

# **Orientalizing architecture in northern Bosnia under Habsburg rule: Exaggerating alterity as a means of cohesion?**

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This paper<sup>1</sup> offers preliminary insights into the phenomenality of Orientalizing styles of architecture in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the period of Austro-Hungarian rule. It examines in some detail three buildings in Banja Luka and Gradiška, with brief detours to Brčko, Dubica, and Šamac, focusing on the problem of decision-making in the planning and design process. This discussion is aided by plan material discovered in the relevant archives as well as contemporary periodicals. The inquiry will conclude with ruminations on this phenomenon's geography: Did Orientalizing architecture in Bosnia's northern region, bordering Croatia-Slavonia, carry different meanings than in Sarajevo and other inland metropolises?

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In 2017, the European Research Council (ERC) provided funding to a five-year project that proposed an in-depth study of the phenomenon of the so-called Moorish style during Habsburg rule in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1878-1918). The project team at the University of Vienna's Department of Art History and its associates in Bosnia set out to shed new light on not only a large number of relevant buildings, but also on the mind-set behind their style's conception and diffusion; instead of 'Moorish', they employ the term 'Orientalizing' as this style drew not upon one but several principal sources within the artistic heritage of the Islamic world. [1][2]

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The project also committed to studying lesser-known buildings located outside Sarajevo, Travnik, and Mostar. In these cities are found not only considerable concentrations of such buildings, but also their most monumental examples. Much less studied, while by no means of lesser interest, are numerous buildings in Orientalizing forms in Bosnia's northern and eastern regions. They, too, serve to elucidate the phenomenality and development of an Orientalizing visuality in Habsburg-era Bosnian architecture.

This paper will present preliminary findings related to such buildings. They have been advanced with the assistance of Miroslav Malinović and Ajla Bajramović, who have surveyed on foot cities and towns in Bosnia's northern lowlands for surviving buildings in variations of this style, and have undertaken archival research in Sarajevo, Travnik, and Banja Luka.

Through a deliberate selection of cases, this paper endeavours to name and discuss the broader issues involved. In doing so, it intends to facilitate the step from documentation to critical analysis.

## 2. CASE STUDIES

### 2.1. Banja Luka, Gornji Šeher Elementary School, ca. 1896 (44°44'51.4"N 17°09'19.9"E)

Among the many schools erected during Austro-Hungarian rule in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Orientalizing forms tended to be reserved for projects related to the Muslim community.<sup>2</sup> This makes the elementary school in the Banja Luka quarter of Srpske Toplice (formerly Gornji Šeher) an interesting case [Fig. 1]. Archival plans [Figs. 2-3] found in the Arhiv Republike Srpske prove that it was planned as a regular elementary school ("IV klassige Elementarschule"). That is to say, it was not built as an Islamic *mekteb* or *medrese* and later converted to a secular function.

The same set of project plans helps us securely date this building (or, at any rate, its planning) to 1896 and broadly attribute it to the provincial head engineer (*Kreisingenieur*) Franz (von) Michanovich. We also learn that he was aided by an assistant ("*Ing.-Adjkt*") named Paul Pirckmayer. Just what this can be understood to mean will be debated below.

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<sup>2</sup> The most monumental examples of educational buildings in this style concern cases in which Muslim high schools from the Ottoman period were rebuilt, usually *ex novo*, as was the case with the *medrese* of Elçi İbrahim Paşa at Travnik (*Elçi İbrahim-pašina medresa*, 1895, arch. Ćiril Iveković). A less prominent example in the area of Banja Luka is the *medrese* of Derviş Hanım Smailagić (*Derviş-hanumina medresa*, ca. 1899, arch. unidentified) at Gradiška, reopening in its original function in 2017. By contrast, for supra-confessional schools the choice of an Orientalizing style was uncommon. The Mostar Gymnasium (1898/1902, arch. Franz Blažek) is easily the most prominent exception.

The Gornji Šeher School is, after the Muslim Reading Room (Turkish *Kıraethane*) perished in the earthquake of 1969, the only surviving building in an Orientalizing style in Bosnia's second-largest city. The polychrome banding and the windows' superimposed horseshoe shapes identify it as belonging to a surge of Habsburg-period Orientalizing public buildings of the 1890s and early 1900s. The widely overhanging eaves, here supported on wooden corbels, are also characteristic for many buildings in this group. The current colouring scheme with alternating pink and yellow is, of course, in disagreement with a more likely original horizontal plaster banding in dark red and beige.



*Figure 1. Banja Luka, elementary school in Srpske Toplice (Gornj Šeher).  
Architect: Franz (von) Mihanovich, built ca. 1896. Photo: Miroslav Malinović, 2018.*

Certain aspects make the Gornji Šeher School diverge from the simplest cases of buildings in this style. Firstly, the generous fenestration; secondly, the asymmetrical façade; and, thirdly, the elaborate roof construction. The latter departs from the economical pitched or hipped standards at the expense of a more varied roof-scape, and closely echoes, as the archival plans reveal, the

interior's organization. The decision for, toleration of, or consent to, an asymmetrical appearance may have followed from the design problem caused by differently sized classrooms: the first and second classes were to have 62 pupils/tables, the third and fourth classes only 49.

