

THE HYPA BUILDING IN ŠABAC

Challenges and Strategies for Protecting Modern Heritage in a Changing Socio-Political Landscape

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the architectural and social significance of the Homes of the Army in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945–1992), a specific typology of objects, built and managed by the army, yet utilized by citizens across generations as community and cultural centers. The Homes of the Army represented the materialization of the doctrine of the Yugoslav People's Army in strengthening the unity of the young multi-ethnic nation. In this sense, their design emphasized monumentality, while also promoting openness, following the trends of Western European modernist practice of the time. However, with the change in socio-political circumstances in the early 1990s, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the deregulation of public space in a corrupt system, in which political instruments are used to support the economic interests of private investors, the fate of these buildings—which had become focal points in the social and cultural life of cities—was, in many cases, left to the market. Preservation efforts, led by architects and cultural activists from the local communities, are focused on the potential of these buildings as spaces for culture and community interaction. The paper presents a case study of the protection of the Home of the Yugoslav People's Army in Šabac, one of the seven most endangered heritage sites listed by Europa Nostra for 2024. By analyzing this example, the paper offers insights into current challenges as well as strategies for protecting modernist heritage across former Yugoslavia. Analyzing the pressure of the market on the one hand and the preservation of local identity on the other, this paper provides a critical analysis of the contemporary narrative on the rehabilitation and reuse of modernist structures that no longer align with contemporary economic frameworks. These insights offer lessons that can be applied to similar conservation efforts globally, making the case study relevant to the broader international context of modernist architecture conservation.

KEYWORDS: community space, Home of the Army, modern heritage, Yugoslav Modernism.

INTRODUCTION: The term Home of the Army may evoke images of barracks or other military facilities to readers outside the cultural and symbolic context of former Yugoslavia. For Yugoslavs, however, these buildings are often associated with social gatherings, rock concerts, and cultural events. They represent a specific typology of structures, built and managed under military administration, yet serving as cultural centers open to all generations of citizens. This was part of what could be described as the Yugoslav People's Army's 'soft policy', aimed at fostering closer ties between citizens and military personnel,¹ while promoting unity within a multi-ethnic nation (Ignjatović, 2005). Given their open character and prime urban locations—typically in central areas of cities—these buildings evolved into focal points of social and cultural life of the local communities.

However, with the dissolution of the country in the early 1990s, the post-socialist transition, and the reductions in defense budgets, many of these buildings were closed and left to market forces (Tadić, 2012). However, the transformation of the economic system did not alter the needs of citizens. Once-established public spaces remained objects of aspiration and public interest for reactivation.

Through the use of archival materials, newspaper articles, interviews, and surveys, this paper examines the history of the Home of the Yugoslav People's Army (HYPA) building in Šabac, its significance in both the local and broader European context, as well as the ten-year struggle of the local community to preserve it. It raises the question of whether modernist architecture, through its struggle for preservation, can become a gathering place for the broader professional community.



01 The HYPA Šabac nearing completion. © Dragutin Petrović Archives, 1962.



02 The HYPA Šabac close to completion seen from a distance on a postcard from Šabac, 1962. © unknown.



03 Illustration of the central zone of the city of Šabac, with the HYPA building next to the roundabout on the top right. © Aleksandar Stanojlović, 2019.

HOME OF THE YUGOSLAV PEOPLE'S ARMY (HYPA) IN ŠABAC

The HYPA Šabac, like other buildings of this typology, was designed in the spirit of the International Style of modern architecture. Through its geometric clarity, horizontal emphasis, and minimalist façade, alongside its functional spatial organization, HYPA Šabac represents one of the most significant examples of modern architecture in Šabac [FIGURE 01]. The building's triangular plot is masterfully exploited to create a dynamic interplay of volumes, while the cantilevered rooftop garden and expansive glazed lobby embody modernist principles of transparency and connection to the urban environment. Its main façade defines the view from one of two principal urban axes, complementing a series of key cultural institutions, including the National Museum and the City Library. As it blends into its surroundings, forming an inseparable

