JOURNAL OF BALKAN ARCHITECTURE

From Past to Future: Spatial Revitalization of Public Spaces in Radovish

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SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH PAPERS

DOI: https://doi.org//10.69648/ECTP6983

Journal of Balkan Architecture (JBA), 2026; 3(1): 69-87

jba.ibupress.com

Online ISSN: 2955-2524

Application: 15.03.2026

Revision: 15.04.2026

Acceptance: 10.05.2026

Publication: 15.05.2026

Miteva, V. & Balkoski, D. (2026). From past to future: Spatial revitalization of public spaces in Radovish. Journal of Balkan Architecture, 3(1), 69-87. https://doi.org//10.69648/ECTP6983

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Paper was presented at 10th urban studies congress, Skopje, R.N. Macedonia. We declare no conflicts of interest.

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BALKAN JOURNALS

Abstract

The research aims to examine the revitalization of the historical urban area (HUA) in the town of Radovish, a small town in the southeastern part of North Macedonia known for its urban and cultural heritage. Particular attention is paid to the revitalization of the old bazaar area, which has played a significant role as a link between the city park and the main square in the town. The area is currently facing various challenges, such as the reduction of pedestrian activity, the deteriorated infrastructure, and the presence of unused commercial spaces.

The research is based on a three-phase methodology. The first phase of the research is based on an empirical analysis based on the relevant literature. The second phase is based on the implementation of the research through the use of photographs, spatial analysis, and the evaluation of the current situation. The third phase is based on the creation of a conceptual design proposal for the revitalization of the area.

The research is based on the principles of placemaking that consider the spatial, social, and programmatic aspects of the area. The research proposes a revitalization of the old bazaar area that will enhance the functionality and attractiveness of the area. The proposal is based on the creation of a pedestrian corridor from the bazaar area to the city park. The proposal will also include the activation of unused commercial spaces in the area. The revitalization of the area will enhance the sustainability of the area according to the principles of contemporary urban planning.

Keywords: Methodology, Placemaking, Public space, Radovish, Urban revitalization

Introduction

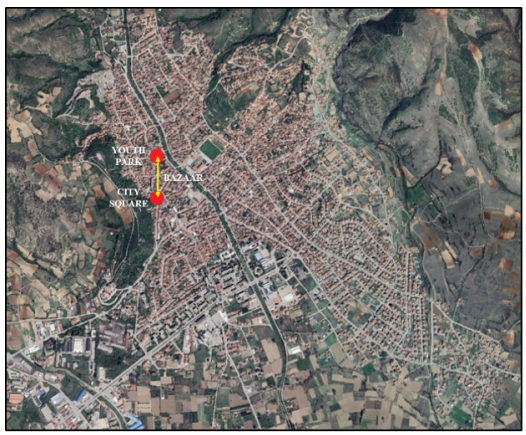
Radovish, is a small town situated in the southeastern part of North Macedonia, whose development has been shaped by a combination of historical, geographical, and socio-economic influences. With a population of 14,460 inhabitants (SSO, 2021), the town functions as an administrative, cultural, and economic center for several surrounding rural settlements. Located in a valley at the foothills of Mount Plačkovica, Radovish developed in close relation to its natural setting, which influenced both its spatial structure and its economic activities. Historically, mining activities, agriculture and local trade played an important role in the formation of the town's urban character.

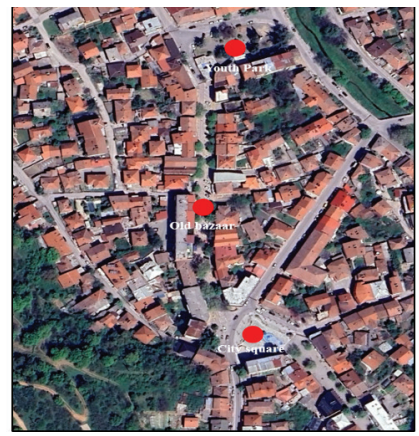
Radovish, similar to many towns in the Balkan region, carries a number of levels of past development. There are still visible signs of the Ottoman period, especially around the old bazaar and the traditional settlements surrounding it. The later periods of development, especially those related to the socialist period, have added a number of public facilities and housing areas to the town. However, the town of Radovish has recently experienced some of the common difficulties faced by many smaller towns. Some of the issues have included a decline in the resident population, the out-migration of the younger population, and a decline in investment. This has meant that some of the public areas have lost some of their vitality.