At the same time, the architect appears to have been determined to orient the buildings so that all classrooms face east. On account of the conspicuously dense fenestration, one wonders if Michanovich was particularly concerned about lighting in this specific project – perhaps due to the school's location in a narrow and deep pass of the Vrbas at the outskirts of the Dinaric Alps. Yet, a key question remains: Why was an Orientalizing style found appropriate for a secular school in the case of this project and not in others?

One approach could be to relate it to the milieu into which it was built – a predominantly Muslim suburb of Banja Luka. The 1895 population census recorded in Gornji Šeher and neighbouring Novoselija, the quarters this school would likely have served, 506 houses with 2,427 inhabitants. 97% of these adhered to the Muslim faith. The fact that less than half of this demographic depended on income from agricultural work also points to a close connection with Banja Luka's urban economy and a corresponding socio-economic status. In Gornji Šeher, a large number (50) of householders was moreover identified as landowners [3:152-3]. This was to be a 'secular' school, but for pupils who came almost exclusively from a Muslim background.<sup>3</sup>

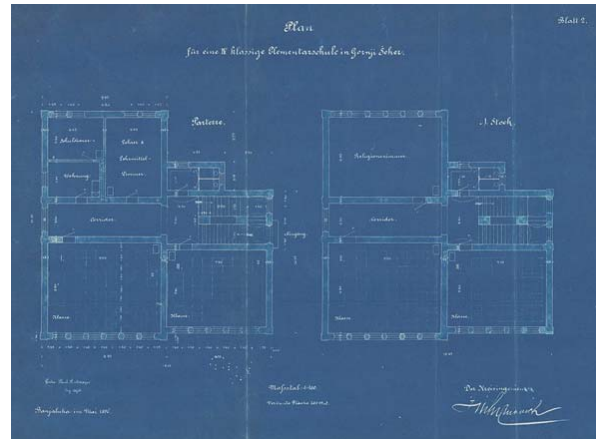
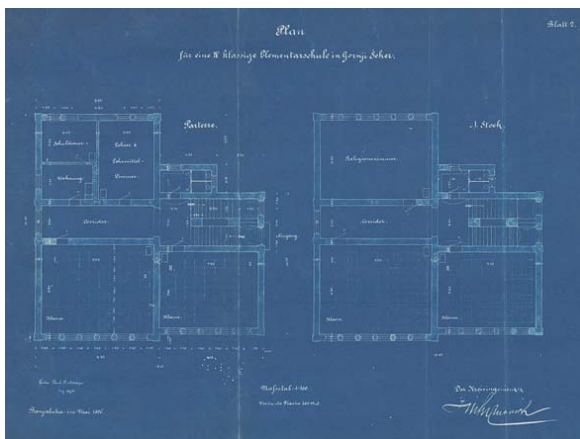


Figure 2. and 3. Banja Luka, floor plans of the Gornji Šeher school, dated 1896.  
Source: Arhiv Republike Srpske.

<sup>3</sup> In 1895, all but 35 of Banja Luka's 6,042 non-Muslims (45% of a total population of 13,566) lived in the lowland quarters of Donji Šeher (mixed but predominantly Muslim), Varoš (almost entirely non-Muslim), and Petričevac (not yet developed).

Or should the preference for this style be credited to the *Kreisingenieur* Michanovich, whose name is linked to a large number of projects in this style in Bosnia's northeast?<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, we still know little about the decision-making power of this group of public servants. They may have mainly executed, if often quite skillfully, what was predetermined by others.

Quite telling in this respect is an unexecuted project for a district authority building (*Bezirksamtsgebäude*) in Bosanska/Kozarska Dubica. Michanovich's signature is found on blueprints that we discovered in the state archives at Sarajevo [Fig. 4]. The design in an Orientalizing style, displaying many similarities with the Gornji Šeher school, is identified there as corresponding to, or deriving from, a template ("Nach einer Type der Landesregierung"). This would suggest that, in such and related cases, stylistic choices were made by upper echelons before orders to plan the details reached the provincial head engineers and their collaborators.



Figure 4. Dubica, project for an unbuilt district authority building.  
Architect: Franz (von) Mihanovich, undated. Source: Arhiv Bosne i Hercegovine.

It may also have been the case that an Orientalizing style was found more appropriate in this situation – by whomever was in the position to make that decision – on account of the asymmetrical scheme apparently necessitated by local conditions, notably the sloping terrain and the lighting

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Tuzla's *Šarena džamija* and the district authority building (*Bezirksamtsgebäude*, later municipality/*općina*) of Gračanica.

problem. The school building standard was an axial symmetrical scheme with classicizing ornamentation. This scheme was, for the same topographical and lighting reasons, probably not considered a viable option for this specific plot. The choice for Orientalizing forms thus may also have followed the decision to proceed with an asymmetrical solution, which may have been found unthinkable for, say, a project in Neo-Renaissance forms. The asymmetry and the resulting varied roof-scape may not have looked that out of place in a residential suburb. The free-standing building indeed resembles a villa more than a school. Orientalizing features such as the polychrome banding or the horseshoe shape were evidently foreign insertions into the traditional architectural fabric of Gornji Šeher. However, the same features probably supported the perceptibility of the object as a public building.

