form an environment in which space itself was set into motion, guiding the observer toward a new experience of the present. In the same text, Dobrović briefly mentions the associative link between the canyon of the Sutjeska River, the site of a decisive Partisan battle during World War II, and the characteristic form of the building, conceived as its urban symbol.

The abstract nature of Dobrović's initial conceptual framework has led to decades of

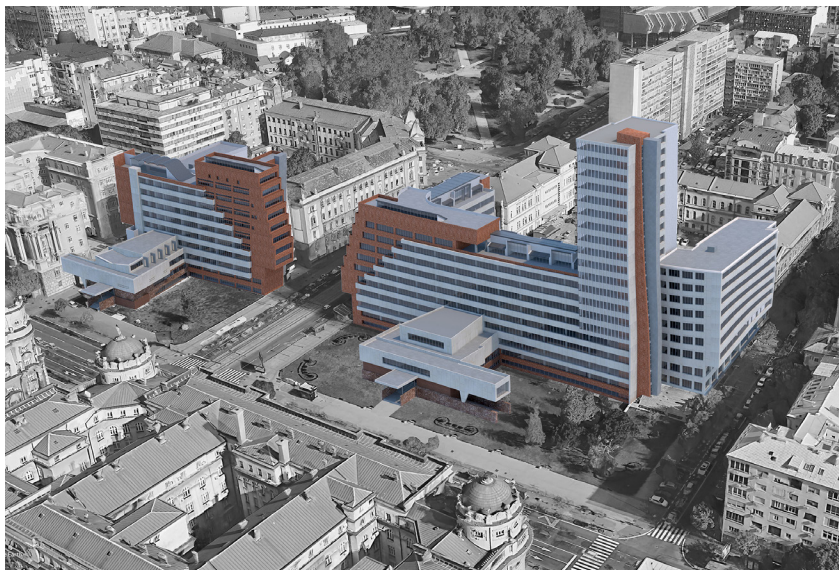


Fig. 1. 3D reconstruction of the General Staff complex (Ana Curk, 2021)

interpretations and attempts to understand the relationship between its theoretical premise and the resulting architectural space. Matejić (2012) and Milošević (2015) provide a detailed genealogy of previous studies on the subject, noting that most of them refer directly to Dobrović's text while still leaving important aspects unresolved. Kovačević (2001) offers a critical shift in interpretation by arguing that the philosophical concept did not constitute the origin of Dobrović's design, but rather represents a "de-theorization or re-theorization" of the actual design process, retrospectively ascribed to it. A distinct contribution to the discourse comes from Vladimir Kulić (2010), who refocuses attention on the symbolism of the Sutjeska Canyon. He emphasizes that the two dominant interpretations of the project are complementary, each addressing a different audience. The theory of 'moving space' defines the project's stylistic and intellectual framework and primarily engages architects and academics, while the association with the Sutjeska battle offers a more accessible layer of meaning to the broader public. Kulić also underscores the transience and shifting relevance of each interpretation, depending on the observer, the prevailing socio-political context, and, as time will show, the state of preservation of the complex.

Destruction and Aftermath (1999 NATO Bombing)

The General Staff complex was struck by NATO air raids twice within a brief interval, leaving lasting scars on its monumental structure. The first attack, during the night between April 29 and 30, inflicted severe damage on the entrance pavilion and the cascading cantilever of Building B, the iconic element projecting above Nemanjina Street, while Building A suffered structural damage in its central section. The second bombardment, on the night between May 7 and 8, caused Building B to lose its entire garage tract, and

the force of the explosions shattered almost all windows. The integrity of Building A was further and irreversibly compromised, leaving the once-coherent composition fragmented and exposed (Fig. 2). A precise estimate of the damage has never been released. The only numerical damage assessment that is available is the "Real Estate Report for Building A of the General Staff of the Army of Serbia and Montenegro" from 2003, stating that 3,497m² of the total 12,653m² in the northern part of the complex was destroyed, while the remaining part of the building was severely damaged. The bombing of the General Staff building was undoubtedly a symbolic act of reckoning



Fig. 2. Damage to the General Staff building immediately after the second bombing (Dragiša Poznanović, 1999)

with an entire state system, particularly given that the building had been abandoned long before the attack and could not have constituted a strategic military target (Jovanović Weiss 2001; Kulić 2010). It was struck precisely because of its architecture and its modernist form embodying the very idea of Yugoslavia.