A distinctive feature of Radovish is the location of its historical urban core (HUA) which is not positioned at the geometric center of the town, but rather on its southwestern edge (fig. 1). This area includes three interconnected public spaces: the main city square, the old bazaar, and the so-called "Youth Park,". Historically, these spaces formed the social and economic heart of the settlement. The bazaar functioned as a lively commercial corridor, the square served as a place for public gatherings and ceremonial events, while the park functioned as a green recreational zone. Together, they created a compact yet multifunctional system of public spaces (fig. 2), that supported daily urban life.

Figure 1 *(left) - location of the urban core of Radovish (source: Google Earth),*

Figure 2 *(right) – the urban core of Radovish (source: Google Earth, authors sketch)*





Over time, the expansion of the town toward other areas and the changing socio-economic context have weakened the role of this historic cluster of public spaces. Today, the bazaar experiences reduced pedestrian movement, outdated infrastructure, and an increasing number of inactive commercial premises. The main square lacks diverse activities that could sustain everyday social interaction. Similarly, the Youth Park remains underutilized due to insufficient maintenance and limited integration with surrounding urban functions. These conditions have gradually reduced the attractiveness of the HUA, contributing to a broader sense of spatial stagnation.

In the field of urban planning, the topic of revitalization of public spaces has become one of the primary strategies for overcoming challenges in the urban environment. The concept of public space is seen as a physical space, as well as a space for social interaction, culture, and economic activity. The lack of public space is seen as a factor affecting the vitality of the urban system as a whole. Thus, for the city of Radovish, the re-examination and redesign of its historical urban core represents a valuable opportunity to strengthen its local identity, as well as create a strategy for the promotion of sustainable urbanism within the city.

This research aims to assess the current status of the central urban area of Radovish, as well as create a strategy for the revitalization of the city center, focusing on the revitalization of the old bazaar, the main square, and the Park of the Youth as a pedestrian zone. The research, grounded on the placemaking concept, which focus-

es on the integration of spatial, social, and programmatic elements, aims to create a strategy for the improvement of the quality of public space, as well as promote social interaction and economic growth within the city center.

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge within the field of architecture and urban planning, as it focuses on the integration of the principles of sustainable urbanism within a smaller city, such as Radovish, within the Balkan region, as well as the preservation of its cultural and historical significance. The city of Radovish, with its unique position, history, and current challenges, represents a relevant case study for the promotion of public space revitalization as a strategy for the promotion of sustainable urbanism within the Balkan region.

Conceptual-Theoretical Framework – the Placemaking concept

In recent years, the revitalization of public spaces has become an increasingly important issue in urban planning, particularly in situations where socio-economic change has resulted in fragmented or under-used historic centers. There are many theoretical and practical frameworks that have been developed over the last few decades and they provide helpful tools for understanding and facilitating the transformation of these spaces.

The placemaking concept was first proposed in the second half of the 20th century by sociologists and designers, particularly Jane Jacobs. Jacobs' work highlighted the importance of vibrant streets, diversity, and people-oriented urbanism. She proposed that successful public spaces are those that are informed by the needs and actions of people rather than planners (Jacobs, 1961).

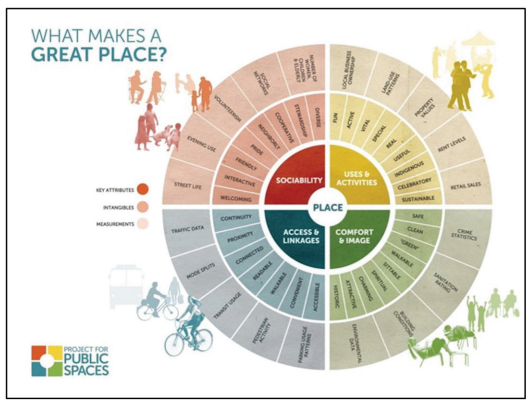
Following these early theories, William H. Whyte proposed a method for observing people's usage of public spaces, which formed the basis for the development of empirical methods (Whyte, 1980). Jan Gehl further contributed to the development of the theory by proposing criteria for evaluating public spaces. He focused on the importance of human-scale design, human activities in public spaces, and the quality of the urban environment. His "12 Quality Criteria" for evaluating public spaces have become a standard tool for assessing the environment (Gehl, 2010; 2011).

