

# ADAPTATION PROJECT OF THE "ROMAN HALL" IN THE CITY LIBRARY OF BELGRADE



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**Abstract:** The adaptation project of the "Roman hall" within the City Library of Belgrade, a cultural monument, began in 2015. The project was initiated to enhance this unique space, primarily used for lectures and book promotions. The building housing the City Library of Belgrade was originally constructed as a hotel in 1869. The City Library moved into the building after World War II. During the 1985 excavation works for the basement, parts of a Roman castrum dating from the last decades of the 2nd century were discovered. The new project focused exclusively on the "Roman hall" in the Library's basement, where the Roman rampart and gate are located. Before executing the project, extensive research was conducted. This included analyzing all available documentation related to the building and the Roman rampart, including historical records, old plans, archaeological reports, previous construction works, and the Library's operational systems. An archaeological investigation was carried out "in situ", and the rampart was carefully treated and conserved. In addition to the conservation process, the entire space was completely transformed, incorporating new interior design, electrical systems, and climate control. Implementing much-needed safety measures was also a crucial component of the project. This paper aims to demonstrate how valuable cultural heritage can be integrated into contemporary interior design, serving the public interest and the institutions that hold it. In this manner, parts of cultural heritage become more available to the public while careful design raises awareness of their importance.

**Keywords:** Cultural Monument, Roman Rampart, Adaptation, Interior Design, Conservation, Reuse, Safety.

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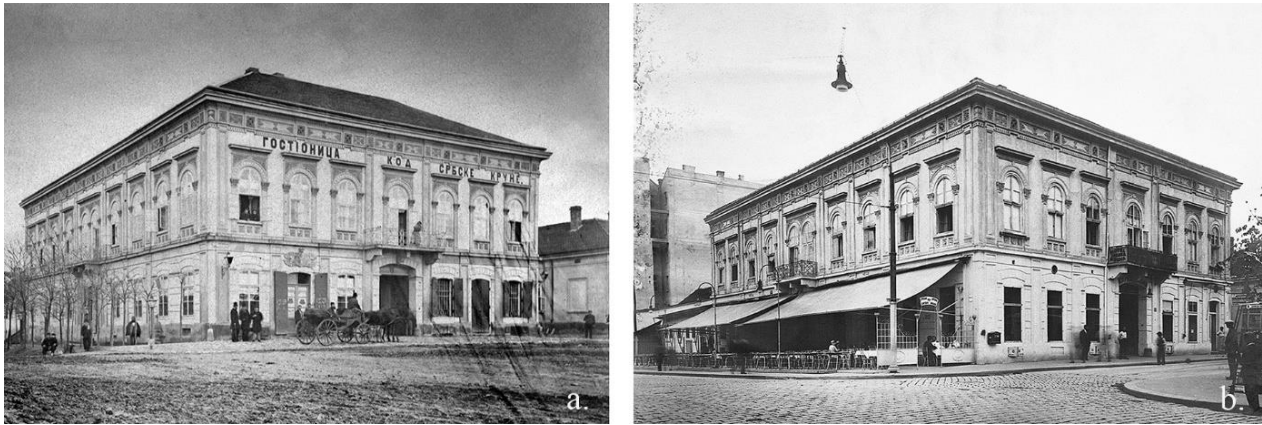
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## Introduction

The building housing the City Library of Belgrade, located at 56 Knez Mihailova Street, represents a sophisticated intersection of Belgrade's multilayered history. Originally constructed in 1869 as the "Serbian Crown" hotel, it was the city's most representative and modern accommodation of its time. Designed in the spirit of academicism with romanticist elements, the building's architecture uniquely preserved the layout of traditional Turkish lodgings, with its structure organized around a central courtyard. Situated at the terminus of a primary urban artery during the city's post-Ottoman liberation, the building stands as a testament to 19th-century urban transformation<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1a,b). The site carries multiple layers of legal protection, reflecting its immense cultural value. It is designated as the "Serbian Crown" cultural asset (Decision on Proclamation, "Official Gazette of the City of Belgrade" No. 19/81). It sits within the protected "Ancient Singidunum" archaeological site (Decision of the Institute No. 176/8 of 30.6.1964) and the "Knez Mihailova Street Area", a zone of exceptional importance (Decision on Designation, "Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia" No. 14/79). While the decision to relocate the City Library to this site was made in 1975, the transformation was not concluded until 1986 [1]. During the extensive reconstruction and adaptation works (1983–1986), significant archaeological remains were unearthed beneath the former atrium. Excavations revealed a rampart and tower dating from the late 2<sup>nd</sup> to the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, identified as a vital segment of the original Roman

