

THE SPRING PAVILIONS OF VRNJAČKA BANJA: MIHAJLO MITROVIĆ'S ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN LANDSCAPE AND CULTURE

ABSTRACT

The paper explores the spa architecture of Mihajlo Mitrović in Vrnjačka Banja through a morpho-typological analysis of the 4 spring pavilions (so called *bivete*) built in the spa park between 1970 and 1990. The spa park, conceived as the central spatial and cultural framework of the town, represents a living palimpsest where natural morphology, architectural typology, and collective memory intertwine. Within this landscape, Mitrović's pavilions function as spatial nodes that articulate the relationship between water, terrain, and built form. Through the phenomenological concept of *genius loci*, the research interprets these structures as architectural mediators that transform the springs into places of encounter between nature, history and culture. Each pavilion embodies a distinct morphological and symbolic response to its context, revealing Mitrović's synthesis of tradition and modernity. The study redefines the spa park as a spatial narrative of specific spa identity, where architecture becomes a medium of memory, continuity, and cultural expression.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The spa parks of Serbia represent an important part of the country's cultural heritage, with those established in the 19th century bearing particular testimony to the beginnings of planned spatial design and the emergence of modern aesthetic values in this region. Although they marked the early stage of Serbian landscape architecture, their beauty and conceptual clarity enhanced and distinguished the settlements in which they were created. By enriching their surroundings with lavish visual and aesthetic forms, these parks emphasized the importance of improving the environment not only for purposes of health and treatment but also through the adoption of the concept of enjoyment and immersion in nature as an essential element for maintaining the human–nature relationship within the urban setting. Spa parks, as a special category with multiple roles, developed at sites of mineral and thermal springs. In addition to their primary recreational and therapeutic purposes, they hold significant aesthetic and stimulative value. Such parks are of great historical importance and belong equally to the domains of cultural and natural heritage, defining the very identity of their surroundings. This opens an additional dimension of the cultural aspect of park architecture, where maintaining continuity while preserving the specific identity of the spa becomes a matter of utmost importance.

Over the course of more than a century and a half, Vrnjačka Banja has continuously evolved as one of the most important tourist centers in Serbia and has become the largest spa town in the country. Its rich urban structure has been shaped through various developmental phases, from early examples of vernacular architecture to the complex typological forms of modern multifunctional buildings. Within this context, the park area of Vrnjačka Banja occupies a special place as one of the most representative and recognizable segments of its urban and cultural heritage. The park has played a crucial role in shaping the visual identity and distinctiveness of the entire spa settlement, while simultaneously defining its cultural and environmental character. The period of the park's most intensive formation and construction encompasses the first half of the 20th century, when, through the introduction of specific architectural elements such as spring pavilions (so called *bivete*) and spa villas, a recognizable morphological structure of the spa landscape was established. These buildings played a key role in forming the visual identity and spatial

recognizability of the settlement, contributing to its specific cultural and landscape character.

Contemporary conditions of tourism development simultaneously raise the issue of the endangered identity values of the Vrnjačka Banja area. Intensive spatial transformations, caused by modern investment pressures and the lack of a clear and applicable protection strategy, have led to the gradual degradation of its recognizable cultural and identity character. Consequently, the question of preserving and reinterpreting the historical layer embodied in the spa park as a characteristic ambient ensemble becomes crucial for safeguarding the authentic identity of the spa in the contemporary context. The study is based on the thesis that architecture, through its typological diversity, plays a decisive role in shaping the tourist experience and in valuing a place within the framework of identity. The spatial entity of the spa park has, since 2010, been declared a protected area of local character (Category III) *in order to preserve its landscape character and all natural and cultural-historical elements within it, especially the spirit and function of the spa environment*, (Ministarstvo zaštite životne sredine, 2023) its authenticity, and significance as a health, recreational, and tourist center, while in 2023 the process of its designation as a protected natural area of the second category was initiated under the title Natural Monument “Parks of Vrnjačka Banja” (Ministarstvo zaštite životne sredine, 2023).

Within this research, the spa spring pavilions are singled out as a specific subject of morpho-typological investigation within the typology of the spa park. They are identified, analyzed, and evaluated for their aesthetic, visual, and ambient qualities, as well as their distinct architectural values and characteristics. As spatial focal points within the landscaped park ensemble, the springs form a unique layer of identity within the park, serving as important nodes where the natural, cultural, and architectural heritage of the spa intertwine. In this sense, the paper is structured to first outline the historical development of Vrnjačka Banja's park system and the emergence of spring pavilions as architectural elements, followed by a typological classification based on their morphological features. Methodologically, the research relies on a combination of archival documentation, cartographic and spatial analysis, and on-site morphological mapping, which together enable a deeper understanding of the springs' evolution and contemporary condition. Through this framework, the study aims to determine how these architectural structures contribute to the overall identity of the spa landscape and how their typological and symbolic values may inform future strategies for protection, revitalization, and the reinterpretation of the spa park's cultural character.

2. THE FORMATION, STRUCTURE AND IDENTITY OF THE SPA PARK IN VRNJAČKA BANJA

The park of Vrnjačka Banja was formed in the late 19th and early 20th century as part of the process of institutionalizing the spa and transforming the area around the natural thermal springs into a designed public space with exceptional tourist potential. It represents a unique entity within the system of green areas of Vrnjačka Banja, woven into the urban fabric of the spa with which it forms a symbiosis. The Austrian architect Franz Winter, who was at that time responsible for many projects in Vrnjačka Banja, designed first plans for the park in 1893. In collaboration with gardener and fellow countryman Johann Januchek, he built the first greenhouse, intended for cultivating seedlings necessary for the landscaping of the spa park (TOVB c. , 2025).