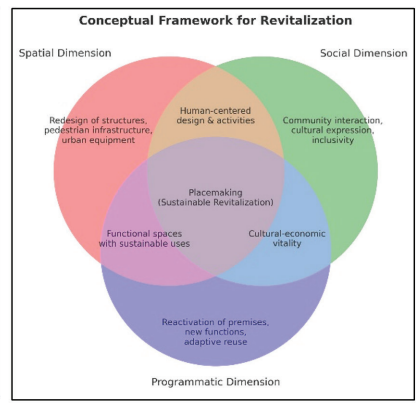
Since the 1970s, the organization *Project for Public Spaces* (PPS) created a methodology that outlines the principles for transforming underperforming areas into vibrant public places. The PPS model emphasizes that successful public spaces are not just about good design; they require programming, management, and com-

munity participation as well. The PPS framework/diagram (fig.3) emphasizes four essential qualities of a good public space: accessibility, comfort, sociability, and activities (PPS, 2024).

Figure 3 (*left) – PPS's place diagram (source: www.PPS.org)*

Figure 4 *(right) – conceptual framework for Radovish's public spaces (source: authors)*





In this sense, placemaking is a multi-layered strategy that combines the spatial dimension (design) with both the social and cultural functions of a space. This view of placemaking has particular relevance for smaller towns where the public life of that town is dependent on a limited number of key public spaces, including the town's bazaar, square and park.

While most of the literature on urban revitalization and placemaking has typically been focused on larger cities, smaller towns have unique issues (and opportunities) associated with their revitalization. The Balkan context is often defined by a combination of the physical structures created from Ottoman urbanism, the spatial planning from the socialist era, as well as the spatial evolution that has occurred post-socialism. Many towns within the Balkans, such as Radovish, have historic downtowns with both a bazaar and religious buildings existing side by side with a more recent overlay of large cultural centers and public squares from the socialist era. Thus, the continued declining industrialization and demographic changes, coupled with an uneven economic development pattern has created a level of neglect and disrepair in the public spaces located in the historic parts of these towns.

In order to revive these types of environments, it is important to strike a balance between the preservation of their heritage and their adaptation to today's con-

temporary requirements. Stanilov argues that the transition to a market economy in Southeast Europe requires a flexible and community-oriented method of urban planning to help bring back a vibrant public life to small and medium sized localities (Stanilov, 2007).

The framework for revitalizing the central urban area of Radovish has three levels of experience (fig.4):

- The spatial level: redesigning and developing physical elements of the environment (i.e., structural elements, pedestrian infrastructure, and urban equipment) per Gehl's principles and the Project for Public Spaces guidelines.
- The social level: creating opportunities for social interaction, cultural expression, and inclusiveness by developing and activating public space through a community-driven programming model.
- Programmatic Level: Reactivating commercial spaces, developing new uses for existing spaces, and adapting existing structures to ensure future viability.

This framework offers a concept of placemaking that is seen as a complex strategy that incorporates not only the historic fabric of a place but also its contemporary needs in the urban environment.

Methodology

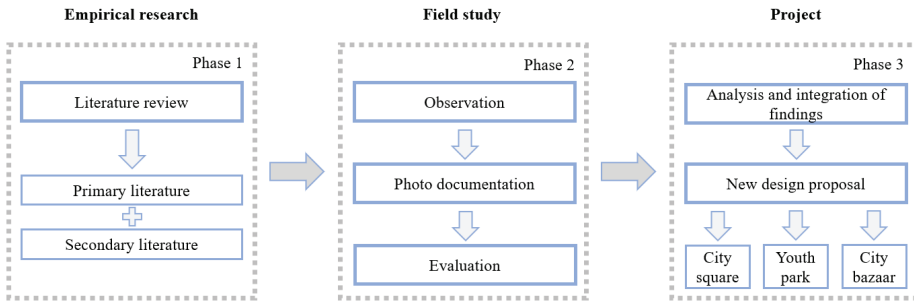
The methodological framework of this research is structured in three phases (fig.5):

1. Empirical research
2. Fieldwork
3. Development of a conceptual design proposal.

Each phase builds upon the previous one, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the spatial, social, and cultural dynamics of the central urban area of Radovish.

