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DESIGN THINKING METHODOLOGY AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR THE SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION OF DARK HERITAGE INTO AN INNOVATIVE CULTURAL TOURISM OFFER IN BELGRADE

DESIGN THINKING METODOLOGIJA KAO INSTRUMENT ODRŽIVE TRANSFORMACIJE MRAČNOG NASLEĐA U INOVATIVNU PONUDU KULTURNOG TURIZMA BEOGRADA

Abstract. Contemporary challenges in managing dark heritage sites require approaches that ensure long-term protection of authenticity while simultaneously enhancing the user experience. This paper explores the application of Design Thinking methodology as an instrument for the sustainable transformation of dark heritage into an innovative cultural tourism offer in Belgrade. Through a survey conducted among 32 respondents during February and March 2026, data were collected regarding the perception of the current offer, the identification of critical points, and the potential for improving the interpretation of the Staro Sajmište site. The results indicate that visitors highly value the expertise of curatorial guidance but, at the same time, recognize obstacles that threaten the sustainability and dignity of the site, primarily in the form of inappropriate content in the immediate surroundings. By applying Design Thinking, the paper defines strategic guidelines for transformation through the introduction of audiovisual materials, short films, and survivor testimonies. Such an approach enables the creation of an offer that is not only technologically innovative but also socially sustainable, preserving the integrity of the heritage for future generations and integrating it into the broader cultural context of the capital.

Key words: Design Thinking, dark tourism, cultural tourism, curatorial guidance, Staro Sajmište, Belgrade, sustainable development.

Apstrakt. Savremeni izazovi upravljanja lokalitetima mračnog nasleđa zahtevaju pristupe koji osiguravaju dugoročnu zaštitu autentičnosti uz istovremeno unapređenje korisničkog iskustva. Ovaj rad istražuje primenu Design Thinking metodologije kao instrumenta održive transformacije mračnog nasleđa u inovativnu ponudu kulturnog turizma Beograda. Anketom, sprovedenom među 32 ispitanika tokom februara i marta 2026. godine, prikupljeni su podaci o percepciji trenutne ponude, identifikaciji kritičnih tačaka i potencijalima za unapređenje interpretacije lokaliteta Staro sajmište. Rezultati ukazuju na to da posetioci visoko vrednuju stručnost kustoskog vođenja, ali istovremeno prepoznaju prepreke koje ugrožavaju održivost i dostojanstvo lokaliteta, pre svega u vidu neprimerenih sadržaja u neposrednom okruženju. Primenom Design Thinking-a, rad definiše strateške smernice za transformaciju kroz uvođenje audiovizuelnih materijala, kratkih filmova i svedočenja preživelih. Ovakav pristup omogućava kreiranje ponude koja nije samo tehnološki inovativna, već i društveno održiva, čuvajući integritet nasleđa za buduće generacije i integrišući ga u širi kulturni kontekst prestonice.

Gljučne reči: Design Thinking, mračni turizam, kulturni turizam, kustosko vođenje, Staro sajmište, Beograd, održivi razvoj.

Introduction

The management of dark heritage sites represents one of the most complex challenges of contemporary cultural tourism, where the need for commemoration and the preservation of the victims' dignity must be balanced with visitor demands for clear and impactful interpretation. In the context of Belgrade, the Staro Sajmište Memorial Center occupies a central yet complex place within the culture of memory. For decades, this site has faced problems of dissonant heritage, inadequate land use, and the absence of an integrated, scientifically grounded tourism offer. The revitalization process reached a concrete epilogue when the reconstruction of the Central Tower of Staro Sajmište was completed in 2024, while the first professionally organized visits began in 2025. It is important to emphasize that this operational regime has been maintained to this day, and access to the site is realized exclusively through organized and guided tours. The subject of this paper is the research into the possibilities of applying the Design Thinking methodology as an innovative, user-centered approach that serves as an instrument for the sustainable transformation of this site. The primary problem addressed by the research is the discrepancy between the high historical significance of Staro Sajmište and the current perception of visitors, who recognize a lack of modern interpretation tools and the presence of inappropriate content in the surroundings. The aim of the work is to identify key pain points of the user experience and define strategic guidelines for the creation of an innovative tourism product based on empirical data collected during February and March 2026. By using Design Thinking, the study seeks to create a model that will ensure social sustainability and the ethical presentation of heritage, integrating Staro Sajmište into the contemporary cultural map of Belgrade in a manner worthy of its historical importance.