Whatever the considerations in the original planning process, it is clear that this school was not a generic project but a surprisingly place-sensitive response, by an almost anonymous public servant, to the challenge of building an elementary school in this particular topographic and cultural setting. The school is listed (as *Zgrada OŠ "Branislav Nušić"*) as a cultural good of Republika Srpska (NKD025) but not as a National Monument of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

## **2.2. (Bosanska) Gradiška, Stara Vijećnica, 1890s (?) with extension ca. 1907 (45°08'49.3"N 17°14'59.1"E)**

While the former City Hall of Sarajevo (*Vijećnica*) is easily the best-known Orientalizing style building in the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is less known that a considerable number of administrative buildings drawing upon a related stylistic repertoire exists in smaller towns throughout the country. In towns along the riverine borders with Croatia, no less than five town halls built in this style are preserved – in Brčko, Kostajnica, Gradiška, Novi Grad (Bosanski Novi), and Odžak.

Among these, the *vijećnica* of Brčko is deservedly the best known. This is a free-standing, axial symmetrical building planned on a tripartite, essentially palatial scheme. All other town halls in this part of Bosnia were erected in corner positions and drew upon different formal typologies.



Figure 5. Gradiška, Stara Vijećnica, 1890s and ca. 1907 (?). Photo: Ajla Bajramović, 2018.

The former municipal building of Gradiška [Fig. 5] is easily the most remarkable historical building in this border town that once featured an important fortress. Within the typology of Habsburg-Bosnian public buildings this case is unusual in many respects. Its architectural ambition clearly surpasses that of the standard type administrative building. The *vijećnica* of Gradiška is alone among the mentioned examples with a pronounced and centrally positioned single belfry – a mainstay component of European town halls. The extroverted, onion-shaped cupola capping this town hall's belfry probably ensured that it was not mistaken for a church's belfry. This was certainly an unwanted association among the makers of Habsburg policy in Bosnia, who at this point in time sought to avoid alienating Bosnia's Muslims.

The belfry pinpointed the town centre for those arriving by boat. In fact, a situation plan [Fig. 6] reveals that this *vijećnica* was located right where the main street met the street leading to the landing spot for ships (“Save-Überfuhr”, “Agentie”, and “Save-Wachstube”), opening toward a square (“Platz”) with a park. From the upper-storey office beneath the cupola, most central places in Gradiška could be surveyed. In the projected floor plan of 1907 [Fig. 7], this room was taken by the district governor (*Bezirksvorsteher*). However, there is reason to believe that it was previously the mayor’s, and located there purposefully.

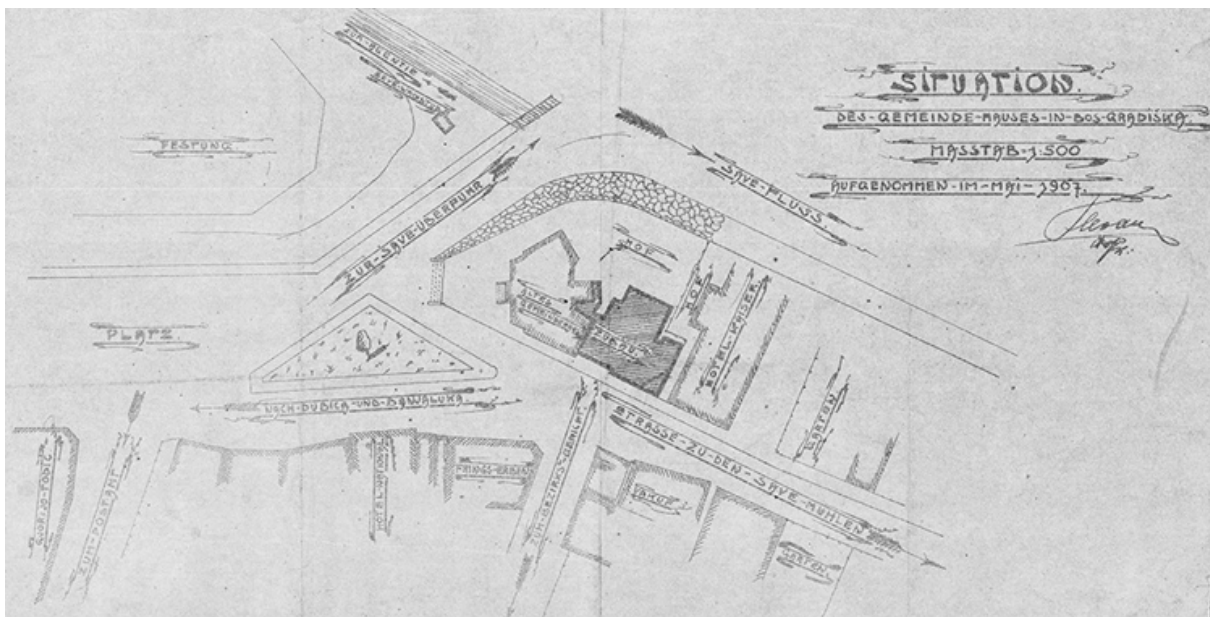


Figure 6. Gradiška, situation plan of with the extension of the former municipal building highlighted.  
Source: Arhiv Republike Srpske.

