

# THE HISTORICAL PROCESSES OF TRANSFORMATION OF THE SPACE THROUGH URBAN DESIGN COMPETITIONS: THE CASE STUDY OF INDEPENDENCE SQUARE IN PODGORICA

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## ABSTRACT

The topic of this research refers to the historical processes of space transformations through urban competitions, on the example of the urban emptiness of the main city square in Podgorica. In this sense, following the continuity of the city's development cycle, it will be important to analyse the semiotics of emptiness as a substantive absence, that have the character of open public space, with the aim of recognizing their potential within the urban context. This paper will present four urban contests, which in different ways look at the need for the transformation of the main city square. The aim of the research is based on the spatial relations of the square as an urban void, in relation to the built body of the city, and the way in which this relation is established with other tangent zones. The circumstances in which the square changed during the development of the city conditioned the transformations that are manifested in the change in the relationship between the urban void and the built environment that forms it, which did not offer an adequate response in relation to the needs of the city. Today's main city square, as the biggest urban void in the city, represents a problem that could not be solved even after several architectural competitions. The results of the research pointed to a specific problem that lies in the wrong approach to announcing competitive tasks. This is indicated by the comparative analysis of four tenders, the end result of which, the existing square, indicates the problem of the proportion of the urban void in relation to the scale of the city, but also of its disintegration.

KEYWORDS \_ *urban void, city square, urban transformations, urban design competitions, urban scale*

## INTRODUCTION

In order to better understand the theoretical context of the city, it is necessary to clarify several basic theoretical terms. The subject of research is the relationship between the theoretical and practical use of the term - urban emptiness (it is connected to the theoretical concepts of void<sup>1</sup>, emptiness<sup>2</sup> nothingness<sup>3</sup>). An important part of the research is related to finding an answer that is the optimal measure of the void within the city fabric, in the form of a public city square. The complexity of theoretical concepts in the field of architectural theory, urbanism, but also in the field of sociological research, indicates the diversity of authors and bibliographic units that were used during the research. Numerous points of view on the topic of emptiness in the city are mostly generally accepted, it is necessary to make a complete multidisciplinary insight into the topic, and illuminate this concept from several different aspects.

In this sense, it will be very important to research the theoretical concepts of the urban void, which began at the end of the 19th century, when space was spoken of in terms of fullness, but not emptiness. It is especially important to look at the period of the 1970s, when the issue of emptiness became popular, and where design was closely linked to the attempt to preserve urban emptiness (Silvestrin 1994, p. 147). Part of the literature is aimed at finding the optimal measure in the relationship between full and empty, as a topographical and spatial structure. Thus, the shaded zones define the positive masses - the built corpus of the city, while the white zones are the voids of the city. Of special importance for the course of research are the theories of Roger Trancik, who identifies five types of urban voids as levels of openness and closure in relation to the urban fabric of cities (Tranciku, 1986).

In traditional urban theory, voids in the city are viewed as part of the unique volume of the city. Designing by subtracting solid parts: 'differential' urbanism is created by interpreting grids as solid or empty at the same time (Joel Kerner, *City of Collective Acts*, project for West LA, 2012). In contemporary theory, urban voids are more and more often designated as spaces that are empty, or emptied, spaces "between" other spaces, spaces without function, "reserve areas", empty buildings, and often arise as a result of uneven urban development and dynamic urban transformations. Rathí recognizes several types of urban voids, which define the city (Kushwah, Rathí 2017). First of all, it singles out morphological and natural gaps and functional gaps as important. As a special category, he lists planning gaps – caused by inefficient and wrong planning processes, which do not integrate urban gaps into the fabric of the city.

