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## **BRICK FACTORY „LAF-ĆELE KULA“: CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF INDUSTRIAL BUILDINGS IN NIŠ**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper presents research conducted by the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments Niš, aimed at conservation of industrial heritage. The subject of the research was the area of the old brickyard 'Laf,' later the 'Ćele Kula' brick factory, and the valorization of its cultural heritage. This involved assessment from an architectural perspective as well as within a historical context. The methodology applied is based on the procedures strictly defined by the Law on Cultural Heritage. Accordingly, the paper presents the evaluation of the mentioned built heritage, showing the results of the research conducted to contribute to the study of industrial heritage in Niš and support development plans (spatial and urbanistic documents).*

**Key words:** *Brick Factory, Laf, Ćele-kula, Industrial Heritage*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Industrial heritage is a very important segment of the built heritage stock of Serbia. Although it was not adequately valued and protected in the past, there are isolated examples where complete rehabilitation and repurposing was carried out (for example: Center for Fine and Applied Arts "Terra" in Kikinda, Serbia), so they can serve as a proof that timely action, adequate treatment and planning can give good results.

Recent adoption of the Law on Cultural Heritage [1] introduced some novelties, but did not make a move towards the introduction of a special category of protection of immovable cultural assets, which would be designated as industrial heritage, however, this does not absolve us of the responsibility to carry out processes of valorization and protection of the same.

In this respect during the years 2022 and 2023 the Institute for the Cultural Heritage Preservation Niš (hereinafter: the Institute) carried out the valorization of the industrial heritage of the former "Laf" brick factory, later known as "Ćele kula", and on that occasion two conservation and valorization studies were prepared as a part of the regular activities of the Institute's professional service on protection of cultural monuments at the City of Niš territory<sup>3</sup>. They primarily involved field work aimed at documenting structures of importance for the field of architectural heritage protection, and then systematizing the collected data, valorizing it and compiling it into a report, along with the results of other research and instructions for further action, all for the purpose of promotion, presentation and revitalization of cultural heritage.

The goal of these studies was to research, analyze and publish so far unknown material that reveals a rich activity in the field of industrial construction, as well as to enable further work on planning and elaboration of locations where it was determined that there are industrial facilities representing a significant testimony of the local society development and progress, all in accordance with the needs of current spatial and urban planning documents<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. HISTORY OF THE INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT IN BRICK PRODUCTION IN NIŠ

Unlike other parts of Serbia, the beginnings of industrialization in Niš cannot be dated before 1880. After liberation from the Turkish rule, Niš remained an important craft center which initiated the first industrialization. Investments in the industry were made with caution and in accordance with the needs of the environment. As Niš was then developing and shaping into a European-looking city, the need for raw materials and building materials was great. Therefore, the investments of industrialists and traders in brick factories offered security and success of the investment.

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<sup>3</sup> Conservation and valorisation studies have their mandatory form and content, especially when prepared in order to enlist state protected heritage and the methodology is based on valid laws and regulations covering this area. Filed work, historical and architectural analysis and data collection (archival, cadastral, photo, graphic, etc.) are all part of the process.

<sup>4</sup> It is a long-standing practice, and now also a legal obligation (Amendments to the Law on construction and planning of the Republic of Serbia from 2023), to prepare conservation studies for the purpose of better valorisation and protection of the heritage in the legal process of urban and spatial planning.

The first brick factory in Niš was built near the Jewish cemetery in 1886. It had a "modern kiln" and was owned by Jovanović, Živković and Popović [2]. Right after that, between 1887-1888, a brick factory named "Terzibašić Brothers" started working near the famous "Skull tower" (Ćele kula). By the year 1903 the owners would change, since it was sold out to Josif Penčić. He expanded the brickyard by four more round kilns, thus increasing the production capacity of the factory. His investment was followed by a large demand for bricks in Niš due to the construction of the main Military Engineering building (Artiljerijska kasarna), for which Penčić sold a large amount of bricks to the state. Another brick factory established near Niš was founded in 1902. Its owners were the Nikolić brothers [2].

At the foot of the St. Nicholas Church in Niš and in the immediate vicinity of the railway line, in 1911, the "Niš District Bank" established a brick factory (see Figure 1), which would later become known as "Laf brick factory" [3].