Topographically, the park occupies a funnel-shaped surface in the valley of the Vrnjačka River, whose riverbed forms an integral part of the park. It is surrounded by uneven, hilly terrain and represents the central core of the spa settlement. Its main feature is the spatial matrix defined by the course of the Vrnjačka River, which forms the main spatial axis. The park covers a total area of 24 hectares of open green space on both sides of the river, gradually extending into the urban fabric of the settlement. The terrain and the water have a crucial role in this system. To the west, the park is bordered by a promenade accompanied by a dense structure of mixed, mostly commercial buildings, followed by the terrain configuration that the park adapts to while remaining within the river valley zone. To the east, the park extends into a looser mixed urban structure of villas and hotel complexes. On the northern side, it spreads around the confluence of the Lipovačka and Vrnjačka rivers, while on the southern side it becomes narrower, following the riverbank all the way to the Snežnik spring and encompassing the surrounding park ensemble. The park is extremely rich in vegetation and contains numerous pavilions and fountains, as well as 45 outdoor sculptures by both domestic and international artists.

The tree-lined avenues of Vrnjačka Banja stretch from the Snežnik mineral spring on both sides of the Vrnjačka River, following its course all the way to the confluence with the Lipovačka River, with one branch leading toward the Slatina spring. They represent one of the most recognizable landscape elements of the spa park. Their formation took place gradually, between 1892 and 1923, indicating a planned approach to landscape design characteristic of the era. The main avenue, almost 1.5 km long, consists primarily of three species of linden trees and includes a total of 902 specimens. Together with a rich and diverse plant composition, it forms a unique horticultural ensemble of exceptional ambient and aesthetic value (TOVB c. , 2025).

From the park's current structure, it can be concluded that it consists of a series of interconnected ambient micro-units. The composition of these spatial segments represents a valuable legacy of landscape and park architecture. Within this spatial logic, a network of micro-ambiences related to various natural segments and cultural contents is formed, slowing down the movement along the longitudinal promenade axis. Within this system, the spring pavilions, together with their surrounding open spaces, stand out as distinctive reference points and spatial nodes that contribute to the recognizability, legibility, and identity coherence of the entire spa area. The park can thus be read as a spatial multi-sequence connecting the spring pavilions as 4 distinct ambient entities. Based on this, it can be concluded that the overall genesis and further expansion of the park were primarily linked to the shaping of the spring areas themselves, following the river's course and filling the natural funnel-shaped space of the river valley with separate micro-ambient units.

When considering the state of spatial development, attention must be paid to the specific sensitivity of this environment. The spa park is, above all, an integral part of the spa complex, but also a tourist oasis, and as such it must be understood as a multilayered organic entity. The spa villa stands out as a particularly important architectural typology within Vrnjačka Banja. Spa settlements, which once enjoyed the status of fashionable resorts where citizens affirmed their social identity, were the ideal ground for the emergence and development of this building type. Wealthy and distinguished citizens sought to materialize their prestige and financial power into lasting assets by engaging prominent architects to design large residential buildings, family houses, villas, and hotels (Marić, Bogdanov, & Manić, 2009). Today, among the buildings enjoying preliminary protection status, there are 84 structures listed as villas. By their composition, size, purpose, urban position, and stylistic features, this group is highly heterogeneous (Marić, Bogdanov, & Manić, 2009). Considering the pronounced ambient specificity of the spa park, the entire urban structure that gradually formed around it developed in direct relation to it, maintaining a traditional approach and a high level of spatial awareness in design. Such a tendency persisted until the 1990s, when new construction trends appeared, driven by speed in approach and decision-making. This architecture largely disrupted the spirit of the spa environment and spread throughout the spa area. Vrnjačka Banja thus acquired the outlines of an urban environment without the necessary infrastructure for such a function, while the spa park resists as a hostage of these spatial tendencies. Such conditions destroy any coherent strategy for the preservation and development of health and recreational tourism, endangering the ambient specificity of the space and undermining any initiative aimed at improving spatial culture or presenting meaningful cultural content (Obradović, 2024).

3. A PERIOD OF CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION: FROM THE SCULPTURE SYMPOSIUM TO MITROVIC'S "VRNJACKA CYCLE"

A turning point in the cultural development of Vrnjačka Banja occurred in 1965, when, thanks to the initiative of the painter and art critic Miodrag B. Protić, a native of Vrnjačka Banja, the Conference on the New Urban and Aesthetic Design of the Morava Region Towns was organized, followed shortly after by the Sculpture Symposium. In terms of cultural content as reference points within the spatial framework of the spa park, these events opened the path toward the formation of the park's artistic identity. The symposium, which gathered numerous sculptors and artists from both Yugoslavia and abroad, fostered a unique synthesis of landscape, architecture, and sculpture, further affirming the park as a space of cultural and aesthetic dialogue. In the years that followed, some of the principles developed during this conference became the foundation for a specific program of spatial culture and other cultural activities within the town. The final result of this initiative was the establishment of the Sculpture Park in open space, officially inaugurated in October 1965 (Obradović, 2022). The period that followed, marked by a series of carefully considered spatial interventions within the park, can be regarded as highly successful in terms of preserving its ambient character and enhancing the cultural identity of the space.