Theoretical Framework of Sustainable Dark and Cultural Tourism

The theoretical foundation of contemporary tourism at sites of suffering rests on the overlap of three key domains: the culture of memory, tourism valorization, and sustainable

resource management. In order to transform dark heritage into an innovative offer, it is essential to understand the synergy of these elements through the prism of contemporary cultural tourism theory. Cultural tourism can be defined depending on: the resources it is based upon, the purpose of the tourists' trip, the motivation of the tourists, and the desire to measure cultural impacts (Pivac et al., 2016: 17). Building upon such multidimensionality, cultural tourism can be defined as a type of tourism activity in which the essential motivation of visitors is learning, discovering, experiencing, and consuming tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourist destination. These attractions/products refer to a set of distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional features of a society, encompassing art and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries, and living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs, and traditions (Rabotić, 2013: 185). The cultural heritage of Staro Sajmište is not exhausted by its architecture and the material remains of the camp pavilions; it encompasses a deep layer of intangible heritage manifested through the culture of memory, oral testimonies of survivors, and social practices of commemoration. According to the UNESCO classification, this segment of heritage includes oral traditions and knowledge which, in the context of dark heritage, become a key resource for authentic interpretation. The integration of these intangible elements into the tourism product allows trauma to be transformed into an educational narrative, preserving the identity of the victims through the living transmission of truth to future generations. Unlike mass tourism, cultural tourism at these sites strives for authenticity and the preservation of narrative integrity, where the visitor becomes an active participant in the process of understanding the past (Richards, 2018: 15).

Sustainable tourism development represents an imperative for the long term protection of natural and cultural resources, while simultaneously strengthening the economic and social foundations of the community. The implementation of sustainable principles in the tourism industry enables the establishment of the necessary balance between economic



growth and the preservation of the integrity of the living and historical environment. In this manner, strategic management based on these postulates ensures lasting stability and the ethical foundation of the tourism economy (Todorov et al., 2023a: 80).

Cultural tourism attractions, especially those based on difficult heritage, act as primary generators of development that can position a destination like Belgrade as a center of reflective and socially responsible tourism. Regardless of whether dark heritage is viewed as a specific market “niche” or as an integral part of the capital’s cultural offer, it requires a sustainable transformation that connects material remains with contemporary artistic production and digital interpretation. Given that heritage tourism is often identified with cultural tourism, Staro Sajmište possesses the potential to become a starting point for redefining the relationship between the past and contemporary tourism needs through innovative management models (Todorov et al., 2023b: 103).

Within this broad framework, dark tourism stands out as a specific and emotionally intensive form of selective tourism. Dark tourism or thanatourism involves travel to places that are, in one way or another, connected to death and suffering. Although this phenomenon is not new, it has recently become a subject of intense scientific interest. The essence of dark tourism is not in morbidity, but often in the need to confront the past, pay respect to victims, and draw lessons from tragic historical events (Rabotić, 2013: 223; Wight, 2006). Accordingly, sites of suffering become places of education and deep emotional reflection (Sharpley & Stone, 2009: 10).

In this context, the sustainability of dark heritage transcends economic frameworks and primarily relates to social and ethical sustainability. According to Smith (2006: 44), heritage is a process of constant negotiation of meaning, and sustainable transformation involves using the site in a way that does not violate its solemnity, while simultaneously providing value to the local community (Mowforth & Munt, 2015: 82). For specific sites such as Staro Sajmište, sustainability directly depends on the elimination of dissonant elements that spoil the dignity of the place and disrupt the culture of memory. Quality

interpretation emerges here as a crucial tool for transformation. The contemporary cultural tourist is no longer satisfied with only passive observation of static exhibits; they seek interaction, storytelling, and emotional engagement. Successful heritage interpretation must “bring history to life” connecting the past with the present in a way that is understandable and personally relevant to the visitor (Rabotić, 2013: 193). Tilden (1977: 21) emphasizes that interpretation is not merely the presentation of information, but the art of revealing deeper meanings. Contemporary models that include personal stories and testimonies ensure that the site’s message remains relevant for new generations, contributing to the creation of a socially responsible and educational tourism product.

