

The Genius Loci of Urban Settlements in the Ottoman Period of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Nadja Sabanovic¹, Lana Kudumovic², Ibrahim Numan²

¹ Institute for construction of Canton Sarajevo, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina,

² Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakif Univeristy, Istanbul, Turkey.

Abstract

Urban settlements in Bosnia and Herzegovina started to emerge in their current form in the Ottoman period, which stretched from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century in Bosnia. In this period, new settlements in Bosnia and Herzegovina were developed according to principles that had already been widely applied in the Ottoman Empire, especially in the region of Central Anatolia. New social values were formed alongside processes of urbanization—these were the most significant changes that drove the development of Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Middle Ages onward. Such realities are conveyed in the unique *genius loci* of the settlements examined here. The aim of this paper is to define the essential spatial attributes of those settlements in Bosnia and Herzegovina that developed during the Ottoman period and their contribution to their “spirit of a place”. To achieve this goal, a range of spatial qualities have been extracted and examined. The discussion highlights how these spatial qualities contributed to the endurance of places with similar conceptual bases, keeping their distinctive spirit and authenticity.

Keywords: *the spirit of a place, Ottoman culture in B&H, historic settlements, the built environment.*

1. Introduction

Over the course of the history of the world, significant changes have been caused by the development of science, technology, and civilization, all of which have contributed to successive improvements in the built environment and living conditions. Inevitably, such changes to build and natural environments have informed the development of particular social standards, interactions, relations, and behaviors, which have all shaped people’s lifestyles and traditions. These processes have at-

tached a specific range of values to each particular place, today recognized as its *genius loci* or the “spirit of a place”. This phenomenon is among the most significant attributes in the value of these places and confirms their authenticity.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, during Ottoman period (1463-1878), urbanization took place based on principles rooted in Central Anatolia, a core region of the Ottoman Empire. These created urban settings, in essence, followed the idea of a division between private (residential) and public space (market/bazaar, *čaršija*, as a center of trade and administration).

The argument is often made that each component of the urban setting encompasses a number of structures that follow similar principles (on a smaller scale) of the division between public and private zones. Fundamentally, this division was based on the principles of Islam, being a new and widely accepted religion spread across Bosnia by the Ottomans, along with new cultural forms and amenities.

The other values recognized in this spatial arrangement are the result of specific environmental conditions and inhabitants’ relationship with nature. These values can be found at both the urban and architectural levels. They appear in the principles used to create variations of open and closed spaces, such as gardens with water and other natural elements, which can provide a pleasant microclimate. The final principle shaping urban settlement was based on the sophisticated logic of the interconnection of elements in space according to function and usage. This type of relation was also echoed in social life, customs, and habits.

This paper will evaluate the process of urban development in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Ottoman period by defining all the relevant elements of significance in shaping its spaces.

In addition to spatial and functional organization, SOCIAL arrangements, ETHICAL ap-

proaches, and RELIGIOUS influences all inform and dominate these spaces. Their common influence has created a range of spatial qualities that have been transmitted into the spirit of various places. It is clear that each of these influences can be found in all the key urban elements of settlements and their particular micro locations. Therefore, spatial qualities can be examined according to their particular spatial arrangement or urban organization, or else the focus can be placed on particular urban areas or architectural elements.

2. The development of urban settlement principles during the Ottoman period

Bosnia and Herzegovina were the westernmost Ottoman *Eyalet* or Principality. After several attempts, in 1463 the Ottoman army under Fatih Sultan Mehmet II conquered the territory of modern-day Bosnia and Herzegovina (**Bašagić-Redžepašić, 1900, pp. 15-19**). With the arrival of the Ottomans, urbanization and the expansion of settlements was rapidly realized according to new demands and relationships and relying on new urban codes and laws. This period saw the development of a new basis for the urban settings of Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Figure 1. Ottoman province (*Eyalet*) Bosnia around 1606
(Šehić, Tepić, 2002, p. 59).

At the beginning of this process of urbanization, it was important that new settlements could serve as administrative centres, as well as accom-

modate military facilities. The arrangement of space was defined according to a number of social spheres—social, religious, functional, and ethical.

Functional elements of the settlements

The typical ottoman city/town had two different areas or spheres of life:

- A. “Čaršija” _Urban core _commercial zone
- B. “Mahala” _ Residential zone (**Grabrijan, 1957, pp. 8, 38**), (**Figure 2**).

The commercial centre (*čaršija*) acted as the urban core and was where various public facilities were located, including: mosques, *hammami* (public baths), public schools, craft and trade centres, marketplaces, public kitchens, *han* and *kara-vansaray* (two kinds of inn/hostelry), and public fountains etc. The *čaršija* was a place of craft and trade, as well as an administrative and religious centre, and included all the important facilities necessary to sustain an urban settlement.