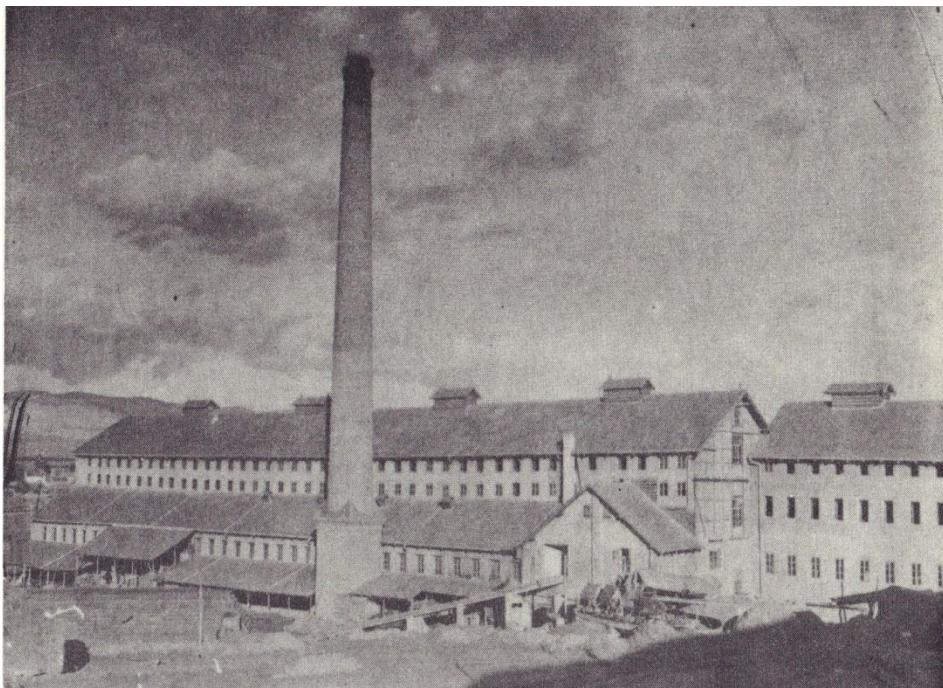


Figure 1. "Laf" brick factory, *History of Niš II, From liberation in 1978 to 1941*, 351.

By the beginning of World War I, this factory produced 2.500.000 bricks per year. Another complex was raised at the so-called "Tutunović's Cellar" location called "White Brick Factory" in 1911 [2][3]. Also, in 1912, the "Južnomoravska Bank" established a brick factory, which was located not far from the previously mentioned. The company "Jovanović and Popović", on the site of the old brick factory between Niš and Medoševac, built a new one, which employed around 100 workers. In the same year, Josif Penčić expanded his brick factory by another 10 round kilns, so that there were a total of 28 kilns. "Nikolić Brothers" facilities were expanded in a similar way.

Before World War I, from the list of companies that worked in Niš, we came across five brickyards: Josif Penčić; Nikolić Brothers; Jovanović; Popović and company and the "White brick factory" [2]. After the great war destruction, already at the end of 1919, 22 industrial enterprises were rebuilt in Niš, among which were

almost all Niš brick factories. In the review of the production potential of some industrial companies from 1923, we see that the "Južnomoravska Bank" brick factory produced 1,000,000 pieces with 30 employees, while Josif Penčić's brick factory had a capacity of 1,500,000 pieces with 80 employees, so it can be concluded that the production capacities significantly increased after the World War I. At that time, Jovanović and Penčić brickyard got the first steam engine and became the only manufacturer of folded roof tiles in Niš. In the same year, we came across data that Vujić, Jovančević and Radosavljević brickyard produced 270,000 pieces of flat roof tiles and 85,000 pieces of bricks [2].

During 1924 Niš industry entered recession. Raw materials are becoming expensive, and sales have been difficult. The Niš brickworks started working with reduced capacity, while the Josif Penčić brick factory and the "Južnomoravska Bank" tile factory stopped production. The brick factory of the "Niš District Bank" and the "White brick factory" made products that were not competitive on the market in terms of price. Excessive production called into question the survival of Niš brick factories, because of the approximately 13,000,000 bricks that six Niš brick factories produced annually, only two thirds were sold. For these reasons, Niš cooperatives and banks and the owners of the brickyards, decided to sell the companies in order not to make more losses [2].

