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Ekaterina Namiceva Todorovska

Department of Interior design and furniture technology, Goce Delchev University Shtip, Shtip, North Macedonia

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4293-3470>

Jasminka Namiceva

Museum of the city of Skopje, North Macedonia

Ekaterina Namiceva Todorovska is now at Goce Delchev University Shtip. Jasminka Namiceva is a distinguished former museum curator, now retired.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ekaterina Namiceva Todorovska
Email: ekaterina.namiceva@ugd.edu.mk

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Architectural Evolution in Skopje Between the World Wars: Bohemian Public Spaces, Innovations, and Urban Identity in the Balkan Context

**Ekaterina Namiceva Todorovska
Jasminka Namiceva**

Abstract

This paper explores the architectural and cultural significance of bohemian spaces in early 20th-century Skopje, focusing on key public and commercial buildings such as hotels, cafes, and theaters. These establishments were central to the city's social and cultural life, serving as gathering places for intellectuals, artists, and the urban elite. The research aims to analyze how the architectural styles of these spaces reflected the broader socio-cultural shifts in Skopje during this period, particularly the interplay between modern European influences and local traditions.

The methodology includes a combination of architectural analysis, historical research, and the examination of contemporary accounts to understand the role of these bohemian spaces in shaping the urban identity of Skopje. The study examines the design elements, spatial organization, and social functions of these buildings, contextualizing them within the broader trends in Balkan architecture.

The results reveal that these spaces were not only significant for their architectural innovation but also for their role in fostering a unique cultural milieu. The eclectic architectural styles found in these buildings mirrored the dynamic social environment of early 20th-century Skopje, where tradition and modernity coexisted.

The study concludes that the bohemian spaces of Skopje were crucial in the development of the city's cultural identity, highlighting the importance of architecture in reflecting and shaping social and cultural life in the Balkans during this transformative era.

Keywords: bohemian spaces, Balkan architecture, Skopje, early 20th century, cultural identity, urban development

Introduction

The architecture of the Balkans, particularly in the urban centers of the early 20th century, reflects a rich tapestry of cultural, social, and political influences. This period witnessed the transformation of cities such as Skopje into vibrant hubs where Eastern and Western architectural traditions converged. The development of public and commercial buildings, including hotels, cafes, and theaters, played a crucial role in shaping the urban identity and cultural life of these cities.

One significant aspect of this architectural evolution is the emergence of “bohemian” spaces—venues that became central to the social and cultural life of the city. These establishments were not merely places for lodging or dining; they were pivotal in fostering a unique cultural milieu where intellectuals, artists, and the urban elite gathered. The architecture of these spaces often mirrored the eclecticism of the social activities they hosted, blending modern European styles with local traditions.

To establish a contextual foundation for this study, it is essential to reference existing research on Balkan architecture, which highlights the complex interplay of cultural, social, and political influences in the region’s urban spaces. Scholars such as Bjelajac (2010) have examined how Balkan city centers, from the 19th to the mid-20th century, evolved as dynamic sites where Ottoman, Western European, and local architectural traditions converged, creating distinctive urban identities. As noted by Đurić (1991), this fusion was especially visible in public and commercial architecture, including hotels, cafes, and theaters, which became essential to both the economic and social fabric of cities like Skopje.

In particular, the concept of “bohemian” spaces within these urban settings reflects a notable shift in the architectural and cultural landscape of the Balkans. These venues—often taverns, inns, or hotel cafes—provided more than dining or lodging; they were sites of intellectual and artistic exchange where the urban elite, writers, musicians, and intellectuals gathered, as explored by Monev (2012) in his work on Skopje’s social spaces. The architecture of these bohemian venues often combined European modernism with Balkan stylistic nuances, creating unique spaces that mirrored the eclecticism of the activities they hosted (Gabriel, 2017).

Research on these spaces contributes valuable insights into how urban identity in the Balkans evolved alongside broader socio-cultural transformations as the region navigated tensions between tradition and modernity (Mitrović, 2007). By understanding the architectural and cultural role of bohemian spaces, we gain a more

comprehensive view of how these establishments influenced Balkan urban life. This paper specifically examines bohemian spaces in early 20th-century Skopje, tracing their architectural forms, social functions, and historical contexts to contribute to the field of Balkan architectural history by elucidating the relationship between architecture and social identity formation.

