

# ARCHITECTURAL INTERPRETATION OF THE NATIONAL AND UNIVERSITY LIBRARY IN PRISHTINA; THE INFLUENCE IN ITS SURROUNDINGS

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**Abstract:** In Kosovo, originality often meant leftovers inherited from other cultures during centuries of invasion and dominance under the Ottoman Empire. Considering the multinational and multicultural character of Kosovan society and its diversity of religions, Roman Catholic and Orthodox religious buildings cannot be disregarded either. The respect for tradition and the existing environment, including architecture are details to be considered. In this context, the National and University Library could and should be considered a valuable example for the years of general transformation in Prishtina and in all of Kosovo. Even with all the contemporary way of thinking, the traditions, the religion and other regional aspects were not entirely disregarded, especially in the case of the Library building.

**Keywords:** Modern regionalism, Architectural interpretation, Autonomous architecture, Islamic architecture and art

## 1. Introduction

The shape of National and University Library, its characteristic domes and its metal netting on the façade have provided and continue to provide possibilities for various interpretations. An attempt will be made to find a very specific space for the structure in architectural history and what its architect originally had in mind, which in some instances differs from interpretations by others. The possibility of controversy arises when attempts are made to classify this building and to interpret its history. When the University of Prishtina in Kosovo was founded in 1970, this building was named the National and University Library, true to its function. Construction of the new library

building, located in the center of Prishtina, began in 1974. The new library was officially opened on November 25, 1982.

The seven-storey building with 12,000 square meters of usable space includes two reading rooms seating 300 and 100 respectively; a periodicals reading room; rooms for special collections; a room for cataloguing and research; an amphitheater seating 150, and a meeting/conference room seating 75. The building has a capacity to house two million books. The stacks are located in the two levels below the ground floor. These are not accessible to the public.

The architectural project for the National and University Library in Prishtina designed by the Croatian architect Andrija Mutnjakovic was approved in 1971 to be built on one of the most central sites on the university complex (*Fig. 1*). The geographical layout clearly indicates that the architect had an opportunity to freely express his creativity. The result was a unique complex containing a large number of cubicles, each topped with small white domes, while a larger covers the center (*Fig. 2*). In this context, the term 'disordering behavior of the volume' might be appropriate, especially when referring to the building being incorporated in the existing environment. The impression is that the building is superimposed on the site, placed in the first row without regard to the rest of the surroundings [1, pp. 105].



*Fig. 1.* The current aerial view of the Library building [2]



*Fig. 2.* View from the surroundings showing cubical volumes and domes, (photo: Eris Kajtazi)

## 2. Analysis

Since its completion, the exterior of the building has conveyed a certain unfinished look. Since the façade is covered with a rough grid of metal netting, the impression is that the construction elements have been left on the exterior of the main building [3, pp. 142]. This architectural style was developed in Western Europe a few years earlier and was still in vogue when the Library was built. An example is the George Pompidou Centre in Paris. Once again, this is only an attempt to identify an impression,

not the architect's intention for the building. Without the metal grid on the façade, the building would simply be a good example of Brutalist architecture.

This opinion comes as a result intending to establish connections and make comparisons with similar architectural tendencies developed elsewhere in Europe at the same time [4, pp. 345]. Yet considering the building's symbolic elements like the white domes indicating the traditional Albanian white wool hat worn today mostly by older men in rural areas, these elements can be brought into connection with the opinion about Modern Regionalism and its abstract part, that it mainly expresses the cultural part of a region. Nonetheless, there are other possibilities for interpreting elements this building contains. They concern not only the original idea behind the design, but also the interpretations mentioned above, which will be developed further in this analysis.

Even though there is an impression of a building superimposed on its site, the metal grid provides a shell-like effect. It appears that the building wants to defend itself against its surroundings. This is even more noticeable in the interior, which does not provide much natural light and therefore creates a lack of transparency, disconnecting the building from external circumstances. This opinion also relates to the abstract part of Regionalism as a reminder that in several situations, the region's population had been placed in a defensive/defending position in the past [5].

The apparent roughness of the building does not convey the idea that it is sensitive to its site. On the contrary, it completely stands on its own in its surroundings. This has been the case ever since its construction. At first glance, it looked harsh to most observers. In time, many have stated that this harshness is now blending into the surroundings and that the building's real architectural meaning is finally becoming clear. Since its very beginning, the building has been interpreted in many different ways, as symbolizing either the Albanian traditional component (traditional white wool hat) or the religious component expressed by its resemblance to the traditional architecture of regional Ottoman or Byzantine religious buildings.

