

Article

Micro-Museum Quarter as an Approach in the Culture-Led Urban Regeneration of Small Shrinking Historic Cities: The Case of Sombor, Serbia

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Abstract: Demographic and economic shrinkage has become a common trend in the current urbanisation environment, especially for small cities in developed countries. The desired socio-economic redevelopment of these cities has been significantly affected by the functional, organisational, financial, and professional constraints caused by both shrinkage and city size. Paradoxically, this slow development has enabled better preservation of their historic cores, urban heritage, and traditional culture. Nevertheless, the aforementioned local constraints have a profound impact on sustainable urban regeneration, and successful examples are still quite rare. This research presents an inspiring case—a small museum quarter in Sombor, Serbia. Museum quarters are a relatively new concept in culture-led urban regeneration; all known examples are located in big cities. Hence, this research tries to create an innovative methodological link between two theoretical fundamentals: the role of cultural heritage in shrinking small cities and its expression through a museum quarter as one of the concepts of culture-led urban regeneration. An analytical framework for the aforementioned single case study is derived by forming this link. The main findings underline that the museum quarters in shrinking small cities should be developed in a micro-format to rationally address and the limited local resources. Furthermore, in contrast to museum quarters in big cities, they should be physically detached from the main retail street to enhance their separate identity and should be internally balanced in both spatial and functional aspects, meaning that the key museum/cultural institutions are equally dispersed throughout the quarter and clearly interconnected by a pedestrian-friendly open public space.

Keywords: urban planning; urban regeneration; culture-led regeneration; museum quarter; historic core; small city; single case study



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1. Introduction: Urban Shrinkage and Heritage Management

Urban shrinkage has become common in the current urbanisation of developed countries [1–3]. This is especially noticeable in Europe, where early mass urbanisation occurred [4]. Cities across the continent are affected by urban shrinkage today. Figures from 2018 show that 45% of functional urban areas (FUAs) in the EU are demographically shrinking, without a perspective to reverse this trend [5]. Smaller cities are more prone to urban shrinkage than bigger ones, as they usually have lower urban densities. Lower density means that the available jobs, workforce, and services are at a greater distance, i.e., small cities imply lower productivity, which clearly explains the identified disbalance [6]. Therefore, the most extreme cases of urban shrinkage in Europe are in small cities and towns in remote and low-density regions in its eastern and less developed post-socialist half, where the predominant majority of urban settlements are losing population due to numerous development challenges [7,8].

The concept of shrinking cities has emerged as an area of joint research efforts to address this challenging global issue [9]. First, this is a multi-faceted urban phenomenon

to which many local and regional factors contribute. However, researchers agree that population decline is the most significant determinant in labelling a certain urban area as a shrinking one, while the causes of urban shrinkage are mainly connected to the weak performance of the local economy [10,11]. Other demographic, social, cultural, political, administrative, and planning factors are also evident; they are interlinked under the umbrella term of urban shrinkage [12]. In the end, urban shrinkage is not a negative process per se. For example, Jessen [13] claims that the significant increase in shrinking cities globally has sparked many recent innovations in urban and regional planning.

Although the topic of shrinking cities has been in the scientific spotlight in recent years, there are still ‘niches’ that are not properly covered by international research. One of them is the position of heritage—usually cultural heritage—in urban shrinkage. This situation contrasts the fact that many shrinking cities have relatively well-preserved heritage, tradition, and culture due to slow development in the last decades [14]. Generally, the sustainable protection and utilisation of cultural heritage in shrinking urban areas are equally important as in those with growing patterns [15]. However, cultural heritage can be both a potential and a burden for shrinking cities, particularly for smaller ones [16]. Even bigger shrinking cities in high-income countries, such as Leipzig in Germany [17] or Taranto in Italy [18], have faced problems with the renovation and occupancy of heritage buildings. Kaufman [19] underpins the diametrical role of heritage in shrinking and growing cities in developed countries; while this heritage is usually among the accelerators of urban growth in the latter cities, in the former ones, some other elements of urban regeneration should initiate its protection, promotion, and appropriate use. Finally, in the worst scenario, cultural heritage sites are left without function and users. Successful examples of the reuse of cultural heritage sites can, in contrast, trigger the regeneration of a wider urban environment. This happened in Łódź in Poland, with the transformation of the industrial heritage zone of the former 19th-century Poznański’s cotton mills into the “Manufaktura” mixed-use project (2002–2006) (Figure 1). This transformation eventually influenced the regeneration of the inner core [20], as well as a rise in local pride and rebranding Łódź as an important former industrial city [21].



Figure 1. The “Manufaktura” mixed-use project with several cultural facilities has triggered the regeneration of the historic core of Łódź, Poland (author: B. AntoniĆ). (a) Outdoor vs. indoor places: Central Plaza surrounded by retail and hospitality facilities; (b) Private and public functions together: Cafés are in front buildings, whereas back buildings are the Factory Museum and Science Centre.

In these regeneration approaches, the physical component of built cultural heritage also matters. Adequate physical interventions in redesigning shrinking cities can improve their visual impression and indirectly show users and visitors that local urban development is moving in the right direction [22]. The importance of the physical appearance of new interventions has a specific aim in shrinking cities, as they need to gain new investors and users, which are rather limited compared to growing cities [23]. Hence, each physical

intervention in a shrinking city should have an imperative to positively interpret and promote both the intervention and the city [24]. This is essential for cultural heritage. The problem with mere physical interventions in shrinking cities is they are usually the most expensive way to regenerate urban space [25]. This especially refers to smaller cities, with generally more limited functional, organisational, financial, and professional constraints, which are also caused by city size, aside from the challenges of urban shrinkage [26].