Figure 5

Research methodology (source: author's drawing)

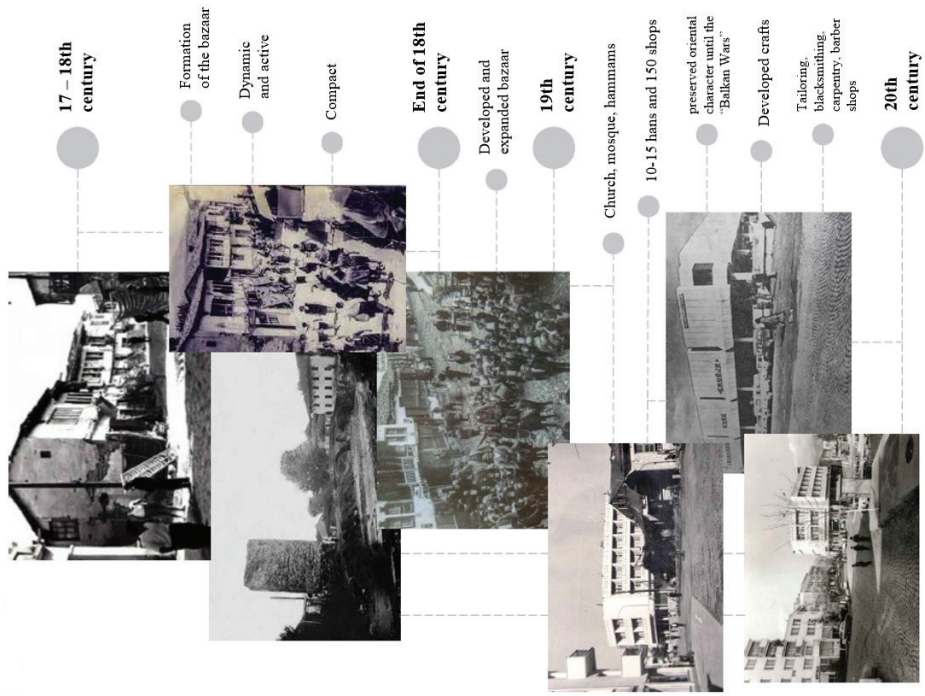


The first phase involved a literature review which was conducted to identify historical and theoretical sources associated with Radovish's urban development and public spaces. The literature consulted was primarily secondary literature, such as books on the history of Radovish, as well as urban studies, in order to identify the historical development of both the old bazaar and the central area of Radovish. Along with these sources, archival materials and historical photographs were studied in order to determine how the public spaces of Radovish have been transformed from the Ottoman Era, through the Socialist Era, to today.

In addition, the photographs and archival materials provided a framework through which to analyze the current conditions in Radovish relative to those of the traditional city (fig.6).

Figure 6

Historical timeline of the bazaar (source: authors diagram, based on research)



In the second phase, the existing status of the HUA was documented and evaluated through photo documentation of the public spaces, an inventory of the urban furniture in each of the public spaces, and studies of pedestrian movement patterns using various times of day. These methodologies provided a thorough overview of how functioning today as well as how they will function in the future.

An important part of developing this methodology was evaluating the condition of three major public spaces (main plaza, Youth Park, old bazaar) against internationally accepted standards for assessing public spaces. Through this evaluation, we could determine the significant and specific strengths and weaknesses of each public space.

The evaluation of the square and the park was conducted using the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) methodology, which is based on 27 criteria grouped into four main categories:

1) Access and Linkages – physical and visual accessibility, connections to surrounding streets, proximity to public transport, and ease of pedestrian movement;

2) Comfort and Image – cleanliness, safety, quality of design, seating availability, and the general sense of comfort experienced by users;

3) Uses and Activities – diversity of functions, presence of programmed activities, adaptability of space, and intensity of use;

4) Sociability – opportunities for social interaction, inclusiveness, cultural expression, and the ability of the space to foster a sense of community.

