

# Life is Serious; **ART SERENE**

## **Biography**

Petar Mitrović (1998) holds a Master's degree in architecture and is a PhD student employed as a Research Intern at the Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad. From 2018 to 2021, he served as a Demonstrator and from 2021 to 2023, he worked as a Teaching Associate in architectural design courses. He received the Special Award in 2020 and the Award in 2022 at the Novi Sad Architecture Salon. Additionally, he is a collaborator on the project "Novi Sad – Modern City," which won the Grand Prix award at the Novi Sad Architecture Salon in 2022. He participated in the research team of the international professional-artistic project SPA:RE – Public Spaces ReClaimed (2022-2024), funded by the European Commission's Creative Europe program. His creative expression extends beyond conventional practice, as evidenced by his two solo exhibitions: "Adaptation of the Terra Museum Complex in Kikinda" (2021) and "Deconstruction of the Urban Artifact: Three Castles" (2023), both published in the same year. He is a member of the Society of Architects of Novi Sad and NK ICOM Serbia.

# HYBRIDIZATION OF SPATIAL NARRATIVE: WORKSHOP AS A RESEARCH METHOD FOR TRACING THE INVISIBLE

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## Abstract

The 2023 student workshop “Hybridization of Spatial Narrative” in Novi Sad explored narrative as a transformative tool in architectural design, serving as a pivotal part of an ongoing research process. Drawing inspiration from the 1906 urban plan of Bočar, which depicted three castles and a central garden (now partly lost to history), the workshop invited architecture students to reimagine these forgotten spaces through storytelling. Organized in collaboration with the Society of Architects of Novi Sad and SKICA, the workshop comprised two tasks: an individual exercise where students crafted imaginary spaces through digital collages based on fictional narratives, and a group exercise designing pavilions intended for community use.

As part of this research approach, the workshop guided students in uncovering hidden layers of meaning within architectural spaces: reconnecting with historical memory and identity, enriching emotional and cultural resonance through narrative-based design while highlighting the community needs. These exercises led participants to reinterpret architecture as a symbolic connector, bridging the real and imagined and underscoring the role of architecture in reflecting aspirations, social dynamics, and cultural values. This research demonstrates how narrative-driven design can reveal latent layers within architectural contexts, providing an innovative and meaningful direction for education and practice.

**Keywords:** spatial narrative, design as research method, student workshop

## 1. WORKSHOP AS PART OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Architectural education faces the challenge of balancing technical expertise with the cultivation of creative and critical thinking. Orhan emphasizes that students should acquire relevant competencies through a formal-informal integrated education process, essential for their professional development (2017). This approach aligns with Pallasmaa's assertion that education should train and support skills of imagination and empathy, which are often repressed by dominant cultural values that discourage fantasy and sensory engagement (1992). Workshops, as suggested by Orhan, provide an environment where students can work independently, confidently, and flexibly, complementing traditional architectural design studies (2017).

Workshops are also recognized as spaces that promote innovation, addressing projects that require creative solutions beyond the scope of traditional teaching or professional practices (Gerosa & Iannilli, 2018). This setting allows for the exploration of "architectural research as an original investigation that generates knowledge and insights based on the unique methods and tools of the discipline" (Menezes de Sequeira, Meeres, et al. 2012). Moreover, the integration of narrative techniques in workshops can transform the understanding of the relationship between fiction and architecture. By evaluating narrative elements such as "plot, structure, and time, students can engage in a design process that invites re-evaluation and reinterpretation" (Eflatun, 2021).

The diversity of methods in architectural design, reflects the discipline's complexity and the need for an understanding of the conditions and implications of these various approaches (Silberberger, Kurath, et al. 2021). Workshops serve as a medium where students externalize their subjective experiences of texts, being mindful of how translation affects the nuance of the content (Letkemann, 2021). In this context, "knowledge is produced not only through experimental practice and the design process but also through the material and textual outcomes of these activities" (Nilsson, 2013).

Given that workshop, that is the case study of this paper, involves the reading of texts and the creation of their visual representations, interpretation plays a central role. As Umberto Eco highlights, texts function as signs and their interpretation becomes an inferential process of selecting among possible alternatives (Cezan, 1999). This interpretive process is crucial in architectural education, especially when bridging the gap between textual narratives and visual design. When discussing the usage of fictional texts, "even the magical and mystical are ultimately the part of that sense-making experience that the architect invents with their buildings" (Breitschmid, 2018).