Therefore, some types of urban cultural heritage are more prone to degradation due to shrinking processes. Kaufman [19] cites housing stock, old residential neighbourhoods, the historic core, and retail streets. Historic buildings with public functions, for example, schools or government buildings, are in a better position. Unexpectedly, industrial heritage is not mentioned, which can be explained by the still less-developed official protection of this type of heritage. However, many other researchers highlight the role of industrial heritage and argue that viable promotion and regeneration programmes can significantly contribute to dealing with the urban shrinkage of industrial cities [27].

The explained circumstances prescribe that the treatment of cultural heritage can not be implemented uniformly because necessary resources have to be utilised rationally [15]. For example, financial constraints are by far more noticeable in shrinking cities [28]. Hence, locally- and regionally-sensitive measures, organised as comprehensive strategies toward cultural heritage in shrinking cities, are welcomed [19,27]. Moreover, this rational approach has to have a spatial reflection. In the concept of shrinking cities, the aforementioned importance of densities hints that it is more effective to regenerate the city zones with preserved higher urban densities and more users, which then can become ‘magnets’ for its surroundings. This approach in urban planning is known as an “urban archipelago” [29]. All of this means that certain priorities in the regeneration and refurbishment of cultural heritage are crucial; the focus should be on the most important cultural heritage aspect, as its regeneration can be utilised for the wider socio-economic renewal of a shrinking city in the best way [15].

This research is the presentation of one such rational approach—a case study of an emerging micro-museum quarter in a historic city with a rich local heritage. Although the model of a museum quarter is well-known, it has been exclusive to big cities. Forming such a quarter at a micro-scale in a smaller shrinking city is completely different due to the abovementioned limiting conditions.

The case study to be examined relating this theoretical and practical gap is the city of Sombor in Serbia, which is one of the fastest shrinking medium-sized cities at the national level but which has a rich urban heritage, culture, and preserved traditions. The city authorities and experts initiated this regeneration project as a local effort to deal with urban shrinkage by using and promoting both tangible and intangible cultural heritage and by spatially focusing on the city’s well-preserved historic core with several museums. The project has recently outgrown the local level, and it increasingly represents a collaboration between different stakeholders from several levels. Moreover, it has started to attract the local creative sector. Thus, this paper has two main aims. First, to contribute theoretically by discussing a micro-museum quarter at a micro-scale as an innovative approach by bridging two theoretical concepts—the role of built cultural heritage in shrinking cities and the concept of a museum quarter, and second, to present the (still) uncommon case of the new micro-museum quarter in the city of Sombor to an international audience, which can be a pilot for Serbia and the wider region of post-socialist Europe, where, as it was already indicated, has the highest number of shrinking cities and towns. Indirectly, this research is also a contribution to contemporary research on small and medium-sized cities in Serbia, such as Sombor. They are rarely in the scientific spotlight in urban studies. Hence, this manuscript can be seen as an attempt to refocus research at national and regional levels from big to smaller cities. Such an approach is in line with the current trends in European urban studies, to rediscover small and medium-sized cities as a new, albeit challenging, topic in contemporary urbanisation on the continent.

Museum Quarters within Culture-Led Urban Regeneration

Before presenting the case, it is important to address the concept of a museum quarter. This concept belongs to the umbrella concept of culture-led urban regeneration. Although this wide concept is still developing, the use of culture for urban regeneration, as well as related research, is abundant; however, the same can not be said for the economics of culture [26]. Thus, the economic aspect of culture is an important factor for the concept formation—to embrace urban economic growth through cultural (re)development [30,31]. On the other hand, this does not exclude the social aspect. Chiu et al. [32] underline the meaning of ‘culture-led’ in this concept as this is the type of urban regeneration that “relies on public involvement and the public’s continued contribution to, acceptance of, and ownership of cultural facilities, activities, and projects” (p. 2). Furthermore, the cultural aspect is challenging, as culture itself is a broad term. Vickery [33] considers that this type of urban regeneration is primarily led by design, creativity, and art. All three terms have many meanings and variations. Therefore, culture-led urban regeneration, aside from the introduced concept of the museum quarter, includes numerous other concepts with a clear spatial reflection:

- Museum districts;
- Museum clusters;
- Culture compounds;
- Cultural districts;
- Creative districts;
- Creative quarters;
- Creative hubs;
- Art districts;
- Arts and entertainment focus districts;
- Cultural production districts;
- Art gallery districts, etc.

Many of these concepts share certain elements, while some of them are even considered synonyms. According to this observation, the proposed research is focused on three concepts of culture-led urban regeneration that concern museums and have ‘museum’ in their name: museum quarters, museum districts, and museum clusters.

Museum quarters as an urban phenomenon appeared in the second half of the 20th century [34]. They differ from ‘classic’ museums by having a visible urban component in their spatial development [35]. Museum quarters have developed as an amalgamation of private and public interests, as well as small and big players in urban space. Vibrant bottom-up incentives in the creative sector attracted the attention of city authorities and experts in the broader sector of urban culture, who functionally and spatially merged them with cultural components, i.e., public cultural institutions—museums in the first place, but also art galleries and cultural centres—further incorporating this ‘fusion’ of both buildings and open public space in a wider urban environment. Therefore, the impact of these museum quarters on neighbouring urban zones has been very visible in both a positive and negative sense [36]. Hence, museum quarters have become an effective instrument to revive and regenerate cities [37,38]. On the other side, museum quarters also have disadvantages, such as tensions between the individual autonomy of institutions and the required conformity under an umbrella quarter organisation [39].