In 2005, following a professional initiative, the Government of Serbia inscribed the General Staff complex in the National Register of Cultural Heritage as a “cultural property of great significance” (Official Gazette RS, No. 115/2005). This belated protection, granted only after the bombing and extensive damage, reflects the broader absence of clear criteria for evaluating twentieth-century architecture in post-socialist countries and a general lack of appreciation for the significance of modernist heritage (Vukotić Lazar 2015, 413). The listing was based on the belief that the damage was reparable and that, despite the bomb-inflicted voids, the building’s character and spatial integrity remained intact. In the years that followed, alleged structural risks were invoked to justify the removal of the central section of Building A and the entrance pavilion of Building B. These interventions paved the way for discussions of the complex’s complete demolition, despite its protected status.

Scenarios for the Future of the General Staff Building

The decision to grant the General Staff building heritage status signaled an intention to reconstruct it to safeguard the architectural and urban qualities that had defined its pre-bombing significance and justified its protection. This measure was adopted at a crucial moment. As early as 2006, the Republic Directorate for Property sought to revoke the designation, arguing that the economic potential of the site surpassed its cultural value. Attempts to remove the building from the heritage register, paving the way for its sale, demolition, and likely substitution with a hotel or other commercial facility, re-emerged

in 2013 (Mučibabić, Vukasović 2013) and have continued intermittently in the years since. Meanwhile, the complex has taken on an additional layer of symbolic meaning, serving as an informal memorial to the NATO bombing and a material embodiment of collective and urban memory tied to the recent war. Reflecting on the coexistence of voids, the one conceived by Dobrović and those carved by the missiles, Jovanović Weiss (2001) poignantly poses the question: “Which void to identify with, which void to remember?” In 2017, architect Slobodan Maldini, representing the Association of Serbian Architects, even proposed that the ruined complex be nominated for inclusion on UNESCO’s World Heritage List as a monument to wartime memory. Although this initiative did not advance, decades of inaction regarding the site’s rehabilitation have allowed the bomb-scarred façade to assume new meanings within Belgrade’s urban fabric.

Architectural associations, as well as historians and theorists of architecture, remain united in the view that the General Staff building must be reconstructed, primarily in terms of its form. Within professional discourse, two principal models of reconstruction are discussed. The first entails a conservation-based approach: a restoration faithful to Nikola Dobrović’s original design, accompanied by the reinstatement of its predominantly administrative function. The second model also implies the reconstruction of the building in a manner that would restore its physical characteristics as a cultural monument, while allowing for adaptive reuse through the introduction of public and cultural programs. Reconstructing the General Staff building in its original form and function would restore its architectural integrity and reaffirm its significance as both a heritage asset and a functioning civic landmark. However, such an approach would inevitably diminish the visible traces of the 1999 bombing that have become an integral part of its historical narrative and collective memory. Completely outside the ongoing debate over which layers of value should be preserved and in what manner, the highest state institutions have continued to promote a model of commercial redevelopment. After several years of relative silence, the issue of privatization has resurfaced, and in November 2024, the General Staff complex was stripped of its protected status. The procedure for revoking its designation as a cultural monument was legally irregular and conducted without transparency. Professional associations responded decisively by organizing petitions and public discussions. A working group of professionals, acting in the public interest, was established to compile all available documentation related to the site’s protection and to advocate for the preservation of cultural heritage. The future of the General Staff building remains uncertain.