The evaluation of city bazaar is conducted using the methodology developed by Jan Gehl, known as the "12 Criteria for Quality." This methodology assesses whether various features of public spaces effectively protect users and whether these spaces are comfortable and enjoyable for those who frequent them. The results are presented using graphic symbols with specific colors to indicate whether the values are positive, negative, or neutral.

The results of the evaluations were brought together in one overall diagnosis for the central urban area analysed. The comparative tables and analyses provided a working document for establishing priorities for intervention. Therefore, the design proposal responds to the deficiencies identified in the evaluations from both PPS and Gehl methodologies, and thus is based upon evidence and the user's perspective.

Results

This research reports its findings based upon the systematic evaluation and analysis of three important public open spaces located within Radovish's central urban area; the primary town square, the Youth Park, and Old Bazaar, and to which, internationally accepted methodologies (PPS and Jan Gehl) were used to conduct the analyses, and the results presented using tables, photographs, and descriptive summaries.

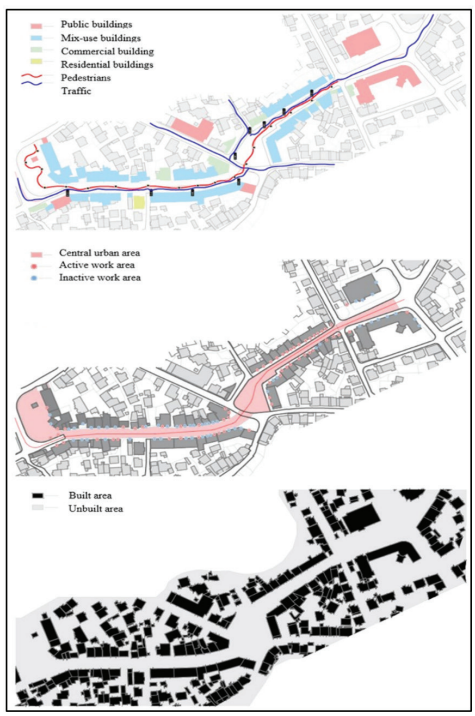
Additionally, an array of urban core analyses identifying the central core proportions of build fabric and site area, active vs inactive surrounding structures (Commercial, Residential, Public, and Bazaar), and pedestrian and vehicle movement patterns, were conducted within a 3-kilometre radius of the core (fig.7).

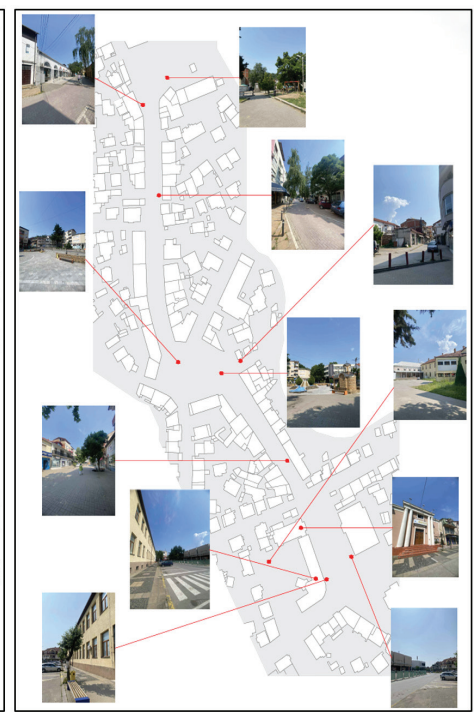
The results form the spatial and functional context in understanding and clarifying the dynamics of the square, park, and bazaar relative to the broader urban structure.

Fieldwork included an extensive amount of photography (fig.8) documenting the historical urban area with an emphasis on the active and inactive streetscape segments. The photographs illustrate locations of degradation as well as spaces for potential adaptive reuse. In reference to the overall site plan of the bazaar, the photodocumentation locations are shown, creating the spatial context for analyzing and interpreting the findings of the evaluation.

