# CULTURE-LED URBAN REGENERATION: NATIONAL CAPITALS OF CULTURE IN SERBIA

DOI: https://doi.org/10.18485/arh_pt.2025.10.ch42

**_ Aleksandra Đukić**

PhD, Full Professor, Faculty of Architecture,
University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia,
adjukic@afrodita.rcub.bg.ac.rs, [0000-0002-7815-6588]

**_ Jovana Stefanović**

Junior Research Assistant and PhD student, Faculty of Architecture, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia,
jovana.stefanovic@arh.bg.ac.rs, [0009-0009-7879-6006]

**_ Jelena Marić**

PhD, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Architecture,
University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia,
jelena.maric@arh.bg.ac.rs, [0000-0002-3906-850X]

ABSTRACT

The National Capitals of Culture Program, initiated by the Ministry of Culture of Serbia, aims to decentralize cultural activities, enhance local cultural infrastructure, and strengthen the identity of smaller towns. This paper examines how the cities awarded this title have pursued development objectives within the program's framework and implemented key capital projects, assessing how these efforts have contributed to urban regeneration, socio-economic growth, and increased visibility on national and regional levels. The research adopts a multiple case study methodology, focusing on the cities of Čačak (2023) and Užice (2024) as National Capitals of Culture from the start of the program to the present day. The study involves the analysis of official program documents, public opinion surveys, and interviews with residents and broader communities, providing a comprehensive evaluation of the program's impact on urban development. Čačak, as the first National Capital of Culture, proposed projects such as the Basketball Museum, a Cultural Incubator, and the reconstruction of the Nadežda Petrović Plateau to enhance the city's brand. Using a similar approach, Užice follows with plans to renovate the Grand Hall of the City Cultural Centre, creating a multifunctional venue for cultural activities. The goal is the evaluation of the extent to which these cities have met the program's objectives, focusing on cultural decentralization and long-term improvements in cultural infrastructure. The findings aim to provide insights into the alignment between planned and implemented projects, offering a critical perspective on their contribution to urban development and their impact as experienced by local communities and cultural stakeholders.

KEYWORDS _ *Culture-led urban regeneration, National Capitals of Culture, cultural decentralization, new cultural centers*

## INTRODUCTION

The project *National Capital of Culture* was initiated in 2023 by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia, with the aim of decentralising cultural activities, enhancing local cultural infrastructure, and strengthening the identity of smaller towns. The project was modelled after the *European Capital of Culture* (ECoC), a significant instrument for promoting transnational cooperation and a key element of the European Union's cultural action. The primary objective of the *European Capital of Culture* initiative was to "highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe, while emphasising their shared cultural heritage" (http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:41985X0622). Similarly, the main idea behind the *National Capital of Culture* is to strengthen key factors of cultural development through support for local self-governments, as well as the protection and promotion of cultural, material, and intangible heritage. Particular emphasis is placed on encouraging the construction and renovation of cultural facilities and the adoption of cultural development strategies at the local level, with a focus on involving citizens and professionals in the processes of creating and implementing cultural policies within units of local self-government (Government of the Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Culture and Information, 2022). The programme is expected to directly result in an improved quality of cultural life in the city, accelerated cultural and tourism development, and the advancement of cultural development strategies at the local level. *Although the initiative is widely perceived as a driver of positive cultural and spatial change, critical perspectives suggest that cultural flagships often fail to resonate with local communities, as their programmes are primarily aimed at tourists and may introduce cultural imagery that clashes with local identities* (Anzani, 2013). The Working Group for the preparation and implementation of the *National Capital of Culture* programme declared Čačak as the first city to hold this title in October 2021. The symbolic transfer of the title from Čačak to Užice was carried out by the "Culture Train" on 21 March 2024. On the same date the following year, Užice passed the title to Zrenjanin. According to official statements from the Ministry of Culture, a large number of applications were received for the selection of the *National Capital of Culture* in both calls for proposals opened in 2021 and 2022 (18 and 12 applications, respectively). This has been interpreted as an indication that local self-governments have largely recognised the importance of the initiative and its potential to enhance cultural content, as well as to stimulate comprehensive social and economic development within their communities (Government of the Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Culture and Information, 2023). According to the officially adopted agenda, the programmes in both cities include a comprehensive and diverse cultural programme, as well as a series of major architectural, urban, and infrastructural projects aimed at improving the cultural offer and public spaces in the cities.