<sup>1</sup> Cultural Heritage Preservation Institute of Belgrade, Documentation: 1985 Adaptation Project (in Serbian).

castrum. This discovery redefined the project, leading to the creation of the “Roman Hall”, a subterranean space where ancient fortifications are integrated into the Library’s functional interior.



**Fig. 1.** a. Hotel “Serbian Crown” in 1895; b. Hotel “Serbian Crown” in 1927

### The Aim of the Adaptation

The primary objective of this paper is to examine how significant cultural heritage can be seamlessly integrated into contemporary interior design to serve public interests. The adaptation of the “Roman Hall” reflects a broader global paradigm in which creative reuse spans diverse typologies and epochs. International precedents, ranging from the conversion of 17th-century barns in the Netherlands to industrial locomotive factories in Germany, demonstrate that repurposing existing structures is a vital driver of urban renewal and environmental sustainability [2].

By transitioning from a hospitality-focused past to a library-centric present, the project highlights how “architectural recycling” preserves a monument's soul. The adaptation of the “Roman Hall”, previously used as a modest space for book promotions, now seeks a more refined design approach. This study provides new insights into how underground heritage can be activated for contemporary use, balancing archaeological preservation with the functional requirements of a modern cultural institution.

### Materials and Methods

This paper employs a multi-disciplinary case study approach to analyze the adaptation of a protected cultural monument from its original hospitality function to a modern public library. To evaluate the project’s success, the research is structured into five sequential stages: historical and archival research: documentation of the “Serbian Crown” hotel and the broader history of the site, architectural analysis: an examination of the 19<sup>th</sup> century academic/romanticist structure and its Turkish-style atrium layout, analysis of prior interventions: a review of the 1983–1986 reconstruction and initial adaptation, definition of Project objectives: identifying the goals for contemporary interior design within a heritage context and technical finalization: documentation of the specific conservation and design works required for the “Roman Hall”.

### The Roman Period and the Ancient Singidunum - Historical Context and Strategic Significance

Belgrade’s urban fabric comprises numerous cultural layers, with the antiquity layer (1st–6th centuries AD) among the most significant. Singidunum was established at a critical geographical crossroads where the river and land routes of Southeastern Europe intersected. By the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, it had become a prominent border stronghold of the Roman Empire, serving as a primary military link in the Danubian Limes (Fig. 2a). Historical sources, including the 6th-century writings of Hierocles, identify Singidunum as one of the five key cities in the province of Moesia Superior, alongside Viminacium, Tricornium, Gratiana, and Horreum Margi [3]. Following the destruction of the earlier Celtic settlement, the Romans established a permanent presence around the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Under Septimius Severus, the settlement was granted *municipium* status and eventually rose to the rank of a Roman Colony after 293 AD [4].