Miodrag B. Protić succeeded, within a relatively short period, in gathering a number of distinguished creators and experts from the fields of culture, art, and architecture to collectively improve the spa's public space. In the following years, mostly through Protić's initiative, many renowned figures from the world of art and culture contributed significantly to the reputation of the spa, including Bogdan Bogdanović, Aleksej Brkić, Uroš Martinović, Olga Jevrić, Dobrica Ćosić, Ljuba Tadić, Dušan Skovran, and others (Obradović, 2024).

Among Protić's collaborators, architect Mihajlo Mitrović stands out as a particularly important figure who, in the years to come, would leave an indelible mark on the architecture of Vrnjačka Banja. In 1965, Mitrović took part in the organization and realization of the Conference on the Urbanization and Design of Morava Region Towns and collaborated with Miodrag B. Protić in establishing the Sculpture Symposium and the Sculpture Park (Obradović, 2022). His creative engagement in Vrnjačka Banja began in 1968, when he was commissioned to develop the town's urban plan. During his early projects in the spa, Mitrović designed several key buildings in 1968, including the reception center "Putnik", the ceramic workshop Mis, and the café-confectionery Goč.

These projects would prove to be a prelude to a whole series of spa buildings designed over the following two decades. Within this twenty-year period, often referred to as Mitrović's "Vrnjačka Cycle", and according to his distinctive and unique architectural typology, four pavilions at the former mineral springs stand out: first "Topla Voda", followed by "Snežnik", "Slatina", and "Jezero". What particularly defines Mitrović's architectural work in Vrnjačka Banja, and represents an essential research question of this study, is his consistent adherence to the phenomenological concept of *genius loci*, which he himself recognized as the central architectural problem, especially in sensitive contexts such as this spa environment (Mitrović, 1984).

In recent decades, the expansion of construction activity in Vrnjačka Banja has endangered nearly all of the delicate cores of its public spaces, reopening questions regarding the evaluation and preservation of these spatial achievements. Consequently, the Sculpture Park, as the most sensitive segment of the spa park, has been completely neglected and no longer exists in its originally designed form. This has disrupted the previously established harmony between the sculptures, vegetation, pavilions, and open park spaces. It seems that an opportunity was missed to preserve and emphasize the park as a valuable work of cultural heritage and an example of modern spatial design.

4. MIHAJLO MITROVIC AND SPA ARCHITECTURE

The architecture of the second half of the twentieth century was marked by a profound crisis of modernism and the emergence of new "rebellious" architectural theories that sought to emphasize the fundamental shortcomings of the modern movement, primarily concerning the loss of architectural identity and the disappearance of the visual narrativity of form, that is, the overall alienated and dehumanized character of modern architecture. On the other hand, Mitrović specialized in spa architecture long before other prominent Yugoslav architects, who only became seriously interested in continental tourism facilities in the late 1970s. (Kadijević, 1999) Over a period of thirty years, he continuously built in spa towns across Serbia (in addition to Vrnjačka Banja, Mitrović's extensive architectural work in Banja Koviljača is particularly noteworthy). This body of work is exceptionally rich in imaginative architectural forms, and within these projects, erected between interwar villas and modern hotel complexes, the critic Zoran Manević recognized the "crown" of Mitrović's architectural career (Maneвиć & Keković, 1994).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Mitrović designed buildings of diverse purposes. In some, he emphasized the international stylistic component, while in others he accentuated the traditional spirit corresponding to national and regional heritage, often incorporating and combining contemporary elements. This seemingly paradoxical synthesis of contrasting principles largely defined Mitrović's architectural expression, as he himself perceived architecture primarily as an art form. As a "new romantic," he was closely aligned with the ideas of both national and international historicism, drawing inspiration from Branko Tanazević, Momir Korunović, Aleksandar Deroko and Bogdan Bogdanović (Kadijević, 1999).

Mitrović followed with great attention the emergence of architectural postmodernism, which became the dominant trend in global architecture during the 1980s. He was, however, also aware of the dangers of naive "archaeological borrowings" and empty commercial quotations superficially justified by postmodern aesthetics. Although he accepted certain fundamental premises of this aesthetic, Mitrović remained faithful to the ideals of the synthesis of visual arts and an integral architectural expression (Kadijević, 1999). Postmodernism merely confirmed the results of his long-standing efforts to reconcile tradition and modernism within architecture. The reminiscences of historical styles, with which he had long been preoccupied, were effectively legitimized by postmodern practice. The unification of plastic, differently modeled volumes into expressive and imaginative compositions would define his work throughout the 1970s. This principle, akin to a sculptural methodology and partly derived from his earlier experiences, was built from striking juxtapositions of almost bizarre structures, forms and materials, and can be observed in his major works from that period.

Mitrović's work, combined with the earlier cultural and spatial concepts of the spa park's design, constitutes a unique synthesis of memory and culture, affirming the idea that the spa park functions as a synthetic space in which nature, architecture and art mutually complement one another. This cultural layer provides the space with identity, continuity and symbolic depth. Mitrović's work on the spring pavilions arises from a deep understanding of the park as a spatial and cultural whole, in which the spring pavilions become architectural sculptures that sustain the *spirit of place* and interconnect the various layers of the spa's identity.