The main subject of this study is the success of the implementation of the planned programme and the achievement of set objectives in the field of cultural and spatial transformation. Čačak and Užice are used as case studies, including analysis of official statements and programme brochures, monitoring the implementation of major urban and architectural projects, as well as examining local residents' perceptions of the significance and effects of the overall programme. Through a comparison of the urban environment before and after the implementation of the programme in both cities, this paper aims to offer a comprehensive assessment of the success in achieving the strategic objectives of the *National Capital of Culture* programme and the degree of alignment between what was planned and what was realised. The expected contribution of this research is an analysis of the extent to which the *National Capital of Culture* initiative has contributed to the processes of decentralising culture, actively integrating the local community into cultural flows, and the long-term improvement of the cultural infrastructure of the cities, observed from the perspective of the direct users of the space.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved the method of content analysis to determine the framework of planned projects and activities within the *National Capital of*

*Culture* programme for the cities of Čačak and Užice. For this purpose, official statements from the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Ministry of Culture and Information, media content, programme brochures, and documents produced under the auspices of the *National Capital of Culture* initiative for both cities were analysed. The second phase of the research focused on the collection and interpretation of data obtained through a survey questionnaire. The survey, conducted among the local population of Čačak and Užice, aimed to gather data on the assessment of the degree of implementation of the planned activities, as well as to analyse residents' perceptions of the effects of the implemented projects on quality of life, the cultural identity of the city, and its regional visibility. The results of the survey serve as the basis for formulating useful guidelines for future *National Capitals of Culture*, enabling the experiences gained from these two cities to be implemented in the successful planning of future programmes. In this way, the experiences from Čačak and Užice may be viewed as a pilot study for identifying the effects of the *National Capital of Culture* programme on local cultural and economic development.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The role of culture in the sustainable development of cities has been gaining increasing significance within urban and cultural policies. Cultural events, such as the awarding of titles like *Capital of Culture*, are regarded as important instruments for generating new values, promoting economic growth, and building a recognisable identity of urban environments (Garcia, 2004). Contemporary cultural policies emphasise the necessity of decentralising cultural content, supporting the development of culture in smaller and medium-sized cities as a means of achieving balanced territorial development (Papanikolaou, 2012). Cultural decentralisation entails empowering local communities, increasing the accessibility of cultural content beyond major urban centres, and actively involving citizens in the processes of creating cultural offerings. At the same time, a sustainable approach to cultural development requires the integration of cultural resources into broader strategies of urban and economic planning, while preserving and affirming local identities (Bianchini, 1993). However, there is always a risk because of the temptation to manage local culture in order to meet the needs of tourists – or, more commonly, what their needs are perceived to be. This has often been perceived by local residents to be done at their expense and against their interests (Matarasso & Landry, 1999, in Anzani, 2013).

In the Serbian context, there is a growing effort to position culture as an important factor in local development, with programmes such as the *National Capital of Culture* recognised as mechanisms for strengthening local cultural infrastructure and encouraging the participation of local populations (Paunović, 2020). Within this theoretical and policy framework, the analysis of the cases of Čačak and Užice offers valuable insight into the achievements, limitations, and specific challenges related to the application of the concept of decentralised and sustainable cultural development in medium-sized cities in Serbia.

## ANALYSIS OF OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Branding of the Programme

The new cultural offering of Čačak and Užice within the framework of the programme was founded upon the cultural identity and specific characteristics of the regions, as well as numerous renowned historical and cult figures originating from these cities (*serb.* Čačanska Rodna, *Era Kulture*).