The research of Rem Koolhaas can be of special importance for the establishment of spatial relations at the city level. He highlights the significance of the urban scale, drawing on *Collage City* and the concept of seeing the building as a block, where empty spaces become a common medium for content. The discourse of emptiness, Koolhaas explains in the essay "Imagining Nothingness" (1985), where the author systematizes the concept of emptiness or absence, which as such define built or unbuilt space. In this way, we are faced with emptiness, as a negative of the built mass, in his works Koolhaas describes it as – the absence of the built (Koolhaas et al, 1995). On the other hand, it introduces the term – nothingness, translated as absence, which results in the absence of the built, thus opening up new possibilities for the architectural program. His "Emptiness Strategy" suggests a concept that is the essence of his attitude, and is reflected in the idea: space is created by absence and emptiness.

<sup>1</sup> **void** – absence of fullness, emptiness. Void is nothingness without a user. Only in the relationship with the user does it gain meaning. Unlike other arts, void in architecture is defined by boundaries, context, as well as the program by which it is intended. Space that includes program and activity. Negative construction of the structure. A hollow space in which there is no body. Opposite meaning of fullness - solid. *Perceptual and Visual Void on the Architectural Form: Transparency and Permeability* (Kuloğlu, N. 2012).

<sup>2</sup> **emptiness** – a term that has been studied since pre-Socratic times. The word has a broader meaning, but in Koolhaas' study it is linked to Democritus' analysis, according to which emptiness is an empty space in which atoms move. "Za atomiste *emptiness* je praznina". *Emptiness and Nothingness in OMA's Libraries* (Şimşek, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> **nothingness** – the concept of nothingness is used in many sciences. It describes the absence or absence of anything. Nothingness also appears as a term associated with emptiness as a result of the absence of architecture, where Koolhaas opens up new possibilities for an architectural program. Nothingness defines an architectural program without the need for construction. With this he says: "Where there is nothing, everything is possible. Where there is architecture, nothing else is possible". *S M L XL*, (Koolhaas, Mau, Werlemann, 1995).

In addition to theoretical concepts, it is important to note that the analyzed time frame of the work can be divided into two parts. As one of the leading motives of the research, are the urban transformations of the main town square in Podgorica and how they influence the change of spatial relations over time, through the policies of urban planning competitions. The first is a general overview of the development of public spaces at the level of the city, from Stara varoš (Ottoman period – 15<sup>th</sup> century), then Mirkova varoš (19<sup>th</sup> century), and Novi Grad (the 1960s), until today. The second part of the research refers specifically to the development of the Independence Square, which is the subject of the research, and it covers the period from the first General Urban Plan from 1957 until today. Accordingly, the research begins with a genealogical map of the city from the aspect of urban void analysis. The research will continue on decades of attempts and market competition policies, specifically related to Independence Square. Although the goal is to find an optimal urban void that would play the role of the main town square in Podgorica, it still has an unresolved status after a series of tenders.

## METHODOLOGY

This theoretical aspect is based on a combination of several theoretical and practical methods, based on a quantitative (objective indicator) and qualitative approach. The methods were used to show spatial relationships that try to identify processes and problems in order to create the main city void - the square in Podgorica. In this sense, apart from the analysis method, the main method is the case study method, which will show the processes of transformation on the example of the Main Town Square.

The generic method, which also includes the historical method, will analyze the spatial relations during the development of the city, in relation to poche and void. In this sense, as initial research, a genealogical map - Nolli plan of four main cycles of the city's development is presented. The focus of the research work is on urban transformations of the main city square, which take place in the form of competition policy and their implementation in the summary of the conclusions, this paper has a critical review of the approach to the treatment of the main city square as a leading urban void, which, regardless of the large number of contests that try to redefine its concept, is still recognized as a problem of the city. The aim of this work is not to review contemporary architectural responses, but to criticize planning practices that do not see the square as an integral whole, but fragmentary, which is the key to its failure.