RIGHT FIGURE. FIGURE 1: Synthesis map of Vrnjacka Banja. (Source: Author illustration, 2025)



5. TYPOLOGICAL CATALOGUE: ANALYSIS OF THE SPRING PAVILIONS

The pavilion “Topla Voda” abounds in the described stylistic, architectural, and artistic qualities. Its architecture features various evocations of Art Nouveau heritage, Northern Expressionism, and an almost fantastic, surreal architecture. Through a simple, transparent structure composed in a checkerboard pattern and made up of stylized and simplified historical motifs of the square and the circle, manifested through heavy concrete decorative, cantilevered, and other structural elements, Mitrović synthesizes elements of tradition and modernity in a unique way. This specific authorial design approach can be characterized as the result of two of Mitrović’s key conceptual starting points. The first concerns the importance of respecting the identity of the site, phenomenologically interpreted as the *genius loci* or spirit of place, while the second is reflected in the way Mitrović models his buildings sculpturally, not concealing the key structural elements but instead giving them significant artistic expression. All these phenomena are evident and can be analyzed through Mitrović’s works in Vrnjačka Banja.

The “Topla Voda” pavilion has been identified as the most significant case study within this research, as it marks the point of origin of Mitrović’s distinctive stylistic language. From this project onward, his architectural expression undergoes a series of transformations, with each subsequent pavilion representing a new phase in the evolution and refinement of his formal, material, and symbolic vocabulary.

5.1 “Topla Voda” spring pavilion

In the early 1970s, an initiative emerged in Vrnjačka Banja to redevelop the main springs within the spa park through the construction plan for the first spring pavilion, “Topla Voda”, located in the zone of warm mineral water near the spa bathhouse, on the site of the old spring. The spa institution “Vrnjačka Banja”, the investor of the project, commissioned architect Mihajlo Mitrović, who at that time, thanks to his earlier works, had already established himself as a proven designer in the spa. This project gave him the opportunity to build his first pavilion in the central spa park, named after the spring “Topla Voda” above which it was to be constructed. The pavilion was built between 1972 and 1975. For this work, Mitrović received the Belgrade Salon of Architecture Award in 1976. The success of this pavilion, as well as the fact that Dr. Milan Babić, who lived, worked, and in his later years managed the spa institution, was deeply dedicated to the development and aesthetic improvement of the spa, opened the way for Mitrović’s subsequent works in Vrnjačka Banja. Babić,

who described himself as a “peasant’s child”, was profoundly connected to his homeland, and through his lifelong commitment to the enhancement of spa treatment and the beautification of the spa environment, became one of the key patrons behind Mitrović’s major projects (Kadijević, 1999).

The “Topla Voda” spring pavilion was planned at an attractive location in the central part of the park, on the site of the old pavilion and the former warm spring. At the time of planning, the spring was covered with a simple wooden structure built in the traditional Morava style, with arcades and colonnades (according to old photographs; see the postcard at Figure 7). Having a distinctive sensitivity for recognizing the characteristics of the project site, this detail became very important to Mitrović. When designing “Topla Voda,” and later other pavilions (most notably the “Slatina” pavilion), he decided to retain and reinterpret many traditional spa architectural elements and associations within his projects.

The new pavilion was designed as a single-story structure with a basement level connecting it to the nearby bathhouse, primarily intended for the collection and use of healing spring water. The position of the “Topla Voda” pavilion is such that it is accessible from all sides and freely placed within the park greenery. Modest in size, of simple rectangular form measuring 17 meters in width and 27 meters in length, and distinguished by four cylindrical corner towers of identical diameters of 4 meters but of varying heights that do not exceed the surrounding treetops, the pavilion exudes a fairytale-like elegance within its wooded environment. The building has no main façade but is spatially defined by the placement of the corner towers, the tallest of which is representatively positioned on the southeast side, facing the adjacent bathhouse and the central park area. Although simple in plan, the pavilion’s location near the bathhouse and on sloping terrain above the river level prevents its façades from being viewed frontally in their entirety. Instead, the visual emphasis lies on the prominent corners with towers whose differing heights, together with the diagonally positioned gable roof descending toward the front, create an illusion of visual incompleteness and ambiguity in the perception of the building’s full volume.

The four dominant corner towers are designed to resemble stylized chess pieces of monumental proportions. They are made of concrete, clad in brick, and extended with almost sculptural elements of exposed concrete. At the upper ends of the towers, the concrete is combined and partially covered with copper sheet. Copper was also used to cover the gable roof, as well as for the cornices and gutters. Traces of the then-contemporary architectural brutalism

are evident in the treatment of heavy, enclosed masses and in the interplay of superimposed motifs that alternate with brick surfaces both inside and outside the building. On one of the towers, the one facing the central park area, a concrete frame with a clock emerges from the brickwork, serving as the main visual motif toward the park. Below the clock, there is a small circular window with a flat vertical concrete console element centered above it. On the adjacent tower to the south, there is another small window, this time without concrete details, clearly positioned toward the less visible rear side of the building. The remaining two towers have no openings and contribute to the building's monolithic and monumental visual impression with their brick cladding.