At this point, it must be noted that the building we see today is actually the product of two building phases. The first, presumably dating to the early 1890s, produced a corner building with arms of approximately the same length hinging from a central tower. This was a municipal building (*općina*), identified on the plan material as “Gemeindehaus,” while supra-municipal matters were still handled in another (presumably older) building variously identified on other archival plans in this lot as “Konakgebäude” and “Bezirksamt”. It appears that it was then decided to turn that older building into the district court – another (undated) plan in this lot identifies it as “Bezirksgerichtsgebäude” (district-level courthouse) and assigns the rooms to corresponding functions – and move the district administration functions into an enlarged municipal building. This detachment may be related to the separation of district courts (*Bezirksgerichte*) from the district authority offices (*Bezirksämter*) in 1906. [4:171-1]

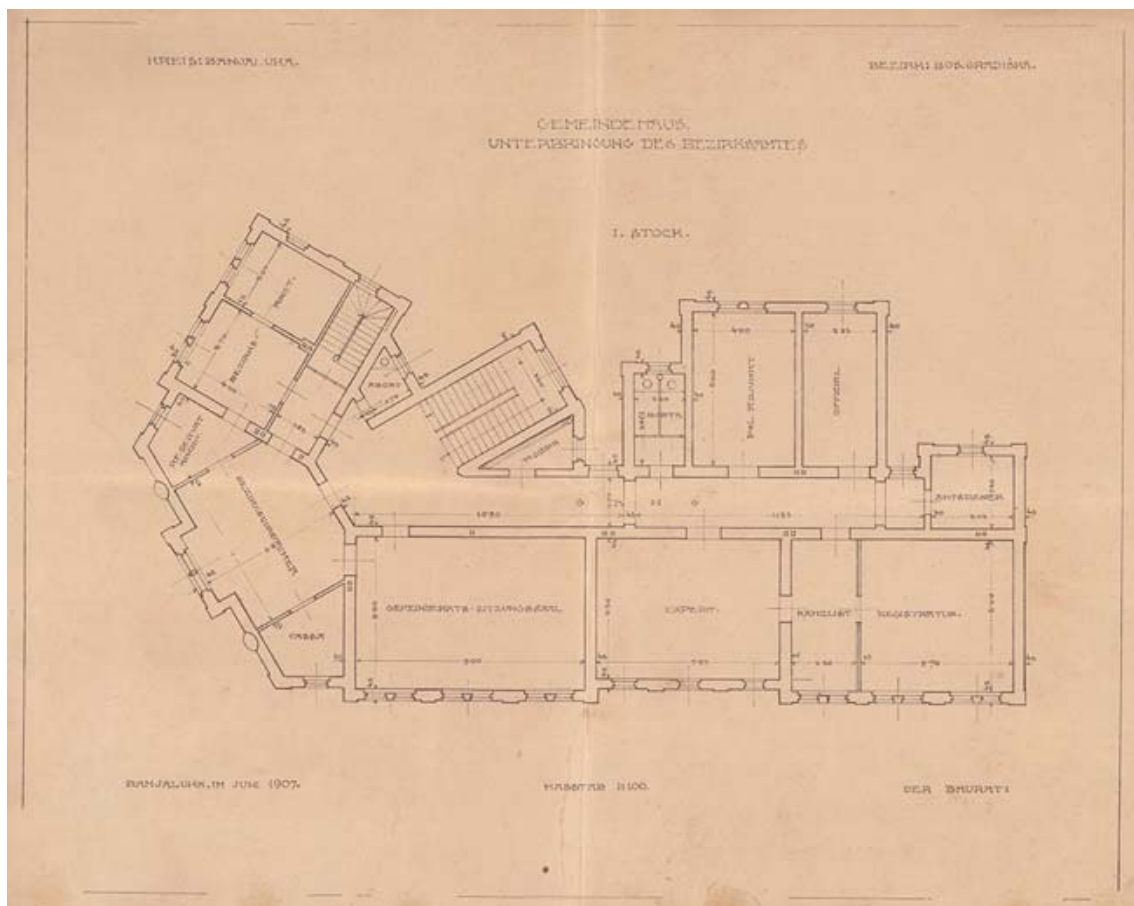
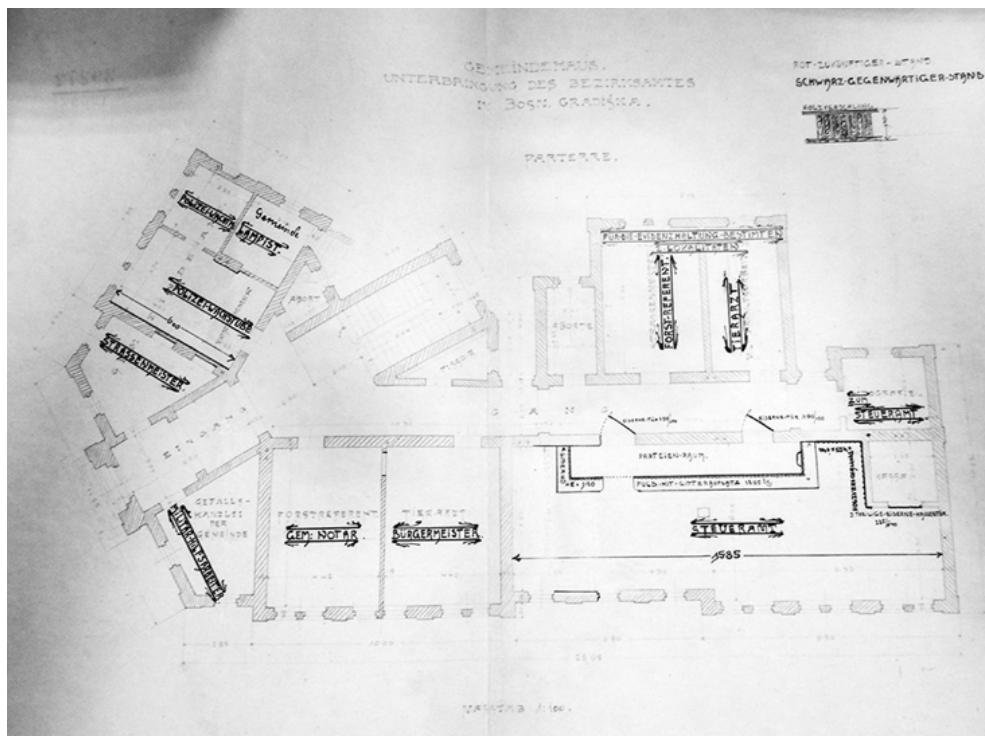