Various public buildings were set in the *čaršija*. These were usually dominating structures built in an oriental architectural style and had an important role in the expansion of Ottoman culture, while also being associated with Islam—the new religion of Bosnia. Public buildings were also important elements in the process of creating the urban silhouette and aesthetic character of a place. The mosque was the primary indicator of an Ottoman urban settlement, being a central place for social meetings and the most monumental public building.

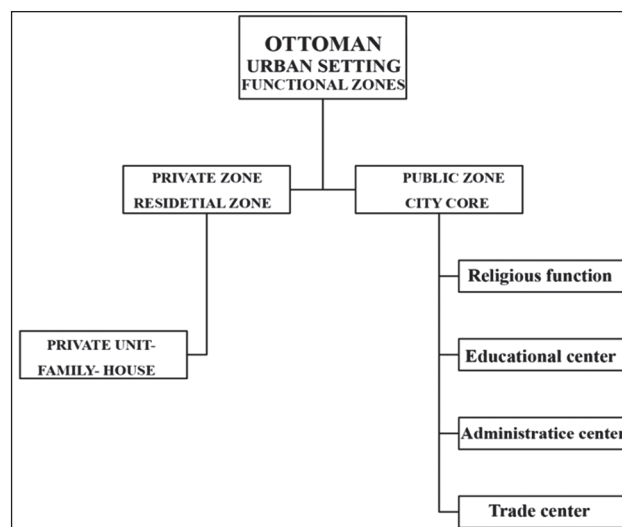


Figure 2. Ottoman Urban settings, graphical representation of urban zones and focal functions

Social arrangement

The *waqf* was the most important institution for the development of urban settlements. The purpose of a *waqf* (a charitable foundation) was to serve the needs of the people and provide social assistance, acting as a kind of social security system (Ertem, Vakıflar dergisi, 2011, p. 26).

During the Ottoman period, new residential areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina were built according to the new state system, standards, and ethics. The characteristic “neighbourhood” was one of the basic principles that influenced the formation of residential culture. Its philosophy was both social and humanistic. Neighbourhoods represented one of the best social systems in the Ottoman Empire for satisfying the needs of inhabitants at the local level. They usually contained public faucets or wells for clean drinking water, bakeries, a mosque, *mekteb* (primary religious school), groceries, and the neighbourhood cemetery (*mezarlik*). There was no strict class border within a neighbourhood between the wealthy and the poorer inhabitants who were usually under the patronage of a wealthy family from the neighbourhood (Pašić, 1991, pp. 73, 81).

Ethical approach

A new sense of privacy suddenly gained importance with the arrival of a new culture (inspired by eastern religious rules and laws). The natural conditions and ambience were also relevant to the creation of built spaces, free of schematic planning systems. Neighbourhoods (*originally: mahalle*) were typical areas for residence and the private family house was the basic unit. In traditional cities, housing was built on slopes, which maximized light in each dwelling unit, and provided good views and the maintenance of close visual ties with the natural surroundings (Kudumovic, 2018, p. 272) (Figure 3).

Cohesion between the built and natural environments was founded on the prioritisation of basic human needs in building practises, constituting an ethical approach to urban development.

This new life philosophy brought a dose of humanity into the building process and the construction of a dwelling saw the application of unwritten laws that respected human beings and the environment. The approach to building was ethical and on

a human scale, except in the case of important religious buildings, which were constructed for God and some public buildings that sought to display the power of the Ottoman Empire.



Figure 3. The appearance of a typical sloping residential Sarajevo neighbourhood (Hrasnica, 2003, p. 68).

Religious influence

In the very early stages of Ottoman rule of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina, almost all the major monotheistic religions coexisted—for example, the majority of Bogomils generally tolerated Islam. Bosnia and Herzegovina became a melting pot of differences and influences. It was the meeting place of Ottoman culture and Bosnian mediaeval tradition and an area influenced by both Mediterranean and Central European culture. In a short time, a particular Bosnian-Oriental style developed (Şimşek, p. 469), while also displaying markings that referenced the local area (Hadžijahić, Traljić, Šukić, 1997, pp. 35-65).

The organisation of the cities/towns was deeply influenced by the Islamic principles of living. These principles attached great respect to nature, water, cleanliness, and good relations between people based on religious beliefs. Endowments (of *waqf*) included different facilities serving religious, educational, cultural, and economic purposes. They were often of considerable architectural value and were made for the benefit of Muslims, as well as for members of other religious communities.

3. “The spirit of a place” in settlements that developed during the Ottoman period in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Defined as “the prevailing character or atmosphere of a place” (**Oxford Online Dictionary**), the concept of the *genius loci* has its origins in ancient Roman culture. In Roman mythology¹, it referred to spirits thought to inhabit particular places and protect them. In the twentieth century, the concept of the *genius loci* came into focus to refer to a location’s characteristic atmosphere or the “spirit of a place” (**Vogler and Vittori, 2006, p. 2**).