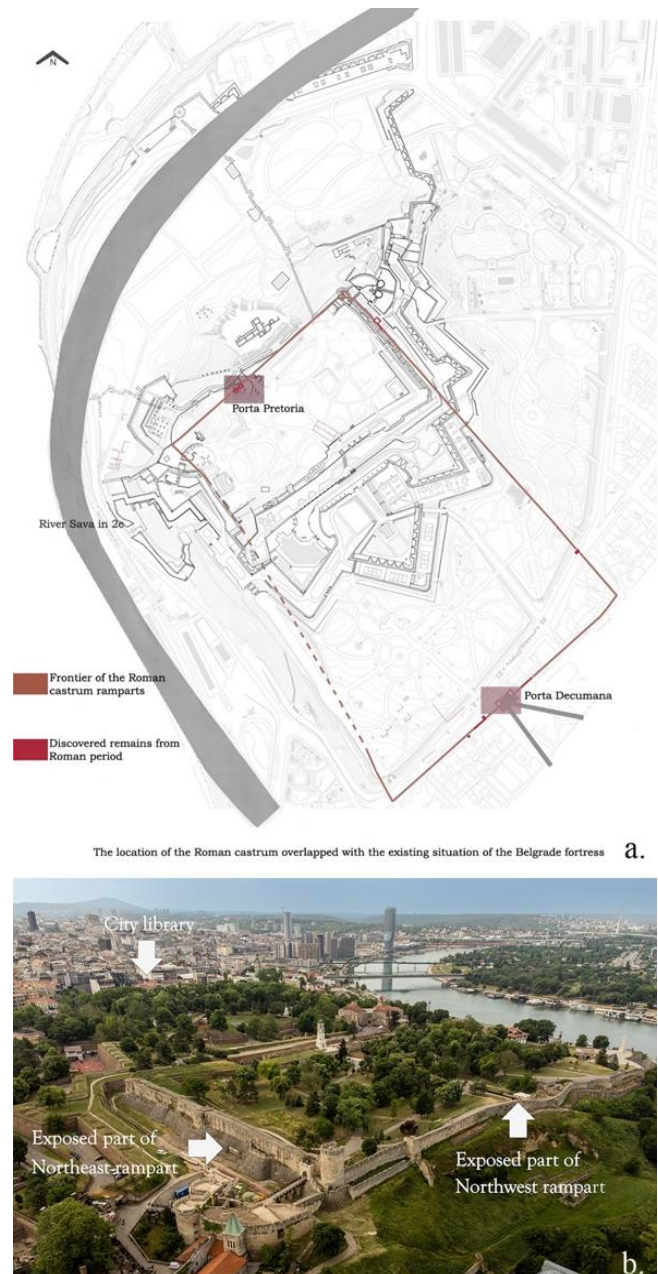
The camp of the Legion IV Flavia Felix was transferred from Viminacium to Singidunum circa 91 AD. This legionary camp became a vital fortification that, according to Procopius, was later rebuilt by Justinian in the 6<sup>th</sup> century [5,6]. Today, the remains of this castrum, with approximate dimensions of 568 × 430 meters [7], lie beneath modern Belgrade. Today, what was once a great military fort of Flavia's Legion lies beneath modern structures, and its shape and form can be understood, aside from literature, only through archaeological excavations and sporadic discoveries that have appeared over the years in different parts of Belgrade [8,9] (Fig. 2b).

### Investigative Archaeology and Key Findings

Systematic archaeological research in Belgrade began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century [10]. Significant breakthroughs occurred during the German occupation in 1942, when Wilhelm Unverzagt conducted excavations on the northern rampart of the Belgrade Fortress [11,12]. In later decades, the *Porta Praetoria* (the northwestern gate) was discovered (Fig. 2a) [13]. The route of the castrum reveals that the gate discovered within the City Library building sits directly opposite the *Porta Praetoria*, aligned on a central axis [14]. The remains discovered during the 1985 Library excavation belong to the Southeast Rampart [15], specifically a portion of the *Porta Decumana* (the southeastern gate). This massive structure, measuring 28 meters in length and 9 meters in width, was situated on the route of the ancient *Via Cardo*—today the site of Belgrade's main pedestrian street, Knez Mihailova.

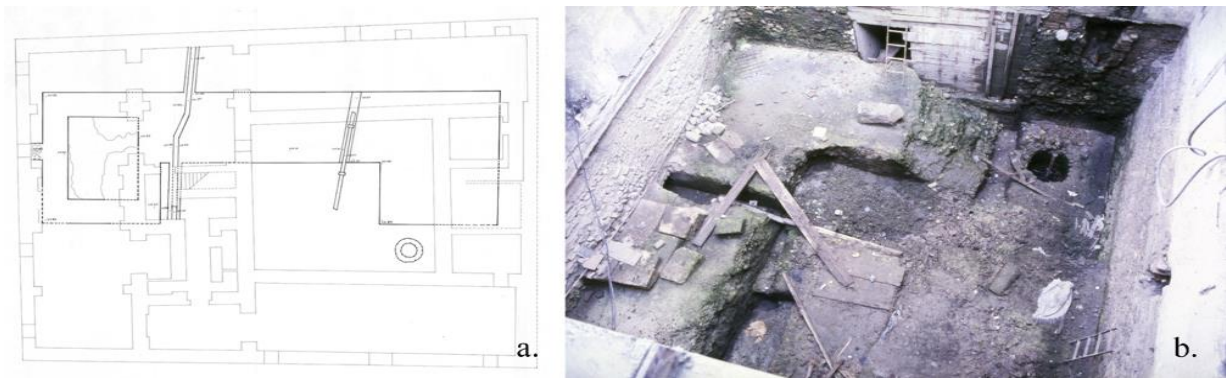
The gate's passage originally consisted of three archways: a central portal for carts and two flanking portals for pedestrians. Based on the foundation depth, the structure is estimated to have stood over 20 meters tall, making it one of the most imposing buildings in ancient Singidunum. Additional findings in the Library include: A lead pipe, which was part of a sophisticated aqueduct system that supplied the fortress with water, medieval well attributed to the Turkish period, which was discovered near the Roman tower (recorded in 1985 but not currently exposed) and *Via Decumana*: one of the main streets of the fortress, identified in 2009 under modern tram tracks, which led from this southeastern gate toward the *praetorium* (commandant's building) [16].