Figure 7. Gradiška, floor plan of the former municipal building, first floor, dated 1907.  
Source: Arhiv Republike Srpske.

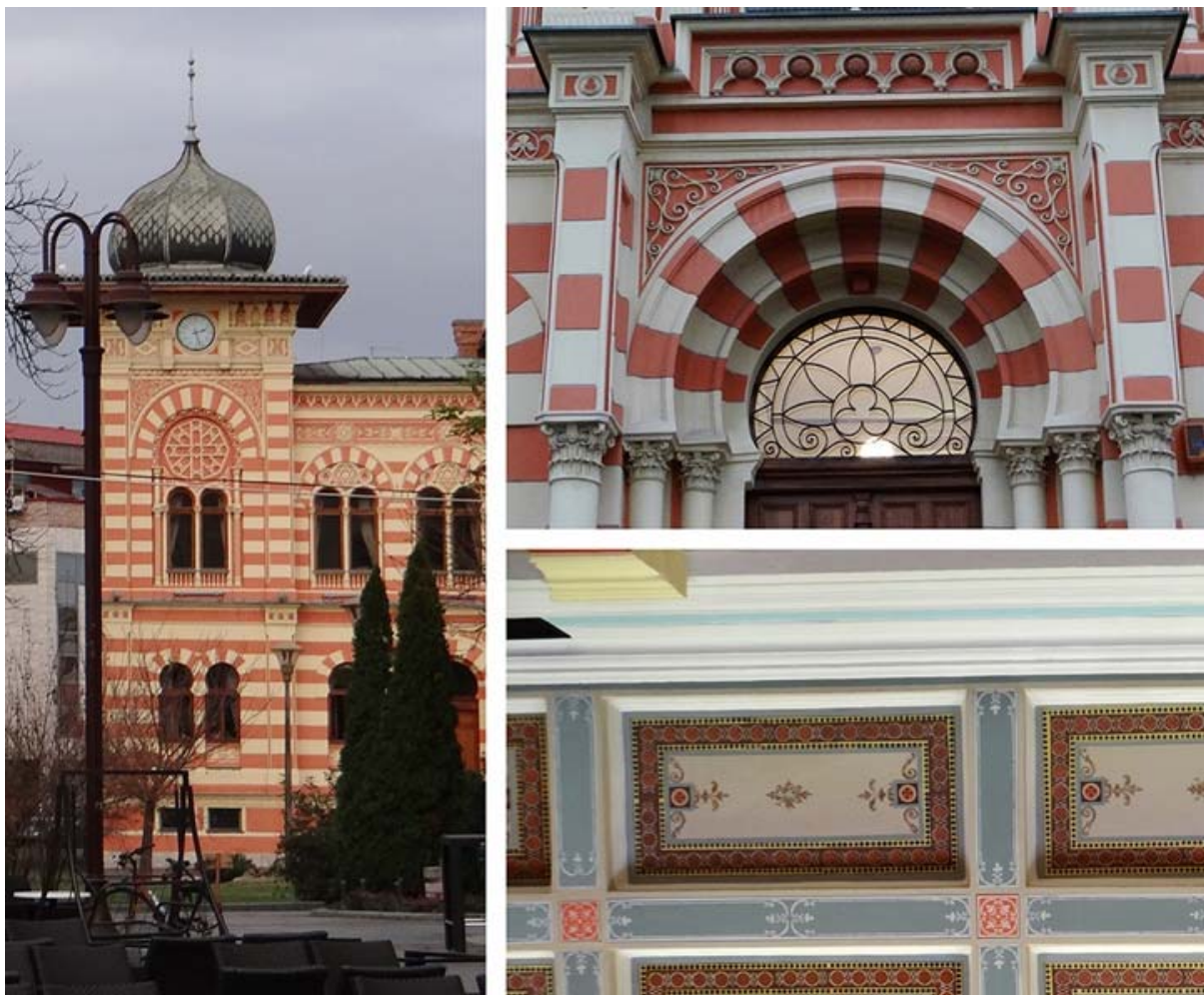
For this, around 1907 an annex was built and rooms re-assigned. The *Bezirksvorsteher* moved into the presumably most representative office in the building, affording a good view and located centrally at the end of the flight of stairs on the upper floor. The mayor is found, on plans dated 1909 [Fig. 8], on the lower floor, taking over the veterinarian's office. It is not clearly stated on these plans that the mayor previously occupied the tower office. However, the fact that it is not only located next to the assembly hall but is directly linked with it through a door [Fig. 9] seems to suggest that this was the case.