Research Methodology: *Design Thinking as a Framework for Tourism Product Innovation*

Although the modern popularity of Design Thinking is linked to the beginning of the 21st century, its theoretical roots date back to the 1960s, when researchers such as Herbert Simon, a prominent American scientist and Nobel Prize winner in Economics in 1978, began to observe design as a scientific process for solving complex problems (“wicked problems”). Simon, through his work in the fields of cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence, laid the foundations of this methodology by defining design as a process of transforming existing situations into preferred ones.

The term was further solidified in 1987 through the work of Peter Rowe, who utilized it within the context of architectural design. However, the methodology as we know it today, focused on empathy and user needs, was globally affirmed by the work of the company IDEO and its founder David Kelley, who transferred the principles of design thinking into the sphere of business and social innovation (Brown, 2008; Rowe, 1987; Simon, 1996). Today, this approach, particularly the five phase model developed at the Stanford Institute of Design (Stanford d.school), is recognized as a key instrument for creating sustainable solutions in various industries, including cultural tourism. The methodological approach in this paper is based on the synergy of the

qualitative principles of the Design Thinking (DT) methodology and the quantitative analysis of data collected through a survey research. Design Thinking is defined as a non-linear, iterative process that research teams use to understand users, challenge initial assumptions, and redefine problems in order to create innovative solutions (Dam & Siang, 2026; Razzouk & Shute, 2012). Within this research, the five phase model developed by the Stanford d.school was applied, encompassing empathy (understanding the experience of visitors and their emotional needs at the site of suffering), definition (identification of key problems and barriers), ideation (generating solutions such as audiovisual archives), prototype (conceptualization of the offer model), and testing through user feedback. The empirical part of the research was conducted via a survey questionnaire during February and March 2026, with the primary goal of collecting data on the perception of the current offer of the Staro Sajmište site and identifying elements that disrupt the sustainable transformation of the space. The research included a purposive sample of a total of 32 respondents. Although numerically small, this sample is highly focused on the population interested in cultural tourism and dark heritage, which is fully in accordance with the methodological needs of the initial phase of the Design Thinking process, where depth of insight and quality of information are more significant than the breadth of the population itself (Brown, 2008; Martin, 2009; Gibbons, 2016; Liedtka, 2018). The questionnaire was structured to cover critical perspectives on curatorial guidance, existing infrastructure, and the potential of digital interpretation tools. The data collected through the survey were processed using the SPSS statistical software (version 26.0), utilizing descriptive statistical analysis. The results obtained in this manner serve as an empirical basis for the problem definition phase within the DT process, enabling the precise mapping of spatial conflicts, such as the presence of inadequate sports and catering facilities in the immediate vicinity of the memorial. In this way, quantitative data directly guide the creative process toward visitor priorities regarding the innovation of Belgrade's cultural tourism offer.

Research Results and Discussion: *Analysis of Perception and Potential of Staro Sajmište*

The analysis of the data collected during the research conducted in February and March 2026 provides an in-depth insight into the current state and future directions of the site's development, with the results interpreted through the prism of sustainability and the need for innovation in the interpretation of dark heritage. Descriptive statistics results from a sample of 32 respondents indicate an exceptionally high rating for curatorial guidance, where the average score (X) for expertise and clear presentation is 4.88 (on a Likert scale from 1 to 5). This finding confirms that the human factor is currently the site's strongest resource and that staff expertise represents a solid foundation upon which further sustainable transformation can be built. In scientific literature, the authenticity of interpretation provided by a professional guide or curator is considered crucial for the transformative experience of the visitor at sites of suffering, as it enables deeper emotional and cognitive connection with the historical context (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006).

On the other hand, one of the most critical research findings relates to the immediate surroundings of the Memorial Center, where as many as 85% of respondents identified the presence of inappropriate content, such as restaurants and sports facilities (gyms), as the main factor undermining the dignity of the victims and the integrity of the site itself. These results, also reflected in the data that 13.3% of respondents would not recommend the tour to others due to the current state, point to a serious problem of dissonant heritage, where the commercial use of space directly threatens its primary memorial and commemorative function (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). It follows from the above that the sustainable transformation of the site necessarily requires a radical spatial reorganization and the removal of all content not in accordance with the solemnity of the place, in order to preserve its symbolic significance. Regarding the potential for innovation of the offer, the respondents showed a high degree of interest in the introduction of contemporary interpretation tools. More than 90% of the research participants believe that the implementation



of audiovisual materials, short documentary films, and authentic testimonies of survivors would significantly improve the understanding of the history of Staro Sajmište. Such views are in complete correlation with contemporary trends in cultural tourism, where digital storytelling serves as a bridge between the past and future generations. The use of technology in the service of memory enables the long-term sustainability of the narrative without the risk of physical degradation of authentic artifacts and spaces, thereby ensuring the ethical and educational relevance of the site in the future (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