Norberg-Schulz (1980), in his book *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, explained the relationship between *genius loci* and architecture. He promoted traditional forms in towns and buildings in order to better understand places and their meaning (**Jive’ n and Larkham, 2003, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 67-81**). For Norberg-Schulz, all spatial segments determine a place including: 1. Image, 2. Space, 3. Character, and fourth attribute 4. Genius loci (**Norberg-Schulz, 1980, pp. 6-73**). Several important factors contribute to defining the spirit of a place. They go beyond physical attributes and include social interactions, habits, and tradition.

Furthermore, people develop relationships with their surroundings and these determine possible directions, paths, points of centralization, and actions in space. In the history of the built environment, natural conditions have always been key to choosing a dwelling place since the time of the oldest civilisation. Throughout the history of urbanization, the first requirement in choosing a location for settlement was always whether the natural conditions could provide for a reasonable quality of life, depending on the purpose of the settlement.

In discussing the qualities of a space and knowing the importance of water for the development of civilization, as well as the meaning of these elements in different cultures and traditions, it is not surprising to see a focus on the use of water in Ot-

toman architecture, especially in Bosnia, a country abundant in water resources. As such, it is reasonable to focus on the role of natural resources and conditions in places designated for urbanization.

Water is a natural element that has great significance as a basic element of life and has commonly been the most important factor in shaping human habitats. It was a key segment in the formation of the Ottoman city, not just from an architectural, functional, and aesthetic, but also from a social, religious, cleanliness, recreational, and psychological point of view. The Ottomans took great pleasure in seeing running water and hearing its sound. They built public fountains, drinking fountains, and water structures wherever it was possible, even in private houses (**Aru, 1949, p. 32**).

During the Ottoman period, drinking fountains and faucets also acted as meeting points where socialization occurred. The use of water in residential architecture was associated with the landscape to form pleasing conditions and pleasant places to live in (especially during the hot, dry summer days). In houses in the southern part of the country, Herzegovina, the way water was made to flow through open channels in private gardens offers a good example of how it was valued as an important design element

Extraordinary examples can be found in the housing complexes of Rizvanbegović on river Bregava in Stolac and Velagićevina on the river Buna, both located in Herzegovina. They can be assessed as having very high ecological standards—even today, they fulfil all the standards of sustainable architectural design and also of lifestyle quality (**Figure 4**). These examples express a harmonious composition of natural environmental conditions with “man-made” architecture, united in the creation of a distinctive spirit of a place.

Another kind of influence that is significant in determining the spirit of a place comes from several intangible elements. Such intangible factors may be associated with a place’s historical background, particular purpose, or anything related to customs and habits etc. Likewise, the Ottoman lifestyle did not just focus on the social arrangement, but also included a focus on spiritual and religious aspects of life.

¹ *Genius loci is a Roman concept: according to an ancient belief, every ‘independent’ being has his own genius, his guardian spirit. This spirit gives life to places and people, bringing them from the cradle to the grave, determining their character or essence (Petzet, 16th General Assembly of ICOMOS, Scientific Symposium, Quebec, 2008, p. 2)*



Figure 4. *Velagićevina residential complex, built in the Ottoman period in Blagaj*
(Source: Dževad Hadžihasanović, 2009)



Figure 5. *Residential house in Begovina, Stolac*

Finally, we can conclude that the spirit of a certain place is like a special ‘substance’ that differentiates places. The character of a built place relies on the interdependent relationship of many tangible and intangible factors (the surroundings, material, colours, lights, sounds, proportions, and many other pieces form the final composition) (Sabanovic, 2020, p. 40).

However, the spirit of a place is not something valued by everyone in the same way. People often connect their dwelling or habitat with a sense of identity or belonging to a place. As such, the same place will not be valued in the same way by inhabitants and by visitors. Inhabitants are those who identify themselves with a place or originate from that place. Each person experiences a place in a different way, but the prevailing characteristics make its character or special spirit dominate its expression and can be marked through human experience.

Inhabitants feel attached to a place, while the interest of visitors may be limited to its aesthetic attributes, or they have an interest in experiencing

local culture, but are often limited to following the recommendations of tourism marketing. Therefore, the appearance of a place in synthesis with feelings reflected towards an observer help construct its character or atmosphere (Yu-Chu, Chen, 2014, pp. 43, 47).

3.1. Qualities of the built environment from the Ottoman period in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Built environments dating from the Ottoman period in Bosnia and Herzegovina reveal a set of components that have, in their interaction, produced the special character of these places. These can be distinguished as tangible and intangible qualities of space, as shown in Table 1. These are recognized as present at both the urban and architectural levels.