## BACKGROUND RESEARCH - TYPOLOGICAL PRESENTATION OF URBAN VOIDS – MEASURE OF VOID IN THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CITY

In order to better understand the context and significance of the urban void in the urban matrix of the city, the development cycle of the city will be presented, through the prism of shaping the urban void. There, the four formative phases of the city will be recognized on the genealogical map. Each historical phase of the city manifests different approaches in the formation and use of urban **voids**, which is closely related to the spatial, temporal and cultural context. The urban voids of **Stara Varoš**, a Mediterranean city with oriental characteristics, are recognized by a densely built matrix in which urban voids represent intimate yards in the back of houses – avlija, of limited size, which is related to the oriental – Islamic principle. A settlement of unplanned organization results in specific relations between built and unbuilt. Breaks – urban voids in such a densely built structure, are manifested as small squares, of a public character, where a mosque was located as a central motif, or a city fountain, where meetings and trade took place.

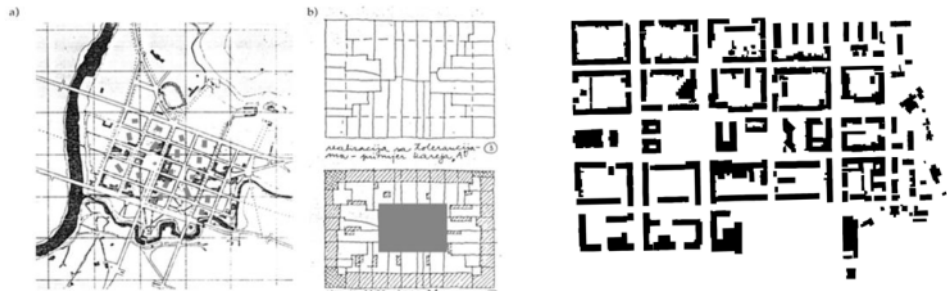
The period between the two wars is characterized by the city's orthogonal urban planning scheme (from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to 1958). Neoclassicism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the formation of Nova Varoš, along with the artistic reflection of secessionism and eclecticism of buildings between the two wars, form a specific architectural and urban concept of the city, which is the subject of this research.

Mirkova Varoš was built according to the urban project of the Russian engineer Vladimir Vorman from 1879, and the plan is characterized by wide streets that intersect at ninety degrees, and houses that form the profile of the street, and behind which there are inner courtyards - atriums. The right to the free outdoor space of each block was realized as an introverted system, which as such has a semi-public character. Vorman's plan clearly shows the Noli approach to the relationship between full and empty, built and unbuilt, which tries to find the optimal measure of emptiness, as a necessary space for interaction within the block.



**Figure 1:** a. Stara varoš, Nollli map of *poche – void* b. urbana struktura Stare varoši, mahala I pazari (source: a Milićević, 2023, b Museums and Galleries of Podgorica, Rovčanin Premović, 2020, [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Bazaar-Carsi-and-Mahalas-Mahalle-in-Stara-Varos\\_fig1\\_340970431](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Bazaar-Carsi-and-Mahalas-Mahalle-in-Stara-Varos_fig1_340970431)).

In addition to the inner courtyards, Vorman also proposed the central square as the leading void of the city, which was realized as such, and which years later, until today, will be the subject of urban transformations. The need for a leading “break” in the city manifested itself as a meeting place, as a market and a place of trade, the visual marker of which was the obelisk built in honor of Duke Mirko. This monument (1886) becomes a symbolic element of the Montenegrin state, which, decades later, will become the visual and spatial – reference symbol of today's Independence Square, in another form of expression.



**Figure 2:** a. Vorman plan for Nova Varos b. Nollli map of *poche – void* (source: a. Popović, Lipovac, Grahovac, 2016 <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/237158>, b Milićević, 2023).