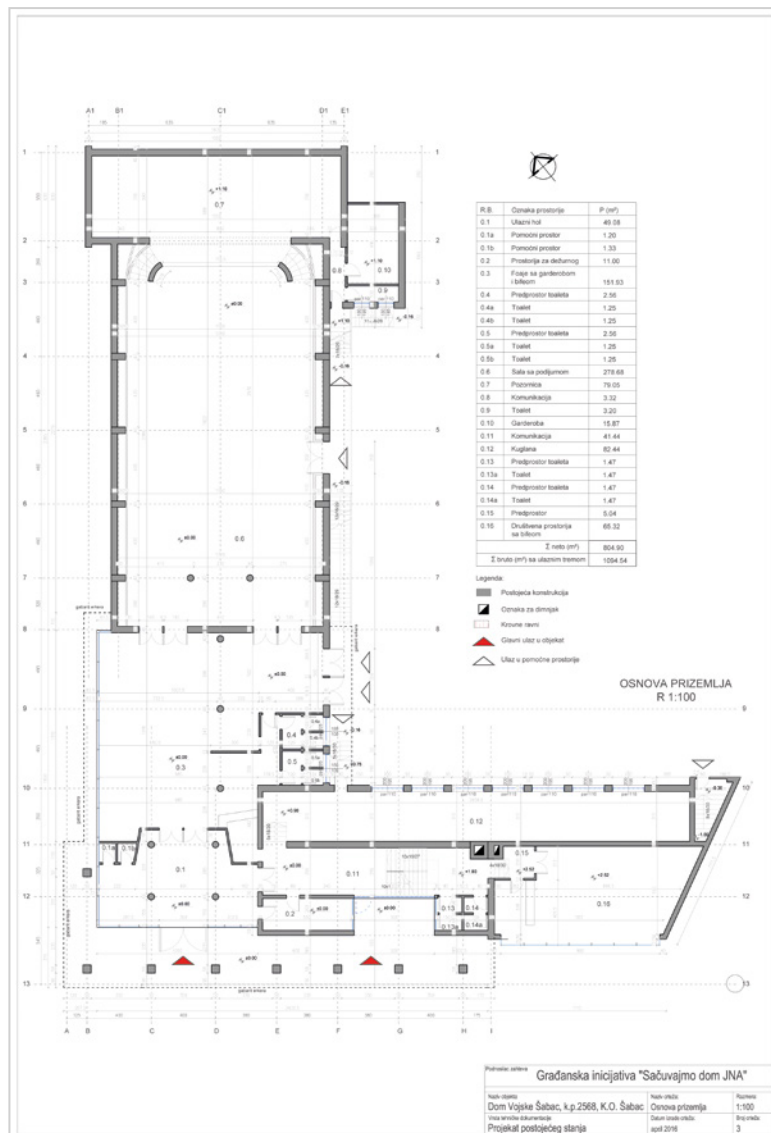
part of the city's architectural ensemble, it serves as a visual and symbolic landmark [FIGURE 02, FIGURE 03].

The investor was the Yugoslav People's Army, and the contractor was the construction company 'Izgradnja', a newly established public enterprise that, in the subsequent period, became engaged in the construction of the city's most significant infrastructure, public, and residential buildings (Gavrilović, 2023). The conceptual design for the building was created by Dr. Vladimir Bjelikov, a professor at the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade and one of the most notable Yugoslav theorists in the fields of architectural and urban design and analysis. The project architect was engineer Gavrilko Drakulić, while the structural engineer was M. Stefanović.²

The construction of a building of this scale and method was an ambitious undertaking for Šabac at the start of the 1960s, making this building important not only in terms of



04 Siteplan of the HYPA building in Šabac, 2016. © Save HYPA Initiative, 2016.



05 Ground floor plan of the HYPA building in Šabac, 2016. © Save HYPA Initiative, 2016.



06 Part of the front façade of the HYPA. © Gavrilović, 2023.

its function and location but also in its technical execution and materialization. It served as a benchmark for many other buildings constructed in Šabac in the following years and remains one of the most significant construction projects of its time (Gavrilović, 2016).

The HYPA Šabac was opened on Army Day, December 22, 1962 (U Šapcu je svečano otvoren Dom JNA [The Home of the YPA was officially opened in Šabac], 1962). It housed the following facilities: a lobby/gallery, a multifunctional hall with a stage for performances, concerts, cinema, a bowling alley, meeting rooms, a café-restaurant with a rooftop garden, a chess room, a reading room with a library, a billiards and table tennis room, and offices. The building also had a spacious courtyard with a summer garden and a stage that could be set up when needed [FIGURE 04, FIGURE 05].