Figure 1

“In the Tavern” - Nikola Martinoski, 1932, 90/67 cm, oil on canvas Macedonian Encyclopedia 2, Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Skopje 2009



After 1918, with the integration into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, the city of Skopje and its population slowly began to stabilize both economically and culturally. The de-Ottomanization at all levels changed the atmosphere in the city, which was especially evident in the drastic transformation of its architectural landscape. Construction activity was booming, with the services of educated architects being utilized, who, after completing their studies at the Belgrade School of Architecture or the architectural academies in Petrograd and Moscow, sought to create a pro-European architectural expression for the city in line with the economic power of the investors. Gavrilov and Gligorije Tomic, Rudolf Vosta, Petar Jankovic, Josif Jurukovski Mihailovic, Ivan Artemushkin, Boris Dutov, Baumgarten, Gazikalovic Stefan, Hadzi Nakovik Kirilo, Ferdo Kraus, Kiril Zhernovski, and Bozidar Nesovic are just some of the architects who, in the span of just two decades,

transformed the face of Skopje from an Ottoman kasaba into a modern European city with an organized urban and communal structure and a new aesthetic for its newly constructed buildings.

Figure 2

Skopje before 1918 - General architectural view of the right bank of the Vardar River.



Literature Review

The study of Balkan architecture, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, reveals a complex interplay of cultural, political, and social influences that shaped the urban landscape of the region. This literature review examines the key contributions and scholarly discussions surrounding the architectural developments in the Balkans during this period, highlighting the influences of both Ottoman and European styles.

Ottoman Influence on Balkan Architecture

The architectural legacy of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans is extensively documented, with scholars such as Đurić (1991) emphasizing the pervasive influence of Ottoman urban planning and architectural styles across the region. Đurić's work provides a comprehensive overview of how Ottoman architectural principles were adapted to local contexts, resulting in a unique blend of Islamic and Balkan elements. This blend is evident in the layout of cities, the design of public spaces, and the construction of religious and civic buildings.

Stojkov (2004) further explores the transition from Ottoman to modern architectural forms, noting that the late Ottoman period saw an increasing integration of European architectural styles. This period of transformation, as Stojkov argues,

was marked by the emergence of eclecticism in Balkan architecture, where traditional Ottoman elements were combined with neoclassical, baroque, and other European styles.

European Influences and Architectural Modernization

The influence of European architectural trends on the Balkans became more pronounced in the 19th century as the region experienced significant political and social changes. Mitrović (2007) discusses the impact of European architecture, particularly from Austro-Hungarian and French sources, on Balkan urban centers. His research highlights the adoption of European styles in the design of public buildings, residential architecture, and urban planning, which signaled a departure from purely Ottoman influences and a move toward modernization.

Bjelajac (2010) provides a detailed analysis of the architectural evolution of Balkan city centers, emphasizing the role of European-trained architects in introducing modern architectural practices to the region. According to Bjelajac, these architects played a crucial role in shaping the identity of Balkan cities, balancing local traditions with European modernity.

Urban Development and Cultural Exchange

The cultural exchange between the Balkans and Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries is a recurring theme in the literature. Monev (2012) explores this exchange in the context of Skopje, examining how the city's public spaces reflected broader cultural interactions between East and West. Monev's research underscores the importance of these exchanges in the development of a distinctive architectural identity in Balkan cities, where local traditions were enriched by European influences.

Gabriel (2017) adds to this discussion by analyzing the transformation of Ottoman urban spaces in the Balkans during the 19th century. He argues that the reorganization of these spaces, often influenced by European models, was part of a broader process of modernization that affected not only architecture but also the social fabric of Balkan cities.

Architectural Heritage and Preservation

The preservation of Balkan architectural heritage is another important topic in the literature. Scholars have highlighted the challenges of maintaining the region's diverse architectural legacy in the face of modernization and urban development.

Berend (2003) discusses the impact of historical events, such as wars and political upheavals, on the architectural heritage of the Balkans, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach to preservation that respects both historical integrity and contemporary needs.

The literature on Balkan architecture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries reveals a rich tapestry of influences, reflecting the region's complex history and cultural diversity (Stojkov, 2004). From the enduring legacy of Ottoman design to the transformative impact of European modernism, the architectural developments in the Balkans during this period are a testament to the dynamic interplay of tradition and innovation. This review underscores the importance of understanding these influences to appreciate the unique architectural heritage of the Balkans and its ongoing evolution.