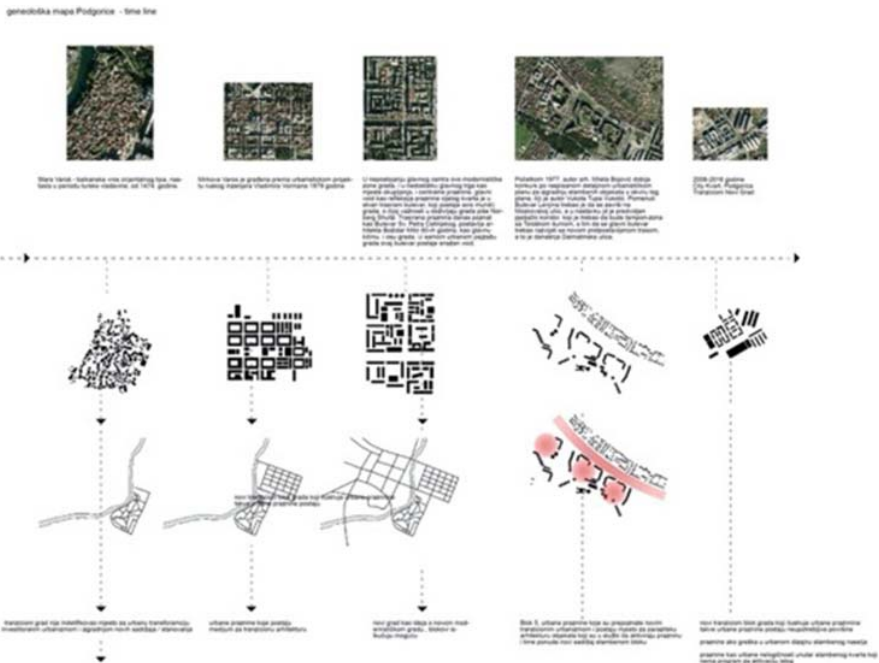
**Figure 3:** Podgorica in 1930, the former square, the search for a measure of emptiness, (source: G.B. Portal analitika, 2015, Retrieved from <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/177810-savkovic-vukcevic-za-obelisk-vojvodi-mirku-trazicemo-mjesto-izmedu-gradskog-parlamenta-i-biblioteke>).

The third cycle in the development of the city – the **Novi grad**, as a result of the emerging socialism, was created after the Second World War on the Morača coast as a settlement of open blocks and modern architecture. The new conception of the functionalist city in the 60s established an orthogonal system of organization of roads, whereby the blocks formed in this way had significantly larger dimensions compared to the block system in Nova Varoš, creating in their interior, large courtyards that represent an urban void. In accordance with the increase in numerous urban planning parameters, the proportion of the city as a whole increases, and thus the need for a larger urban void, which becomes a place of interaction, is created. The socialist concept of the city strengthened the idea of creating common spaces, and the imperative of their utility value is precisely the public space.



**Figure 4:** a. Novi grad, Noll map poche - void b. The boulevard as a continuous urban void c. Noll plan of the Novi grad (source: a. Miličević, 2023, b. private archive Blagota Brajović, c. Miličević, 2023).

In the absence of the main square as a place of interaction, the boulevard is recognized as the main void, which becomes the axis mundi of the city, about whose importance in the experience of the city Norberg Shultz writes. Continuous emptiness, today known as Bulevar Sv. Petar Cetinjski, designed by architect Božidar Milić in the 1960s, as the main backbone and axis of the city. In the very urban landscape of the city, this boulevard becomes a powerful void, which builds a recognizable street profile, it can be concluded that this boulevard has the power of a square – a continuous open square.



**Figure 5:** Diagram – genealogical map of urban voids of the city (source: authors).

The boulevard had the appearance of a linear square, the established backbone of the city that has the character of a public space. The vision of the development of the city, which will eventually become a dense structure, speaks of the author's attitude that at that moment he is building a void within an empty space, linearly connecting two voids, opening space for a new expansion of the city. He has the strength to exist for a decade to move the city, giving it the basic artery around which the blood flow of the city is generated. The transitional phase of the city's development (since independence in 2006), as a syndrome of investor urbanism, ignores urban voids as public space, instead they become a side product of bad planning. The focus of this research is Independence Square, as the leading urban void of the city, the process of its formation and transformation will be presented below.