Figure 7 *(left) – urban analysis of the historical urban area of Radovish (source: authors)*

Figure 8 *(right) – photo documentation of the central urban area of Radovish (source: authors)*





- City Square

The PPS evaluation of the main square using 27 criteria showed both advantages and disadvantages. Each criterion was evaluated based on field observation, photo

documentation and user experience evaluation. The results (tab.1) indicated that the main square has a fairly good level of accessible connections to adjacent streets, as well as clarity in its spatial organization. The open layout of the main square provides visual prominent in the urban form, and ease for pedestrian movements.

Table 1

Evaluation of the city square of Radovish, (source: authors)

RADOVISH – CITY SQUARE			
Elements of public space	CRITERIA	EVALUATION	
		Summer	Winter
Access and linkages	Easily accessible	🟢	🟢
	Sidewalk access	⚫	🟢
	Access to various types of transportation	⚫	⚫
	Parking space provided	🟢	🟢
	Ramps for disabled people	🔴	🔴
	Proximity to services and activities	⚫	🟢
	Signaling and information	🟢	🟢
Comfort and image	Attractiveness of public space	🟡	🟡
	Representativeness	⚫	🟢
	Safety during use	🟢	🟢
	Historical significance and age	🟢	🟢
	Cleanliness, hygiene and maintenance	🟡	🟡
	Good and comfortable urban equipment	⚫	🟡
	Digitization of public space	🟢	🟢
Uses and activities	Daily Use (Liveliness)	🟡	🟡
	The most common period of use	All day	All day
	Use of various age groups	⚫	⚫
	Offering different activities	🟢	🟡
	Active surrounding facilities and places	🟢	🟢
	Unused parts and spaces	⚫	🟡
	Security and supervision	🟢	🟢
	Temporary entertainment activities	🟢	🟢

RADOVISH – CITY SQUARE			
Elements of public space	CRITERIA	EVALUATION	
		Summer	Winter
Sociability	Attracting people	●	●
	User grouping	●	●
	Interaction and socialization	●	●
	Night use of space	●	●
	Encourage positive feelings	●	●
Evaluation	● a positively evaluated aspect ● a neutral evaluated aspect ● a negatively evaluated aspect		

There are also significant limitations within the findings. The square does not provide a diversity of uses and activities, limiting its attractiveness beyond occasional public events. There is little seating or shade provided within its design, which inhibits the ability to use the square comfortably on a daily basis. The lack of a variety of functions such as cafes, kiosks, or cultural programming prevents the square from being a continuous generator of social life. Thus, although the square has a significant symbolic position in the community, it is underutilized on a daily basis.

- Youth Park

The park indicates a presence of green/ recreational area within the historical urban core and was assessed with the PPS methodology (tab.2). The findings about the strengths of the park included the fact that it enhances mobility within the park through the use of green infrastructure to enhance the quality of the environment, provides patrons an accessible location to engage in leisure and activities and is an effective contributor to informal gathering opportunities through its size, ability to provide green infrastructure, and ability to visually appeal to users.

Table 2

Evaluation of the city park of Radovish, (source: authors)

RADOVISH – YOUTH PARK			
Elements of public space	CRITERIA	EVALUATION	
		Summer	Winter
Access and linkages	Easily accessible	●	●
	Sidewalk access	●	●
	Access to various types of transportation	●	●
	Parking space provided	●	●
	Ramps for disabled people	●	●
	Proximity to services and activities	●	●
	Signaling and information	●	●
Comfort and image	Attractiveness of public space	●	●
	Representativeness	●	●
	Safety during use	●	●
	Historical significance and age	●	●
	Cleanliness, hygiene and maintenance	●	●
	Good and comfortable urban equipment	●	●
	Digitization of public space	●	●
Uses and activities	Daily Use (Liveliness)	●	●
	The most common period of use	All day	All day
	Use of various age groups	●	●
	Offering different activities	●	●
	Active surrounding facilities and places	●	●
	Unused parts and spaces	●	●
	Security and supervision	●	●
	Temporary entertainment activities	●	●
Sociability	Attracting people		●
	User grouping	●	●
	Interaction and socialization	●	●
	Night use of space	●	●
	Encourage positive feelings	●	●
Evaluation	● a positively evaluated aspect ● a neutral evaluated aspect ● a negatively evaluated aspect		