The workshop also highlighted the role of tacit knowledge in architectural design. As Chard describes, is inherently unreliable and cannot be taught as a fixed sequence of instructions, unlike the methods used in mathematics or the sciences (2017). Instead, it is a form of tacit knowledge, as defined by Polanyi, which encompasses insights that are difficult to articulate but crucial to the design process (1966). This understanding reinforces the value of workshops as spaces where architectural education can transcend conventional methodologies, encouraging students to engage deeply with the complexities and uncertainties of design.

## 2. METHODOLOGY OF A WORKSHOP

### 2.1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The workshop draws inspiration from the unique 1906 urban plan of Bočar, a village in the Banat region of Vojvodina in northern Serbia. This historical plan envisioned three castles surrounding a central garden, creating a striking focal point for the village that served in the workshop as a distinct foundation for exploring spatial narratives. However, contemporary observations revealed the existence of only two castles, raising questions about the third castle's actual existence. This mysterious absence invited an exploration into the role of narrative in both historical documentation and architectural imagination. The Hertelendy family's castle complex in Bočar, representative of the luxurious residential architecture characteristic of Vojvodina, served as a poignant case study. This region, rich in historical architecture, presented a fertile ground for investigating the hidden stories embedded in these structures. *The imaginary urban artifact* of this complex, comprising three castles and an interstitial garden, vividly captures the intertwined layers of past and present. Conceptualized as a space that integrates the full scope of its context, it encompasses both factual history and archaeolog-

ical illusion, with origins theorized either as an antecedent structure or as a synthesis of pre-existing spaces (Mitrović, 2023a; 2023b). This juxtaposition of old and new, illustrated in Fig. 1, underscores the dynamic interplay between (potentially fictionalized) history and modernity within the urban fabric.

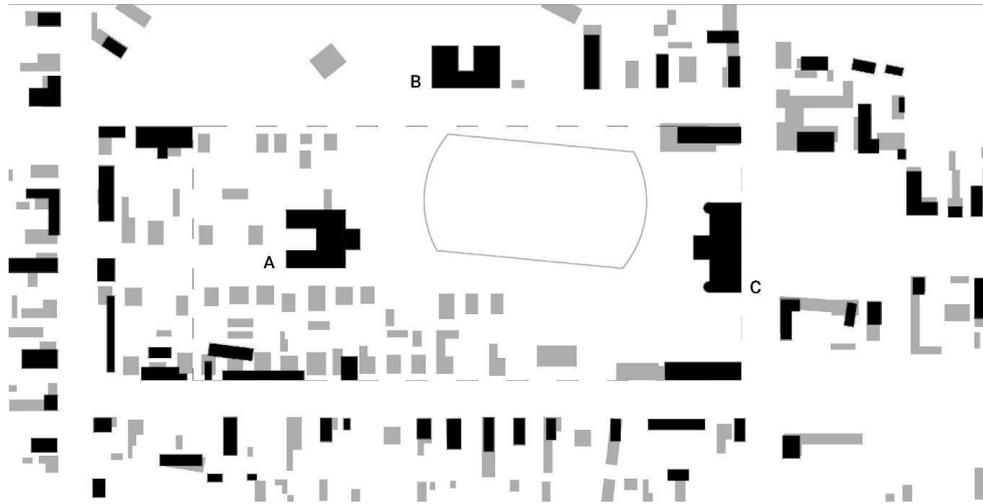


Fig. 1. The original 1906 urban plan, shown in black, and the contemporary 2023 layout, shown in grey, depict three castles: Imaginary Castle (A), Hertelendy-Bayer Castle (B), and Hertelendy-Bajić Castle (C)

## 2.2. ABOUT THE WORKSHOP

*Spatial Narrative Hybridization: Three Stories for Three Castles* was an intensive workshop designed for architecture students, held on May 13-14, 2023, in Novi Sad. This workshop aimed to bridge theoretical knowledge and practical application, offering participants a unique opportunity to engage with architectural narratives through a series of structured lectures and hands-on design tasks. The focus was on the intersection of text and architecture, exploring how narrative functions could be effectively integrated into the architectural design process.

The primary aim of the workshop was to enable participants to engage critically with architectural spaces by uncovering and interpreting the narratives concealed within them and “through the *delaying method*, we navigate the visible, potential, and hidden layers of a site” (Zeković, Konstantinović, et al. 2015), reimagining it as an *imaginary urban artifact* that reflects both factual history and latent narratives, enhancing artistic interpretation. This approach encouraged participants to incorporate narrative insights into the design process, thus enriching their architectural practice and fostering creativity and innovation. The workshop emphasized the importance of continuous education beyond the traditional university curriculum, advocating for the development of skills essential for professional competency in architecture.