## RESULTS – CASE STUDY

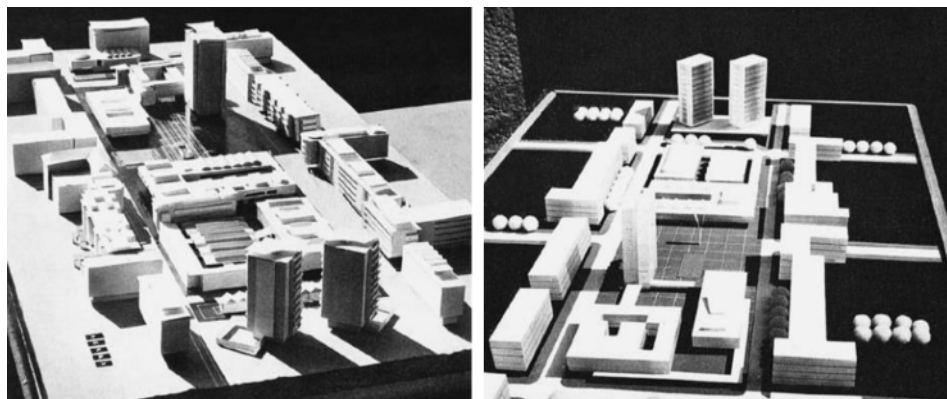
### The process of the creation of an *urban void* – the main city square in the making

After a brief presentation of the genealogical map of the development of the city of Podgorica, the research continues with the analysis of the process of the creation of the main city square, as the leading urban void of the city. The event that changed the cycle of the city's development, and led to completely new urban transformation processes of the city, was the Allied bombing in 1944, which razed the city to the ground. After the liberation, there was a need for modernization of the city, which was already visible in the competition that was announced for the arrangement of the city center. In the same year that the first GUP of Titograd (1957) was passed, the results of the competition for the design of Ivan Milutinović Square were published. The competition was announced with the aim of renovating the center of Titograd, which was completely destroyed by the earthquake, according to the highest standards, so that the city would get a leading public space. From then until today, this tender and plan will represent the most significant vision of the transformation and modernization of the city. As such, it aimed to find an adequate measure of the city's urban void, in relation to its tangential built-up zones, and to internalize the void.

The winners of the first prize were architects Milorad Knežević and Petar Muličkovski, whose conceptual solution was based on the establishment of a pedestrian square with four functional units: cultural (theatre, museum, gallery, etc.); administrative (city public board, ten-story building for social organizations, social institutions, clubs, etc.); commercial (shops, services, catering) and residential (four-story buildings located along the northern edge of the square and two skyscrapers on the eastern side, placed at an angle of 45 degrees in relation to the orthogonal street matrix) (Alihodžić, Stamatović Vučković, Ašanin, 2019).

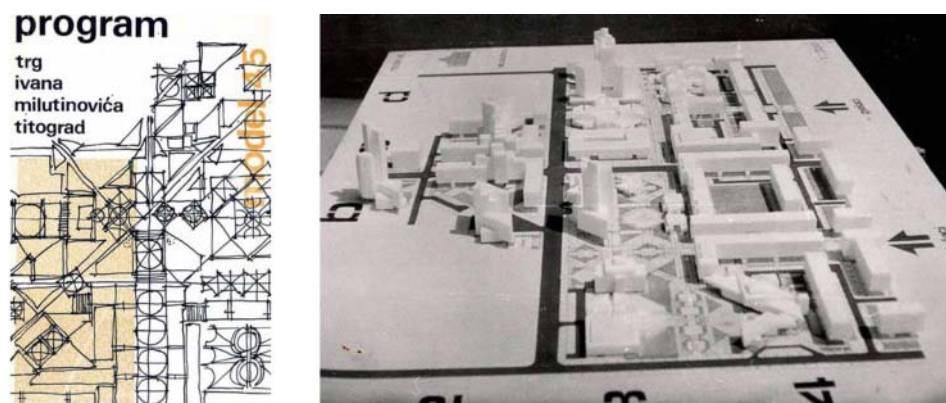
The intention of transforming the central square surrounded by monotonous flat facades into the archetypal locus of a new, modern city was materialized through two residential skyscrapers. The fundamental value of their work lies precisely in a different, typically modernist conception of urban space, making it functionally and visually undisturbed. The visual dominance of Fabris' skyscrapers in the city center was undoubtedly achieved by the compact modernist volume. The result of the award-winning solution was the construction of the "Beko" department store (architect Božidar Milić (1967-1969), with passageways and semi-atriums connecting two smaller squares (today's Independence Square and Balšića Square). As such, it exists today as a leading memory and architectural landmark of the square, although its function is transformed over time. Today, its existence is the subject of discussion and debate on the architectural scene, because precisely its position can become a key argument or problem in the integration of these two squares.

