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# CULTURAL AND THERAPEUTIC LANDSCAPES IN THE ROLE OF HEALTHY CITIES

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## Abstract:

Fast global changes affect cities from both economic and social standpoints. The COVID 19 pandemic has completely reshaped urban life and led to a greater respect for social connectedness, mental health and well-being. During the pandemic, people went to parks, green areas and picnic areas more regularly, which showed the importance of the availability of public areas for exercising, stress relief and social interaction. In addition to improving the environment, green areas are crucial for rest and relaxation from the fast pace of urban life. This paper explores the potential of specific areas to encourage citizens to adopt a healthier lifestyle and increase their well-being, focusing on the cultural landscape of the historic Srpske Toplice (Gornji Šeher) neighborhood in Banja Luka, a segment of urban and architectural heritage that has preserved elements of local traditional architecture and culture.

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**This neighbourhood, known for its hot springs, was built under the Ottomans and has a unique combination of natural and architectural elements. The research discusses the importance of the connection between people and their environment, highlighting how cultural heritage and a sense of place can enhance citizens' mental health and well-being when utilized for therapeutic purposes. The cultural landscape of Srpske Toplice was built between a green area (Starčevica Nature Park) and a blue area (Vrbas River). This paper presents a case study that aims to enhance our understanding of landscapes by considering the cultural, spiritual, emotional, physical and social well-being of communities.**

***Key words:* healthy cities, therapeutic landscapes, heritage, Banja Luka.**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The fast pace of life and the growing impact of chronic diseases make the importance of caring for public health ever greater. This paper explores open spaces such as urban parks, forests and gardens as resources that can help people improve their mental and physical health, rest, connect with nature, engage in physical activities and nurture social connections. It is necessary to ensure that cities are sustainable, vibrant, accessible, and well planned and designed, in order to support the health and well-being of their residents. According to the World Health Organization definition, healthy cities are characterized by safety, perceived attractiveness, convenience and timely accessibility (WHO, 2003). The concept of healthy cities and ensuring good health in the context of urban environments was discussed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, due to a decline in urban living conditions resulting from the fast urbanization of cities.

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw the development of many agendas and related projects for improving health in urban spaces. The COVID 19 pandemic has changed habits regarding the use of urban space. The Charter of Public Space, adopted at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Biennial held in Rome (UN Habitat, 2013), states that “public spaces are a key element of individual and social well-being, the places of a community’s collective life, expressions of the diversity of their common natural and cultural richness and a foundation of their identity. The community recognizes itself in its public places and pursues the improvement of their spatial quality” (UN Habitat, 2013).

The foundations of the initiative to make cities healthy and smart by establishing a historic connection between urban planning and public health strategies can be found in Agenda 21 (United Nations Sustainable Development, 1992), which addresses the planning of sustainable cities, adopted at the UN conference held in Rio de Janeiro. Many European countries have adopted Agenda 21 locally, considering people’s health and well-being as a key goal of urban planning. Involving a network of European cities in a campaign for healthy and sustainable cities has contributed to improving urban planning through integral planning, community involvement, inter-sectoral cooperation and political support. Many European cities have been involved in the implementation of an approach to urban planning that takes into account citizen health and well-being, since planners and architects have become more aware of the need to plan for a quality life, in line with sustainable development principles. Economic pressures, land use policy and community habits are challenges faced by cities when applying the principles of healthy urban planning. Further, cities working towards the goal of healthy urban planning develop strategies sensitive to

their spatial resources and the cultural habits of their citizens. These strategies are informed by the awareness of the need to protect natural and cultural heritage and regenerate the environment to safeguard its historical, cultural and environmental resources.

Cities and their environment are considered to be a coherent unit. A landscape is a part of a life cycle that creates a holistic perspective in terms of the relationship between health and well-being. Landscapes are special places and research has determined a positive connection between places and the well-being of citizens (McIntosh *et al.*, 2018). The first studies on landscapes were carried out by geographers in the latter half of the 1960s, when they became a field of interest for sociologists, psychologists and architects. Many sociologists identified the impact of landscapes on people's development and their character and vice versa. The World Heritage Convention (UNESCO, 1992) introduced the term "cultural landscape" as the "combined works of nature and man". The term embraces a diversity of manifestations of the interaction between humankind and the natural environment. Riley (1992) defines an affective relationship between people and landscapes that have a cultural form, with continuity and values inherent to human culture. The American geographer Will Gesler was the first to introduce the phrase "therapeutic landscape" in 1992 to refer to places that provide physical, mental and spiritual healing (Gesler, 1992). Such places are labeled therapeutic landscapes, "where physical and built environments, social conditions and human perception combine to produce an atmosphere which is conducive to healing" (Gesler, 1992). Gesler focused on studies that connected health and places as an aspect of health geography. The European Landscape Convention further defines and delimits the notion of "cultural landscape", making it a legal term and permitting effective protection of such landscapes (Žganec-Brajša, 2021).