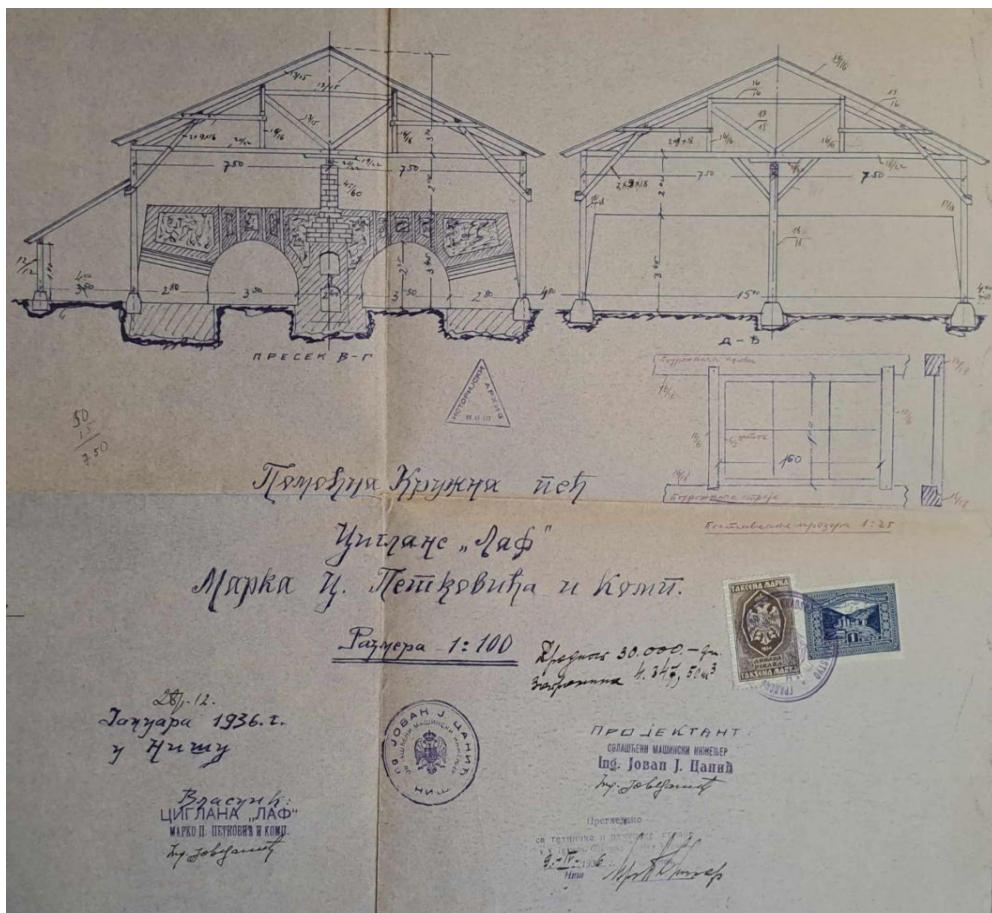


Figure 2. The part of the original design (sections) of the new circular kiln in "Laf" complex from 1936. The history archives of Niš. "GRAPO-TON fund", box No 32

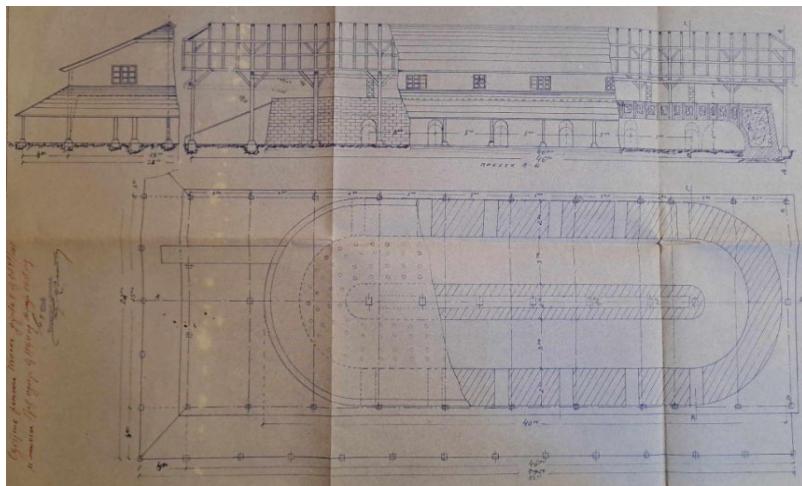


Figure 3. The part of the original design (part of the facade, section, ground floor) of the new circular kiln in "Laf" complex from 1936., The history archives of Niš, "GRAPO-TON fund", box No 32