"Bohemian" Public Spaces

In reflecting on the tourism and hospitality industry in Southern Serbia during the early 20th century, Bogdanovik provides an insightful narrative of growth and development in this region. He begins by emphasizing the unique natural and historical wealth of Southern Serbia, from its healing baths and natural spas to battlefields that serve as reminders of the country's liberation struggles and victories. For Bogdanovik, these are not merely geographical or historical sites; they are essential components that render Southern Serbia a rich and multidimensional tourist destination.

However, Bogdanovik notes that it was not enough to rely on these natural and historical assets alone. He writes, "It was our responsibility to uncover this inexhaustible wealth and enable both domestic and foreign tourists to come, see, and enjoy the artistic and natural treasures that our classical South offers." In this sense, the task fell to both private individuals and public initiatives to build the infrastructure necessary to support tourism, an emerging industry in the region.

Bogdanovik illustrates the parallel development of the hospitality sector and transport infrastructure, underscoring that modern tourism required not only beautiful landscapes and historical monuments but also the necessary amenities to attract visitors. He mentions the construction of hotels, restaurants, inns, and guesthouses alongside roads, railways, and transportation companies. This synergy between hospitality and transportation was critical in transforming Southern Serbia into a significant tourist destination.

The statistical data Bogdanovik (1937) provides further demonstrates this growth. He recounts how, in 1919, there were only 4 hotels in Southern Serbia, with a mere 53 rooms and 90 beds. By 1933, that number had grown to 23 hotels, boasting 514 rooms and 685 beds. These figures reflect a steady rise in tourism demand and infrastructure development, as well as the foresight of local citizens and authorities who recognized the economic potential of tourism in the region.

Bogdanovik's account also underscores the importance of these modern hotels and their amenities. He highlights Skopje, Ohrid, Bitola, and Prilep as key tourist centers where new, modern hospitality services emerge, offering visitors comfort and accessibility. These developments, he argues, were driven by the entrepreneurial spirit of the local population, who first recognized that the tourism industry could be a profitable branch of the national economy.

By placing this growth within a broader historical and economic context, Bogdanovik (1937) not only narrates the emergence of tourism in Southern Serbia but also frames it as part of the region's modernization and integration into the wider Balkan and European contexts. His narrative reinforces the idea that tourism was not just a result of external demand but an active, locally-driven effort that saw the region's resources as both cultural and economic assets.

In conclusion, Bogdanovik's reflection on the development of the tourism industry during the interwar period underscores how this dynamic period of transformation reshaped Southern Serbia's economy, culture, and identity. The rise of hospitality and tourism, driven by both public and private initiatives, reflects a broader narrative of modernization that would leave a lasting impact on the region's urban development and architectural landscape.

The taverns, beer halls, and summer gardens of the newly built cafes and hotel restaurants, as well as the cinema halls with their summer terraces in Skopje, became the favorite entertainment spots for the people of Skopje. They not only enjoyed good music and a good drink but also knew how to create a proper "bohemian" ambiance, which old Skopje residents still recount and fondly remember today. Because of their uniqueness, a few of these places have been etched into the cultural memory of the city, even though they disappeared several decades ago (Đurić, 1991).

Figure 3

Skopje – around 1930 – general architectural view of the right bank of the Vardar River.



As early as 1912, the “Zrinski” tavern was built right on the banks of the Vardar River—a modest single-story building with a spacious dining hall where various cultural events were organized, including dance parties, balls, performances by a salon orchestra, and even film screenings. Branislav Nušić housed the National Theater in “Zrinski,” where theatrical performances for the 1918/1919 season were held, making the tavern a kind of “cultural center” for actors, musicians, poets, and painters. The garden of “Zrinski” was particularly attractive, becoming an exclusive venue for organizing various summer events, with the lights of Petromax lamps creating a special atmosphere at night. It was these very lamps that caused the fire that destroyed the building in 1926.

Figure 4

The “Zrinski” restaurant, from 1912-1926, was a bohemian spot where, alongside the regular restaurant offerings, many cultural events took place, including performances by the National Theater under the direction of Branislav Nušić. The garden of “Zrinski,” (left) an exclusive venue for summer events, was illuminated by Petromax lamps (middle), which created a special nighttime ambiance. Unfortunately, these lamps were the cause of the fire that destroyed the building in 1926 (second).

Newspaper “Politika” from January 19, 1926



In 1919, architect Gavril Tomić designed a modest building for the tavern in Islahane Park (Tomić, 1919). A few years later, the City Council of Skopje, which was also the owner of the building, constructed a new structure that Skopje residents recently knew as the Kermes tavern. The carefully chosen horticultural design around the building, enhanced by a spacious fountain, transformed this place into one of the most popular tavern locations in the city, especially during Skopje’s long, hot summers, when various cultural events were organized (Gabriel, 2017).