The extension of ca. 1907 created the additional office space needed for the building to fulfill the tasks of both a municipal and district authority. This was done by expanding the building toward the northeast. This enlargement was undertaken through selective reiteration of the original building's architecture. In fact, no rupture is visually evident. The projection with the assembly hall in the upper floor is repeated after a recessed section with three window axes. However, it appears that the recurring projection in the extension was due to purely formal considerations. For the floor plan reveals that it accommodated not a large assembly room but rather two smaller offices.



*Figure 8. Gradiška. floor plan of the former municipal building, ground floor, dated 1909.*  
Source: Arhiv Bosne i Hercegovine.

Additional insight can be gained through comparison with the *vijećnica* of Brčko, which, if this chronology can be confirmed, must have served as a central reference for the one in Gradiška. This association is perhaps most visible in the towers' design: the cupolas' onion shape and the structuring of surfaces are closely related [Fig. 9]. Another feature that recommends this association is the funnel portal with superimposed horseshoe-shaped arches [Fig. 10]. It is found at Gradiška (with Alhambresque capitals) and at Brčko (with Corinthian capitals) and, to our current knowledge, nowhere else.



*Figures 9, 10 and 11. Brčko, Vijećnica. Architect: Ćiril Iveković, 1891. Details of façade, portal, and ceremonial hall ceiling. Photo: Ajla Bajramović, 2018.*

However, there is one marked difference between the treatment of façades at these two town halls. At Brčko we find a considerable amount of stucco ornamentation employed so as to enliven the surfaces. At Gradiška we find similar ornamental patterns, yet mostly executed in paint. This suggests

that these buildings' architectural morphology and façades were deliberated independently. Was the decision at Gradiška to reduce plastic decoration in favour of painted decoration perhaps due to a smaller budget?

There is another intriguing difference. At Brčko, the ceremonial hall on the first floor ("Gemeinderats-Sitzungssaal"), articulated on the façade as a monumental central section with mullioned windows surmounted by stained-glass rosettes in geometric shapes, is not decorated in a corresponding style in the interior. Surprisingly, a sort of 'Pompeian style' [Fig. 11] was chosen instead. At Gradiška, by contrast, what remains of the ceremonial hall exhibits a pronouncedly Orientalizing style. Thanks to damage visible during site visits in 2018, it can also be discerned that at least some of this decoration [Fig 12], if indeed contemporary to the project and not a later addition, was on wallpaper rather than painted onto the plaster.

More than many other buildings, the old *vijećnica* of Gradiška raises questions about decision-making and design processes in the Austro-Hungarian administrative structure in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It illustrates how the challenge of extending and reorganizing an existing structure was approached. Finally, with regard to the case of Brčko, it illustrates how (presumably) preceding projects informed (presumably) later developments in the same category. In Gradiška's case, the replication was very selective. The model was translated for a different site rather than transposed there. The building (as part of the disparate ensemble *Vijećnica i Hotel Kaiser*) is listed as both a cultural good of Republika Srpska (NKD770) and a national monument of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

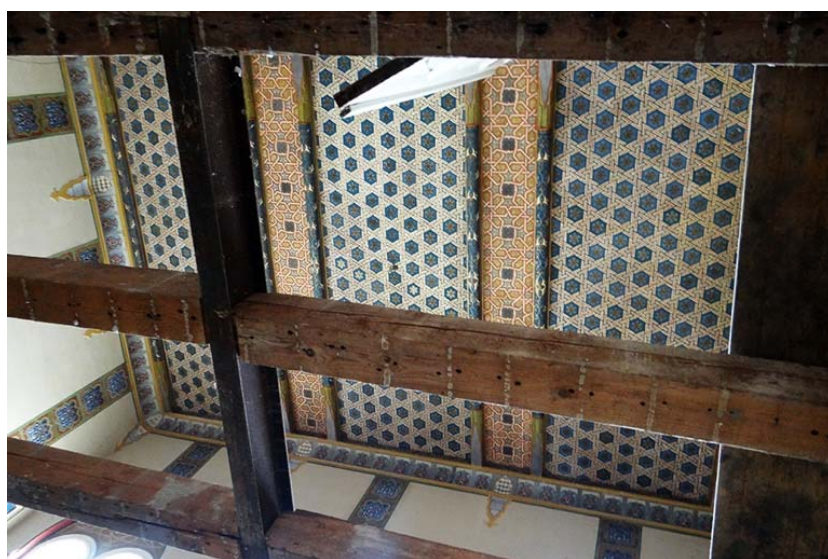


Figure 12. Gradiška. Stara Vijećnica, ceiling of ceremonial hall.  
Photo: Ajla Bajramović, 2018.

### 2.3. Banja Luka, former Husedžinović house, ca. 1911 (44°45'54.9"N 17°11'14.0"E)

This building's [Fig. 13] importance in the region's architectural history appears to have been greatly underestimated. It represents one of the few truly significant examples outside Sarajevo of the so-called Bosnian Style (*Bosanski slog*), developed in the early 1900s in reaction the damage that imported architecture caused to traditional townscapes. While this 'neo-Bosnian' style's proponents were foreigners themselves, there are clear indications that it had a broader following among Bosnia's different communities than the exoticizing Orientalizing style of buildings like the Sarajevo *Vijećnica*. Even so, this early neo-vernacularist experiment remains largely unknown outside Bosnia. The Husedžinović house in Banja Luka was the work of the renowned Josef (Josip) Vancaš, one of the 'builders' of Sarajevo. The contemporary significance accorded to this project is evidenced by the publicity it received in the German-language architectural press [Fig. 14-15]. [5] That publicity affords us privileged insight into the design process and considerations during that process. Also exceptional is the preservation of one part of the original interior – some of which remains on site, some of which resides in a local public collection. Together with the fact that the original householder was a relatively well-known person in Banja Luka's more recent history, a fairly comprehensive picture can be drawn.