From the two Niš brick factories established at the foot of the hill, where the church of St. Nicolas is positioned at the beginning of the XX century, the first one was founded by "Niš District Bank" in 1911, and the second one by "Južnomoravska Bank" in 1912. "Južnomoravska Bank" was bought by Marko C. Petković, merchant and banker born in Zaječar, in the period 1926-1927 after the big losses in 1926 [4][5]. After buying the brick factory, Petković invested money, while his son-in-law engineer Jovan Canić, Dragomir Pejić and partners Stojan and Milan Canić invested in brick machines and started a brick factory, which in 1928 was called for the first time "Laf".

During 1927, the brick factory of Marko C. Petković and company stabilized production. The acquisition of new "helmet devices" improved production by enabling the grinding of soil that, after lying for a year, was ready for the production of bricks and tiles. This process improved the quality of the products, and "Laf" won a new market and became competitive even with bricks from Veliki Bečkerek [2].

In 1932, the owners of the "Laf" brick factory bought the brick factory of the "Niš District Bank". Similar to the case of the "Južnomoravska Bank" in the coming years of the next crisis, numerous regulations were passed that limited, for example, the expansion of the "construction area" in Niš and introduced numerous levies for industrialists. This is until 1935 or 1937, when economic prosperity comes back.

During 1936, in its old plant under the St. Nicolas church, the "Laf" brick factory tried to improve the conditions of brick production. By raising the roof structure over the circular furnace, it enabled its use even during winter conditions and better protection of the products from atmospheric precipitation (see Figure 2. and 3). The value of the investment was 30,000 dinars. The roof construction was made by engineer Jovan J. Canić.

Apart from this kiln, there were other circular kilns in the area. Today, only the chimney, 60 meters high, is preserved from this building. Due to the routing of the new road and the conversion of the entire area of the old brick factory into a residential and business zone, its complete dismantling and removal is now planned.

By the year of 1939, the raw material needed for the production of bricks in the area of the old plant was almost used up, the "Laf" company bought land at a new location near the Gabrovacka River. The convenience of the new location was the land that could be used for the production of bricks and tiles, and thus the investors solved the problem of the lack of raw materials they faced in the stationary plant. Here, the "Laf" brickyard erected a new furnace of the "Hoffmann system" with an upper gas outlet. The furnace was located only 20 meters from the road. It was made up of 22 straight chambers and 4 chambers in curves. The furnace was fired from the upper side of the vault where there were walled openings in four rows, which could be closed with metal covers. The fuel used to run the furnace was finer coal.

After the occupation during World War II, two out of four brick factories were functioning in Niš, and after the war, the reconstruction of the country, together with the industry, began. The brickyards could not be immediately restored to their full capacity, and a little stock of roof tiles and bricks were stored in the "Laf" brickyard, so they were distributed to the citizens. "Laf" brickyard will be the first to start production again.

Due to its specific location, Niš has been a city that has undergone many major changes, demolitions and renovations throughout its history. In addition to the widely known "Niš Electronics Industry", whose beginnings date back to the year 1948, there were also potentials in the form of already existing complexes, which functioned before, and which were taken over by the authorities and developed further within the new socialist state, which had the needs and capacities for large production complexes, and which again, at first, were supposed to meet the needs of the construction industry, in order to rebuild the destroyed and devastated post-war Yugoslavia. Among these buildings was the brick factory "Laf", i.e. "Ćele kula".

At the end of 1946, factories and companies that the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia recognized as important for the entire country were nationalized. As early as 1945, 20% of the ownership of the brick factory was transferred to the state. The rest of the property was transferred to the state in 1946 by the confiscation of Marko C. Petković's entire property. During 1947, the new government tried to expand and reconstruct the brick factory. By decision of the City People's Committee in Niš on February 28, 1948, the name of the brick factory was changed to Brick and Tile Industry "Ćele kula" [2]. After that the formation of a completely different social order was established.