Kochergina [36] differentiates museum quarters from other similar concepts using five key characteristics, defining them with several important features. Museum quarters always include (1) high-profile and famous museums; (2) are usually housed in very valuable buildings or complexes, i.e., high-level cultural heritage; (3) are located in inner urban cores; (4) have extraordinary accessibility at the city level. In addition, (5) open public space between (museum, cultural) buildings is becoming an important urban catalyst to form a museum quarter. The same author proposed four spatial models of a museum quarter, additionally emphasising that spatial elements are not crucial, but deep collaboration between key museums/cultural institutions is [36].

1. Independent core: Cultural components are isolated on one site, with a clear boundary. Example: Vienna, Berlin;
2. Neighbourhood: Cultural components in one urban neighbourhood without a clear boundary. Example: Amsterdam, Munich;
3. City network: This is a 'fusion' of the two previous models. Example: Frankfurt am Main;
4. Urbanised nature: Cultural components are in one urban park, resembling the 'neighbourhood' model in other characteristics. It includes ecological elements (greenery), but the location in the park prevents higher urban densities. Example: Budapest, Copenhagen.

Although some museum quarters, such as those in Vienna (Figure 2), Amsterdam, or Berlin, are world-known, these culture-led urban constructs are not very frequent—there are approximately 20 museum quarters across the world [36]. Moreover, none of them is in a city with less than 100,000 inhabitants. The same can be said regarding general research on museum quarters, as this type of literature is still scarce.

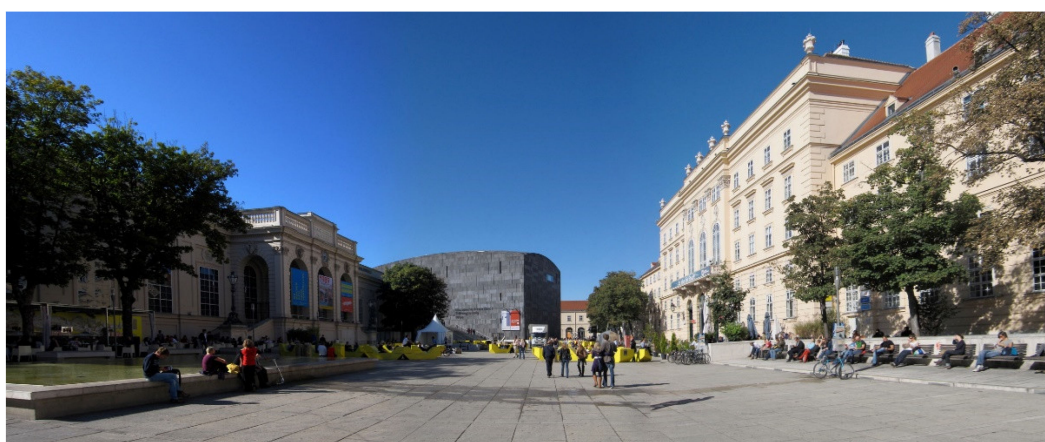


Figure 2. World famous Museum Quarter (MQ) in Vienna, Austria, formed from the former army headquarters (author: B. Antonić, 2021).

Museum districts, as the model of culture-led urban regeneration, are much more widespread than museum quarters. This is perhaps related to the fact that they are a less coherent spatial group. Museum quarters always territorially coincide with a significant urban element—urban block, neighbourhood, riverfront, or park [37]. In contrast, museum cultural districts vary both functionally and physically. Hence, a museum district can be generalised as a place for cultural and arts communities and facilities in one city [40]. The difference between the two similar terms is also related to the meaning of a quarter in culture-led urban regeneration as a territorial and functional agglomeration. For instance, Santagata [41] defines a creative quarter as an agglomeration or “a spatial agglomeration of buildings dedicated to performing arts, museums, and organisations which produce culture and related goods” (p. 12). Museum quarters and districts are more similar in an internal organisation; both of them require special management, but, in the case of museum districts, it can happen without incorporating urban planning, in the form of grassroots development of the local creative class [40]. Furthermore, the issue of built/urban cultural heritage can be fully omitted in museum districts, as some of them are based on quite new buildings and complexes [42].

The important fact in the discussion about museum quarters and districts is that both phenomena are attached to bigger cities. For example, among 48 museum districts with their own Wikipedia page, none of them is located in a city with less than 100,000 inhabitants. The smallest cities with named cultural districts are Cambridge and Oxford in the United Kingdom, with approximately 150,000 inhabitants, but being very old university cities with huge student populations, they are also very specific. Additionally, these cities are all demographically growing or regrowing. This online research also confirmed that some

museum districts are rather small, containing a few cultural and creative facilities/sites along a 'normal' street or around a small square, so it seems that they do not precondition physical urban elements.

The third similar term is "museum cluster". Museum clusters are "geographic concentrations of interconnected museums which work closely with local suppliers, tourist attractions and public sector entities" [43] (p. 69). It seems that a museum cluster is a more general and strictly functionally related term in this field of research, encompassing both the afore-explained museum quarters and districts. Nevertheless, this concept also underpins "urban" as a denominator, highlighting the importance of public space—both indoor and outdoor—for this type of culture-led urban development [44].

Considering the previous data, it is obvious that museum quarters and districts are similar, but their differences are also visible, related to their spatial characteristics. Museum quarters are a more profoundly planned urban model and strictly linked with built cultural heritage within urban space as a physical link, while museum cultural districts are more implementable due to their nature based on the functional side—museum(s) as an institutional framework. Nevertheless, both of them are related to bigger and growing cities, but these cities have to be additionally rich in cultural heritage in the case of museum quarters. To sum up, the concept of the museum quarter best resembles the cases in small shrinking cities, such as in Sombor.