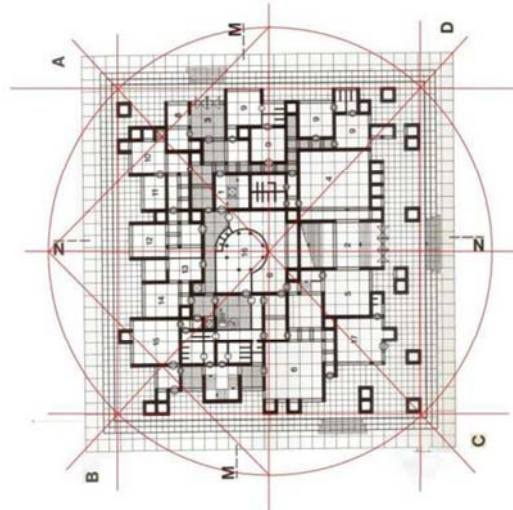
If it is taken into consideration that the building's function was that of a university library, the symbolic reminder of Ottoman rule must be recognized, namely the white domes, which were also characteristic design elements of mosques, which Kosovo's majority Albanian population used to attend. In the former Yugoslavia, priority was placed on Brotherhood and Unity among the various nationalities and not on religion. This view is supported by the fact that the building was designed and constructed for the University of Prishtina, founded in 1970. One purpose of the university was to offer higher education in the Albanian language. This has led most observers to the interpretation that the symbolism of the Library building's design was to characterize the Albanian population and the Albanian people themselves with the very popular white wool hats [6].

### *2.1. The geometry of the layout*

Nevertheless, an analysis of the building must also take into consideration that its design does contain components of Ottoman/Islamic architecture. This first of all manifests in the building's proportions, which resemble the geometrical proportions common in Islamic architecture [7]. Furthermore, lineaments and geometrical models were added to the National and University Library building's ground floor layout to be

compared with relation systems of lineaments and diagonals, using examples from Islamic and Ottoman architecture. It will be noted that even though these buildings vary in their layouts and construction models, in any case their proportional relations will be considered. The explanation of the relational side of the layout (*Fig. 3*) correlates with the study conducted by two authors, Khadim and Julaihi, called *The Proportional Relations Systems of Islamic Architecture*. They observed several systems like the system of proportional relations (triangulation, quadrature, pentagonal, lineaments), the system of dimensions (the standard module) and the system of relations (the reciprocal relation) [8, pp. 3].

The layout of the Library building correlates with the above observation under the results of the analysis of the Architectural Models Geometrically, which relates to proportional relations diameter with its chords and perimeter, as well as the square side with its diameter [8, pp. 5]. Furthermore, the layout of the Library and its interior spaces are not following a symmetrical order. However, the entire shape can be inserted within the quadrant whose diagonals equal the diameter of the circle (*Fig. 3*).



*Fig. 3.* The layout of the ground floor inserted within a circle shape (source: the Author plot)

## 2.2. The shell-effect and protection screen

Another possibility of interpretation that relates the Library building to Ottoman or Islamic architecture and design is that the grid covering the structure also has the function of protecting the building from the sun. 'Mashrabiyya' are elements that can be compared with the grid installed on the façade of the National Library building. They were used in Islamic architecture, mostly on the exterior, for protection from the sun while allowing a breeze to enter inside. They were designed with various patterns and mainly made of wood. Metal was rarely used, only on public buildings or houses of the rich people [9]. If the design of these traditional Islamic screens is compared, which had

a variety of patterns as polygons of various shapes; with the hexagonal shapes of the Library grid (Fig. 4), (Fig. 5) geometrical similarities are found.



Fig. 4. The effect of external grid in interior (photo: Teuta Jashari-Kajtazi)



Fig. 5. Metal grid covering the façade (photo: Eris Kajtazi)

There are other contemporary buildings connected to the Islamic world, which have elements resembling ‘mashrabiyya’ screens. Among the most recent examples are the Arab World Institute in Paris, designed by Jean Nouvel (built between 1981 and 1987) [10], and Banque Marocaine du Commerce Extérieur (BMCE) branches in Morocco (Casablanca, Fez, Rabat, Marrakech, Eljadida), designed by Foster and Partners (built between 2007 and 2009) [11]. The building designed by Jean Nouvel was constructed about the same time when the Library was finished and those traditional elements were used on its facade. The buildings designed by Foster and Partners, belong to the most recent years of contemporary architectural development showing these screens as traditional elements. These buildings are used as examples not only to show the architectural use of traditional Islamic screens, but also to support the contemporary interpretation of the metal grid on the façade of the National Library building.

