

Reframing a Monument: the House of Revolution in Nikšić between Memorial Architecture and Fragmented Adaptive Reuse

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Abstract

The House of Revolution in Nikšić, Montenegro, designed by Slovenian architect Marko Mušič in 1976, remains one of the largest and most ideologically complex unfinished buildings in the former Yugoslavia. Conceived as both a cultural centre and a monument to the city's World War II liberation, its construction began in 1977 but was halted in 1989. Over time, the structure shifted from a symbol of collective pride to a contested and often negatively perceived element of urban identity. This paper examines the House of Revolution as a case of adaptive reuse within a post-socialist context. While many citizens perceive the building as a failed relic, others recognise its historical and social value, particularly given that its construction was collectively financed through mandatory salary contributions. In 2015, an international architectural competition proposed a phased adaptation strategy, yet the winning concept was never implemented. Instead, the building has undergone fragmented and uncoordinated reuse. The paper argues that the House of Revolution demonstrates how unfinished monumental architecture can be understood not as a problem to be completed, but as a layered and ongoing process of negotiating memory, identity, and contemporary use.

Keywords: House of Revolution, Nikšić, Adaptive Reuse

Introduction

Following the Second World War, Nikšić underwent rapid political, social, and economic transformation within socialist Yugoslavia. Due to its favourable geographic position and industrial potential, the city emerged as a centre of development, significantly reshaping its urban structure and identity (Bojković 2024).

A key moment in this transformation was the post-war urban plan developed between 1954 and 1958 at the Institute of Urbanism of the Faculty of Architecture, Civil Engineering, and Geodesy in Zagreb, under the leadership of Josip Seissel. This plan established a coherent spatial framework that integrated new urban blocks while maintaining continuity with the historical core (Bojković 2024). (Fig. 1)

Within this context, monumental architecture played an important role in expressing collective memory and ideological values. The House of the Revolution, designed by Marko Mušič in 1976, was conceived as both a cultural centre and a memorial to the city's liberation during the Second World War. Its monumental scale, ideological charge, and unfinished

state make it a particularly challenging case of adaptive reuse in a post-socialist setting. Adaptive reuse theory emphasises preserving cultural significance while enabling contemporary use and community engagement (Plevoets and Van Cleempoel 2011; Bullen and Love 2011; Brooker and Stone 2004). In Nikšić, however, these principles are complicated by ideological ambiguity, institutional indecision, and fragmented implementation.



Fig. 1. Location of the House of the Revolution within the urban core of Nikšić (photo by the author, 2018)

This paper is based on the analysis of planning documentation, architectural drawings, and relevant literature. Using an analytical and interpretative approach, it identifies key obstacles to the coherent adaptive reuse of the House of the Revolution.

Problems and Challenges of Adaptive Reuse

Adaptive reuse has become a central theme in contemporary architectural discourse, particularly in relation to sustainability and the transformation of post-industrial and post-socialist environments. Rather than a linear process, adaptive reuse involves continuous negotiation between historical layers, present needs, and future possibilities (Plevoets and Van Cleempoel 2019).

One of the primary challenges concerns authenticity and integrity. Douglas (2006) notes that interventions in existing structures require balancing historical meaning with new

functional demands. In ideologically charged buildings such as the House of the Revolution, this balance is especially delicate, as the original political narrative no longer aligns with contemporary social values.

Economic and institutional constraints further complicate adaptive reuse. According to Bullen and Love (2011), such projects often demand greater coordination and investment than new construction. In post-socialist contexts like Montenegro, limited institutional capacity and slow decision-making processes hinder long-term implementation. The House of the Revolution exemplifies this condition, remaining suspended between symbolic recognition and practical neglect.

A further challenge lies in ideological reinterpretation. As Brooker and Stone (2004) argue, adaptive reuse inevitably entails symbolic transformation. In Nikšić, adapting a monument dedicated to socialist revolutionary struggle requires confronting unresolved questions of collective memory and urban identity (Huyssen 2003).

Finally, fragmentation represents a critical issue. Although the 2015 international competition proposed a phased and integrated strategy, its non-implementation resulted in spontaneous and disconnected uses. These partial adaptations reflect institutional incapacity rather than a deliberate reuse strategy, producing spatial and symbolic incoherence (Cairns 2019; Macdonald 2009).