2. Methods and Materials

As previously discussed, this paper is methodologically a single case study, tailored to analyse a new micro-museum quarter in Sombor, Serbia. A case study approach is typical for research where the thorough investigation of cases(s) is necessary within a broader real context [45]. However, a single case study prevents comparisons and understanding of similarities and differences between cases, which is typical for multi-case studies [46]. Thus, a single case study requires a more stringent relationship between theoretical background and a case study, where theory enables the formation of an analytical apparatus to study the case. The results and findings of the case study are then used as a new contribution to further develop the initially exposed theory. "When a single case study is used, the researcher can question old theoretical relationships and explore new ones because of that a more careful study is made" [47].

This paper follows this premise. It first derives analytical criteria for the case study from two theoretical corpora. They are derived by crossing the characteristics of museum quarters with the main postulates about the regeneration of smaller shrinking cities with rich cultural heritage. This step has already been elaborated. The next step is context analysis, as the significance of real context has been underlined for case studies. In the sense of this research, context can be interpreted in three ways: theoretical, spatial, and temporal. Again, the theoretical context has already been covered. Spatial context has two layers: the first one is the city of Sombor, and the second layer is the western part of its historic core, where the museum quarter has been formed. Finally, temporal context entails a brief explanation of the city's genesis from the early modern period, with the setup of the current urban fabric with heritage buildings and ambience.

Materials for this research were gathered through the collection and spatial analysis of onsite and online data and live workshops with local representatives and experts in urban planning, urban design, strategic planning, culture, and tourism. Statistical data are used to support the main arguments about the city's demographic development.

Analytical Framework

Analytical criteria to study the case of a micro-museum quarter are developed by combining the tasks that describe the role of cultural heritage in the regeneration of historic shrinking cities with the characteristics that determine the existence and functioning of a museum quarter. In line with the presented theoretical fundamentals, the criteria pertain to the physical and functional aspects of the analysed area, which is posed as a limitation in

the research. The criteria are further described by the quantitative indicators. All analytical elements are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Analytical criteria and indicators.

THEORY	CRITERION	INDICATOR
Museum quarter	i. High-profile and famous museums (at the regional level)	1. The percentage of museums at the municipal level located in analysed area 2. The percentage of public thematic museums at the regional level located in analysed area
	ii. Museum housed in extremely valuable buildings/complexes (significant cultural heritage)	3. The percentage of museums in analysed area housed in protected buildings
	iii. Museums located in the inner urban core	The position of the analysed area within the urban environment > is already confirmed
	iv. Existence of 'in between' pedestrian-friendly open public space	4. The percentage of museums and other cultural institutions interconnected by pedestrian zone
	v. Official protection of cultural heritage	5. The percentage of buildings under state protection as cultural heritage in analysed area
	vi. Visible utilisation of cultural heritage	6. The percentage of museums and other cultural institutions in analysed area located in protected buildings
Cultural heritage in shrinking cities	vii. Heritage as a triggering element of wider functional revitalisation	7. The number of new commercial establishments regarding central urban functions (retail, tourism, hospitality)
	viii. Physically refurbished historic environment	8. The percentage of refurbished buildings or buildings in a good state
	ix. Physical interventions with an innovative and creative urban or architectural design	9. The appearance of innovative and creative exterior design, such as murals, new squares, public art, etc.
	x. Higher urban densities	10. The floor area ratio of the blocks in analysed area to the surroundings

3. Context Analysis: The Genesis of the City of Sombor and Its Micro-Museum Quarter

3.1. The Genesis of the City of Sombor

The city of Sombor is one of 28 official cities in the Republic of Serbia and the administrative seat of Zapadnobački (Western Bačka) District in the northern Serbian Province of Vojvodina. The city is situated in the historic region of Bačka in the Pannonian Plain. Within the country, Sombor has an extreme north-western location, close to the tripoint of Serbia with Hungary and Croatia.

Sombor has been an important cultural hub in the southern Pannonian Plain. However, the city itself is not very old; a settlement at this location became a fortified town at the eastern end of the wetlands along the nearby Danube River, the second longest in

Europe, only in the late 15th century. During the Ottoman rule of the Pannonian Plain (1541–1687), all settlements acquired loosely controlled organic development [48]. Sombor followed these patterns, establishing itself as a small urban settlement with an oriental matrix [49]. However, the ‘Golden Age’ of the city was during the Habsburg period (1687–1918; Habsburg Empire 1687–1867 and Austro-Hungary, 1867–1918), as Sombor became the seat of large Bač-Bodrog Country and the first city in southern Pannonia that gained royal free city status in 1749 [49]. During these early decades of the Habsburg rule, the urban matrix of Sombor was heavily regulated, but it preserved the remnants of the previous organic matrix from medieval and oriental epochs. In this aspect, Sombor is a bit different from most settlements in southern Pannonia, which were completely reshaped into the modern orthogonal urban matrix [50]. This advanced development was also visible in the city demography; Sombor was one of the largest cities in the former Yugoslavia in the middle of the 19th century, having the same number of inhabitants as, for example, Belgrade or Zagreb. The progress was reflected in social and cultural life, as the city became a regional cultural hub, especially for people of Serbian ethnicity. The oldest higher school (college) for Serbian teachers was founded in Sombor in 1778, and it is still active as a faculty. The other ethnicities—Germans, Hungarians, Roman Catholic Slavs (Bunjevacs, Šokacs), and Jews—were also important in sociocultural and economic spheres [51]. Hence, Sombor has many monumental buildings of civic, ethnic, and religious institutions, such as big regional theatres, several national libraries, and schools. Many large public buildings were erected for relatively significant administration, as well as many town palaces for affluent Somborians. This progress was also visible at the urban level (Figure 3); the central core of Sombor was urbanised, with many city streets becoming avenues with rich urban greenery [52].