The conceptual framework of Čačanska Rodna is based on cultural and historical values, along with numerous individuals whose lives and creative work are closely connected to the city. The slogan was inspired by the name of a characteristic plum variety and a recognisable agricultural product from the Čačak area, alluding to the vision of Čačak as a fertile ground for the development of culture,

arts, and other fields such as sport and science across centuries. During 2023, Čačanska Rodna was presented through four subthemes, jointly creating the cultural profile of the city: *At Liberty* (*serb. Na Slobodi*), *On the Morava* (*serb. Na Moravi*), *At the Crossroads* (*serb. Na raskršću*), and *On the Cobbles* (*serb. Na kaldrmi*). The rationale behind this division lies in the fact that each of these units highlights, in its own way, the most important elements of the city's current cultural production, as well as the richness of national and local heritage. Such thematic structuring allowed for a better concentration of resources and focus on different aspects of the city and its dynamics.

For Užice, the programme concept was founded on the fact that Užice was the first city in Serbia, and the second in the world, to have an operational hydroelectric power plant. The branding of the entire programme was aligned around the central motif of light, which leads us "through the authentic story of Užice, its cultural and historical heritage, from the Neolithic period to the present day, as a symbol of the beginning of a new era – the era of culture." Within the *Era Kulture*, four thematic fields were defined, encompassing cultural-historical heritage, contemporary artistic practices, and future perspectives in the spirit of the city's cultural development (https://erakulture.rs/), namely:

- *Torchbearers* (*serb. Luconoše*): focusing on the foundations of faith and science, significant individuals, "learned people," and educators who have left a mark on both the general and the indigenous cultural identity of the Eras;
- *Noble Flames* (*serb. Pla(e)menite baklje*): addressing humanity, inclusion, children, youth, education, and ecology;
- *The Colourful Lights of the Spotlight* (*serb.* Šarena svetla reflektora): encompassing projects aimed at promoting the ideas of authenticity, diversity, multiculturalism, and cooperation;
- *Cyber Era* (*serb. Sajber era*): a thematic field gathering project activities oriented towards modernisation, digitalisation, and visionary approaches — the light of the past illuminating the path to the future.

**Planned Architectural and Urban Projects**

The program "National Capital of Culture of Serbia" was designed as an initiative aimed at improving the city's cultural life and contributing to its long-term urban revitalisation through infrastructural and programmatic interventions. The strategy foresaw that all works would be executed according to high standards of architectural aesthetics, urban mobility, and sustainability, to profile Užice as an example of best practice in the cultural policy of medium-sized cities in Serbia. As part of the "Čačanska Rodna" program, planned projects include the rehabilitation of Župana Stracimira Street into a pedestrian zone, the opening of the Basketball Museum in the building of Sokolski dom, the revitalisation of Roman baths and their integration into the city promenade, the opening of an ethnological exhibition at the City Hall (Hadžić's or Vire's house), the reconstruction of Cara Dušana Street with landscaping, a space for the permanent collection of the Art Gallery "Nadežda Petrović", the legacy of Branko V. Radičević, the "Culture Train" (*serb. Voz kulture*) connecting Čačak with other cities (Požega, Užice, Valjevo, Belgrade), the rehabilitation of the Nadežda Petrović Square, and the opening of the Poetry Museum.

As part of the "Era of Culture" program (*serb. Era kulture*), major projects include the reconstruction of the Great Hall of the City Cultural Centre (*serb. GKC*) with the modernisation of technical equipment and the improvement of its capacity for hosting various cultural events. In addition, a multi-storey building is planned to be constructed at the site of the former shooting range in the city centre. The program also includes a range of infrastructural projects funded by the Ministry of Culture and the City of Užice, These projects include the reconstruction and adaptation of the house of Mihailo Milovanović in the village of Ribaševina, the development of project and technical documentation for the reconstruction of Partisan Square, the removal of accessibility barriers for people with disabilities

in cultural institutions, and the installation of solar digital boards and info desks along a 6-kilometre trail leading to the Neolithic settlement (Ministry of Culture, 2023). Special attention has been given to the planning of public space development, such as the Small Park in front of the City Cultural Centre (*serb. GKC*) and the plaza around the fountain in the central city area, with the idea of creating new open spaces for leisure, social activities, and outdoor cultural events. The program also includes the construction of the "Dinaric Fishermen's Settlement" (*serb. Dinarsko ribarsko naselje*), which will feature a museum exhibition in the form of a traditional household showing the culture of habitation and nomadic life from the 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as a section dedicated to tourist activities with facilities designed in the spirit of traditional architecture.