FIGURE 2: "Topla Voda" pavilion in Vrnjacka Banja. (Source: Author, 2024)

Between the towers stretches a central rectangular, transparent, and spacious area covered with a gable roof, richly decorated with different materials and dominated by a diagonally placed massive concrete beam. The program of the spring pavilion is simple, consisting almost entirely of a single open interior intended for the use and access to the spring water, while all auxiliary spaces are located within the corner towers or in the basement area that houses pumps and other technical installations. Two entrances were designed, the main one on the southern side and a secondary one on the northern side. The entrances are slightly projected from the façade line and stylistically follow the circular geometry of the towers. Above them are cantilevered canopies composed of concave superimposed concrete elements. Both long façades are transparent. In the upper zone between the towers, a perforated concrete cornice reflects the form of arches (arcades), followed by a colonnade of steel pillars with glass panels between them. According to the technical description and reports (as seen in: Arch. Mihajlo Mitrović, Main Design Project from 1972 for the "Topla

Voda" Pavilion in Vrnjačka Banja), the interior walls are of exposed concrete, plastered, painted, or clad with grouted brick or ceramic tiles. Some walls retain grouted brick or are covered with wallpaper. The floors are made of marble or ceramic tiles.

The project envisaged that the main entrance, oriented south toward the park, would lead into the ground-floor space where the spring outlets are located, while the exit, placed on the western side toward the bathhouse, consists of two single doors opening onto a narrow raised platform with a small staircase descending to the level of the forecourt in front of the spring, facing the bathhouse complex.

The central space is exceptionally well-lit, with glass walls extending along both sides of the building (from tower to tower), creating complete transparency. The floor is made of polished white marble, which, in combination with the natural light entering from the park, enhances the ambient quality of the space, producing reflections reminiscent of water. In contrast to the white marble floor, six dark marble drinking fountains are arranged in the central area in a concentric circle with a diameter of 10 meters, positioned at the very center of the space. The ceiling of the main hall is clad with dark elm planks following the slope of the roof. The entire room is very tall, with a varying height depending on the roof's inclination, reaching a maximum of 7 meters according to the plan. In its central and highest part, a diagonally placed oversized load-bearing concrete beam measuring 70 by 140 centimeters in cross-section spans between two towers, creating an outstanding sculptural effect within the open ground-floor space. From this beam, large spherical white glass lamps are suspended on steel rods, further contributing to the spatial ambiance and perceived depth.

In the northern part of the building, there are two spiral staircases clad in striking dark greenish-blue decorative ceramic tiles, descending into the basement level. Through the use of the spiral staircase, Mitrović once again emphasizes the circular form, logically complementing the geometry of the adjacent towers. Next to them, concealed by a wall clad in grouted brick, is the secondary northern entrance. Extending from the entrance is an access corridor lined with decorative ceramic tiles, serving as an isolated passageway leading to the other two towers. Another warm-water fountain is located here, in the tower oriented toward the bathhouse, while the opposite tower contains a designated seating area.

On the opposite, southern side of the building, the right-hand tower was designed as a room for distributing drinking glasses, with a small upper level serving as storage, while the left-hand tower (facing the bathhouse), which is also the tallest of the four, was designed as a kiosk, that is, a souvenir shop and workshop, with an upper gallery and direct access to the basement level via a spiral staircase positioned within the tower.

The geometry of the “Topla Voda” pavilion is almost entirely based on various interpretations of circular and square motifs. The main homage to the Art Nouveau style is expressed through the design of the souvenir shop entrance at the base of the pavilion’s most prominent “Clock” tower. The door design unmistakably recalls the famous entrance to the “Glassmaker’s House” in Brussels, one of the most celebrated examples of Art Nouveau architecture.

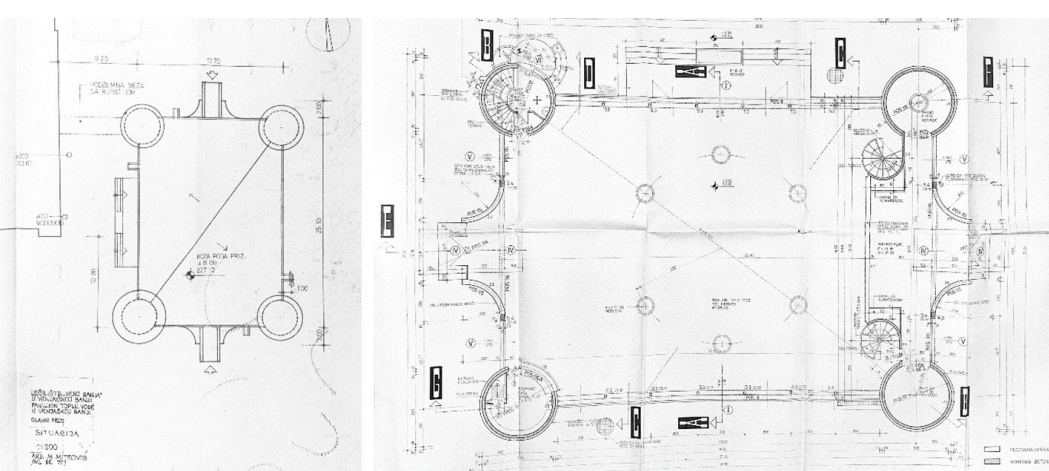


FIGURE 3: Situation and ground plan of the “Topla Voda” pavilion in Vrnjacka Banja. (Source: Historical Archives of Kraljevo, 2024)

The building as a whole appears harmonious, although it is essentially an expressive amalgam of diverse forms and monumental structures characterized by unexpected artistic and sculptural qualities. The arched, cylindrical, circular, oval, and triangular motifs, interpreted through both the general form and structural details of the building as well as through façade and interior elements, create highly unusual architectural scenes, suggesting the presence of deliberate constructive metaphors. The exterior treatment is enriched with contrasting elements of primary and secondary plasticity. The interior, rich in volume and

artistic detail, captivates with its romantic appearance. It can be concluded that Mitrović created a building of almost sculpturally modeled silhouette. With its extraordinary form, the pavilion gives the spa park a visual sense of romantic and fairytale-like atmosphere. The old spa pavilions and bathhouses, mostly built with central domed volumes complemented by lower annexes, charming colonnades, and arcades, are vividly evoked in this and later works of Mitrović in Vrnjačka Banja.