Figure 3. The historic core of Sombor: (a) The Square of Holy Trinity with the city hall and Roman Catholic Church; (b) the main pedestrian street and the backbone of the former Serbian Quarter with the “Županija” Building (District Court) in the background (author: B. AntoniĆ, 2023).

After World War I and the dissolution of Austro-Hungary, Sombor became a border city of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia with Hungary. Along with its new peripheral position, the city lost its administrative importance to Novi Sad, followed by the transfer of administration and institutions, as well as the regional elite [49,53]. Economic and demographic stagnation lasted until the 1950s when Sombor entered a short period of socialist industrialisation and demographic regrowth [53]. The city’s historic core with urban and architectural heritage was, however, recognised and protected during the rise of awareness about cultural heritage in the 1960s–1970s [54]. However, after the fall of socialism and the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the city faced many economic problems and

an even more peripheral position close to two national borders. This has had a negative impact on the whole city, including its cultural heritage.

Three post-socialist censuses show that Sombor lost 9647 inhabitants in the last 20 years (2002–2022), or almost 19% of the population, which places the city among the most affected shrinking medium-sized cities in Serbia. Interestingly, despite many negative consequences, this extreme urban shrinkage also triggered local authorities and experts to explore out-of-the-box approaches for city redevelopment.

The described ups and downs of Sombor can be presented through the city demography, divided into four modern periods (Table 2).

Table 2. Sombor: the demographic review of official population censuses ¹.

AUSTRO-HUNGARY (1867–1918)		INTERWAR YUGOSLAVIA (1918–1941)		SOCIALIST YUGOSLAVIA (1945–1992)		POST-SOCIALIST SERBIA (1992–)	
Year	Population	Year	Population	Year	Population	Year	Population
1869	24,309	1921	31,342	1953	33,632	2002	51,471
1890	26,435	1931	32,334	1971	44,100	2011	47,623
1910	30,593	/	/	1991	48,993	2022	41,814

¹ Data for the censuses 1921–2022: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia; data for earlier censuses: Hungarian Central Statistical Office.

3.2. Micro-Museum Quarter in Sombor

The micro-museum district in Sombor is a relatively new project; however, the city core, where the quarter is located, has a history of cultural life and heritage protection. “Venac” (Eng. *Coronet*) is the name of the historic core of Sombor due to its physical appearance, as the core is detached from the rest of the city by a ring of four boulevards with rich urban greenery (Figure 4). The core contains many valuable buildings and open public spaces, of which more than 95% are older than 100 years. The historic urban area, Old Downtown of Sombor—“Venac”, is therefore protected as a spatial cultural–historical unit by national legislation [55]. This corresponds to the definition of a protected historic centre by UNESCO [56].



Figure 4. Picture “Sombor seen through bird’s eye” (author: B. Jovin; 2004)—a focus on “Venac” historic core of Sombor (author: B. Jovin, 2004; credits: Sombor City authority).

The museum quarter is located in the western part of “Venac”, which was established as the administrative centre of the city in the early 18th century, with several administrative buildings, such as the City Hall and Grašalković Palace. The first major cultural institution

and building was the National Theatre of Sombor in 1882 (Figure 5(5)). The city cultural centre was built at the westernmost edge of the core in 1919 (Figure 5(7)). After World War II, the nearby Lederer House was adapted for the National Museum of Sombor (Figure 5(1)), one of the largest in Serbia, whereas the Gallery of Milan Konjović, one of the finest Serbian modernist painters, was opened in 1966 in the old building of the city pharmacy from 1838 (Figure 5(2)). The children's section of Sombor City Library was transferred to the interesting building (urban villa) of the former Hungarian cultural club in the eastern part of this zone during the postwar years (Figure 5(9)). Finally, the central street of this zone—Zmaj Jovina Street—was pedestrianised in 1996.

MICRO-MUSEUM QUARTER IN SOMBOR

CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS
GENERALLY OPEN FOR PUBLIC
AND TOURISTS:

1. National Museum in Sombor
2. "Milan Konjović" Art Gallery
3. Museum of Danubian Germans
4. Gallery of Modern Art
5. National Theatre of Sombor
6. Lutheran Church and small cultural scene
7. "Laza Kostić" Culture Centre of Sombor
8. Atelier "Višinka" (former Chapel of St. John of Nepomuk)
9. "Karlo Bjelicki" Library of Sombor - children section
10. Hungarian Cultural Centre in Sombor