### Implemented Architectural and Urban Projects

In Čačak, within the programme unit *"Na slobodi"*, one of the several planned projects is the reconstruction of Župana Stracimira Street, from Hajduk Veljkova Street to Gospodar Jovanova Street. The project involves the formation of a pedestrian zone and promenade connected to the Roman Square, City Square, and the new Nadežda Petrović Square in front of the Čačak Gymnasium. The arrangement of public spaces, particularly the reconstruction of the Small Park, faced sharp criticism due to disproportionately high costs relative to the modest scope of interventions, as well as the use of materials and solutions that were deemed inadequate and aesthetically questionable. General public dissatisfaction was further exacerbated by news of the resignations of some local government officials connected to the programme, which fuelled accusations of potential corrupt practices in the public discourse. Overall, the implemented projects did not meet expectations in terms of quality, timing, or transparency, significantly affecting the perception of the programme as a missed developmental opportunity for the city of Užice (Užicemedia, 2024; Green-Left Front of Užice).

## SURVEY RESULTS

The anonymous survey was an integral part of the research on the impact of the *"Capital of Culture of Serbia"* programme on the local community. It consisted of 33 questions divided into three sections: evaluation of the cultural programme offers, evaluation of spatial interventions carried out within the programme, and evaluation of the impact on branding and visibility of the city. The survey participants were of different genders, age groups, and educational levels. Participants from Čačak made up 57.9% of the total number of respondents, while the remaining 42.1% were from Užice. The largest percentage of respondents were women (81.4%), while men represented a significantly smaller group (18.6%). The majority belonged to the age group of 36 to 65 years (71%), followed by young people aged 18 to 35 (71.4%). The highest level of education was higher education (52.9%), with the next largest group having completed secondary education (25%). Of the total number of respondents, as many as 85.5% were not currently students of academic or vocational studies at any level.

### Cultural Programme Offer Evaluation

When asked about their habits and the frequency of attending cultural events in Čačak, the responses were varied: once a month (36.4%), several times a month (22.1%), once every six months (15.7%), rarely (12.1%), once a week (8.6%), and once a year (5%). Of the total number of respondents, 68.6% were familiar with the National *Capital of Culture* programme. According to the survey results, 62.8% of respondents observed changes in residents' habits in attending cultural events every month following the implementation of the new cultural programme. Of this group, 27.1% stated that they now attend cultural events much more frequently, while 35.7% stated they attend somewhat more often than before on a weekly (51%) and monthly (41.7%) basis.