Additionally, between 1987 and 1989, Mitrović had the opportunity to reconstruct the old Roman spring “Fons Romanus Revidivus”, which had been unjustly buried after World War II and was located in the immediate vicinity of the “Topla Voda” pavilion, thus forming a unique visual ensemble together with it. The spring consisted of two single-flight marble staircases with the original pre-war balustrade descending to the spring level. Mitrović covered this Roman spring with a glass pyramid, a popular interpolation motif in world architecture of the late 1980s. However, during the reconstruction of the spring in 2015, the pyramid was removed, and the Roman spring was redesigned, acquiring a completely different contemporary appearance.

With the “Topla Voda” pavilion, Mitrović began his exploration and experimentation with the forms of spa spring architecture, which would later manifest spatially in his diverse interpretations of historicist architectural elements. By following the continuous transformations of form and detail in his pavilion designs, one can trace the influence of the ornate spa Art Nouveau style and observe its gradual evolution toward renewed monumentality, expressiveness, and sculptural form.



FIGURE 4: “Topla Voda” interior. (Source: Author, 2024)

5.2 “Snežnik” spring pavilion

The pavilion “Snežnik” was built between 1978 and 1981. It is positioned at the southernmost point of the park, directly on the bank of the Vrnjačka River. The new pavilion replaced the old circular wooden spring structures. In this case as well, Mitrović used the form of the previous pavilion as the main motif. This time, the plan is circular, characterized by a stepped circular attic cornice from which glazed fields descend like drapery. The building is situated on a highly specific and narrow terrain morphology, positioned between the descending slope and the river course. The area surrounding the spring is designed to follow the form of the pavilion from all sides, softening the slope descending from the hillside toward the building and the river. The platform is filled with planters, benches, and light fixtures designed in accordance with Mitrović’s expressive architectural language.

Glass and solid wall surfaces alternate rhythmically, creating a special effect of transparency that gives this pavilion its distinctive visual identity. The entire geometry of the pavilion is once again based on the interplay of the circle and the square. Similar to the “Topla Voda” pavilion, Mitrović also used brick cladding here (this time in white), combined with concrete and glass. Above the structure rises a cylindrical tower adorned with a narrow central window containing a clock, reminiscent of the “Clock” tower of the previous pavilion. Over the central part of the structure emerges a stylized cylindrical lantern.

Aleksandar Kadijević observed that the main idea of the building is reflected in the expression of its structure and in the way the terrain is shaped around it, similar to the works of Mitrović’s contemporaries, such as Mandić in Prizren and Užice, and Martinović and Petrović around the Terazije Fountain in Belgrade. (Kadijević, 1999) The circular central space around the drinking fountains is covered with a light structure made of slanted, thin lattice beams converging toward a central mushroom-shaped capital of the main column, evoking an almost classical monumental aesthetic. Just as in the case of the “Topla Voda” pavilion, where the main diagonal beam plays an essential ambient role in the central space, here the same role of a central sculptural element is assumed by the main column, whose form and position dominate the interior.

“Snežnik” achieves radial transparency and visual dialogue with its surroundings and tree-lined avenues, acting as a spatial focal point of open vistas from which, following the Vrnjačka River northward, the park structure gradually unfolds.

5.3. “Slatina” spring pavilion

The third spring pavilion, “Slatina”, is the result of Mitrović’s Art Nouveau inspiration. It was built in 1985 and is located along the roadway that follows its length. The approach to the pavilion is designed ceremoniously, reminiscent of the spatial compositions in Bogdanović’s memorials, giving visitors the impression of entering a sanctuary. (Kadijević, 1999) This unusual stepped, plastic “forecourt” leads the visitor into an elongated cruciform space covered by a low blind dome and wide overhanging eaves. The building fully follows the gentle terrain gradient, allowing visitors to descend toward the water in an almost ritual manner. The surrounding platform, similar to that of the “Snežnik” pavilion, is arranged on all sides and furnished with highly expressive architectural elements and outdoor furniture characteristic of Mitrović’s design style. Unlike “Snežnik”, “Slatina” is more introverted: it is enclosed toward the exterior, focusing on its inner ambiance. Sculptures surrounding the pavilion on all sides complete the scenography of its extraordinary micro-environment. Along the stepped approach to the pavilion, slender columns with lamps inserted into narrow recessed niches rise from cubic low planters.

Shallow, fantastic, and floral motifs are carved into the inner surfaces of these niches. Between the planters there are rhythmically interspersed benches, creating a harmonious alternation of architectural and functional elements. Subtle contrasts of light and dark surfaces evoke the romantic atmosphere of the pavilion’s interior, further enhanced by masterfully crafted stained-glass windows that panoramically depict the old vistas of the spa. The central space is designed so that the drinking spring is placed at a lower level, requiring visitors to descend into a recessed circular area to reach the water. Within this space stands the central fountain, integrated into an abstract sculpture by Miodrag Živković. The distinctive atmosphere of the interior is further enriched by variously shaped supports holding bright white spherical lamps, similar to those in the “Topla Voda” pavilion.