This solution of the square was a topic of discussion and criticism, in which the square essentially remains disconnected from the rest of the city's life. Alberto Mambriani, in his book *Modern Architecture of the Balkan Countries*, encourages this very well-founded criticism by stating that the new architecture failed to offer common spaces and places where citizens truly meet (Mambriani, 1970). On the other hand, two years later, their work was included among the 150 projects that represented Yugoslav architecture at its first international exhibition (Ignjatović, 1959).



**Figure 6:** Conceptual solution for the main square in Podgorica in 1957 (Source: Katalog Ignjatović, B. (ed.) (1959), Contemporary Yugoslav Architecture = Architecture Yougoslav Contemporaine, Ljudska pravica, Ljubljana).

At the end of the 1960s, Ivan Milutinović Square acted as a rather inharmonious combination of the remains of the pre-war town and several new modern buildings, and the competition solution was only partially implemented, resulting in an undefined square. Therefore, at the beginning of 1971, the city authorities announced a new competition for its programmatic and urban-architectural solution. The competition was announced by the Assembly of the Municipality of Titograd and the Association of Architects of Montenegro, as republican, anonymous. Seven author teams from Montenegro participated in the competition. and the first prize went to the team of the Republic Institute for Urban Planning and Design from Titograd, consisting of: architect Milorad Vukotić, architect Vasilije Đurović, architect Slobodan Slovičić and technician Budmila Stanić (Ašanin, 2020). "Their work, under the code Model 45, made a fundamental contribution to the idea of transforming the main square and its immediate surroundings into a truly attractive city center and improving and intensifying the lived experience of this space through an adequate selection of program contents and bold interventions in the physical structure Nova Varoš,, (Ašanin, 2020). In order to have a more comprehensive view of the square space in the context of the city, the authors have, on their own initiative, expanded the scope of the intervention, including all blocks of Nova Varoš. Such an approach opened up the possibility of a fundamental reconstruction of the urban form, not only the square but also its contact zones, i.e., the complete fabric of Mirkova Varoš, with special attention to the protection and affirmation of the part of the construction fund from the interwar period that "survived" the bombing.



**Figure 7:** The first prize-winning solution of the competition from 1971 (Source: Slovičić, 2014. <https://montenegrina.net/slobodan-bobo-slovinic-primijenjena-umjetnost-galerija/>)