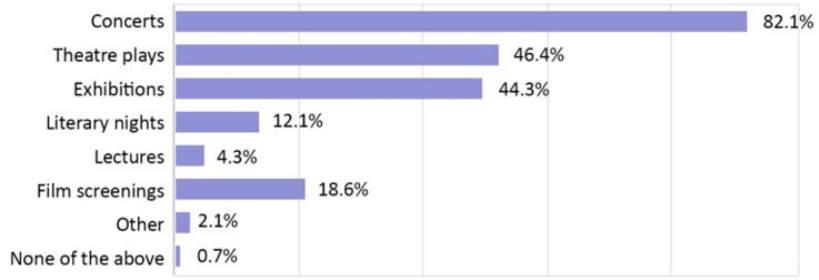


**Figure 1:** *What types of cultural events did you most often attend as part of the program?* - results

Within the framework of the *"National Capital of Culture"* programme, the most visited cultural events were undoubtedly concerts (82.1%) and theatre performances (46.4%), followed by exhibitions and museum displays (44.3%) and film screenings (18.6%). When evaluating the quality of cultural content, the most common rating on a scale of 1-5 was 4/5, given by 38.6% of respondents, followed by a rating of 3/5 given by 35.7%. As unsatisfactory (1/5), the quality of the programme was rated by 6.4% of respondents, while 17.1% rated it as excellent (5/5). The quality of diversity in the cultural offer was varied, with ratings on a scale of 1-5 as follows: extremely poor (5.7%), quite poor (5.7%), average (37.9%), quite good (33.6%), and excellent (17.1%). The frequency of cultural events during the programme was deemed adequate by 62.1% of respondents, with the optimal number of events being realised. A certain percentage of respondents even stated that there were too many events (7.9%), while others felt there were too few (30%). In terms of programme targeting, responses indicated a clear priority for adults (70.7%). Respondents noted that there was a lack of programmes for children (35%), youth (34.3%), and elderly people (25%) within the event's scope. Despite these criticisms, the overall offer was rated as adequate and accessible to the public, with 80% agreeing that the programme was not tailored exclusively for professionals in creative industries. When asked which themes were most represented in the cultural programme, the most frequent answers were: presentation of local tradition and heritage (53.6%), presentation of important and prominent local historical figures (41.4%), popularisation of cultural events among different generations (39.3%), highlighting the significance of freedom and the city's identity through art (17.1%), and introduction to new figures on the local cultural scene (15.7%).

**Spatial Interventions Evaluation**

The selection of newly planned cultural buildings, according to the agenda, was predominantly rated as average 3/5 (31.4%) or generally satisfactory 4/5 (25.7%). Only 7.9% of respondents expressed strong dissatisfaction, while 13.6% were very satisfied. When evaluating the importance of newly constructed cultural buildings for the city, the majority of respondents considered their impact to be average (36.4%), with only 10% believing the buildings were of exceptional importance for the city. It is important to highlight that most respondents feel the current capacity of cultural buildings after construction does not meet the needs of the local population (68.6%). On a scale of 1-5, the majority of respondents rated the significance of urban interventions as average with a score of 3/5 (30.7%) or unsatisfactory with a score of 2/5 (27.9%). Regarding the impact of the newly implemented infrastructure solutions on the quality of life in the city, respondents felt that the improvement was partial (44.3%) or non-existent (46.4%). When asked, *"Which project/spatial intervention in the city during the programme did you consider most significant and why?"* responses varied between cities. Some responses from respondents in Čačak included the closing of the city centre to car traffic and the expansion of Dušan's Street with a pedestrian zone, the Basketball Museum, the Ethnological Museum, and the Nadežda Petrović Square. In Užice, there was no predominant or specific answer, but the most common feedback was that "*the potential of being the first National Capital of Culture*

*was not fully used for any lasting cultural project in the city*," and that "*very little is being done to promote genuine cultural and artistic values, with a lack of inspiration, motivation, or resources for those making decisions at the local level or leading such projects*". Some respondents mentioned the renovation of the large hall in the Cultural Centre (*serb. GKC*) as significant, stating that it was the only project completed, although full praise was not given due to certain technical shortcomings (e.g., very poorly done sound system). It is also important to note that respondents positively evaluated all actions promoting culture among young people and providing space for their development, as well as actions like a special exhibition for blind and visually impaired people, to further engage people with special needs.

### City Branding and Visibility Impact Evaluation

The largest percentage of respondents (62.9%) believes that the cultural programme contributed to the city's branding, primarily through cultural promotion, followed by local population engagement (12.1%) and economic development (6.4%). A segment of respondents (18.6%) expressed dissatisfaction and doubts about the transparency of financial flows, the personal promotion of individuals and their material prosperity, as well as the criteria leading to the affirmation of artistic contents of low aesthetic value. The majority of respondents (84.35%) feels that the programme currently only has short-term positive effects on the city's cultural development, but that it has partially succeeded in initiating further development of the city (16.4%) or somewhat (39.3%). For respondents, both the construction of new cultural buildings and the reconstruction of existing infrastructure are equally important aspects for the development of culture in the city (55%). The distribution of responses about the effect of the "Capital of Culture Serbia" programme on greater recognisability of the city at the national level is fairly balanced, with positive (33.1%), sceptical (38.1%), and negative (28.8%) answers. Respondents who gave a positive answer felt that concerts (due to performers appealing to a broad audience) and theatre performances (due to the quality of content) were primarily responsible for this increased recognisability. Some respondents noted that "*everything is short-lived*" and that these programmes "*do not have a broader impact beyond the city*." When asked about the scope of the "Capital of Culture Serbia" programme, a clear majority of respondents (64.5%) believes that the programme contributes to promoting the local peculiarities of cities in Serbia. A portion of respondents (42.8%) believes that the programme generally contributes to the decentralisation of culture in Serbia, but a significant portion also holds a negative view about these effects (26.1%). The prevailing negative opinion (45.7%) is that the programme has not helped position their city as a cultural centre, which is mainly reflected in responses from participants in Užice.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the responses from the local population in Čačak and Užice reveals a range of thoughtful and diverse suggestions for improving cultural programmes in the future. Respondents express a need for an increase in both the number and variety of cultural events, with a particular emphasis on introducing content that is currently lacking, and which is adapted to all age groups, especially the elderly and the youngest. They highlight the importance of reducing the "estradisation" of concerts and the preference for hosting opera and similar high-quality artistic productions. In addition to programmatic suggestions, respondents strongly emphasise the need for the professionalisation of cultural project management, with a focus on greater transparency in financial management, reducing political influence on programme selection, and ensuring a professional and impartial approach to cultural policy.