Figure 5

Project for the modest café building in the Islahane Park, 1919 – Architect Gavril Tomić, which was later replaced by a new project that, by the late 1920s, became the most frequently visited place in the city, especially during Skopje's long, hot summers.



**Restaurant in
Islahane park**



Around 1873, near the newly constructed railway station in Skopje, the “Turati” Hotel was built to accommodate engineers from German, French, Belgian, Italian, and Russian companies who were involved in the construction of the railway line. The hotel not only served foreign travelers arriving at the railway station, but it also became a gathering place for Skopje’s intellectuals and diplomats, along with the city’s elite, earning a reputation as a “bohemian” hub. According to research by Professor Lj. Monev, the terrace of “Turati” was a place where “a European engineer with his hat and a Turkish official with his fez could be seen together, East and West meeting over a game of billiards.” The hotel was known for serving high-quality beverages sourced from Thessaloniki and even featured a special salon with a piano (Bjelajac, 2010). During the interwar period, the conditions were such that the traveling theater of Ljuba Ristić performed plays like “Đido” and “Ivkova Slava” at the hotel. Various high-quality drinks were consumed, including cognac, champagne, and beer, but the most popular drink was the local mastika. Records indicate that at the “Turati” Hotel, as well as the “Europa” Hotel, people regularly gathered for “a glass of mastika.”

Unlike the caravanserais that were the only accommodation options in the city until the early 20th century, with almost no hygienic or technical infrastructure, a wave of new modern hotels was built along the central urban axis, King Peter Street, from the railway station to the Stone Bridge. According to a 1924 report in the newspaper *Nasha Stara Srbija* (Anonymous, No. 18, 1924, 2), there were about 300 public venues in Skopje, including cafes, taverns, cellars, bars, bistros, inns, and hotels. By 1928, 31 hotels were registered. These establishments offered a variety of entertainment for their visitors, including daytime matinées, evening dances, and holiday celebrations, all accompanied by good wine, Weifert beer, and grape brandy. The spirit of St. Tryphon was always present in the city, especially during the holiday dedicated to him, which was the official feast day of the Skopje Tavern and Café Association, represented by the renowned restaurateur Vladan Bogdanović.

Unfortunately, very few buildings from this period have survived to the present day, making it difficult to analyze their architectural design and interior craftsmanship in detail. However, fortunately, some architectural plans, a few photographs, and records from newspapers of that period allow us to recreate an image of these buildings. According to *Vardar* newspaper records, the “Moscow” Hotel attracted people from the middle social classes, mainly civil servants, yet it was recognized as a bohemian and artistic environment. Traditional popular folk songs were played there, and it was noted that the performance of the song “Ajde slušaj, slušaj, kaleš bre Ando” would draw ovations. Recommendations for the “Moscow” Hotel from the interwar period mentioned: “Sofka in Skopje, in the café ‘Moscow,’ with the Sevdah voice of the popular singer. Her evenings are an attraction for Skopje’s nightlife. The atmosphere is bohemian; Sofka is worthy of Koštana.” It was hard to find a seat in the restaurant. The popular orchestra led by Pajo, consisting of a pianist, a cellist, and three violinists, played there.

Figure 6

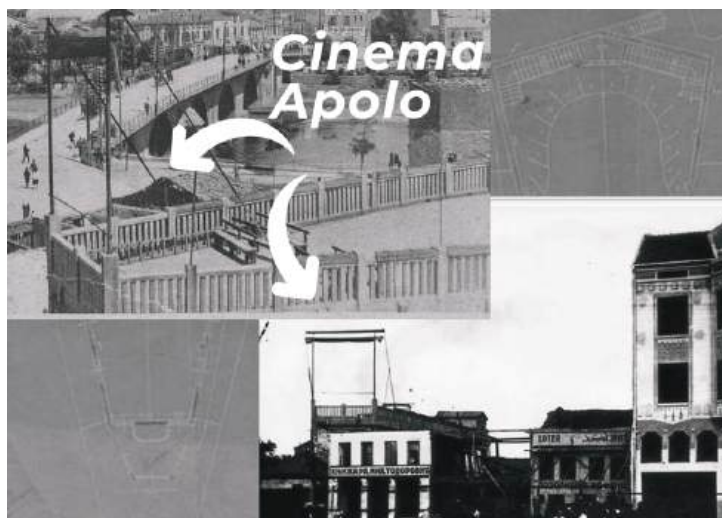
Hotel “Moscow” on King Peter Street.