While many parts of the castrum have been re-covered after documentation, the remains within the City Library are among the few preserved *in situ* and accessible to the public, forming the heart of what is now known as the "Roman Hall" (Fig. 3a,b).



**Fig. 2.** a. Plan of Belgrade fortress with incorporated plan of Roman castrum and discovered archaeological remains; b. Parts of the Roman ramparts exposed at the Belgrade fortress, with the position of the City Library



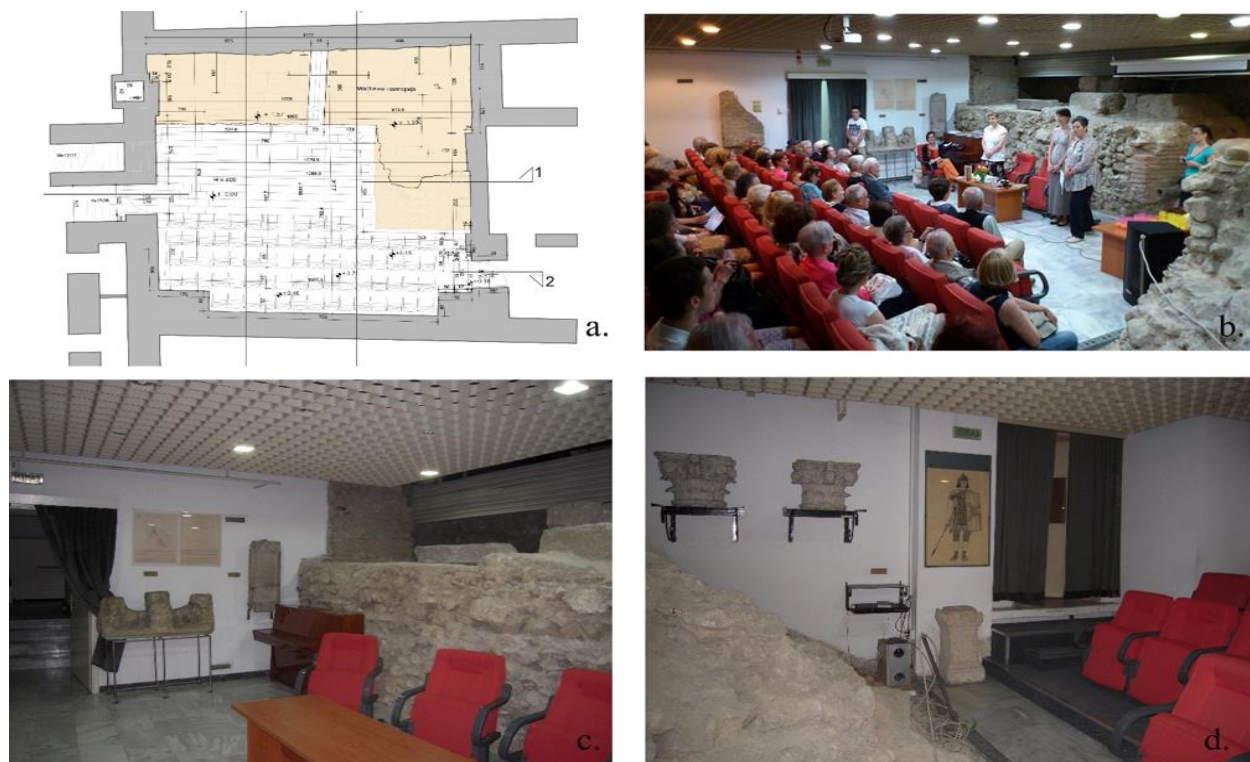


**Fig. 3.** a. Plan of the remains of the Roman southeast rampart discovered in the City Library in 1985<sup>2</sup>; b. Photo of discovered findings in 1985