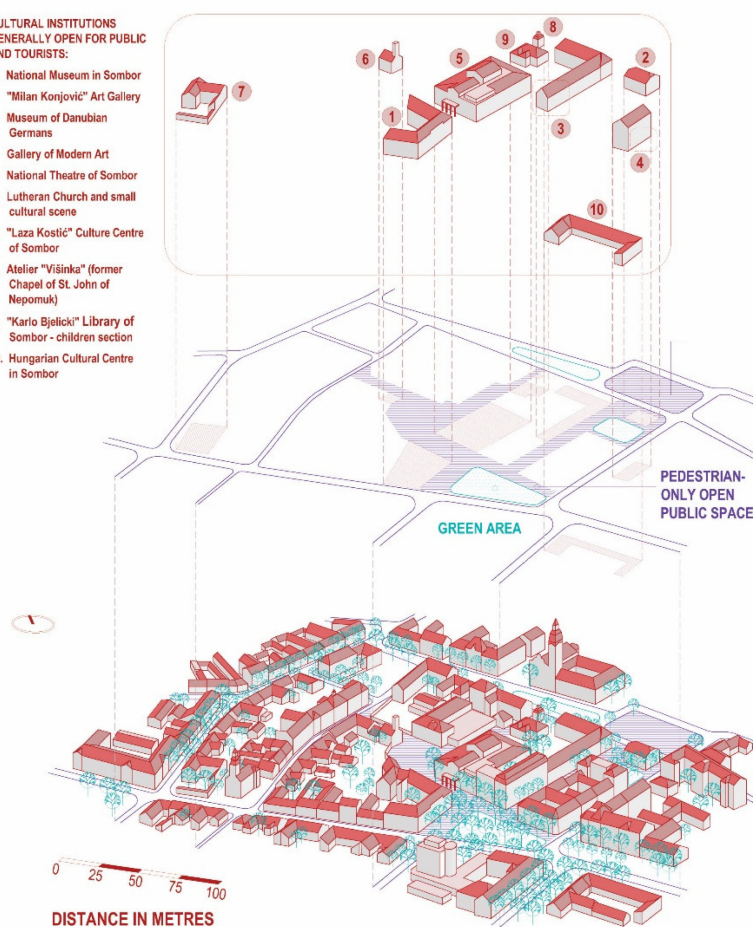


Figure 5. A new micro-museum quarter in Sombor: spatial organisation with marked museum and cultural institutions (Author: B. AntoniĆ, 2022).

After two decades of stagnation, incentives for the regeneration of Sombor's historic core emerged after 2000. The first project was the refurbishment of the main (retail) street of Sombor in 2007–2008. Then, a new detailed urban plan for the "Venac" area was enacted in 2009, with stricter rules for the sustainable development of this heritage area [57]. At the same time, many local cultural events gained importance [58]. New impulses for the redevelopment have been the rise of cultural tourism in this section of the Danube Region and the beginnings of cross-border cooperation, where the border position of Sombor has become (paradoxically) an advantage.

During the 2010s, German heritage in Sombor was rediscovered as the city became the national seat of the German minority. This included the refurbishment and reuse of several buildings for cultural activities in the new museum quarter (Figure 6). The western section of Grašalković Palace was transformed into the Museum of Danubian Germans in Serbia

(Figure 5(3)) as a new thematic museum, while the nearby Evangelist (Lutheran) Church (Figure 5(6)), which served the German community before World War II, was completely refurbished. It was also dedicated for both religious and cultural purposes, for instance, small concerts of classical music (Figure 6a). The city cultural centre—“Laza Kostić” Culture Centre—was completely reconstructed and modernised in 2020. Open public space in this city zone was also reconstructed but with a dual approach. The open public spaces close to the most valuable heritage buildings were designed in a more traditional way (Figure 6a), while new ones got a more modern look (Figure 6b). This part of the Sombor historic core has been recently promoted as a cultural zone with an emphasis on several museums (Figure 5).



(a)

(b)

Figure 6. Open public space in a micro-museum quarter in Sombor: (a) a refurbished, traditionally designed Square of Kosta Trifković with Evangelist (Lutheran) Church; (b) a modern artistic expression as additions in a new nearby pedestrian corridor (Author: D. Siljanović Kozoderović, 2021).

The second phase of the development of the “Venac” core has just started, with a new general plan for this protected area (a draft phase in late 2023). The motive behind creating it is the rise of the general interest in Sombor. On the positive side, the city is becoming a new hotspot of cultural tourism and a sort of ‘playground’ for slow-city life in Serbia. For example, several small hospitality businesses have recently emerged in and around the museum quarter—cafes and restaurants with a music scene, guesthouses, and retail with alternative, specialised, and tourist-oriented products. New urban regulation, for example, for *Albergo Diffuso* or dispersed hotels, has been incorporated in local urban plans for the first time. There is a negative side, too. The new urban scene has also taken the attention of big-format private development, which triggered an increase in multi-family residential construction in the outer city core. This is opposite to the sustainable presentation and utilisation of the “Venac” heritage area. The new urban plan tries to mediate all these challenges.

At the same time, the city of Sombor has started cross-border and regional cooperation through several projects and networks. One of them is the DANUrB+ INTERREG international project, with several implemented relevant activities: (1) the collecting, digitalisation, and customised presentation of urban heritage for international visitors, (2) work with local stakeholders in culture and tourism regarding their spatial needs, (3) the research of the intensity of use and the character of users of the main open public spaces, and (4) the systematisation of urbanism-related data for further promotion through movies, digital guides, and video clips. The ultimate goal is to support international awareness about the urban heritage of Sombor as a still insufficiently promoted local brand [59], with an emphasis on the new micro-museum quarter in the city core.

4. Results

The results of the analysis by the previously derived criteria and indicators are given in Table 3. Additional comments are also included. Furthermore, the results by specific indicators (indicators 5–10) are mapped (Figure 7).