Spatial and Social Dimensions of the House of the Revolution

The House of the Revolution was conceived as both a memorial and a multifunctional cultural centre, intended to preserve collective memory while supporting public life (Bojković 2018). (Fig. 2)

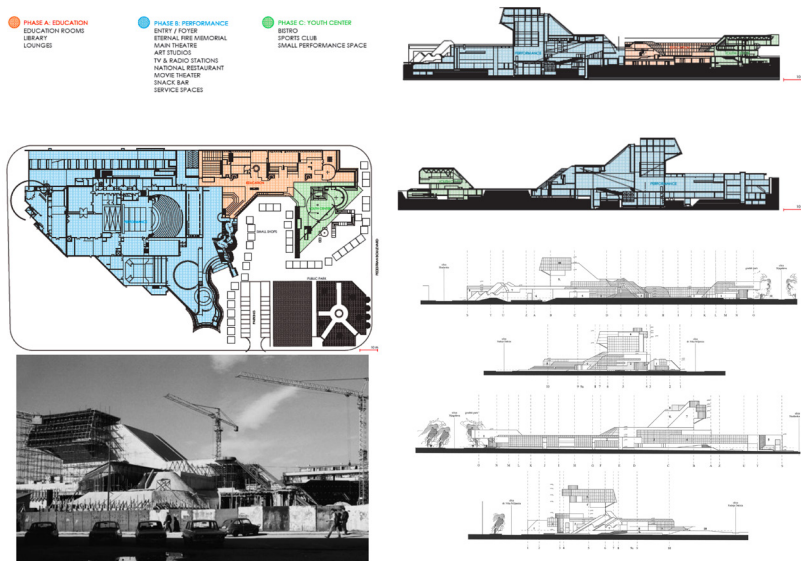


Fig. 2. Plans, sections, and elevations of the House of the Revolution (based on the original 1976 design)

Mušić's project envisioned a complex of approximately 22,000 m², including theatres, cinemas, exhibition spaces, educational facilities, and public promenades, while the memorial function occupied a relatively small portion of the building (Bojković 2019). A central internal promenade functioned as the spatial organiser, linking programmatic elements and integrating the structure into the urban fabric. (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3. Exterior and interior of the House of the Revolution (photos by Sead Šabotić, 2015)

Construction ceased in the late 1980s due to political and economic instability. Over time, the unfinished structure deteriorated and became associated with neglect, despite its continued recognition as a cultural and historical asset (Milošević 2013).

In 2015, the Montenegrin Ministry of Sustainable Development and Tourism organised an international competition to reinterpret the building. The winning proposal by SADAR+VUGA and HHF Architekten introduced the 10/20/70 strategy, combining limited programmed use, public promenades, and large areas reserved for future activation. (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4. Winning proposal from the 2015 international competition (SADAR+VUGA and HHF Architekten)

Despite its conceptual clarity, the proposal was never implemented, leaving the building vulnerable to uncoordinated interventions.

The House of the Revolution Today

Today, the House of the Revolution is characterised by fragmented and unsystematic use. A restaurant, gym, commercial spaces, and a local television station occupy isolated parts of the structure, while most volumes remain unused. Each intervention functions independently, lacking spatial continuity and symbolic coherence. (Fig. 5)



Fig. 5. The House of the Revolution today (photo by Jelena Kontić, edited by the author 2024)

International experience demonstrates that the adaptive reuse of large-scale heritage structures requires long-term coordination and institutional commitment. The transformation of the Zollverein Coal Mine Industrial Complex in Essen illustrates how sustained planning and governance are essential for successful reuse (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

In Nikšić, the absence of an integrated strategy has resulted in the loss of architectural and symbolic unity. The building, once conceived as a unifying civic monument, now appears as a disjointed assemblage of partial adaptations, reflecting broader institutional and cultural uncertainty.

Conclusions

The House of the Revolution in Nikšić illustrates the complexity of adaptive reuse when applied to monumental and ideologically charged architecture. Institutional limitations, fragmented implementation, and unresolved questions of memory have prevented a coherent transformation, despite the availability of well-conceived architectural strategies. The 2015 international competition demonstrated that phased activation and spatial

openness can provide viable frameworks for reuse. However, without long-term institutional commitment, such concepts remain unrealised.

Rather than framing unfinished socialist monuments as problems requiring completion or erasure, this case suggests an alternative understanding of adaptive reuse as a layered and ongoing process. Accepting incompleteness, enabling incremental activation, and maintaining symbolic ambiguity may represent more appropriate strategies for engaging with difficult heritage in post-socialist cities. In this sense, the House of the Revolution functions not only as a challenge, but also as a critical laboratory for rethinking adaptive reuse as a temporal and negotiated practice.

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