It can be concluded that the entire structure carries numerous memories and recollections of the old spa architecture that flourished in Europe at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. With the “Slatina” pavilion, Mitrović’s fascination with Art Nouveau motifs reached its culmination, achieving an entirely new, original, and unrepeatable transposition of the spirit of historical stylistic forms into the modern sensibility of his time.

5.4. “Jezero” spring pavilion

The last of Mitrović’s pavilions in Vrnjačka Banja, named “Jezero”, was built in 1990, with preparatory work beginning as early as 1987. The pavilion is situated on the shore of a small artificial lake, its green hue harmoniously integrating with the surrounding landscape and enhancing the natural composition of water lilies. This work represents the most stylistically liberated of Mitrović’s spa structures. Having by then “forgotten” his Art Nouveau–inspired Slatina, he revived his earlier inclination toward expressionist and experimental gestures. The “Jezero” pavilion has a monolithic, pyramidal contour animated by striking contrasts between protruding and recessed segments, solid and void masses, and rectangular, rounded, and curved surfaces.

From a visual standpoint, Aleksandar Kadijević argues that the pavilion synthesizes elements of Mitrović’s entire “Vrnjačka cycle,” as it unites the structural and expressive qualities of “Topla Voda”, the classical rigor and monumentality of “Snežnik”, the “neo–Art Nouveau” lyricism of “Slatina”, and the pyramidal motif from the Roman spring. (Kadijević, 1999) The roof, covered with traditional green Art Nouveau tiles, is dramatically emphasized by large, modernist glass windows. Coloristically close to “Slatina”, the polymorphic mass of the “Jezero” pavilion expands visually in all directions, merging with both the water and the surrounding greenery. In the interior, just above the drinking fountains, another monumental sculpture by Miodrag Živković is installed, further reinforcing the artistic and spatial synthesis that defines Mitrović’s late spa architecture.

FIGURE 5: Variable stylistic characteristics of the 4 Vrnjačka Banja pavilions, from left to right: “Topla Voda,” “Snežnik,” “Slatina,” “Jezero”. (Source: Author, 2024)



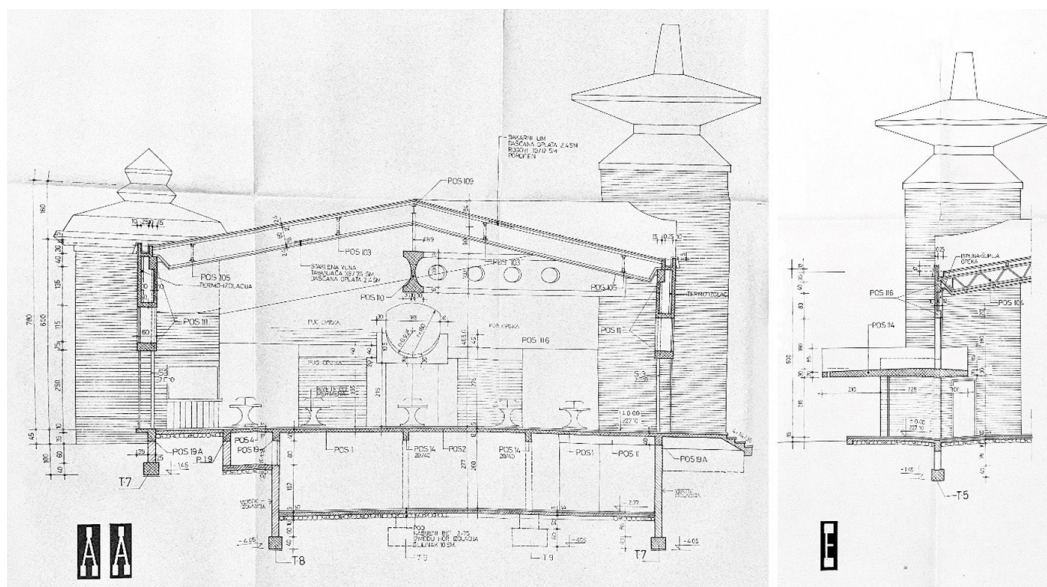


FIGURE 6: Characteristic cross-sections through the “Topla Voda” pavilion. (Source: Historical Archives of Kraljevo, 2024)

6. SYNTHESIS - THE SEMIOTIC LINK BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW

In the case of the spa pavilions, it is not unusual that through their form and spatial atmosphere, Mitrović’s architectural expression and spiritual understanding of space transcend mere utilitarian value. In this sense, it is important to emphasize that his unique architectural fusion emerged precisely at a time when architectural discourse in Yugoslavia was critically reassessing the modernist style of the 1950s and 1960s, particularly the International Style, which was often viewed as being detached from the history and culture of the places where buildings were erected. As a result, many architects sought to integrate components of “regionalism” into their works, taking into account the history of a site, tradition, and vernacular heritage. One of the outcomes of such reinterpretations of improvised traditional motifs and historicism was the emergence of an architectural tendency that equated the constructive and the artistic components of design (Radović, 1995). This was an architecture that arose as a response to the monotony and visual anonymity of the International Style, asserting sculptural form as a primary principle of architectural expression. These efforts eventually culminated globally in the rise of postmodernism, which achieved full recognition during the 1980s.