Analysis of the Sociodemographic Structure of Respondents

The empirical research was conducted on a purposive sample of 32 respondents. The sample structure was carefully planned to ensure the relevance of data for the development of a dark heritage tourism product, which by its nature requires a high degree of ethical awareness and historical background knowledge. An analysis of the collected data reveals a distinct intellectual and professional

profiling of the participants. The dominance of highly educated individuals (over 80% of respondents with a university degree or a higher level of education) is key to this study, as it guarantees that the obtained evaluations regarding interpretation and sustainability are not based on superficial tourist curiosity, but on critical reflection of dark heritage. The distribution according to employment status is of particular importance. The clear distinction between respondents employed in the public sector (34.4%) and those from the private sector and entrepreneurship (46.8% in total) allows for the examination of the problem from two key perspectives: 1. The institutional perspective, which recognizes the need for state support and systemic memorialization, 2. The market perspective, which evaluates the financial sustainability and the potential for integrating the site into Belgrade's commercial tourism offer.

Gender and generational representation, with a wide range from students to retirees, ensures a comprehensive insight into how the culture of memory is transmitted and interpreted among different demographic groups.

Table 1. Sample display by gender, age and education

Category	Classification	Number	Percentage
Gender	Female	19	59.4%
	Male	13	40.6%
Age (average)	39 years old	(Range 24–80)	/
Education	Master's / Magister / Doctoral studies	19	59.4%
	Faculty (4 years) / Specialist studies	7	21.8%
	College (2 years)	4	12.5%
	High School	2	6.3%
Occupation	Public sector employees	11	34.4%
	Employees in the private sector	7	21.8%
	Entrepreneurs / Self-employed	8	25.0%
	Retirees	4	12.5%
	Students	2	6.3%

Source: The author's own research

Analysis of Previous Experience and Awareness of Dark Tourism

The second part of the research focuses on the respondents' level of information regarding dark tourism and their experience with similar sites both domestically and abroad. The results indicate that the sample does not consist of random passers-by, but rather a profiled audience with significant experience in visiting sites of suffering. The fact that a significant number of respondents have

visited world-class memorial centers, such as Auschwitz, Dachau, or Jasenovac, suggests the existence of a reference framework for comparing the quality of interpretation. High awareness of the term "dark tourism" prior to the visit further confirms the existence of a clearly defined target group interested in this specific type of offer. Such previous experience directly influences the respondents' high expectations regarding the dignity, objectivity, and innovativeness of the dark tourism product at the Staro Sajmište.

Table 2. *Previous Experience and Respondents' Awareness of Dark Tourism*

Indicator	Answer Category	Number (f)	Percentage (%)
Previous Visits to Sites of Suffering	Yes	24	75.0%
	No	8	25.0%
Visits to international concentration camps (Auschwitz, Dachau, etc.)	Yes	13	40.6%
	No	19	59.4%
Prior knowledge of the term "dark tourism"	Yes	19	59.4%
	No	7	21.9%
	I'm not sure	6	18.7%

Source: The author's own research

The quantitative data presented in the previous tables confirm that the sample possesses a high degree of professional and experiential competence for the critical evaluation of the observed site. The clear correlation between the respondents' high level of education and their previous experience at international dark heritage sites indicates that they are capable of recognizing nuances in interpretation and identifying structural deficiencies in the Staro Sajmište offering.

Such a profiled sample provides a valid basis for further analysis of the quality of curatorial guidance, as their responses do not merely reflect a subjective impression but are grounded in comparative experience and knowledge of global standards in the field of memorial tourism. It is precisely these high expectations of the respondents that become a key benchmark in the next phase of the analysis, which focuses on the actual realization and



content of the tourism product. After analyzing the sample structure and the experiential profile of the visitors, it is necessary to evaluate the actual realization of the tourism product in the field. The focus of this part of the research is on curatorial guidance as the primary channel of communicating dark heritage to the audience. For the purpose of evaluating the respondents' attitudes, a five-point Likert scale

was used, where respondents rated their level of agreement with the provided statements (from 1 – “strongly disagree” to 5 – “strongly agree”). The high ratings obtained across all categories, as presented in Table 3, indicate that the curatorial interpretation at the Staro Sajmište is currently the strongest segment of the offering, providing the necessary ethical and scientific weight to the entire process.