Because there are several weaknesses associated with the park's operation, the overall effectiveness of the park is reduced. The underutilization of the park is due to limited opportunities for active programming. Field observations indicate that the park is utilized infrequently during non-programmed periods as a result of having limited to no active programming or amenity support. In addition to the lack of active programming or amenity support, other maintenance issues were also identified, which included outdated urban components (e.g., benches), inadequate lighting and poorly maintained walking paths. The inadequacy of these components has compromised the level of comfort and safety for park users, resulting in limited utilization after hours.

- Old Bazaar

The old bazaar was assessed according to Jan Gehl's 12 Quality Criteria as they relate to protection, comfort and enjoyment (tab.3). The findings identify several areas of deficiency: the pedestrian pathways are narrow/unlevel, there is inadequate illumination throughout the bazaar, there is a lack of seating for customers wishing to rest, and only a few functions remain active since most of the storefronts are now vacant. As a result of this decline in business activity, less foot traffic and vitality exist at the bazaar than at other times.

Table 3

Evaluation of the old city bazaar in Radovish, (source: authors)

City	**RADOVISH – CITY BAZAAR**				
Category	Criteria		Evaluation		
			positive	negative	optimal
Protection	1.	Protection against traffic and accidents – feeling safe			
		Protection for pedestrians		●	
		Eliminating fear of traffic		●	
	2.	Protection against crime and violence – feeling secure			
		Lively public realm			●
		Eyes on the street			●
		Overlapping functions day and night			●
		Good lighting		●	
	3.	Protection against unpleasant sensory experiences			
		Wind		●	
		Rain/snow	●		
		Cold/heath			●
		Pollution		●	
		Dust, noise, glare		●	

Comfort	4.	Opportunities to walk			
		Room for walking without obstacles		●	
		Accessibility for everyone		●	
		Interesting façades		●	
	5.	Opportunities to stand / stay			
		Attractive zones for standing / staying			●
	6.	**Opportunities to sit**			
		Good places for sitting with good view		●	
		Benches for resting			●
	7.	**Opportunities to see**			
		Reasonable viewing distances			●
		Interesting views			●
		Lighting (when dark)			●
	8.	**Opportunities to talk and listen**			
		Low noise levels		●	
		Street furniture that provides “talkscapes”		●	
	9.	Opportunities for play and exercise			
		Invitations for creativity, activity, play		●	
		By day and night / in summer and winter		●	
Delight	**10.**	**Scale – buildings designed to human scale**	●		
	11.	Opportunities to enjoy the positive aspects of climate			
		Sun / shade			●
		Heat / coolness			●
	12.	**Positive sensory experiences**			
		Good design and detailing		●	
		Good materials			●
		Trees, plants, water			●

The data presented confirms and reiterates that the bazaar possesses considerable spatial and cultural significance. The bazaar’s linear form provides a naturally existing pedestrian connection between the Park of the Youth and the city’s primary square. The human scale of the buildings and streetscape provide an intimate ur-

ban condition that is well-suited for social and cultural activities. In addition, the strong historic identity of the bazaar may provide a backbone for its revitalization. These latent qualities suggest that, through a focused focus on intervention, the bazaar can be again become the centre of Radovish's urban activity.