Table 3. Analytical criteria and indicators

INDICATOR	RESULTS	COMMENTS
1. The percentage of public museums at the municipal level located in analysed area	4/7 > 57%	There is one public museum outside the analysed area—the Museum of the Battle of Batina on the Danube Riverside, and two private museums—the museum of old perfume bottles in Bezdan and the “Mali Bodrog” ethno-museum in B. Monoštor.
2. The percentage of public thematic museums at the regional level (Bačka Region) located in analysed area	3/9 > 33%	Regionally, there are nine thematic public museums in the Bačka Region (924,879 inh. in 2022), of which three are in the analysed area: the Museum of Danubian Germans, “Milan Konjović” Art Gallery, and Modern Art Gallery (Figure 6).
3. The percentage of museums in analysed area housed in protected buildings	3/4 > 75%	Only the Gallery of Modern Art is not housed in a protected building; however, this is also a historic building located in the protected urban ambience of “Venac”.
4. The percentage of museums and other cultural institutions interconnected by pedestrian zone	8/10 > 80%	Only two of the ten listed institutions in the analysed area are not in the pedestrian zone (Figure 6): the “Laza Kostić” Cultural Centre and the Hungarian Cultural Centre in Sombor.
5. The percentage of buildings under state protection as cultural heritage in analysed area (auxiliary buildings in yards are not considered)	Arch. protection 13/55 > 24% Urb. protection 100%	Figure 7a All buildings in “Venac” are protected as a spatial cultural–historical unit (urban heritage), while the most valuable buildings are protected as cultural monuments (built heritage).
6. The percentage of museums and other cultural institutions in analysed area located in protected buildings	Arch. protection 7/10 > 70% Urb. protection 100%	Figure 7a Three institutions are not housed in protected buildings: the “Laza Kostić” Cultural Centre, the Hungarian Cultural Centre, and the Gallery of Modern Art.
7. The number of new commercial establishments regarding central urban functions (retail, tourism, hospitality)	14 new establishments	Figure 7b New establishments—since 2000 (number): Facilities: hotels (1), guesthouses (2), AIRBNB apartments (5), restaurants (2), cafes and bars (3), and souvenir shops (1).
8. The percentage of refurbished buildings or buildings in a good state (auxiliary buildings in yards are not considered)	Share: 23/55 > 42% 2/55 > 4% 13/55 > 24% 17/55 > 31%	Figure 7c Refurbished or new building Building in refurbishment Building in a good state Building in a bad state

Table 3. Cont.

INDICATOR	RESULTS	COMMENTS
9. The appearance of innovative and creative exterior design	7 examples	Figure 7d There are 2 places with innovative urban design, 2 new murals, 1 new urban sculpture, 1 unusual pavement, and 1 modern tourist signalisation.
10. The floor area ratio of the blocks in analysed area to the surroundings	~150%	Figure 7e This figure implies a very urbanised area with high built density.

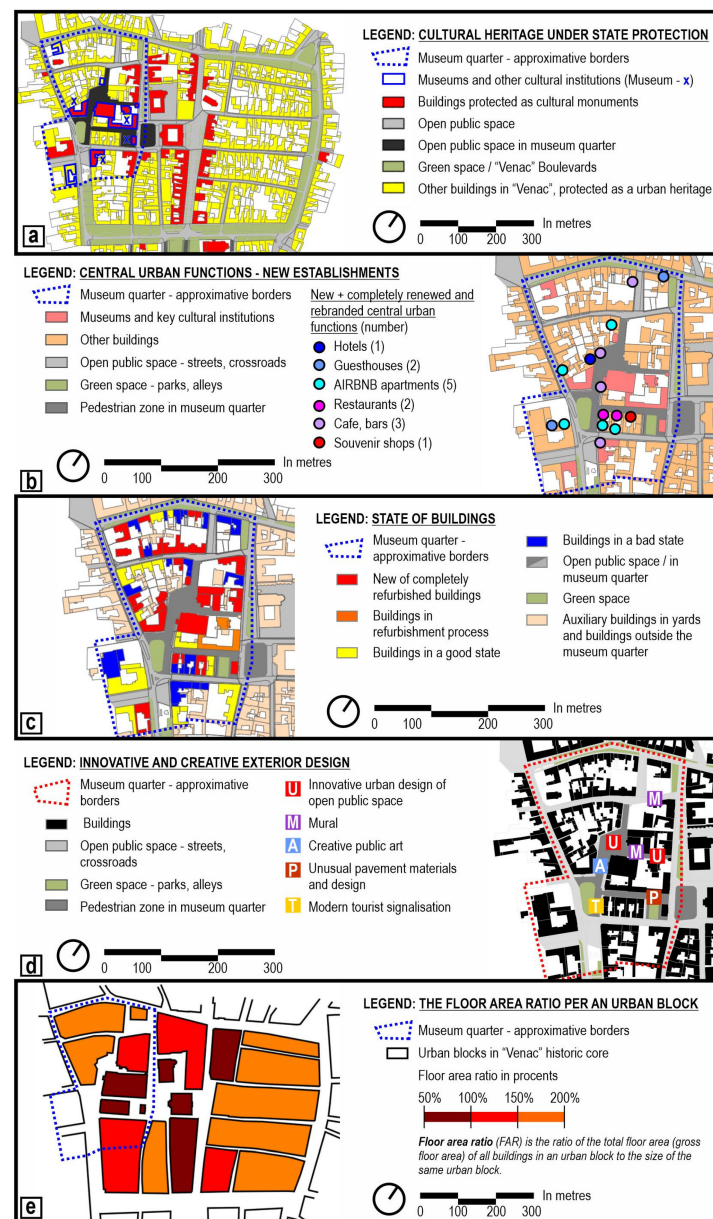


Figure 7. The analysis by the indicators No 5-10: (a) cultural heritage under state protection; (b) central urban functions – new establishments; (c) state of buildings; (d) innovative and creative exterior design; (e) the floor area ratio per an urban block (Author: B. AntoniĆ, 2023).

5. Discussion

The results of the previous analysis of the emerging micro-museum quarter in Sombor, Serbia, presented in Table 3, underline several important findings, which can be roughly divided into two groups.