A newspaper article published at the onset of the construction predicted that the building would become the most representative cultural institution in the city (Počela izgradnja Doma JNA u Šapcu [Construction of the Home of the YPA in Šabac has begun], 1960). Throughout its operation, the building played a significant role in the social life of Šabac. It hosted dances, celebrations, concerts, film screenings, and other events that added new layers of memory for generations of residents. According to writer Ivan Glišić, the HYPA was always welcoming to young people, offering opportunities for groups that, for political reasons, could not perform elsewhere.³ This

approach resulted in the paradox that in smaller towns across the former country, Homes of the Army evolved into centers of alternative culture.

The original appearance of the building has been entirely preserved to this day [FIGURE 06]. From its construction until the early 2000s, when it was maintained by the Army, the building remained in good condition, despite no major repairs or restoration work being carried out. However, after the City of Šabac purchased the building in 2008, it became a target for thieves who gained unrestricted access and stole furniture, equipment, and even installations. Additionally, some windows have been broken. Despite these issues, thanks to the completely intact metal roof and the high quality of the construction, the building remains structurally sound.

Following the purchase, a competition was announced for the design of a commercial building on the site of the HYPA (Miljuš, 2018). However, the building remained under city ownership. At the end of 2015, the City Assembly decided to sell the building. In response, 30 architects from the city took action by sending a letter to the mayor,⁴ thereby forming the Save HYPA initiative.

THE SAVE HYPA INITIATIVE

The Save HYPA initiative did not emerge suddenly. Since the sale and closure of the Home of the Army, discussions had been ongoing about the possibility of utilizing the space, primarily by cultural workers and for cultural



07 Roundtable in 2016. © Dimitrijević, 2016.



08 Roundtable in 2024. © Gavrilović, 2024.

purposes. The building's premises and its potential to meet the city's cultural needs were well recognized.⁵ Today, the city lacks a proper art gallery, cinema, concert and event halls, a chess club, social gathering spaces, and venues for collaboration among various civil society organizations.

It was precisely these civil society organizations that submitted a proposal to the mayor for the building to be used as a Youth Center,⁶ where art associations, music groups, and various civil society organizations would gather. This proposal would not require initial investments from the local government to adapt the space, but it was not accepted.

The Initiative has since focused on three main areas of action. Gathering support from professional organizations, cultural institutions, groups, initiatives, and public figures; raising public awareness about the importance of protecting the modern architectural heritage and the power of citizens to oppose government decisions; and submitting a proposal to the relevant Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments to have the Home of the YPA protected as a cultural monument. All these activities by the Initiative flowed concurrently, often interrelating with one another.

Retrospectively, the Initiative's temporal course was marked by the support of two major international organizations: Docomomo (Erić, 2016) and Europa Nostra in 2023⁷. As part of securing support from these organizations, roundtables were organized in Šabac,⁸ where experts in the field of architectural heritage preservation discussed future plans and activities [FIGURE 07, FIGURE 08].

Following the first roundtable, held in 2016 at the Šabac Library, a comprehensive proposal was submitted to the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments to include the Home of the Yugoslav People's Army in Šabac on the list of immovable cultural assets. This proposal was adopted, and the building has since been protected by law. Although this does not definitively eliminate concerns about the potential destruction of the building—especially given the current (adverse) stance of the Serbian

authorities toward heritage protection institutions, which are often perceived as obstacles to investor-driven urbanism—it does restrict investors' opportunities to pursue complex and potentially risky circumventions of the law.

The Initiative focused not only on the architectural value of the building but also on its former and potential future use as a social and cultural center, in accordance with the Faro Convention⁹. The decision to include this aspect was natural, given the history of the HYPA, but also useful due to the still insufficiently established valuation of Modern architecture, both institutionally, despite the Council of Europe's 1991 recommendation, and within the general public. By insisting on the preservation of HYPA with an emphasis on democratic participation, activists employed an approach that challenges neoliberal urbanism, advocating for heritage as a tool for social equity rather than reducing it to economic capital (Meskell, 2018).