With regard to the architecture, first, the façade's axial symmetry is noteworthy. It may be considered exceptional in comparison to the picturesque impression buildings in this neo-vernacular style generally sought to achieve, and usually through asymmetrical designs. In that sense, the Husedžinović house seems to exemplify a compromise between the ambition to produce something in line with a tradition and the need to achieve accord with established European schemes of representative monumentality.



Figure 13. Banja Luka, former Husedžinović house. Architect: Josef (Josip) Vancaš, ca. 1911.  
 Photo: Miroslav Malinović, 2018.

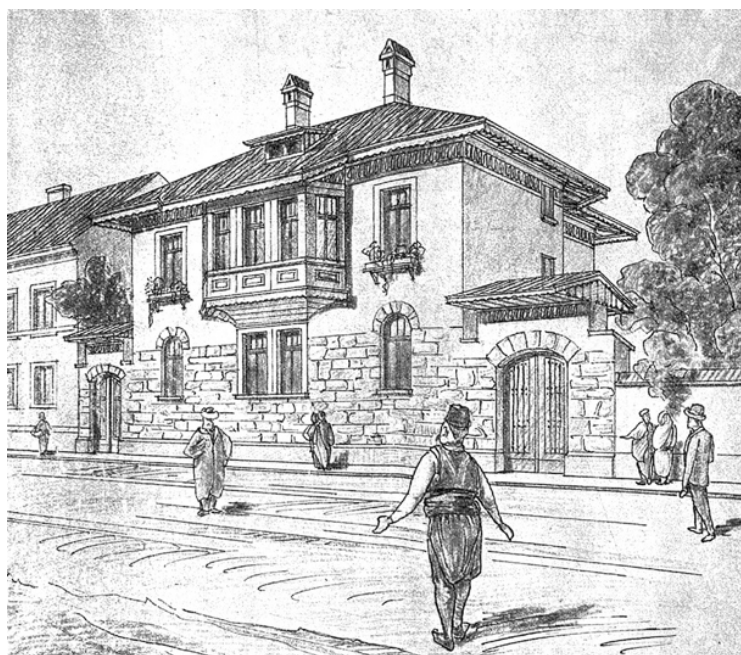


Figure 14. Banja Luka, former Husedžinović house as depicted in Der Bautechniker in 1915 (XXXV/25, plate 25).

The façade is divided into three parts. The central section is pronounced by a bay window surmounted by a cat-slide roof and a clustering of windows, echoing a traditional interior seating arrangement. The lateral façade areas are distinguished by semi-circular arches on the lower tier. The (originally irregularly) rusticated plinth adds a romantic touch. The reductionism of the mostly geometric ornament (cornice frieze with vertical lining, rectangle contours on bay window, window compartments) betrays a late secessionist influence.

If we compare the illustrative drawing by Vančaš from a century ago with today's building [Figs. 13 & 14], we notice that some important characteristics of the original appear to have been undone. The green colouration contrasts with the whitewashed façades that are considered defining for this style. Moreover, the plinth's facing with industrially processed stone of uniform shape contributed to a loss of picturesqueness, as have the windows' plastic frames on ground floor level. The original chimneys have also been removed. All this aside, the building's overall character is well preserved.

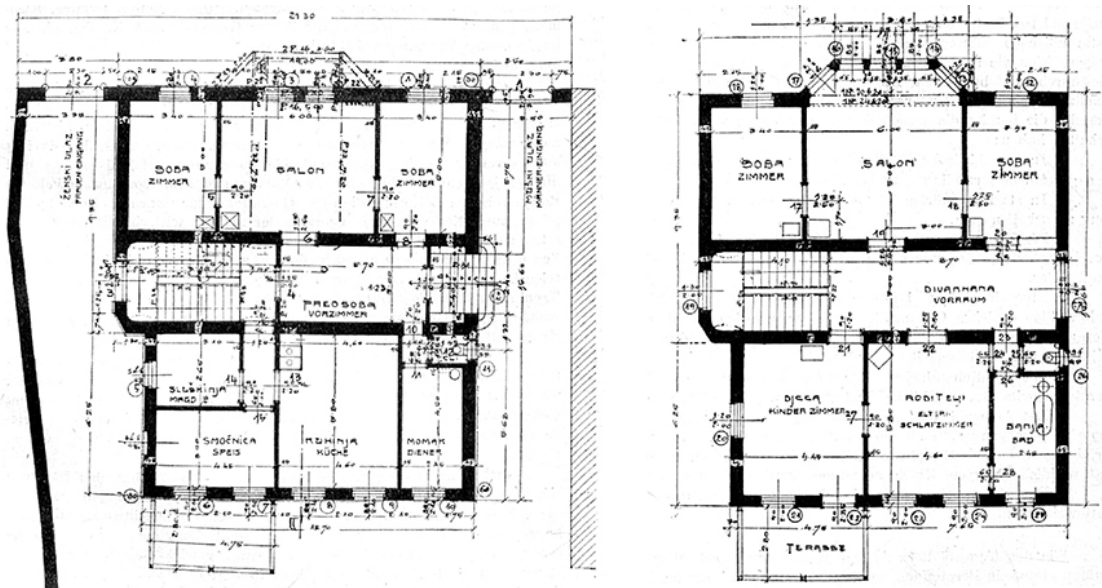


Figure 15. Banja Luka, former Husedžinović house, floor plans.