According to Mitrović himself, the primary challenge he faced when designing in Vrnjačka Banja was the complex phenomenological concept of *genius loci* (Mitrović, 1989). Human space, not only urban space, has always been a field of signification and meaning. The relationship between the elements that constitute a city, its specific context, can be interpreted as a kind of writing, as the inscription of human presence into space and the creation of a distinctive and unique *image of the city* (Lynch, 1974). Architecture thus becomes a medium of communication through which legibility is achieved. In this communicative process, architecture can be understood as a unique nonverbal language, while buildings themselves function as signs, as spatial units that, analogous to linguistic structures, convey meaning. This architectural language reveals the problem of the *genius loci*, or spirit of place, a concept that Christian Norberg-Schulz bases on the relationship between humans and their environment as determinants of every individual context in an authentic and singular way (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

The complex concept of “*place*” in this context can be understood as the existential field of architecture and its surroundings, as the condition of spatial events. Unlike abstract space, place provides context and specific meanings; it is the product of experience and encompasses physical, aesthetic, historical, cultural, and symbolic dimensions. Since the essential characteristic of place lies in the presence of architecture, or potential built form, it follows that each place is defined by its unique configuration of landscape, physical setting, and spatial relationships - factors that shape its distinction from any other. From this arises the hypothesis that contextualization forms the foundation of every new architectural concept, which must seek to adapt to its context, and that the meaning of an architectural form should emerge from interpreting and responding to the pre-existing event, that is, *the place* itself.



FIGURE 7:

Left: An old postcard from Vrnjačka Banja showing the former pavilions “Topla Voda” and “Slatina”; upper right: “Slatina”; lower right: the colonnades of “Topla Voda”. (Postcard source: spomenikdatabase; Photo source: Author, 2024)

In the context of Vrnjačka Banja, the question of architectural identity is particularly sensitive. The settlement originated on the site of the original village of Vrnjci, and its early construction style was rooted in vernacular building traditions. Over time, especially in the early twentieth century, with the arrival of more visitors, particularly doctors and engineers educated abroad, the entire identity of the village began to change. These visitors brought with them aesthetic norms and values shaped by the places where they had studied or lived. The decision of prominent figures of that time to invest in Vrnjci led to the rapid construction of luxurious holiday villas and hotels, transforming the area into an elegant spa environment (TOVB a. , 2025).

Mitrović, aware of the responsibility inherent in redefining spa architecture, identified two key questions as central to his conceptual approach: *the spirit of place* and *the need to strengthen the relationship with spa tradition* (Mitrović, 1989). He emphasized that *every place has its own precise requirements, conditions, and specificities, and that the architect's primary task is not to violate the integrity of the place, but rather to, through respect and understanding, engage with it only as much as the place itself allows* (Mitrović, 1989). Mitrović aimed to extract those elements “validated by time” from pre-war spa tradition and reinterpret them in a new visual language suited to contemporary architecture.

However, the refined atmosphere of the old spa milieu could neither be fully restored nor replicated, as Mitrović himself noted: *It belongs to the past times* (Mitrović, 1989). The noble world that once shaped Vrnjačka Banja had long vanished from the historical scene. Yet, traces of that bourgeois refinement endure in the decorative architecture of the remaining villas, pavilions, and hotels.

What arises as a central question here is the design logic and the relationship between *spirit of place* and *style*, that is, whether and how the valorization of the *genius loci* concept can influence the formation of entirely new but contextually appropriate architectural expressions. The spirit of place should not lead to imitation or literal reproduction of historical architecture. Its relevance lies not in the fidelity to historical or stylistic forms but in its contribution to the continuity and enhancement of the spa's distinctive atmosphere and identity. *The combination of old and new must remain meaningful only if it is reinterpreted in new ways, while tradition serves to affirm and inspire what is contemporary* (Venturi, 2008). This dialectical interplay between the universal and the regional, the traditional and the avant-garde, becomes the condition for architecture's survival.

This issue remains highly relevant today, but an examination of the history of spa architecture reveals that it was already recognized by the mid-twentieth century, when the expansion of spa facilities introduced a wave of new, often contextually *inappropriate* (Venturi, 2008) architecture that disrupted the stylistic harmony of the historical spa environment.

Mitrović's "Vrnjačka cycle" ultimately demonstrates how a distinctive architectural language can emerge from the inventive reinterpretation of tradition. By transforming historical motifs into expressive geometric forms uniquely attuned to the spa landscape, Mitrović achieved a synthesis that was both original in the Yugoslav context and deeply rooted in local cultural memory. His tectonic approach, particularly visible in the symbolic corner towers of "Topla Voda," reveals a deliberate layering of meanings through which past and present, play and monumentality, ornament and abstraction converge into a coherent architectural narrative. The poetic interplay of brick and concrete, the sculptural massing, and the evocative use of symbolic quotations all show his capacity to construct polysemantic spaces capable of sustaining multiple readings. In this way, Mitrović forged a personal model of synthetic imagination that integrates diverse temporalities into a unified and timeless architectural expression. His pavilions in Vrnjačka Banja therefore stand as exemplary instances of how modern architecture can meaningfully engage with cultural heritage by activating the phenomenology of place and enriching the identity of the spa landscape.

FIGURE 8: “Clock” tower of “Topla Voda”. (Source: Author, 2024)



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