Traditional built environments commonly respect natural conditions, engage local crafts, use domestic materials, respect human nature, and express the traditional lifestyle of a certain period. Physical appearance is important in the development of recognizable silhouettes of settlements. They can include slopes with traditional houses descending towards a river and urban centres arranged as a composition of domes and hipped roofs intersected with greenery. In such a place, the central mosque was emphasized above any other structure. The usage of local materials was important in depicting the local tradition embedded in those spaces. Urban spaces were created to fulfil functional needs while taking into consideration sustainability and connections to resources—clean water, fertile land, roads, and rivers etc.

In Ottoman culture, there was also a notable correlation between indoor and outdoor spaces and a necessity of achieving unity with natural surroundings. Consequently, they shaped the spatial aspects of dwellings, which consequently affected urban forms (Numan, Pulhan, 2005, p. 161).

The most heavily accentuated qualities included the ethical principles of building, respecting nature, and respecting the human scale and basic human needs. These also included maintaining good relations with one’s neighbours, the right to a view, and an appreciation of privacy. Morals (ethics) are not just evident in the relationship between

Table 1. Spatial qualities of the built environment from the Ottoman period in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Qualities and characteristics		URBAN LEVEL		ARCHITECTURAL LEVEL	
		Public zone čaršija	Residential zone mahala	Public buildings	Houses as dwelling units
TANGIBLE	Spatial	Centres with commercial, religious, educational, social, and administrative functions and a strategic position.	Follows terrain morphology; no spatial conflict is present regarding sunlight, vista, or privacy.	Contribute to the emergence of recognizable silhouettes and urban morphology (e.g. domed buildings such as mosques, hammams, madrasas etc.).	Distinguished private/closed and private/open space in the housing compound arrangement.
	Environmental	Spontaneous open public space design (e.g. commercial streets); natural elements (e.g. rivers, greenery etc.) are interwoven into urban tissues of centers.	Bounded by nature; human scale; privacy.	Public buildings compounds integrate positive relations of open and closed spaces with the presence of natural elements that contribute to the overall building design.	Pleasant micro climate; importance of cleanliness; ecology and comfort.
INTANGIBLE	Sensory	Social interaction.	Sense of belonging to the community.	Social benefits.	Sense of privacy.
	Symbolic	Respect of religious laws and social justice; coexistence of different religious communities.	Unity and harmony.	Power.	Safety.

people and nature, but also between people. It can be concluded that spatial and social boundaries influence the design of built environments (as an example, the phenomenon of privacy in oriental architecture should also be mentioned). On a large scale, this was reflected in the division into public (administrative and commercial centre) and private (neighbourhood) spaces. At a smaller scale, private houses were also divided into private and public spaces. Therefore, the spatial organization of a house, depending on its function, was designed to be open or enclosed. Thus, traditional houses were open to nature and the environment. The way houses communicated with their natural surroundings of gardens and courtyards was a product of spontaneous design. Elements, such as greenery, gardens, and water, were a part of house design. On the other hand, from the outside houses were isolated islands and thus hidden from outside observers or visitors. The administrative and trading centre (čaršija) of an urban place provides an example of a place open to all users and public and social activities. In such an environment, we

can encounter the public *hammam* (public baths) as a small enclosure, a mystical world in the middle of the crowded čaršija where everything happened. Similarly, most public buildings were built according to the logic of creating the built environment to fulfil similar principles. Their physical appearance in combination with local traditions and lifestyle, contributed to the formation of the particular spirit of a place.

4. Conclusion

The Ottoman period was a very productive time in the urban development of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Urban development was based on principles that distinguished private and public spaces at different levels. Different aspects of an urban space, such as social arrangement, religious influence, the functional elements of settlement, and ethical approaches to nature and humans were all significant in creating a unique spirit of a place. Recognising spatial qualities in each urban element and its interconnection can help us to under-

stand the range of values embedded in the urban and social fabric—its structure made up of both tangible and intangible elements.

The Ottoman urban fabric in Bosnia is still, in its essence, present today in the historic centres of many settlements, even though the historical periods after the Ottomans saw new social and political attitudes that reshaped the urban settings and many structures lost importance. The new atmosphere was accompanied with forgotten traditions and values, including those specific to residential areas. For example, the essence of distinguishing private and public areas has been forgotten and with rapid globalisation and other influences of modern times, the disappearance of traditional and spiritual values at the global scale has intensified, leading to a subsequent loss of authenticity.

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Corresponding Author:
Nadja Sabanovic,
Institute for construction of Canton Sarajevo,
Sarajevo,
Bosnia and Herzegovina,
E-mail: nadja.sabanovic@gmail.com