Source: Der Bautechniker XXV/25 (1915), p. 193.

Regarding the interior, the spatial arrangement itself [Fig. 15] is noteworthy from the viewpoint of architectural history. This project by a non-Muslim architect closely echoes the householder's requirements to retain a traditional spatial division of public/male and private/female. This is illustrated and described briefly but tellingly in the journal *Bautechniker*, seemingly by the architect himself.

Two entrances correspond to the different sexes' preferred paths of entry: males to the left, females to the right. The male section leads to a vestibule from which the 'public' rooms of the householder, facing the street, were accessed; the servant's room is immediately to the left. The 'female' entrance provides easy access to the maid's room and the kitchen as well as direct access to the staircase leading to the ('private') upper floor. Noteworthy, too, is that these rooms are not multifunctional anymore, although that would more closely correspond to traditional dwelling practices. On the floor plan we see a parents' bedroom, with an *en-suite* bathroom, next to the children's room, both facing the Vrbas. The salon (Turkish *divanhane*) of the 'private' upper floor, by contrast, faces the street. In contrast to traditional *konak*-type residences, which often emerge from a courtyard shielded from public view by walls, this representative townhouse also directly faces the street.

What we see here is a quite creative interpretation by Vancaš of a traditional gendering of space. The separation is not twofold but fourfold, and for this purpose engages the building's height as well as depth. The 'private' upper floor is separated into a more public area, articulated on the exterior through a densely fenestrated (and hence more transparent) bay window, and far less public areas facing the garden. This division apparently facilitated the house's later division into two privately-owned flats.

Also interesting is the furnishing programme, to the extent that it can be reconstructed. [6] [7:227,233] The householder's workspace on the ground floor featured wooden furnishings, imported from Cairo via Vienna (!), carpets from Shiraz, Bosnian rugs, and a ceiling painted in Orientalizing forms. It was known as the 'Arab room', probably reflecting a European fashion at the time. In 1958, the movable objects were transferred to the holdings of the Museum of the Bosnian Krajina in Banja Luka, that is, the present day Muzej Republike Srpske. On the upper floor, the *divanhana* more clearly corresponds to a local, Ottoman tradition, possibly amalgamated with (a contemporary take on) the cultivated simplicity of the Viennese *Biedermeier* aesthetic. Most of the furniture, indeed, was imported from Vienna, as was the tableware and a large wall clock with an engraved inscription, in German, reading "Time is Money". This probably reflected the householder's mercantile ethic, for the Husedžinovići were not an old 'noble' family but more recent upstarts. The householder Hamzaga owned a profitable brick factory and later served as the city's mayor. On the upper floor was also the so-called Pink Room; its furniture arrived from Paris, again via Vienna, and echoed the style of Louis XV. This section of the furniture was sold to a buyer in Dubrovnik and is not preserved in situ.

In the end, one can ponder the reasons for Hamzaga Husedžinović's choice of this specific architect and style at this point in time. It is likely related to Vancaš's project for the *Landesbank's* Banja Luka branch, erected just before. Husedžinović may have taken a liking to this building (destroyed in the earthquake of 1969), which, as a businessperson, he must have visited quite regularly. This may have led him to commission the bank's architect to plan his residence using a similar formal repertoire. This style contrasts greatly with the villas another Muslim entrepreneur named Ali-aga Kučukalić commissioned from a yet unidentified architect in a more established Orientalizing style in Brčko and Šamac [Fig. 16], presumably only a few years earlier.

The Husedžinović house is not on Bosnia-Herzegovina's list of national monuments, but has been listed as a cultural good of Republika Srpska (NKD064).



Figure 16. Šamac, former villa of Ali-aga Kučukalić. Photo: Ajla Bajramović, 2018.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The relative briefness of Habsburg rule (1878-1918) stands in great contrast with the extensive architectural imprint it left on Bosnian-Herzegovinian townscapes. Public buildings played an important role as forerunners of a changing aesthetic and models for imitation. However, while the architecture of historicism is often said to have had a homogenizing effect on Central Europe's urban fabric [8], this evidently did not preclude projects, both publicly and privately commissioned, that would clearly have conflicted with an alleged agenda of homogenization.

Just south of the old Sava border between Bosnia and Croatia-Slavonia, we find a large number of buildings designed in Orientalizing forms. In this particular region, which long constituted a threshold between the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, one would have expected efforts to level the differences caused by longstanding separation. Yet, these buildings seem to emphasize rather than downplay the region's liminality. Its historical alterity is stressed rather than silenced.

The three buildings discussed above also allow us to draw significant, if preliminary, conclusions with regard to the process of these buildings' planning and design. They may be exceptional; at the same time, they illustrate how 'case-sensitive' provincial building projects could be, if deemed necessary.

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