Around 1920, the still undeveloped Skopje square on the right bank of the Vardar River began to take shape into an urban core that would soon become a public space with a “bohemian” epithet. In the following years, café establishments with a new pro-European spatial concept were built, enabling the organization of various cultural events. In 1924, architect Gligorije Tomić designed the building for the “Apolo” cinema and café at the request of café owners Nikola and Mihail Matić, who wanted the project to adhere to all contemporary technical and hygienic principles of a modern public building.

Figure 7

The design for the cinema hall and theater café “Apollo” – 1924, by architect Gligorije Tomić.



The reinforced concrete structure of the building allowed for the construction of a flat roof, which was designed and functioned as a summer cinema stage, where cold drinks were served during performances. Throughout the year, the “Apollo” hosted cultural events, with the café on the ground floor and the cinema hall hosting top artists, including Russian traveling theater and ballet troupes, orchestra concerts, soloists, choirs, oriental dancers, and ballroom parties. This building not only became a cult place for the bohemian world of Skopje in the early 1920s but also served as a nucleus for future buildings that followed in its line, forming a consistent façade along the eastern regulation line of King Peter Square and the largest complex of “bohemian” cafés known as “theatrical” cafés, including “Marger” and “Ujedinjenje.”

Figure 8

Advertisement for Hotel “Splendid” and Hotel “Bristol” – Vardar newspaper, 1933 – the first hotels in Skopje to introduce central heating, a bathroom with hot water in each room, telephone connection, and a modernly equipped interior.

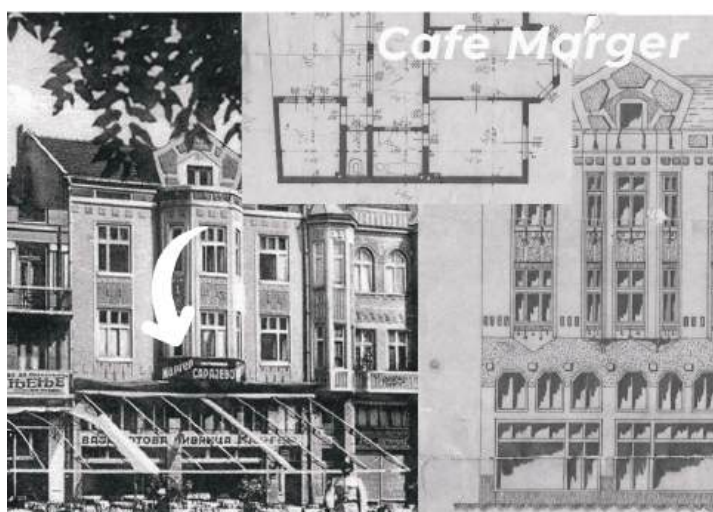


The “Marger” building, also known as the “theatrical café,” was constructed as a modern reinforced concrete structure, for which architect Vošta made precise static calculations and drawings for all formwork reinforcement positions. He also took on the construction of the building as a contractor. The stylistic orientation of this building, like most buildings erected in the early 1920s, was academicist, as the architectural matrix of the architects present in Skopje was rooted in the principles of Russian academism and Western European academicism. However, the spirit of eclecticism was particularly present in Skopje during the 1920s, resulting in an undefined stylistic architectural image for the period (Mitrović, 2007). The designer of the “Ujedinjenje” building was Russian academician Boris Dutov, who skillfully incorporated academic elements into the simple volumes of the buildings he was entrusted with, achieving a pro-European effect despite the relatively modest capital that investors were willing to invest. In most of the buildings Dutov designed, he ensured compliance with the city’s sanitary and communal regulations, as evidenced by the project for the sewage connection of this building to the city network. The project for the “Idadia” café in the Debar neighborhood from 1928 is presented within this study, not to highlight the qualities of the architectural con-

cept, which is modest both in terms of space and aesthetics, but to emphasize the architect Boris Dutov's ability to create a space free from the glamorous impression of academic elements, yet dimensioned in a human scale, giving the ambiance a homely warmth. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why local residents of Debar Maalo have embraced this café as their daily gathering place, which has lasted for 90 years and carries the epithet of a "bohemian" café.

Figure 9

The design for the building of the café "Marger," constructed in 1924, was the work of the experienced architect Rudolf Vosta.