### The 2015 Adaptation Project: Methodology and Implementation - Project Background and Initial State

In 1985, during the initial conversion of the "Serbian Crown" hotel into the City Library, the discovery of significant Roman remains led to a pivotal design shift. The space originally intended for book storage was redesigned as the "Roman Hall", a multipurpose venue for cultural events. However, between 1985 and 2014, the interior remained largely unchanged (Fig. 4a-d).

By 2014, the Library management initiated a modern adaptation project. Initial investigative works revealed that the Roman ramparts and tower were in a state of advanced degradation. Mortar was crumbling, and the absence of physical barriers allowed visitors to walk directly over the ancient masonry. The hall was cluttered with unsuitable furniture, outdated lighting, and poor ventilation, while the "lapidarium" collection on the walls, though valuable, visually burdened the space and distracted from the *in-situ* remains (Fig. 4c,d).



**Fig. 4.** a. Plan of "Roman hall" before the works in 2015<sup>3</sup>; b.<sup>4</sup>; c, d. Photo of "Roman hall" in the basement of the City Library before 2015

<sup>2</sup> Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture grada Beograda, Tehnička dokumentacija: 1985 Arheološki nalazi u Biblioteci grada Beograda (in Serbian).

<sup>3</sup> Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture grada Beograda, Tehnička dokumentacija: 2015 Projekat adaptacije Rimske dvorane u Biblioteci grada Beograda (in Serbian).

<sup>4</sup> Belgrade City Library (BGB), "Roman Hall" with Archaeological Site, official website (in Serbian). Available at: <https://bgb.rs/sr/rimska-dvorana/> (accessed on August 3, 2026).

To establish a sound conservation strategy, the project began with a thorough analysis of the existing environment. This included: documentation review, analyzing 1985 archaeological reports and photographs to compare the current state with the original discovery; material analysis, assessing the degree of endangerment and risks to the Roman stone and mortar; stakeholder interviews, consulting with the Library Director and technical staff to understand operational requirements; and technical recording, creating a high-precision survey of the hall, including the ramparts and tower. The complexity of the site, an underground archaeological zone within a cultural monument, required an integrated design team. The Cultural Heritage Preservation Institute of Belgrade led the project, coordinating with external specialists to develop mechanical and electrical systems. Designers were granted creative freedom by the investor, with the only specific requirement being a collaborative choice of the primary color palette.

### Architectural and Conservation Intervention

The primary goal was to elevate the Roman remains from a "background element" to the hall's focal point. This was achieved through a four-segment strategy: conservation, interior redesign, and the modernization of mechanical and electrical installations. Professional conservators and archaeologists performed a deep cleaning of the masonry (Fig. 5). Damage from years of physical contact was repaired with materials compatible with the original Roman construction. To prevent future degradation, the rampart was physically separated from the public area. To create a neutral backdrop that highlights the ancient stone, the design used industrial, minimalist materials: a three-level, stepped wooden structure was installed for seating. This "tribune" style maximizes space and integrates modern technology, featuring built-in power and USB sockets for visitors. A suspended ceiling and rear wall were constructed from drawn steel mesh. This choice provides a contemporary aesthetic while allowing for the discrete integration of HVAC and lighting systems.



**Fig. 5.** *Cleaning of the rampart in 2015*

The outdated lighting was replaced with a dual-layered system. Overhead lights are hidden above the steel mesh, while a steel U-profile was installed along the base of the rampart to house LED strips. These graze the stone surface, emphasizing its texture and historical weight (Fig. 6a-d).