In the first post-war years, the state recognized the importance of the industry for the production of bricks, because of the need for reconstruction of destroyed buildings and the construction of new ones. In such a situation, the new director of the brick factory, Milivoje Vuković, even with old overhauled machines, managed to increase production capacity and improve the transportation of raw materials to the factory by installing rails and wagons. By 1949, the brick factory "Ćele kula" had reached the ability to produce 90,000 pieces of bricks per day [5]. The management of the brick factory managed to install one machine for the production of bricks in a closed space, which extended the working season [6]. In the 1950's, in accordance with the current policy of self-management and the transformation of the company's assets into socio-economic enterprises, the brick factory received its first workers' councils and management boards, through which it was managed [5].

At the same time, in the early 1950's, the introduction of the free market system coincided with a decrease in the demand for finished products, but also with a lack of quality soil at two of the total five brick factories that existed at the time [5]. At the end of the 1950's, the first investments and reconstruction of the brick factory were made in order to improve production and expand the assortment. At the beginning of the sixties, the brick factory had a wide range of different products: bricks, roof tiles, hollow bricks, fireclay bricks, fireclay flour, folded roof tiles, etc. The production of different products was aimed at increasing competitiveness on the market. However, apart from the production of bricks, the brick factory failed to meet the market needs of other products [5]. Also, the 1960's in the brickyard were marked by bad management, and there were proposals to introduce forced administration.

The seventies were focused on the expansion of production, geological research and the construction of a new factory, which was not developed until 1978, when it was decided to start its construction. The new factory was put into operation in 1980. Entering the 1980's, the factory, which employed 600 permanent and 150 seasonal workers, became unstable. The brick factory entered the new decade with plants that were not technically equipped, some of which used coal and some fuel oil as fuel [5]. Also, the occurrence of abuses within the management team caused damage in business. Customers owed more and more money to the brickyards, the payment of which was late or absent. By 1994, the production of finished products fell from 110 million to 20 million [7].

Since 1997, the brick factory "Čele kula" has been operating as a construction material joint-stock company. In 2007, in accordance with the policy of the Republic of Serbia, the Social Enterprise of Construction Materials "Čele kula" has been privatized by selling 70% of its capital to "Srbijateks AD" from Belgrade, while 30% of the capital is transferred to employees free of charge. Today, the brickworks are in a very poor state and have been left to decay. Recently there had been cases of intentional dismantling of the remains of buildings, noted by the Institute.

### **3. ARCHITECTURAL RESEARCH AND VALORISATION WITH TECHNICAL MEASURES AND GUIDELINES**

The original brick factory "Laf-Čele kula" included a number of cadastral plots and buildings and a wider area between the church of St. Nicolas and Gabrovacka River. At the beginning of the XX century, several brick factories were established in the area in question, which were later united and included other newer plants. One of the main production complexes was the "Laf" factory. Later, the production was expanded to a new location, which is located a little further to the east along the Gabrovacka River [8][9].

When evaluating this type of heritage, it is particularly important to pay attention to the following facts:

- industrial complexes generally cover large areas,
- in some cases, you can find at one pace buildings whose dating spans hundreds or even more years,
- belonging buildings have different purposes, forms and values,

- a large number of former industrial complexes, which were located on the outskirts of settlements, now form an integral part of residential and business zones in modern cities.

In discovering the rich history of the industrial heritage in Serbia, a special place belongs to its design and construction. Although in the beginning the architectural qualities of industrial buildings and complexes were not taken into account, the role of architects in the design of industrial buildings became bigger and more significant with the development of industry and society. Many famous names in world architecture have made an immeasurable contribution to industrial construction. The use of new materials and constructive systems on industrial buildings pushed the boundaries of contemporary architecture, so that many solutions were responsible for the development of construction science and technology. The presence of Serbian architects in industrial construction was visible at the end of the XIX century, when Serbian authors appeared more and more as designers. Dimitrije T. Leko, Momir Korunović, Branko Tanazević, Josif Najman, Dragiša Brašovan, Jan Dubovi (Jan Dubovy), Grigorije Samojlov (Grigorij Ivanović Samojlov), Nikola Dobrović, Ratomir Bogojević, Božić Petrović, Rajko Petrović, Rajko Antić and Marković many others, with their designs for factories, observatories, railway stations, printing houses and mints, made their enormous contribution [10].