### 2.3. The interior specific: concentric circle area

During the analysis of the Library building, further resemblance to Islamic architecture in the interior can be found, namely specifically in the marble tiling on the floor of the main hall [12]. It is of rectangular outline in which a concentric circular area with light stairs is inscribed. Marble tile patterns on the floor run from the center of the circle, i.e. in the concentric circular geometric shape. This recalls the use of the circle in Islamic architecture as a basic geometrical shape from which other design patterns emerge. A description of how the circle was used in Islamic art and architecture with astronomically definable limits and by means of geometry, numbers and the alphabet, is provided by Samer Akkach, author of a publication about the architectural ideas in pre-modern Islam [13, pp. xvii]. Going back to shape of the circle used on the floor of the

main hall in the Library, a comparison can be found with the concept of 'knowledge', keeping in mind that the main function of the building was to convey knowledge with every step. Related to this, Akkach uses the triplicity of the knower, known, and knowledge which in geometrical terms of the circle can be defined as the unity of the circle (the knower), the multiplicity of the points of the perimeter (the known), and the connecting lines (the knowledge) [13, pp. 69]. The sequence from the interior, of the main hall in particular (*Fig. 6*), will create stronger relations with the above concept presented by Akkach.



*Fig. 6.* Marble tile patterns in the main hall (photo: Teuta Jashari-Kajtazi)

After all, the National and University Library building is one of the best-known contemporary modern structures in Kosovo. From the beginning, it has provoked many thoughts, ideas and opinions about the origin of its architectural design. It has been suggested the architectural design had been submitted to two other international competitions - in Libya and in Sarajevo, - which it did not win, and that Prishtina had become an alternative location for it. That may be the reason why its design and especially the domes are sometimes interpreted as Islamic architecture. However, considering the system under which it was built, this interpretation is certainly questionable. The results of the analysis indicate other possibilities of interpretation. Still, the building's design and specific elements do bring Islamic architecture, art and culture to mind. It is also worth mentioning that the elements cited as the traditional Islamic screen (*mashrabiyya*) as an important feature of otherwise contemporary structures (especially recent buildings in Morocco by Foster and Partners) show that it is often intended and possible to keep and continue the same tendencies in modern buildings. The National and University Library is only one example.

Regardless of what symbolic elements were used in the Library's design, this building is also important because it represents a rare example of Brutalism in architecture that is hidden under a metal grid and has a large number of cubicles arranged in random order. All those cubicles of different sizes should somehow represent the young Albanian population of Kosovo - the majority population - ready to be educated in their own language. This is definitely one of the most symbolic features,

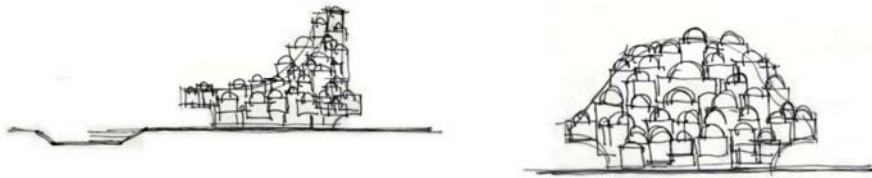
although the building has been interpreted in many different ways. It is site-specific, in many ways related to its surroundings, an introverted design but connected to the cultural backgrounds affecting social life as well as future developments [14, pp. 71].

The building's many different interpretations mentioned above have all had their impact. However, all past, present and future interpretation should keep in mind the architect's own first thoughts about the design and the creation of this work of architecture. An important contribution is Bonta's idea of the de-codification as a process of communication and interpretation of an architectural structure, which corresponds with the interpretation of the Emitter (the Architect) [15].

The above mentioned ideas and thoughts about the Library are just different interpretations, some of them undocumented that have accompanied the building for years as responsive type of architecture [16, pp. 160].

#### 2.4. The library monograph

The Monograph on the National and University Library Building and the architect's own input in that publication correspond completely with the information obtained from him directly as well as from his presentation at the Kosovo Academy of Arts and Science. There, architect Andrija Mutnjakovic gave a lecture entitled 'My architectural work in Kosovo'. Meeting with him allowed us to include a 'designer's interpretation' of the Library's architectural concept, which he had also expressed in the Monograph [17, pp. 30–43]. Fortunately, copies of first sketches (*Fig. 7*) and project designs from the architect himself were obtained, too.