The workshop was open to all architecture students in Serbia, with a limited number of participants to ensure a focused and interactive learning environment. Those interested in participating were encouraged to secure their place by registering through the provided online form.

This educational initiative was organized in collaboration with SKICA (Student Creative and Research Center of Architecture) and the Society of Architects of Novi Sad. These partnerships highlighted the workshop’s commitment to fostering a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach to architectural education, further enriching the learning experience for all participants.

## 2.3. WORKSHOP EXERCISES

### 2.3.1. Methodology of the first exercise

Participants in the workshop were each assigned a text, crafted specifically around the three stories concerning the three castles in Bočar, each written by a different author. This task required students to engage in a process of spatial interpretation, where they identified elements within the narrative that inspired them to conceptualize a spatial ambiance. To guide this exploration, the narratives provided to the students were

carefully crafted by young writers, students from Belgrade University, who integrated relevant historical facts into the fictional stories. This blending of fiction and history served to anchor the imaginary spaces in a context that was both relatable and thought-provoking, allowing students to engage deeply with the material and to reflect on the role of narrative in architectural design.

The objective was to establish a direct and meaningful relationship between the written text and architectural space, thereby exploring how narrative can serve as a catalyst for architectural design. The outcomes of the exercises were to be represented visually, utilizing digital techniques with which the students were already familiar, such as digital collage, ambient imagery, 3D modeling, and other related methods. The choice of representation techniques was intentional, aimed at encouraging students to select the method that best communicated the essence of the imaginary spaces they had conceptualized.

The task encouraged students to adopt a highly creative approach, urging them to transcend conventional spatial limitations and consider the broader implications of narrative on spatial design. This exercise was not merely about replicating physical space but rather about investigating the potential of narrative to evoke imaginary spaces. These spaces, although fictional, they were to be imbued with emotional resonance, defined by their spatial feelings, and characterized by the ambiance they create. The exercise emphasized the importance of understanding how narrative influences the perception and experience of space, particularly in terms of how emotions and human interactions can be shaped by the architectural environment.

### **2.3.2. Results of the first exercise**

The representation of results was a critical component of the workshop, serving as both a culmination of the design process and a means of communicating the complex interplay between narrative and architecture. By presenting their work visually, in a digital format within template of 20x20 cm, students articulated their design ideas clearly and compellingly. These eleven created visuals were directly extracted from the fictional stories, illustrating how narrative elements were translated into spatial concepts. This approach not only demonstrated the students' technical skills but also highlighted their ability to think critically and creatively about how narrative can inform and enhance architectural practice. The visual representations thus became a powerful tool for showcasing the integration of storytelling into architectural design.

### **2.3.3. Methodology of the second exercise**

In the second phase of the workshop, participants were organized into teams of three, with each team working with three different stories. This task required them to collaborate on the design of a pavilion structure situated on a designated green space (80 x 30 meters), where once was a part of the garden that lay between the three castles. The design challenge was to create a pavilion inspired by the three different imaginary spaces that emerged from the first task, effectively translating narrative-driven concepts into a tangible architectural form. The pavilion design process necessitated a critical examination of how different narrative spaces could be harmonized within a single structure, reflecting the diverse themes and atmospheres evoked by the stories. This task was not only an exercise in design creativity but also in narrative integration, where students had to consider how the abstract elements of storytelling could be spatially represented.

The proposed program for the pavilion structures was diverse, offering various possibilities that ranged from recreational and cultural spaces to educational and memorial functions. For example, students designed an open playground that resonates with the playful aspects of one story, while another part of the pavilion could serve as a cultural park featuring an outdoor cinema, dance stage, or amphitheater, aligning with the cultural narratives of another story. Alternatively, the pavilion could function as a memorial park, a space for relaxation and meditation in nature, or even as an event space that encapsulates the communal spirit of the narratives. Additional possibilities included designing an art gallery or a settlement museum that would display historical artifacts or works inspired by the fictional narratives. Educational spaces were also considered, such as outdoor classrooms for elementary school students or facilities dedicated to teaching children about agriculture and animals, thereby connecting the pavilion's design to the local context and community needs.

Overall, the second task was designed to challenge participants to think critically about the intersection of narrative and architecture, pushing them to explore how storytelling can inform and enhance the design process. By synthesizing different narrative spaces into a cohesive architectural form, students were able to develop a deeper understanding of how architecture can serve as a medium for narrative expression, creating

spaces that are not only functional but also rich in meaning and context.