Precisely because of its social significance, the Initiative to preserve the Home enjoyed strong public support from the very beginning. This was evident in reactions on social media and in conversations with citizens during public events organized by the Initiative. The emotional connection people had with the building, along with overwhelming community support, has continued to fuel the Initiative's determination to persist in its efforts. Additionally, the Initiative actively maintained communication with citizens to broaden its support base and instill hope that restoration was possible, all with the intention of pressuring authorities into committing to the building's reconstruction.

Over the years, numerous public events have been organized, primarily on the square in front of the HYPA building. The common goal of these activities has been to remind or inform citizens about the various facilities the building could offer. So far, film screenings, concerts, exhibitions, workshops, and drawing competitions [FIGURE 09] have been held in front of the building. In addition, a petition for the preservation of the building was launched in 2016, instantly gathering more than 10,000 signatures from the citizens of Šabac [FIGURE 10].



09 A drawing competition for high school pupils in front of the HYPA building. © Simović, 2024.



10 Signing the petition in front of the HYPA building. © Manjenčić, 2016.

Beyond these events, the Initiative engaged in extensive media outreach, publishing articles, giving interviews for radio and television, and producing short video messages featuring support from prominent figures. Additionally, a documentary film was made, featuring past and potential future users of the building.

The Initiative also received public support from cultural institutions in Šabac, as well as professional associations, including Docomomo Serbia, the Society of Conservators of Serbia, the Ministry of Space, the Association of Serbian Architects, Europa Nostra Serbia, and Expeditio Kotor, as well as civil society organizations, magazines, and music groups.

All this resulted in the hope among citizens that restoration was possible.

The online survey conducted by the Initiative in July 2023 shows that the citizens of Šabac are highly interested in protecting architectural heritage and support the Save HYPA initiative.¹⁰ Most respondents attribute the greatest responsibility for architectural heritage to the local government. According to citizens, successful initiatives for the protection of cultural monuments are characterized by the persistence of the initiative members, their ability to mobilize a large number of citizens, and the involvement of experts. Additionally, citizens believe the city would be significantly richer in content if the HYPA were reconstructed. They miss concerts and cinemas the most, but all other former uses of the building are also represented in their responses.

As a result of the Initiative's actions, the city administration decided in 2018 to restore the building and reinstate its purpose as a community and cultural center. The following year, the documentation for the project was completed, and a request for a construction permit was submitted. The city's budget for 2019 allocated EUR 425,000 in funds for this purpose.¹¹ It can be assumed that this plan was initially hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequently by local elections, which resulted in a change in the local administration. Funds were allocated for the same

purpose in the budgets for 2020, 2021, and 2022,¹² but the restoration of the building has not begun.

After the new administration gradually discontinued the project, 50 engineers from Šabac sent a letter in September 2023 advocating for the restoration.¹³ However, no response was received. Meanwhile, the Initiative continued its activities.

In response to the nomination by the Initiative, the HYPA was named one of Europa Nostra's 7 Most Endangered Heritage Sites in Europe for 2024.¹⁴ Experts from Europa Nostra, along with representatives from the European Investment Bank Institute, visited Šabac to tour the building and meet with the mayor, the Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia, and representatives of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments.¹⁵ Separate meetings were held on August 28 and 29, 2024, and a joint conference on February 4, 2025, in the Town Hall, involving all interested parties [FIGURE 11]. During these discussions, the EU Delegation representative encouraged a commitment to the restoration of the building, and it was agreed that the members of the Initiative, together with experts from the Municipality would prepare the documentation and apply for EU grants.¹⁶

Involving experts from the 7 Most Endangered Program not only enhanced the visibility of the HYPA building throughout Europe but also fostered dialogue with key stakeholders, paving the way for a potential solution.

CONCLUSION

The case of the Home of the Yugoslav People's Army in Šabac highlights the precarious position of modernist architectural heritage in post-socialist societies, where changes in the social system, privatization, and institutional neglect have led to the endangerment of buildings that once were part of a collective identity and a sense of progress. The Šabac case is not isolated, but rather reflects tensions across Eastern Europe, where modernist heritage—often discredited as a "socialist relic"—is facing destruction in favor of neoliberal urban development



11 Conference Home of the HYPA Šabac – the Way Forward © The City of Šabac, 2025.

(Czepczinski, 2008; Kulić, 2019). As a representative of a specific typology of buildings, but also of Yugoslav modernist architecture, the story of the HYPA transcends local borders and challenges the Western-centric stereotype of Eastern European countries as passive recipients of ideological narratives, rather than as active producers of public spaces for civic participation (Todorova, 1997; Normand, 2021).