Adaptive Reuse of the General Staff Building: Design Proposal for a Cultural Centre and Museum

The proposed program and design concept for the restoration of the General Staff complex constituted the author’s final master’s project at the China Academy of Art in 2021, completed under the supervision of Professor Wang Shu. The project was developed from the theoretical framework of the author’s master’s thesis, titled *Research on the Relation of War, Culture, and the Built Environment: Architectural Ruins as Cultural Construction after NATO’s Bombing of Yugoslavia*. The narrower focus of the research was directed toward mapping the architectural casualties of the NATO bombing in Belgrade and examining their social and cultural significance before and after the act of destruction. Particular attention was given to how selected models of urban revitalization have influenced the evolving position

of these sites within collective memory. Among the case studies was the General Staff building, whose significance changed from its role as a representation of state authority, then through its architectural merit, turning into an unintentional monument of NATO bombing, and finally becoming endangered heritage.

The design proposal adopted an adaptive reuse approach that combines careful reconstruction of the building's original architectural features with the integration of new public and cultural programs, aligning physical restoration with the preservation of memory. The project proposes assigning a public function to Building A by transforming it into a cultural center accessible to citizens. The program would include a museum exhibition dedicated to Yugoslav modernist architectural heritage, as well as a library, conference halls, and multifunctional spaces for academic and cultural events. Building B, which structurally withstood much of the bombing, would be reconstructed and reinstated to its original administrative role for the needs of the Ministry of Defense, currently located in its undamaged sections—the tower and the southern wing.

In terms of form and composition, and in accordance with the provisions governing the building's protected status, the structure is reconstructed to the greatest possible extent in line with Dobrović's original design, to preserve the architectural and urban values that warranted its designation as part of the national cultural heritage. At the same time, through subtle modifications in the treatment of surface materials, the project seeks to reconcile two distinct layers of meaning: the architectural and the commemorative. While the original material, the red stone from Kosjerić, would be retained, the design envisions the reconstruction of façade sections scarred by missile strikes in a way that preserves the presence of the voids. The façade system would comprise two layers: an inner glass wall and a secondary steel framework aligned with the existing façade plane. Within the 25 × 25 cm grid of the steel mesh, similar to the substructure described in the technical appendix to Dobrović's project (Kovačević 2001, 173-174), fractured stone fragments would be inserted in place of complete square panels.

This composition forms a robust, semi-transparent lattice of fractured stone through which light would subtly filter. During the day, and particularly when viewed from a distance, the irregular pattern of the stone would be scarcely perceptible due to the building's monumental scale. In this way, the atmosphere and imposing presence of the General Staff complex would be revitalized, while preserving its modernist character (Fig. 3). At night, illuminated from within, the luminous "scars" tracing the sites of impact would emerge. The glowing voids, broken slabs, and scattered joints symbolically evoke the suspended instant of the explosion—a moment of silence when the façade panels shattered under the blast yet had not yet fallen to the ground (Fig. 4). Thus, after dark, the building itself becomes a living monument to the nocturnal NATO air raids.

Rather than erasing the material evidence of the 1999 bombing in pursuit of Dobrović's original vision, such a strategy would reinterpret it within a contemporary civic framework, transforming the reconstructed structure into an active setting for reflection, dialogue, and collective cultural experience.



Fig. 3. Daytime, reconstructed Dobrović's General Staff with barely visible façade alterations, 3D visualisation (Ana Curk, 2021)



Fig. 4. Bright voids on the evening and nighttime façade, transforming the complex into a monument to the NATO bombing, 3D visualisation (Ana Curk, 2021)

Conclusion

The General Staff building embodies the inherent contradictions of war-damaged heritage. As an architectural landmark, it represents the ambitions of Yugoslav modernism; as a ruin, it bears witness to the violence of 1999; and as a contested site, it reflects Serbia's struggle between remembrance, privatization, and urban development.

This study demonstrates that choices regarding reconstruction shape the evolving meaning

of the site: total reconstruction risks erasing the material evidence of the past, while commercial redevelopment undermines its cultural significance. A hybrid adaptive reuse approach offers a balanced alternative – one that respects both the tangible and intangible dimensions of heritage while reactivating the site as a public resource.

At a time when the complex's legal protection has been revoked yet its international importance reaffirmed, decisive action is imperative. The proposed cultural center and museum exemplify how minimal, reversible interventions can weave memory into the fabric of contemporary urban life.

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