In this regard, there must be an obligation to adequately assess and evaluate each individual complex and facility, before entering into consideration of spatial and urban planning and elaboration.



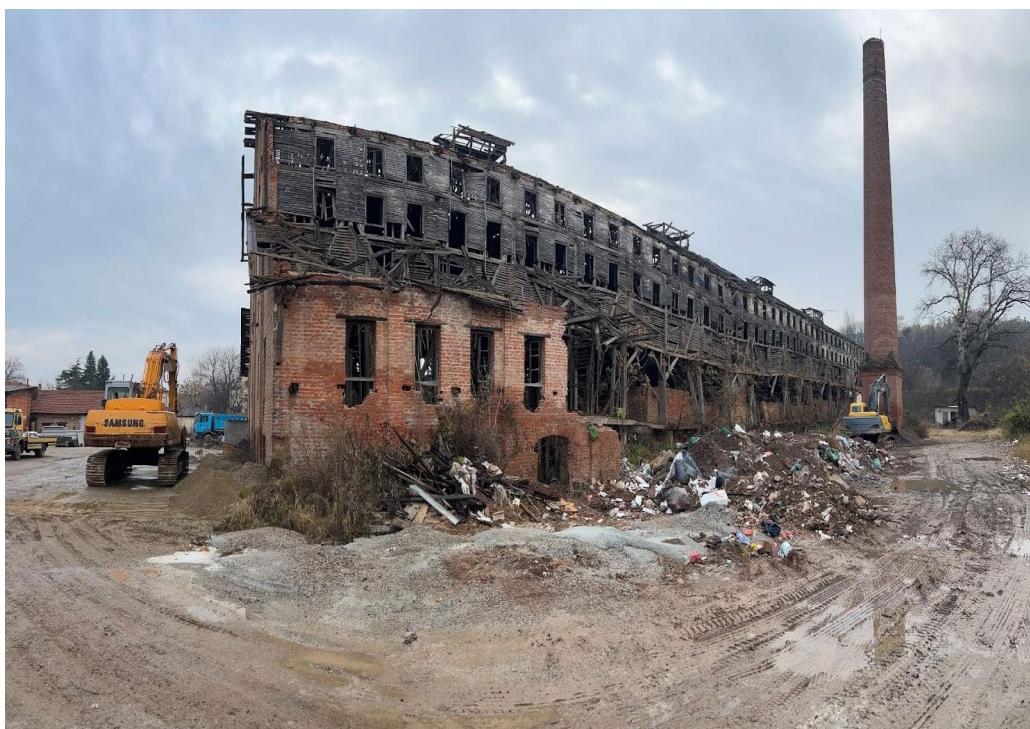
Figure 4. The site plan of the south-east part of the City of Niš with the locations of the "Old and New brickyard", E.V.Petrović (based on <https://a3.geosrbija.rs/>, April 2025.)

The need to create a valorization and conservation study arose from the fact that the official document on conditions of the Institute, which were issued in the process of creating planning documents for the City of Niš, stipulated that the space and facilities of the "Old brick factory" should be protected as assets that enjoy previous protection by the Law, as well as that it is necessary to additionally valorize the entire space in order to establish guidelines for further planning of the arrangement of this space and conversion in accordance with the spatial and urban planning documentation.

The studies included the valorization of the buildings of the former brick factory, in the location of the older plant, on two cadastral plots. Technical and photogrammetric recording was done, in order to document the architecture of the preserved structures. Valorization of the architectural heritage was also carried out and guidelines were given for further development of the sites.

The Institute carried out a technical and photogrammetric survey of the main buildings and structures to preserve original data on their dimensions and positions.

In addition to all of the above, research was also conducted on available historical data and documentation in archives, as well as a review of available literature, so this work presents the basic results of research primarily in the domain of historical data and architectural recordings.