## NEW COMPETITIONS AS A SEARCH FOR THE OPTIMAL URBAN VOID

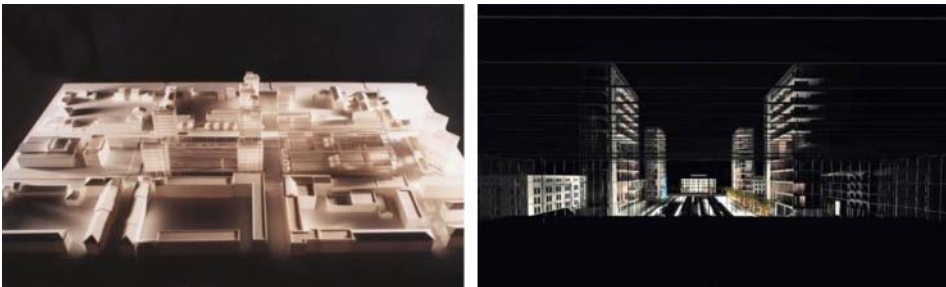
Unfortunately, the realization of this square solution was largely incomplete, and this opportunity to create an urban void is considered to have been missed. At the beginning of the 1990s, this realization was finally abandoned, and none of the planned cultural, catering, and trade-crafts contents was implemented. According to the plan, only three buildings in the immediate vicinity of the square were realized - among them are residential blocks (1970s) I SDK (1980s), and the connections of the square with the rivers were not established, and the old library and modest one-story houses were kept. The central part of the area planned for the square will remain occupied by parking for almost twenty years.



**Figure 8:** a Titograd's central square in the mid-1970s, b View of the square with soldiers' solitaires Fabris (source: a. Vukićević, 2020, <https://www.vijesti.me>, b. Alihodžić, 2019. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/221658>).

Since the main city square did not function as a public space at that time, but as a public parking lot, the need for a new attempt to build the main city square is happening within the framework of a new international tender announced in 2002.

The municipal authorities, not having a clear vision for the square, are announcing the competition in the given - the same dimensions, regardless of the fact that the scale of the city has grown many times compared to the last competition in 1971. The competition for the reconstruction of the square is won by the author Branislav Redžić (ARCVS), who is another in a series of solutions that remain unrealized.

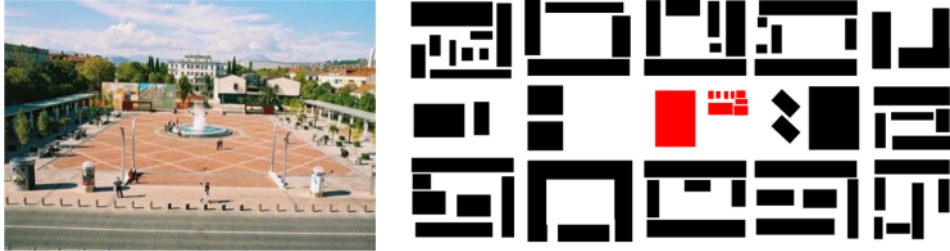


**Figure 9:** The first prize-winning solution in the competition for the reconstruction of the square from 2002, by Branislav Redžić (Source: ARCVS, Arhitektonski biro, <https://arcvs.com>).

The first post-referendum architectural solution for Trg Republike (today Independence Square), by Mladen Đurović (Arhitektonski atelje), was finally realized in 2006-07. This approach and solution, without a competition and after a series of unrealized ones, caused indignation from the profession. After construction, it turned out to be very dysfunctional, aesthetically bad, which is still a generally accepted attitude today. The square is uneven in relation to the tangent promenade zones, which represents a non-communicative and disintegrated space. The thoroughfare in Slobode Street divides the area of the square from Balšić Square, which is further divided by the Beko shopping center, while the potential can be read in their unification.



Balšića Square, with an underground slope, becomes the main city parking lot, and as such a missed chance for the main city square in Podgorica to acquire an appropriate scale and function. The square is of questionable aesthetic value, with old-fashioned red stone paving, very cheap and useless footbridges positioned on the side, and a fountain that represents the central motif. Subsequently, for political reasons, and to mark the space, the redesigned obelisk was returned to the square, as a symbol of statehood.



**Figure 10:** a. Independence Square today, b. The broken connection between the two squares by the Beko shopping center, as a problem of integral urban emptiness (source a. Podgorica, 2020. <https://podgorica.me>, b. Milićević, 2023).