The first group encompasses those findings that confirm the potential of the analysed part of the historic core of Sombor to become a regionally significant, well-shaped museum quarter in a micro-format. First, the area of the micro-museum quarter in Sombor has a high concentration of museum institutions at both local/municipal and regional levels, which is a precondition to considering it as such a quarter. Second, most of these museums are housed in historically valuable buildings under state protection as a built heritage. Finally, most of them are interconnected with a pedestrian zone around Zmaj Jovina Street and two squares, the Square of Republic and the Square of Kosta Trifković (Figure 6). This means that the Sombor case fulfils the basic characteristics of a micro-scale museum quarter.

The other findings belong to the second group, which indicates challenges for culture-led urban regeneration in the form of a micro-museum quarter in small shrinking cities, such as Sombor. They are extracted from the research on the position and role of cultural heritage in shrinking cities. First, although the two first indicators that consider state-protected buildings as cultural heritage provide more than affirmative results, this is not so clearly visible for the next three indicators. Second, the number of new commercial establishments related to retail, tourism, and hospitality is not high. Third, although many key buildings have been refurbished in recent years, the percentage of buildings in a bad state waiting for refurbishment is still significant. Last but not least, the appearance of innovative and creative exterior design is still underrepresented in the analysed area. These findings do not call into question whether this analysed area in Sombor has the elements of a museum quarter but whether it is at a sufficient level of urban development or, more precisely, urban regeneration. In other words, they uphold that the process of the quarter formation is still in its initial phase.

There are also side findings of the analysis. For example, museum quarters, as well as similar culture-led urban zones, have to be distinct from or physically separated from the main street with retail functions in smaller cities. This characteristic is not so visible in bigger cities, where historic cores are huge, and this overlapping is not an issue.

The presented maps regarding the indicators to analyse the Sombor quarter also indicate other spatially related findings for the formation of the quarter.

The new commercial establishments in tourism, hospitality, and retail that follow the rise of culture-led urban zones, such as a museum quarter, are not well-developed. The map (Figure 7b) further implies that they are concentrated around the southern half of the quarter, where the majority of cultural institutions are located. It confirms that the private sector follows 'smart' capital investments in the public sector.

The next map that covers the state of buildings in the Sombor case (Figure 7c) hints that the pace of refurbishment is not sufficient, particularly for buildings in private ownership in the peripheral parts of the area, despite some of them being better accessed from the rest of city. This, therefore, overlaps with the previous finding about public–private interlinks.

The spatial analysis of innovative and creative design in the Sombor case (Figure 7d) shows that these examples are relatively rare. Furthermore, they are not adequately visible to external users, which calls into question the readiness and capacities of the local level (Sombor) to promote and brand this space in innovative and creative ways, i.e., ways that are different from the one that is present today, which it is a sort of extension of a well-established local urban identity, without risking any out-of-the-box innovation in urban design.

6. Conclusions

The main findings from the undertaken analysis undoubtedly confirm the existence of the micro-museum quarter in Sombor as a medium-sized shrinking city with rich history

and cultural heritage, but they also underpin the main challenges for its current and future development taken into consideration; the main conclusions are following.

The Sombor case is in its initial phase of formation, mainly implemented at the local level and without good cooperation between the public and private sectors. The city of Sombor is active in creative planning and strategic documents for urban development; this highlights the prospective creation and adoption of a specific local policy or, at least, strategic document for the museum quarter, which will connect all spatial and non-spatial elements, as well as all urban actors important for its further development. This strategic approach to urban development was also stressed as one of the key elements for the urban renewal of shrinking cities in post-socialist Europe in international literature [7]. The recently initiated one-year status of a national capital of culture [60] or even a European capital of culture [61] or can be a proper tool in the culture-led urban regeneration of Serbian medium-sized cities and their historic cores, such as Sombor. The micro-museum quarter in Sombor, therefore, can be a good national-level pilot to form and promptly implement such a strategic approach, especially knowing that Sombor is probably the most well-preserved medium-sized city in Serbia. Hence, the city and the quarter can be a proper showcase for others across Serbia and its surroundings, a region where such pilots are scarce.

To sum up, the project of forming a museum quarter, even at a micro-level, such as the case in Sombor, is a never-completed task. It is critical to involve actors from different tiers (local/municipal, regional, and national) and sectors (public, private, NGO). Sombor, as a shrinking medium-sized city in a remote location with limited local capacities and resources, requires this mix of actors, including cross-border and intra-regional cooperation, even more. Such complexity behind the development of the Sombor case can also be a step forward to promote it as a showcase across the region.

This research also gives inputs for the explained theoretical corpus. For instance, it is important to add that the number of museum/cultural institutions in a museum quarter or any similar culture-led urban zone is not only determined; their sprawl throughout the zone matters, too, especially for its vitality over the years. Then, it seems that the significance of a pedestrian-friendly open public space is not adequately emphasised—it proves to be a critical characteristic to balance the development of the zones of culture-led urban regeneration, such as museum quarters. This is essential as research on privately owned entities in culture-led zones is still rare. These entities are usually small and follow the main cultural organisations in the zones, so their appearance in open public space in the zone and connectedness through it are imperative for their economic sustainability. Future research should be focused on these still uncharted subtopics—the spread and concentration of key cultural establishments, the meaning of open public space in culture-led urban redevelopment, the other aspects of the research of museum quarters, more visible after initial phase(s), such as ecological and social aspects, and the position of small private entities within cultural zones for their economic vitality—to further embrace the status and in situ development of museum quarters at a micro-level and in a limited urban environment such as the presented case in Sombor, Serbia.

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