*Figure 5. Brick factory main building with the preserved chimney and round kiln - "Old brickyard", E.V.Petrović (February 2023)*

At the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023, the team of the Institute inspected the condition of the buildings of the old brick factory and found that there are very few physical remains of the oldest buildings shown in the previous chapters. Two cadastral plots were considered, namely cadastral plot 7399/25,

Niš-Ćele Kula, on which there was a chimney of the former circular furnace (see Figure 4 and 6), and cadastral plot 7399/26, Niš-Ćele Kula, on which there is a largely preserved building (see Figure 4 and 5), with the whole circular furnace and approx. 2396 m<sup>2</sup> by the cadastral plans, but only approx. 1546 m<sup>2</sup> preserved in situ, as well as the chimney, which is now physically separated from the building corpus, and was once an integral part of it [9].

The Institute issued the formal document with the conditions for the preparation of urban planning documents and left the possibility to carry out valorization to the extent that was possible at the moment in order to preserve it for future generations.



Figure 6 The preserved chimney of the "Old brickyard", E.V.Petrović (October 2022)

In our work we have included the following:

- in the previously defined areas of interest all existing facilities were evaluated, as well as the factual situation on the ground along with the available documentation, and it is determined that the number 1 facility, together with the factory chimney, is damaged,
- under the conditions of the Institute, which were drawn up in order to prepare planning and urban planning documents, it is prescribed that the buildings of "Old brickyard" ("Stara Ciglana") enjoy a modicum of prior protection as a cultural property, but it is obvious that in the process of planning this was not fully considered, nor incorporated into the rules of construction and arrangement, and some buildings of this complex are directly threatened by planned traffic roads and interventions, as well as by the determination of the very purposes of individual spaces,
- in the case of the cadastral plot 7399/26, Ćele-Kula, the planned road is placed along the eastern border of the plot, so the main building itself is not threatened, which means that we could still incorporate the existing building in the new construction plans (see Figures 4 and 6).

The following measures are prescribed for further elaboration and action to preserve parts of the main building, prioritized as follows:

1. for circular kiln - mandatory conservation and revitalization (a section for the presentation of the history of the brickyard is planned for),
  2. for the chimney - desirable conservation and revitalization,
  3. for the parts of the wooden structure and wrought iron elements - preferably conservation and revitalization,
  4. for the north facade - optional conservation and revitalization.

It is necessary to incorporate the preserved parts of the main building into the newly designed and planned complex, in a way that it will ensure their new function, maintenance, preservation and adequate presentation.

During the detailed elaboration of the location and the development of the urban and conceptual designs, it is mandatory to obtain the special conditions of the Institute, as well as the approval of the urban-technical and design documentation.

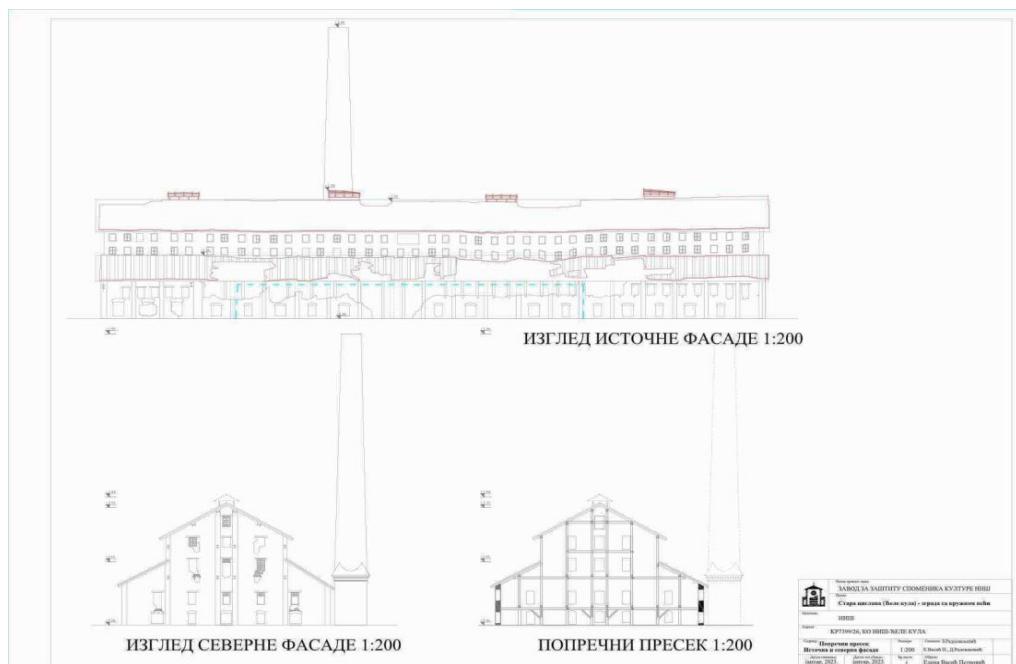


Figure 7 Brick factory main building (No 1 at the cadastral plan) with the preserved chimney and round kiln - "Old brickyard". E.V. Petrović (February 2023)