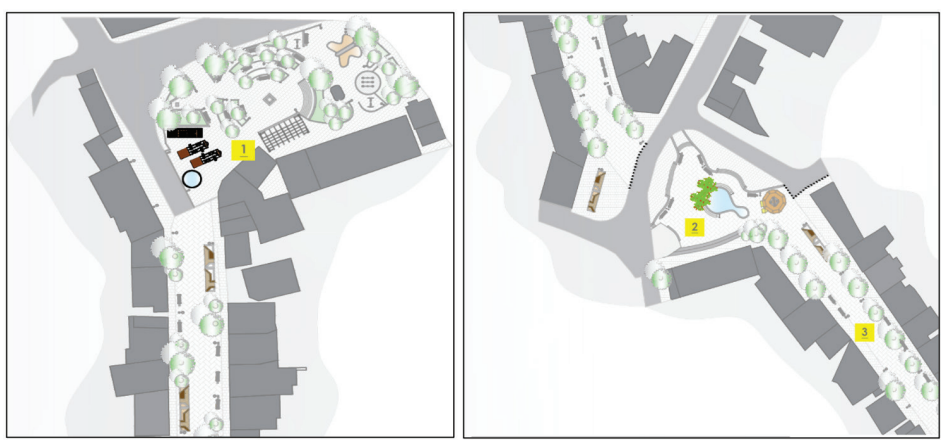
Discussion - newly proposed project

The revitalization project is a response to the evaluation findings and aims to develop Radovish's central public spaces into vibrant, functional and accessible environments. Negative or neutral characteristics found in the assessment will be addressed through specific spatial, social and programmatic interventions. Improvements to accessibility, urban equipment, safety and programming will take place to ensure that the town square, Youth Park and old bazaar become mutually supportive areas that will collectively improve the livability and identity of the city's core.

The proposed solution (fig. 9,10) redesigns the old bazaar as a continuous pedestrian route through the entire HUA, reactivates previously non-commercial spaces, modernizes urban equipment and provides additional items to encourage social interaction and increase public safety.

Figure 9 *(left) – site plan of the Youth Park (1) (author's design),*

Figure 10 *(right) – site plan of the city square (2) and part of the bazaar (3) (author's design)*



Primary efforts in the Youth Park are directed at renovating and transforming the existing café bar to align it with the design of the park. The use of vibrant color wooden paneling, as well as decorative lighting, helps create a distinct visual identity for the café-bar while better integrating the café-bar into its surroundings. In addition to the park already having some pieces of children's playground equipment, urban furniture, such as benches and litter bins, have been added to provide much needed functional amenities to better organize and provide better functionality in the park, (fig. 11).

The interventions within the Bazaar, which constitutes the principal pedestrian thoroughfare of the core regional district have centered on modernizing and augmenting urban furniture, particularly through creating multi-functional parklets (fig.12). The components of these parklets not only provide areas for seating, but also incorporate zones for vegetation, resulting in a unique visual identity to the space. The wooden segments of the parklets are integrated into the finished surface of the pedestrian walkway, enhancing the livability of the public realm and creating an attractive atmosphere for urban life. Waste bins have also been strategically placed throughout the site to enhance functionality and sustainability over time.

Figure 11 (*left) – tactical interventions in the Youth Park, café bar (author's design),*

Figure 12 *(right) - parklets along the old bazaar (author's design)*



For the main square and the street "Spaso Radovishki", the conceptual design foresees minimal interventions. The fountain located at the center of the square is reactivated, while the surfaces are enriched with urbanization elements and newly formed green areas, thus increasing the quality of the space (fig. 13,14).

Figure 13 (left) – *design proposal of the city square (author's design),*

Figure 14 *(right)– new parklets in the square (author's design)*





Conclusion

The proposed revitalization of the central urban area in Radovish demonstrates how targeted interventions can reshape neglected public spaces into functional, inclusive, and socially vibrant environments. By addressing the weaknesses identified through evaluation—lack of comfort, insufficient programming, and decline of traditional functions—the project introduces practical and context-sensitive solutions that improve daily urban life.

Other than physical changes, the project also emphasizes the role of placemaking as a means to achieve the transformation of public spaces to develop a sense of identity, sociability, and cultural expression. The repurposing of Youth Park, the activation of the main square, and the rejuvenation of the old bazaar are all indicative of the role of small-scale but well-thought-out design processes to achieve positive social and economic benefits for the community.

The significance of this research is based on the demonstration of the role of public space revitalization as an instrument for sustainable urban development even for small towns. The connection to heritage helps to develop a sense of identity while also providing an opportunity for growth.

The City of Radovish needs to commit to the building, construction, and maintenance of this facility to achieve the objectives set for the completion of this project. The future direction of this initiative needs to be clearly defined to ensure community participation, community engagement, and activities to ensure the sustainability of the revitalized public spaces for many years to come.

The benefits of the initiative will be felt by the central part of Radovish while also contributing to the discourse on the need to develop public spaces that can contribute to the growth of a community.

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