Table 3. *Evaluation of Curatorial Guidance Elements*

Statement (Evaluation Elements)	Average Value (X)	Mod (Mo)
Curator's expertise and clarity of presentation	4.88	5
Objectivity and grounding in historical facts	4.81	5
Dignity and appropriateness of the delivery method	4.94	5
Clarity and comprehensibility of the presentation	4.75	5
Organization and timing of the tour	4.63	5

Source: The author's own research

High mean values, which exceed 4.60 for all observed parameters, unequivocally confirm that human resources represent the highest quality pillar of the current offering at the Staro Sajmište. The rating for the dignity and appropriateness of delivery ($X=4.94$) stands out in particular, which is of crucial importance for a dark tourism product where the ethics of remembrance must take priority over any form of commercialization. The fact that the mode for all categories is the maximum of 5 indicates a high degree of consensus among respondents regarding the quality of interpretation. These results suggest that room for improvement should not be sought in the method of curatorial presentation, but rather in the accompanying infrastructural and environmental factors.

Analysis of the Educational and Emotional Impact of the Visit

The success of a dark heritage tourism product is measured not only by the quality of the information provided but also by the long-term effect it leaves on the visitor's consciousness. Table 4 presents the evaluation of attitudes regarding the educational impact and emotional experience following the completion of the guided tour. These data are essential for understanding the “empathy phase” within the Design Thinking model, as they indicate the level of internal change among the research subjects.

Table 4. Educational Effect and Emotional Impression of the Visit

Statement (Evaluation Elements)	Average Value (X)	Mod (Mo)
The visit to the Staro Sajmište contributed to my better understanding of historical events	4.69	5
The tour had a significant educational effect on me	4.72	5
The visit left a strong emotional impression on me	4.81	5
I believe that such visits encourage the development of social awareness and a culture of remembrance	4.88	5
After this visit, I believe that dark tourism can play an important social role	4.78	5

Source: The author's own research

The results shown in Table 4 indicate an exceptionally high level of agreement among respondents regarding statements related to the transformative role of the visit. The stance that such visits encourage the development of social awareness and a culture of remembrance stands out in particular ($X=4.88$), confirming that respondents do not view the Staro Sajmište merely as a historical site, but as an active instrument of social education.

The high mean value for emotional impression ($X=4.81$) confirms that the curatorial interpretation successfully bridged the gap between historical facts and the visitor's personal experience. This is in line with the view that educational tourism enables the direct application of knowledge through interaction with the environment, thereby contributing to the formation of critical thinking and the social awareness of participants (Todorov, 2026: 45). In this way, a visit to the Staro Sajmište ceases

to be passive observation and becomes a process of active learning. Finally, the fact that respondents recognize the important social role of dark tourism ($X=4.78$) provides direct legitimacy for the further development of this specific tourism product within your research thesis.

The final part of the research analyzes the strategic aspects of transforming the Staro Sajmište into a comprehensive dark heritage tourism product. The results indicate an exceptionally high degree of consensus among respondents regarding ethical standards and the developmental potential of dark tourism, alongside a clearly defined readiness to support sustainable management models. Through a set of statements, respondents evaluated the ethical, educational, and economic frameworks of future development, providing insight into how the broader professional

**Table 5.** *Future Development, Ethics, and Sustainability of the Tourism Product*

Statement (Evaluation Elements)	Average Value (X)	Mod (Mo)
I believe the Staro Sajmište has the potential to be part of Belgrade's cultural offering	4.67	5
Curatorial guidance is key to the responsible interpretation of the site	5.00	5
This type of tourism product can be developed in a sustainable and ethically responsible manner	4.93	5
The development of dark tourism must be based on respect for the victims and historical facts	5.00	5
Charging for a professionally guided tour is justified if the revenue contributes to site preservation and educational programs	4.73	5
I believe it is possible to establish a balance between education and financial sustainability	4.47	5
Question	Yes (%)	No (%)
Would you recommend this guided tour to other tourists?	86,7%	13,3%

Source: The author's own research

and interested public perceives the long-term sustainability of this site.