## 4. DISCUSSION

The process of designing industrial buildings is a complex and demanding procedure. In addition to the functional requirements, it is necessary to take into account the constructive possibilities, and in addition to all that, if the designer and investor wants the final form to have a certain artistic quality and composition with a name, the design specifications are just getting more complicated. This aesthetic component has often been very successfully realized in the past, and many well-known designers and architects have made their contribution in this area [13].

This also applies to the reconstruction and rehabilitation processes. Additionally, it is crucial for architects and planners to recognize that heritage is not an obstacle

to development but rather an opportunity and a significant value that can enrich contemporary design and urban planning.

Everything that happened in the field of designing and building industrial spaces in Europe during the XIX and XX century was adopted over time in Serbia as well. At the beginning of the industrialization in the XIX century, when industrial facilities were built with the main foreign capital, plans for their construction were created abroad.

The development of the industry in Serbia got more intensive together with the general development after World War II when several hundred large and complex industrial and agricultural buildings and thousands of individual commercial buildings were built. By using the most up-to-date technique and construction technology, as well as the engagement of professional staff, the best achievements in this field have been followed.

The complex field of industrial architecture in Serbia has not been sufficiently explored and studied so far. This statement also applies to the City of Niš.

Although, Serbia has ratified numerous international regulations related to the industrial heritage protection, our laws are not always aligned with them and we are still far behind any specific policy in this area. In 2013 the resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe dates under the title „industrial heritage of Europe“ [11] was adopted, but the first reaction to the consequences of the industrial decline in western Europe, date from the 80s of the XX century and principles were further developed in Recommendations of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in 1987 and 1990 [12].

This is why whenever a chance occurs the Serbian Institutes in charge of the immovable cultural heritage protection conduct activities in order to first of all enable an adequate assessment of the historical buildings and then to provide their protection and incorporation into modern life.

One of the priorities is a clear and precise mapping of such facilities and complexes within the plans. Most often the problem occurs when the spatial and urban planners need to implement such points of interest with the purpose of the specific areas, blocks or plots and with to apply specific planning and construction rules to it, because unfortunately this is not done in the right way.

As we could see previously, we had this problem for the „Old brickyard“, because regardless to the designation of the previous protection planners practically ignored the existence of the facilities in this area.

So, in this case we had to adapt to the plan, instead the plan was adapted to the built heritage. Anyhow, the presence of the marking of previous protection gave us an opportunity to do the detail valorization and to explore the best options for this specific heritage complex.

The valorization process is supported by the research results and then we decide on the concrete conditions, recommendations and actions. Since the official conditions are purely technical documents and we did not decide to proceed with the designation proposal, this paper aims to make contribution to the further research on the industrial heritage by systematization and presentation of the research and the relevant planning issues.

On the other hand, besides following the regulations, we also could learn from many positive [12], but also negative experiences from all over the world.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this article has provided a detailed overview of the industrial buildings for brick production in Niš, highlighting their historical significance and architectural value. The research underscores the importance of preserving these structures as vital components of the city's industrial heritage. Furthermore, it emphasizes that these historic industrial buildings are not merely markers on a map but very valuable assets to the city. This could also contribute to the worldwide heritage studies, that should be applied in cultural heritage research and valorisation since the industrial heritage aspect is very often considered underrated especially by the World Heritage List [14]. For example development of annual inscribed nominations indicates a rapid increase in the number of sites on the List, but the category "Industrial Heritage", as a under-represented category, has increased not nearly as rapidly [15].

Through the examination of specific examples, it is evident that these buildings not only represent technological advancements of their time but also embody the socio-economic development of Niš. The findings suggest that further efforts should be directed towards the conservation and adaptive reuse of all very well preserved industrial sites in any possible way or option, ensuring they remain a tangible link to the past for future generations.

This paper contributes to the broader discourse on industrial heritage preservation and encourages further research into similar sites in Niš and across the region.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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