A particular emphasis was placed on the need for strengthening the marketing visibility of programmes, including better media presentation, the installation of appropriate advertising structures, and a call for the development of more effective strategies for promoting cultural content. Alongside improving

the information available to the local population, there is also a priority to establish clear branding for the advantages of life in less urbanised areas, which would further encourage local pride and cultural identity. Additionally, internationalising cultural programmes is highlighted, with respondents pointing to the need for better organised international promotion to make the local cultural scene visible to a broader global audience. Respondents suggest that carefully planned campaigns could attract an international audience, thereby not only strengthening the cultural profile of cities but also contributing to the development of cultural tourism.

A significant number of survey participants highlight the need for greater support for local artists, cultural and educational associations, as well as the inclusion of young people, particularly primary and secondary school students, in the organisation and implementation of events, thereby strengthening the local cultural scene in the long term. Furthermore, responses emphasise the desire for local communities to take a more active role in programme implementation—not just as an audience but also through volunteering, participating in organisational teams, and content creation, which would ensure a deeper connection to cultural initiatives and their long-term sustainability. The possibility of organising workshops for the youngest and raising awareness among young people about the importance of cultural education was also mentioned. Finally, there is a clear call for the continuity of cultural activities even after the formal end of the "Capital of Culture" title, with an emphasis on avoiding short-term projects and insisting on long-lasting, strategically planned initiatives.

The overall findings show a high level of interest from the local community in more active participation in cultural life, with a focus on authenticity, transparency, and the professionalisation of cultural production. Following the examples of Čačak and Užice and considering all the positive and negative aspects as noted by the local population, future cities holding the title of "Capital of Culture Serbia" should leverage this valuable experience to maximise the potential and strengths of the programme.

## REFERENCES

[1] Bianchini, F. (1993). Culture, conflict and cities: Issues and prospects for the 1990s. In F. Bianchini & M. Parkinson (Eds.), Cultural Policy and Urban Regeneration: The West European Experience (pp. 199–213). Manchester: Manchester University Press.

[2] Garcia B. (2004). Urban regeneration, arts programming, and major events: Glasgow 1990, Sydney 2000, and Barcelona 2004. International Journal of Cultural Policy 10/1, str. 103–118.

[3] Anzani, C. (2013). A critical look at culture-led regeneration as a strategy for city branding: Can the 'museumisation' of the city be sustainable in the long term? *Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship (ICCE), Goldsmiths, University of London.*

[4] Papanikolaou P. (2012). The European Capital of Culture: The challenge for urban regeneration and its impact on the cities. International Journal of Humanities and Social Science 2/17, 268-273.

[5] Пауновић, В. (2020). Децентрализација културног система Србије: потребе и модел имплементације (докторска дисертација). Универзитет уметности у Београду, Факултет драмских уметности.

Consulted online sources, April 2025.

- http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:41985X0622
- https://kultura.gov.rs
- https://www.srbija.gov.rs
- https://www.jpgradaccacak.co.rs
- https://www.turizamcacak.rs
- https://www.jpgradaccacak.co.rs
- https://uzice.rs
- https://erakulture.rs/