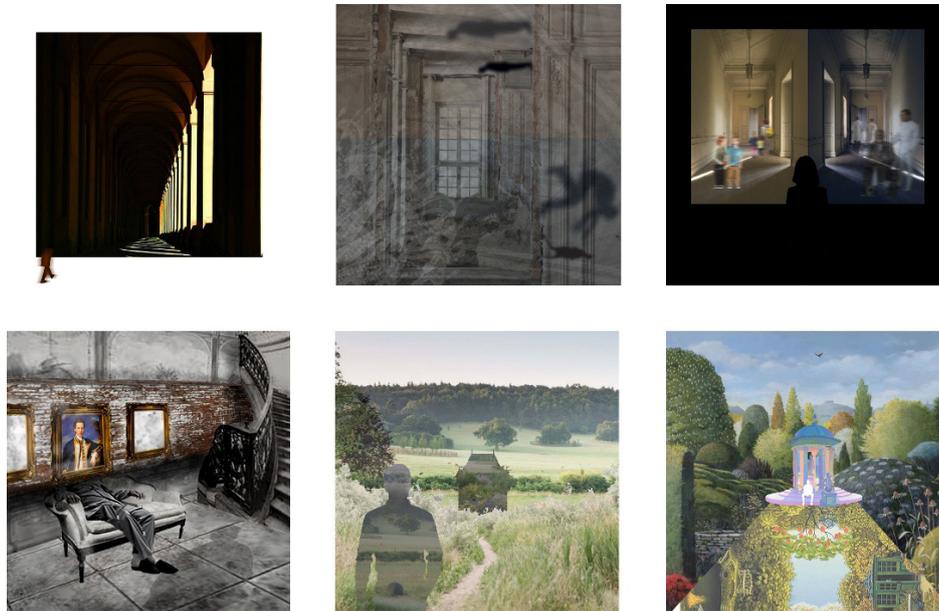


Fig. 2. Visuals of the students' works from the first exercise, exploring the potential of spatial narratives to translate and trace given text into imaginary spaces<sup>1</sup>

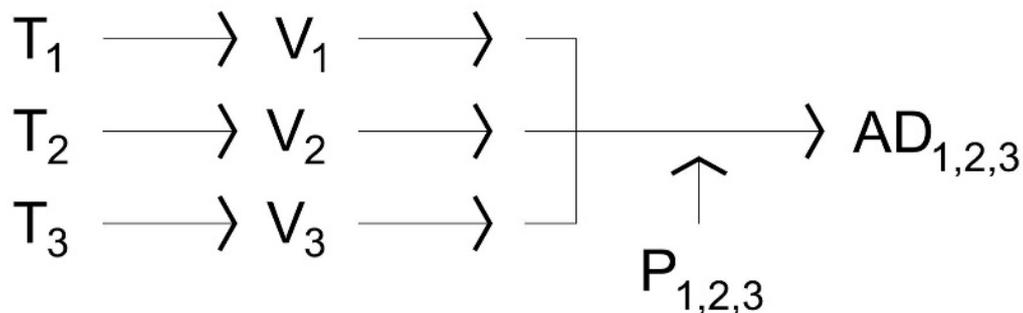


Fig. 3. Three distinct texts (T1, T2, T3) served as the foundation for generating three corresponding visuals (V1, V2, V3). By integrating these narratives through their visual representations and introducing architectural programs (P1, P2, P3), the process culminated in the development of three architectural designs (AD1, AD2, AD3)

#### 2.3.4. Results of the second exercise

In the second exercise, students were organized into teams and tasked with creating pavilion designs based on three different narratives from the first exercise. Each team had three different fictional stories from the first exercise and had selected one architectural program from a given list and integrated meaningful elements from the chosen narratives into their pavilion designs.

Each pavilion design reflected a unique interpretation of the narratives, demonstrating the students' ability to synthesize storytelling with architectural program into a meaningful space. The final projects illustrated how different stories could inform and shape the architectural environment, showcasing a diverse range of creative approaches to integrating narrative into architectural design.