*Fig. 7.* First sketches provided by the Architect (source: Andrija Mutnjakovic)

Justification for the basic design idea began with the meaning and concept of regionalism, in particular the contemporary architectural interpretation of regional styles. In this case, the regional input from Kosovo was the regions Byzantine and Ottoman influence (see layouts in *Fig. 8*) as spaces or areas were covered with domes. With the Library, the characteristic feature to be considered a symbol is the architectural form using cubes and spheres. With this starting point, the architect drew his first sketches, believing that this building should preserve the idea of national identity and pass it on to other generations [17, pp. 36].

In his treatment of internal spaces, especially the reading rooms and their natural lighting, the architect again applied the common component of both Byzantine and Ottoman architectural forms (or rather Byzantine and Ottoman regional or traditional

forms), the dome or cupola (*Fig. 9*). In this regard, he mentions that the light is both close to the reader and even (*Fig. 10*).



*Fig. 8.* Characteristic layouts of both, Byzantine and Ottoman structures  
(source: Andrija Mutnjakovic)

On the other hand, the main intention of the much discussed façade, as the architect pointed out himself, was to use it as an external device to control solar light. It comprises of hexagonal metal parts that also serve another purpose, namely the ‘internal illumination of space’. As the architect says: ‘... shade was also required to create a more intimate atmosphere for reading...’ [17, pp. 39], (*Fig. 11*).



*Fig. 9.* Main hall in library  
(photo: T. Jashari-Kajtazi)



*Fig. 10.* Large reading room  
(photo: T. Jashari-Kajtazi)



*Fig. 11.* Small atrium  
(photo: T. Jashari-Kajtazi)

As the architect said, the functional part of the Library is the same as in all modern libraries. Upon entering the Library, visitors will notice that they are taken straight from



the entrance into the hall/atrium, which forms the common area. The first and second floor is mainly used as larger-sized reading rooms, with a capacity of 100 and 300 seats, respectively. The other reading rooms, designated to specific subjects, are arranged on other floors. For example, reading rooms for researchers are on the third and fourth floor. The reading room for users with special needs is situated on the ground floor of the building. All reading rooms are connected to catalogue areas. The two bottom floors (the basement and the lower ground floor), are mainly used as stacks for books. Administrative and other office areas are situated on the first floor, with separate doors and with unobstructed access to catalogue areas and reading rooms on all levels [18, pp. 72].

The summary written by the architect briefly confirms that he deliberately used religion symbolism in his design, of all ethnic groups in Kosovo, expressing this way the spirit of place. The analysis of the layout including the grid on the façade and the marble floor of the main library hall indicates the possibility of other elements of Islamic architecture and art.

However, the architect did not mention this particular detail that the Library building without the exterior design elements belongs to the Brutalist school of architecture. If the metal grid (sun protection or exterior sun control device) is excluded from the rest of the design, the raw concrete structure becomes obvious [19]. Yet the metal grid, covering the facade of the structure, makes the building more than 'rough' with 'tough aesthetics'. The exterior elements of the Library and the use of the metal grid for the purpose mentioned by the architect places the building in the category of combining Brutalism and Sculptural Romanticism, resulting in the so called New Brutalism including the environmental design [20, pp. 79]. Clearly, this definition suits the main concept of the National and University Library design.

### 3. Conclusion

The Library is a structure that had and still has a strong impact on Kosovo's society. Its consequences in terms of the architectural and social context (the specifics of time and place) must be taken into consideration. Architecturally, the Library always has been a structure located on one of the city's most significant sites. This building with its symbolic and emblematic importance, with all its strengths and weaknesses, is still perceived and understood in many different ways today. This is mentioned because of the strong impact and consequences this building has had and continues to have, giving rise to a number of debates. Even so many years and a few generations later, the building is still of interest to a general public, and especially to students attending the university. The Library's architecture and its interpretation is still the subject of debate among contemporaries.

Detailed analysis above has indicated close association with Ottoman/Islamic architecture and art. Examples have shown a correlation between:

- the setup and geometry of the layout;
- the use of traditional Islamic 'Mashrabiyya' screens; and
- the use of the concentric circle form on the marble floor of the main hall.

In summary, interpretations, meanings in general, show strong interaction between the architect's thoughts and those of interpreters.

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