Despite market pressures and administrative inertia, the ten-year struggle to preserve the building—through legal protection, sustained community pressure, and support from international organizations—provides lessons for reclaiming modernist heritage and public space. This case highlights the need for proactive heritage conservation strategies and calls for further research into sustainable models of joint struggle that will ensure that modernist heritage contributes to a better future.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 "We would not want the new Army House with its social facilities to serve only military personnel. On the contrary, it should become an institution where access will be free for all citizens. Only through close cooperation and daily connections between Army members and citizens, and especially with our youth, the Reserve Officers' Association, the Veterans' Alliance and other socio-political organizations, will we achieve the moral strength of the people and the army – which is a decisive factor in the fighting strength of our country in a possible modern war," is part of the speech by Lieutenant Colonel Zdravko Nenić, at the ceremonial opening of the JNA House in Šabac, reported in the local newspaper *Glas Podrinja*, on December 22, 1962.
- 2 After the closure of the company, the documentation of the social enterprise "Izgradnja" was transferred to the Inter-Municipal Historical Archive in Šabac.
- 3 See interview with Ivan Glisic in the documentary "Ivan Glisic in the Home of the YPA", available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMHBYqskXJY>, Accessed Mar. 5, 2025.
- 4 See "Pismo gradonačelniku Šapca" November, 2015.
- 5 Referring to the parameters of the General Regulation Plan "Šabac" – revision, Official Gazette of the City of Šabac, 2015, 18/15, Marija Milosavljević in her Master's thesis "Revitalization of the Home of the YPA", Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad, 2017, states that the city lacks approximately 1,700 square meters of space designated for culture, which is slightly less than the area of the HYPA.
- 6 See "Dom omladine Šapca", December 2015, available at: https://www.academia.edu/104114366/Dom_omladine_Šapca, Accessed Mar. 5, 2025.
- 7 See Evropa Nostra Srbija, Podrška inicijativi „Sačuvajmo Dom JNA“, August 2023.
- 8 See Podrinske, Okrugli sto o sudbini zgrade Doma JNA u Biblioteci šabačkoj, March 2016 and Podrinske, Čuvari nasleđa – za očuvanje Doma JNA, March 2024
- 9 See Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, Council of Europe Treaty Series – 2005, 199.
- 10 See Gavrilović, M. 2023. "Rezultati istraživanja o stavovima građana Šapca na temu zaštite graditeljskog nasleđa i o Inicijativi Sačuvajmo Dom JNA". Available at: https://www.academia.edu/128021525/Rezultati_istraživanja_o_stavovima_građana_Šapca_na_temu_zastite_graditeljskog_nasleđa_i_o_Inicijativi_Sačuvajmo_Dom_JNA, Accessed Mar. 5, 2025.
- 11 See Odluka o budžetu grada Šapca za 2019. godinu, od 17. 12. 2018. Available at: <https://sabac.rs/dokumenta/budzet/>, Accessed Mar. 5, 2025.
- 12 See Odluke o budžetu grada Šapca za 2020, 2021. i 2022. godinu. Available at: <https://sabac.rs/dokumenta/budzet/>, Accessed Mar. 5, 2025.
- 13 See Gavrilović et al. 2024. Pismo Skupštini grada Šapca, Gradskom veću i gradonačelniku Šapca.
- 14 See 7 Most Endangered list for 2024 at: <https://www.europanostra.org/europa-nostra-and-eib-institute-announce-europes-7-most-endangered-heritage-sites-2024/>, Accessed Mar. 5, 2025.
- 15 See Technical Report on the HYPA building: <https://7mostendangered.eu/sites/home-of-the-yugoslav-peoples-army-in-sabac-serbia/>, Accessed Mar. 5, 2025.
- 16 See Conference held on February 4, 2025, for instance: <https://sabac.rs/vesti/delegacija-eu-izrazila-spremnost-da-finansira-obnovu-doma-jna-u-sapcu/>, Accessed Mar. 5, 2025.