<sup>1</sup> Students (from left to right), first row: Mila Divljak, Boško Ristić, Vedrana Kasalica; second row: Jovana Dugonjić, Dušica Piperski, Jovana Gavrilović

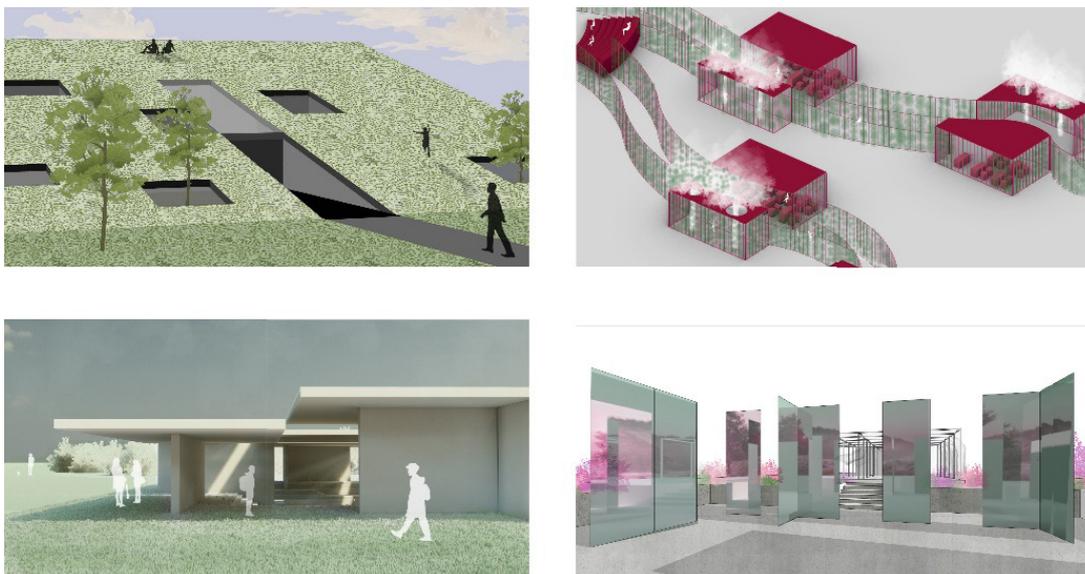


Fig. 4. Projects resulting from the second exercise, demonstrating how merging three given texts and visuals from the first exercise within a defined architectural program can lead to cohesive architectural designs<sup>2</sup>

### 3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the “Hybridization of Spatial Narrative” student workshop illustrates how design can function as a methodological approach that generates new knowledge and meaning. By uniquely blending fictional narrative with historical reference, the workshop goes beyond conventional methodologies, using Bočar’s lost heritage - it’s imagined third castle and historical garden - as a foundation for speculative design. This approach encourages participants to explore the intricate relationship between stories and spaces, leading to the creation of architectural forms that reinterpret cultural and historical contexts and address community aspirations within hypothetical spaces.

Positioned within the field of design as a research method, this narrative-driven approach highlights design as a means of inquiry and discovery, uncovering hidden cultural meanings and heritage values within architectural contexts. By integrating narrative theory with architectural practice, the workshop demonstrates that design is not merely a tool for creating physical structures but also a method for investigating architecture’s role in shaping collective memory and cultural identity. Aligned with the principles of design research, this approach produces academic and pedagogic contributions with innovative applications for architectural education. To enhance rigor while preserving its narrative focus, future iterations could incorporate structured feedback mechanisms, such as participant surveys or thematic analysis, adding scientific validation to this qualitative methodology.

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<sup>2</sup> Groups of students (from left to right), first row: Milica Janjić, Jovana Gavrilović, Vedrana Kasalica; Dunja Pavlica, Mila Divljak; second row: Boško Ristić, Jovana Dugonjić, Dušica Piperski; Elena Ogrizović, Nikolina Divić, Nikola Radanović

<sup>3</sup> This paper’s abstract was published in the *Book of Abstracts* prior to the International Scientific and Professional Conference «*Life is Serious; Art Serene: Architectural-Scenic Research*», which took place from October 23 to 25, 2024. Subsequently, the full paper was written and published in the *Book of Proceedings* in 2025.

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Collaborators on the student workshop: Dr. Višnja Žugić, at the time, an Assistant Professor; currently, an Associate Professor at the Department of Architecture and Urbanism, Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad.; Anja Čanji, a student of General Literature and Literary Theory at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade.; Milena Andelić and Jelena Damjanović, both students at the Department of Architecture and Urbanism, Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad, and members of the Student Creative and Research Center for Architecture, Novi Sad (SKICA).

Writers of the fictional stories about the three castles: Anja Čanji, Milica Đorđević, Viktor Tanasković, students of General Literature and Literary Theory at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade.

Participants of the student workshop: Boško Ristić, Dunja Pavlica, Dušica Piperski, Elena Ogrizović, Iskra Srnka, Jovana Dugonjić, Jovana Gavrilović, Mila Divljak, Milica Janjić, Nikola Radanović, Nikolina Divić, and Vedrana Kasalica, all undergraduate students at the Department of Architecture and Urbanism, and the Department of Scenic Architecture, Technique, and Design at the Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad.

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