The analysis of the results from Table 5 reveals an absolute consensus among respondents (Mo=5, X=5.00) on two key points: the necessity of curatorial guidance and the imperative that the development of dark tourism be based on respect for victims and historical facts. These findings directly confirm the paper's starting hypothesis that

dark tourism at Staro Sajmište must not be left to spontaneous development, but rather to a strictly controlled and scientifically grounded interpretation that respects the highest ethical standards.

The high average rating for the site's potential to become part of Belgrade's cultural offering (X=4.67), combined with the fact that the vast majority of respondents (86.7%) would recommend this tour to others, indicates the

product's strong social and tourism potential. A certain percentage of those who would not recommend the visit (13.3%) can be linked to the current state of the site and the existence of inappropriate content that undermines the dignity of the memorial, further justifying the need for the transformation of the space.

Particularly significant is the finding regarding the justification of charging for services for preservation purposes ($X=4.73$), which, in combination with the belief in a possible balance between education and financial sustainability ($X=4.47$), provides a strong empirical argument for the introduction of self-sustaining management models proposed in this paper. Such results confirm that sustainable tourism development requires the harmonization of economic interests with the protection of cultural and natural values and the active involvement of the local community in the planning of tourism activities (Todorov, 2024: 44).

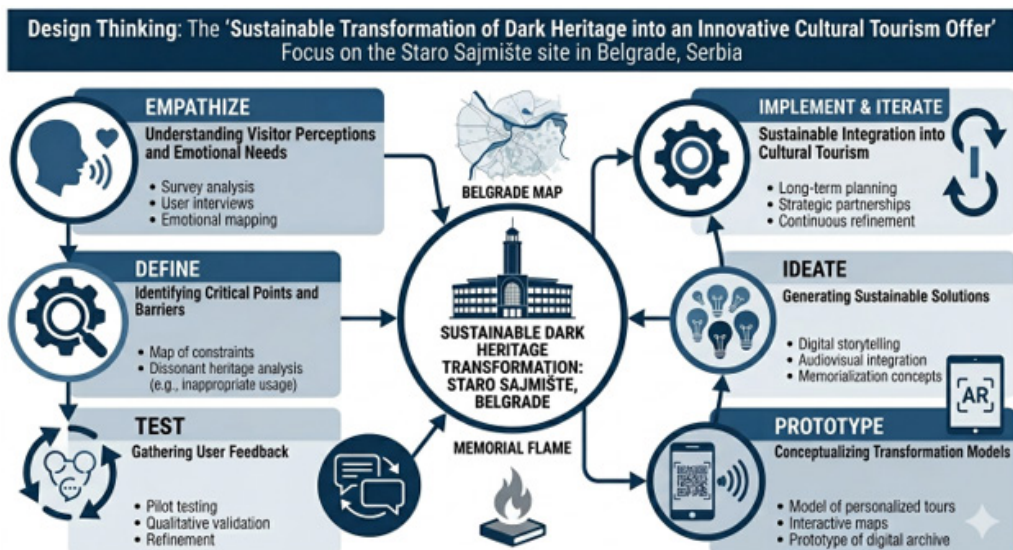
A Model for the Sustainable Transformation of Dark Heritage into Belgrade's Innovative Offering

Based on the identified needs of visitors and the analysis conducted within the "Empathy" and "Define" phases, this paper proposes a

transformation model that integrates Staro Sajmište into the broader cultural context of Belgrade (Scheme 1). This approach stems from the viewpoint that a tourism product is not merely a commercial service, but represents a strategic development model that creates lasting values for individuals, institutions, and society as a whole (Todorov, 2026: 46). This confirms earlier research positions that the introduction of dark tourism attractions in Belgrade requires careful analysis and planning to ensure the preservation of cultural value and an ethical approach (Todorov & Mijuk, 2023: 25).

The model is based on three key pillars: spatial decontamination, digital narration, and institutional networking. In this context, the development of dark tourism in accordance with sustainability principles enables the preservation of historical heritage and visitor education, while a careful approach to interpretation contributes to the preservation of cultural values and awareness raising (Todorov et al., 2025: 57). Through the application of Design Thinking methodology, which is recognized in modern tourism as an effective tool for creating user-centered solutions while aligning development with

Scheme 1. A model of transformation of the dark tourist attraction Staro Sajmište



Source: Author's own creation



sustainability principles (Todorov, 2026: 97), the ideation process resulted in solutions that directly address the barriers identified in the research. To preserve the dignity of the site, the primary transformation step is the gradual relocation of inadequate commercial content and the creation of a “buffer zone” of silence and reflection, which would serve to prepare the visitor for entry into the memorial space. Such a transformation ensures social sustainability, as the site ceases to be a place of conflicting purposes and becomes a space of pure remembrance (Hartmann, 2014). Poria and Ashworth (2009) emphasize that heritage is not just a physical remnant of the past, but a contemporary resource whose interpretation directly depends on “whose past it is” making it inherently susceptible to conflicts between different social groups.