The "Ocean" café is also an indispensable part of the urban milieu and a notable "bohemian" establishment. Although no architectural documents exist for the building, it is interesting from the perspective of interior design because in 1935, academic painter Martinoski, a frequent guest, was invited to paint large frescoes with erotic compositions depicting various café scenes. These were 13 or 11 compositions of completely nude people, interpreted by some as bacchanals and by others as symbols of an ode to love. However, Martinoski's avant-garde artistic expression was not well received by the authorities, leading to his imprisonment, while the frescoes had a short life, reflecting the general atmosphere of conservatism and stagnation of the time.

In the early 1930s, the rapid development of cinematographic technology sparked a need for new cinemas in Skopje, where residents could enjoy the latest world

blockbuster films while maintaining the Balkan custom of consuming refreshments during the screenings. Several such establishments were built between 1924 and 1935. Another key cultural landmark on King Peter Street was the newly constructed cinema building, which became a beacon for intellectuals, artists, and citizens, attracting all lovers of cinematic art. The reinforced concrete structure of the newly erected building, with a flat roof slab, created an open summer cinema stage, while the cinema hall gave Skopje residents the impression of being in the most luxurious Parisian cinema, decorated with rich pro-baroque vignettes, velvet seats, and luxurious mezzanine balconies where drinks from the foyer bar were served. Architect Ivan Artemushkin, although arriving in Skopje in 1920 as an academicist from the St. Petersburg Architectural Academy, demonstrated through his exceptionally rich architectural production that he was a designer of great profile, following all modern trends in world architecture. The 1933 “Urania” tone cinema building has a completely modernist architectural expression in its entire corpus, both in the composition of the facades and the organization of the interior, using entirely contemporary building materials in the interior finishes.

Fortunately, known as Kino Kultura, this building remained almost unchanged until the beginning of this century, allowing for more detailed in situ studies. However, unfortunately, our careless attitude towards the entire architectural and cultural heritage, including the few surviving buildings from the great construction period of 1920-1940 in Skopje, has led in recent years to the near-complete devastation of the interiors of these buildings and inappropriate, unprofessional, and unstudied renovations of the façade structures.

Therefore, we welcome the idea of organizing such scientific gatherings as the voice of researchers and “seekers” of cultural values. Although they are quiet, they still serve as a ray of light in the darkness that envelops the entire cultural policy. Today’s understanding of the “bohemian” way of life, based on newly composed bourgeois standards, pulsating in the rhythm of cheap folk culture, are certainly not values that should be embedded in the cultural memory of future generations, unlike those we have attempted to briefly review today.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has explored the significant contributions and developments in Balkan architecture during the early 20th century, particularly focusing on key projects that have shaped the urban landscape of Skopje. By examining the

works of architects such as Gavriilo Tomić, Gligoriје Tomić, and Rudolf Vosta, the study has highlighted the blend of traditional and modernist influences that characterized this period. The research has also emphasized the importance of these architectural endeavors in the social and cultural life of Skopje, as these buildings not only served functional purposes but also became central to the city's identity and daily life.

While this paper offers valuable historical insights into the architectural and cultural evolution of early 20th-century Skopje, it currently lacks specific proposals or recommendations for addressing the identified challenges in preserving and revitalizing these heritage sites. Including practical suggestions would enhance the study's applicability, providing guidance for architects, urban planners, and policymakers who seek to integrate historic preservation with modern urban development. For instance, explicit strategies for adaptive reuse of bohemian public spaces or frameworks for maintaining the architectural integrity of historic sites while accommodating contemporary needs could strengthen the study's practical impact. By bridging the gap between historical analysis and actionable recommendations, this paper could serve as a more comprehensive resource, offering both a deeper understanding of Balkan architectural heritage and concrete strategies for its sustainable preservation and continued relevance in the modern urban landscape.

The analysis of specific projects, such as the modest café in Islahane Park and the more elaborate structures like the Apollo Cinema and Theater Café, illustrates the diversity of architectural approaches in the region. These projects reflect a transitional period in Balkan architecture, where local traditions were increasingly intersecting with modern European trends.

Overall, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of Balkan architectural history by shedding light on the lesser-known yet impactful projects of the era. It also underscores the need for further research into the preservation and documentation of these historical structures, many of which continue to influence the architectural character of the region today. Through this exploration, the paper reaffirms the significance of early 20th-century Balkan architecture in the broader context of European architectural development.

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