Since the solution for the main town square is still bad and inadequate, both in terms of scale, as well as in terms of function, content and tangent zones, there is a new need for the reconstruction of the main town square. With the aim of revitalizing the city center, expanding the pedestrian zone and increasing the number of parking spaces, a new competition was announced (in 2020) for the creation of a conceptual solution for the reconstruction of Independence Square. 35 works were submitted to the competition, and the author's team of the first-prized work consists of an international group of experts led by Ninoslav Krgović – senior architect at OMA studio. Such a solution, another in a series of architectural failures, which met with great resistance from the professional public and the citizens of Podgorica. The problem is a very poorly announced competition, in which the essential functional problem of the existing city square is not recognized, where the need for a larger, integral public space, which needs new relational relations, is not recognized. The square again remains in the same dimensions as the previous one, not providing a new quality and an answer to the need to redefine the main urban void of the city, both in terms of volume and functionality.



**Figure 11:** Independence Square, the winning solution in the 2020 competition – OMA, DEPOLIS (source: ARCHITIZER, <https://architizer.com/projects/1st-prize-independence-square-podgorica-montenegro-international-competition/>).

In this way, the square only gets a slightly different form, and such an attitude ignores the problem of disintegration with the Balšić Square, leaving all the built tangent structures in their original form. That the decision-makers and the professions that work on announcing the competition do not have a vision of the potential of joining these two squares, is shown by the recently published solutions for Balšić Square, which is treated as such as an independent entity.

In the solution, the authors of which are not mentioned, the clear position is that next to the main square, another one should be formed, with a city garage, which makes the space overbuilt, endangering the potential of an integral urban void, which was recognized as such back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



**Figure 12:** Balšić Square, a new solution for the square with a garage (2023). Confirmed disintegration with Independence Square (source: Vuković, 2023. <https://volimpodgoricu.me/pg-info/ovako-ce-izgledati-balsica-pazar-ivan-vukovic-objavio-fotografije-i-najavio-radove-foto>).

Only a few solutions received at the competition recognized the need to integrate two squares, Independence Square and Balšić Square, which gives the city a new spatial dimension and quality, which as such isolates the pedestrian capacity of the city center from traffic roads, and creates space.



**Figure 13:** One of the non-awarded competition solutions, which integrates Independence Square and Balšić Square into an integral space, ING Invest (2020) (source: ING INVEST, 2020. <https://inginvest.me>).

## CONCLUSIONS

Podgorica, as the capital of the country, does not have a main city square that aesthetically, functionally, and dimensionally meets the needs of a fast-growing modern city. The city's need for a leading urban void dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1886), when the first square was formed – the Pazar, in whose place, decades later, we still do not have an adequate solution for the main city square. The dynamic development of the city affects its rapid expansion in different directions, but the essential problem of the city is visible in the lack of a leading center. In this sense, its growth is inarticulate, and the city has a problem with legibility and use. The main city square, as the leading urban void of the city, records four failed international tenders, which show a lack of understanding of the integral approach to solving the leading void. The first solution represented a very radical post-war transformation of the inner city center, of which only some individual buildings were realized. The idea of the square at that time implied complementary functions that would form one compact unit, forming a functional and engaging square. The second, never realized solution, also offers a strong transformation of the city core, which goes beyond the scale of the city square. It is interesting that the first two tenders in their call require an analysis of the wider context, which is the only correct approach. It is impossible to treat the square as an isolated spatial entity.

The next competition was announced in strictly defined dimensions of the square, which represents a key problem. Such a thoughtless approach, without analysis, results in an urban void that does not correspond to the scale and needs of the city. Such an approach makes the square a disintegrated space within the city, and as such it is dysfunctional and non-communicative. Such a wrong approach was repeated in the last competition. This is exactly the reason why the results of that competition are completely unusable. Because such an approach does not contribute to improving the quality of the existing, very bad urban space. The last competition is just one more proof in a series, that there is a lack of an analytical integral approach that is based on volume relationships of emptiness – fullness, built and unbuilt, in tangent zones, as a response to the needs of the new scale of the city. Apart from the volumetric one, the problem is legible in a functional and aesthetic sense, and as such, ultimately, builds a very bad and wrong image of a modern city.

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