The main component of the new tourism offering is the introduction of digital archives accessible via QR codes at key points on the site, which was supported by over 90% of respondents. The model envisages audio platforms featuring survivor testimonies, thereby increasing empathy through the personalization of history, with mandatory content adaptation through subtitling and sign language for the deaf, as well as audio description and tactile elements for the blind and visually impaired visitors, and the use of augmented reality (AR) to display archival footage, enabling visual reconstruction without damaging the physical remains. This approach preserves the authenticity of the site, which, according to research by Wei and Zhang (2023), proves to be a key driver of responsible visitor behavior and long-term destination loyalty. Strategic positioning requires the support of the Ministry of Tourism and Youth and the Tourist Organization of Belgrade through the inclusion of Staro Sajmište in integral cultural routes. Such institutional support is crucial because tourism and heritage preservation are not necessarily opposing processes. On the contrary, adequate management of tourism development can provide the necessary resources and social visibility for the physical survival and revitalization of endangered sites. In this way, through the integration of education, practical experience, and cooperation with local actors, a “win-win” situation is enabled, visitors

acquire knowledge and emotional connections with the destination, while cultural resources gain a chance for valorization and preservation (Todorov, 2026: 46). The promotion strategy must be based on ethical marketing that prioritizes education over mere tourist attraction (Lennon, 2017).

However, it is important to highlight the limitations of this paper, which primarily relate to the purposive sample of 32 respondents. Although Design Thinking favors in-depth insights, making decisions at a national level requires longitudinal research on a more representative sample, including international tourists. The sustainable development of dark tourism at this site depends on the balance between commodification and piety, as confirmed by Light (2017), who emphasizes that dark tourism should be viewed as a significant potential for the revitalization of difficult heritage precisely through the careful balancing of commercial sustainability and dignified interpretation. As Stone (2012) states, such sites do not serve only to display the past but as spaces for confronting difficult themes and moral reflection in contemporary society, further justifying the role of Staro Sajmište in the broader cultural context of Europe. Future research should focus on the application of artificial intelligence (AI) in creating personalized tours and on examining the psychological impact of digital interpretation on the emotional perception of visitors, ensuring that technology remains in service of, rather than above, the essence of the memorial. Knudsen and Waade (2010) argue that authenticity at sites of remembrance is not found only in physical remains but in the emotional investment of the visitor, where media and technology play a key role in ‘reviving’ the space and creating a profound personal experience.

Conclusion

The conducted research confirmed that the transformation of the Memorial Center Staro Sajmište into an innovative cultural tourism offering requires an integrated approach that balances piety, education, and the contemporary needs of visitors. The application of Design Thinking methodology enabled the precise identification of key conflicts within the space, where the high

expertise of curatorial guidance faces barriers in the form of a dissonant environment and a lack of modern interpretative tools. The results clearly indicate that visitors do not perceive Staro Sajmište as a static monument, but as a dynamic space for reflection that requires the active application of innovative solutions. The proposed transformation model, based on empathy toward the victims and user needs, offers solutions that preserve the authenticity of the site through digital narration and augmented reality (AR) without compromising its physical structure. A special contribution of the paper is reflected in the definition of an ethical and inclusive framework of interpretation, the model insists that dark heritage must be accessible to everyone. By introducing sign language translation and subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing, as well as audio descriptions and tactile elements for blind and visually impaired visitors, Staro Sajmište is transformed into a space of universal accessibility. This achieves the highest level of social sustainability, where technology serves not only to inform but to bridge barriers in understanding historical traumas. Institutional support and ethical marketing are recognized as essential pillars that will ensure that dark tourism in Belgrade remains in the service of social responsibility and a culture of remembrance. The former camp Staro Sajmište possesses the potential to become an example of sustainable transformation in which innovations serve to deepen empathy and preserve the dignity of the victims, thereby ensuring that the message of the past remains relevant and legible for all future generations within the global cultural context.

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