The floor was replaced with a modern cast floor (cement screed base), providing a seamless, durable surface. To demarcate the "sacred" archaeological zone, a bed of pebbles was placed in the steel U-profile, serving as both a visual and physical barrier without the need for intrusive fences.





**Fig. 6.** Roman hall. a, b. before the works; c, d. after the works

## Results and Discussion

The 2016 renovation successfully integrated four critical sectors: archaeological conservation, interior design, and the modernization of mechanical and electrical systems. By December 2016, the project, led by the Cultural Heritage Preservation Institute of Belgrade, had achieved a delicate balance between preserving the Roman fortifications and optimizing the hall's cultural utility.

The primary achievement of the project was the affirmation of the Roman rampart and tower. By reducing seating density and physically distancing the furniture from the masonry, the design created a clear distinction between the ancient ruins and the modern venue. This "coexistence of eras" is facilitated by physical protection: the introduction of a pebble-filled U-profile serves as a non-intrusive barrier, preventing physical contact while allowing for close visual inspection and technological modernization - the hall now functions as a high-tech cultural hub, equipped with integrated sound systems, projectors, and discreet electrical connectivity (USB and power sockets) within the tiered seating (Fig. 7a-d).



**Fig. 7.** a,b,c,d. Reuse of the "Roman hall" after the works



### Adaptive Reuse (AR) as a Theoretical Framework

The transformation of the Belgrade City Library serves as a sophisticated example of Adaptive Reuse. The project navigates several layers of AR: the building as built heritage, a historic monument, and an architectural landmark.

The essence of AR is the transition to a new purpose that differs from the original design intent. In this case, the discovery of the Roman castrum in 1985 forced an "unplanned" but vital shift in the building's evolution. While the 1980s intervention followed the standards of its time, preserving the facade and adapting the interior, the 2016 project represents a more nuanced, modern approach to AR. It acknowledges that the discovery of the subterranean layer fundamentally redefined the basement's utility, shifting it from a storage site to a public monument [17-19].

The "Roman Hall" stands as a rare success story in the Belgrade context. Historically, many significant findings in the city, including Roman baths, hospitals, and even the *Porta Praetoria*—were documented and re-covered with soil (*reburied*) [20] rather than presented to the public (Fig. 8a). In other instances, "reconstructions" were built above ground level, losing the authentic *in-situ* connection (Fig 8b), or presentation was reinterpreted with the artefacts brought from other archaeological sites dated from the same period as in Shopping center Rajiceva – next to the City Library [21] (Fig 8c).



**Fig. 8.** a. Excavated Roman baths in 1972; b. "Reconstruction" of Roman baths above the original ones; c. Reinterpretation of artefacts

In contrast, the "Roman Hall" project aligns with best practices observed across Europe, where archaeological discoveries made during infrastructure works are integrated into the living city. By keeping the *Porta Decumana* visible and accessible, the project avoids the destructive "above-ground reconstruction" models and instead provides an authentic encounter with Belgrade's ancient origins.

## Conclusion

The adaptation of the “Roman Hall” demonstrates that even within the structures of a high-value cultural monument, innovative interior design can revitalize stagnant heritage sites. This project serves as a definitive case study proving that the preservation of ancient structures does not require the exclusion of modern technology. On the contrary, the two can enhance one another, creating a space that functions simultaneously as a high-performance library and a living museum.

Achieving a successful synthesis between these disparate historical periods requires a design philosophy that prioritizes the ancient fabric above all else. In the case of the “Roman Hall”, the immeasurable value of the archaeological site dictates that the modern intervention remains subservient. Because the inherent “beauty of the space” is already articulated by the Roman masonry, contemporary design elements, such as the steel mesh and timber seating, were simplified and reduced to their functional essence to avoid competing with the past.

The discovery and subsequent revitalization of these ruins serve as a powerful narrative of Belgrade’s development. These structures, buried for centuries and rediscovered at the confluence of the Sava and Danube, testify to the city's enduring strategic and cultural wealth.

The process of designing and executing this project was both intellectually demanding and technically challenging. It required a delicate balance between the rigid requirements of conservation and the fluid needs of a modern library. Ultimately, it has been a distinct honor to contribute to the new identity of the “Roman Hall”, ensuring that the Roman rampart and tower are no longer mere relics of the basement but central, celebrated figures in Belgrade's living cultural landscape.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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