In recent decades, there have been many studies into the therapeutic qualities of places from the social, cultural, tangible, sensual, and affective perspectives, using new terms and phrases such as "network", "experiences", "environment", "mobility", "gatherings", and "qualification of a place" (Marques *et al.*, 2021). Many cultures nurture a tradition of healthy lifestyles and use forests as therapeutic environments. In Japan this is known as "Shinrin yoku" (meaning "forest bathing"), in Korea it is called "Sanlimyok", in Ireland Boladh na Sioga and in Serbia "Shumadian forest hammam". All of these phrases refer to walking through forests as an element of therapy. Many European countries conduct forest therapy and aromatherapy as preventive healthcare measures (Finland, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Austria, Spain, Portugal, etc.). During previous years, Harvard Medical School of Public Health has organized workshops exploring how to integrate elements of nature into city plans in order to enhance the quality of human life. There are very few studies that deal with including architectural and natural heritage, even though their significance has been recognized in recent years.

There are historical places with unique features that not only help define a city's identity but also possess therapeutic potential. Historical places offer the possibility of combining the hedonic (subjective) and eudaimonia (psychological) effects of well-being (Sofaer *et al.*, 2021). A study conducted in 1999 explored the healing aspects of "special" places such as pilgrimage sites, forests and thermal springs (Bell *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, there is increasing recognition of the positive relationship between spiritual activities and health, particularly through the examination of spiritual places known for their healing and healthful qualities (Williams, 2010). Closing cities due to the COVID 19 pandemic prevented people from visiting historical places, which raised awareness of their value once these places were

reopened. Studies show that after the reopening of borders, many people decided to visit historical places and spend time there. One can conclude that cultural landscapes – often open spaces that promote a sense of belonging – are beneficial for people's mental and physical health and foster an emotional connection to historical places.

According to McIntosh *et al.* (2021), the concept of therapeutic landscape nowadays has been expanded to encompass its social role and its contribution to the promotion of health and healing. This change of a place's role occurs when there is a change in the approach to a therapeutic landscape and a focus on the tangible, social, ethnological, historical and cultural experience of a place. According to Cameron Duff (2011), therapeutic environments can be assessed and categorized in terms of their tangible, social and affective properties. Tangible resources are characterized as the tangibility of a place, its approach, services and information. Social resources are those that improve social connectedness and create opportunities for interactions. The affective dimension is the basis for identifying with a place and having a sense of belonging, and it also concerns the meaning a place has for an individual or a group (Duff, 2011). Foley and Kistemann (2015) deal with the embodied experiences of therapeutic landscapes as a collection of affects, emotions and bodily experiences. Williams (2009) describes the relationship between health and places using six categories, which, together with the promotion of health, are important from social, cultural, ecological and historical standpoints. One can conclude that therapeutic landscapes are much more than bodily experiences, since they create emotional, historical, cultural, economic, social, aesthetic and other relationships. Therapeutic landscapes stimulate all five senses, build stronger connections between people, and enhance the relationship between individuals and nature.

## **2. METHODOLOGY AND STRATEGY OF THE RESEARCH**

This paper presents a case study of the historical neighborhood of Srpske Toplice in Banja Luka, exploring its potential as a recreational area and therapeutic space for locals. The research takes into consideration previous studies of this old neighborhood for insights relevant to the subject, as well as other important themes. The research method used was a comparative analysis of different theories of healthy cities and cultural landscapes using results achieved in previous studies, both in the world and in the region. The topic includes examples from relevant literature dealing with the relationship between people and their environment, the emotional aspects of this relationship such as a sense of place, and a symbolic and humanistic approach. It is necessary to turn the attention of scientists dealing with health to useful concepts in spatial planning in order to encourage new studies.

The neighborhood of Srpske Toplice was selected for its unique natural and built environment. As Banja Luka's oldest urban core, it holds significant symbolic and historical value and plays an important role in the city's memory. In order to understand the studied location, we analyzed it using historical and current maps, which include the surrounding area, featuring forests and the Vrbas River. The results can be used to explore ways to enhance the characteristics of the area and, through urban regeneration, increase its economic viability and liveability, as well as the possibility of transforming its landscape to add to the wellness agenda and support related contemporary lifestyle trends. The paper also analyzes spatial planning practices, from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, focusing on applicable urban plans and protection measures. In order to

understand how people use this area, relevant information was obtained from stakeholders and authorities from different organizations in charge of planning activities in the area.

### 3. THERAPEUTIC LANDSCAPES AND ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

A landscape includes not only the natural characteristics of the land with vegetation, morphology and hydrology but also the spiritual, cultural, social and aesthetic values and attributes. The word landscape was used in the Old English language as *landscaef* and it referred to the shape of the land. With the shift from Old to Contemporary English (16<sup>th</sup> century), the word landscape stopped being used in England. A similar word in the Dutch language, *lanschape*, was used by painters in order to mark village scenery paintings. Later, the word was used again in England for depicting nature (Online etymology dictionary, 2021).

The European Landscape Convention (2000) defines a landscape as “an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors”. Landscapes and the environment were of particular interest to geographers in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Architect Christian Norberg-Schulz (1979) became interested in the phenomenology of landscapes, examining the phrase “genius loci” and exploring the characters of places and their significance for people. Cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove explored the concept of a landscape, its symbolic meaning (Cosgrove, 1985), and its status in cultural paintings (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988). Landscapes have a prominent place and a positive role in the well-being and mental health of people. Cullen considers that landscapes have become a part of architecture (Engler, 2016). This has encouraged researchers to examine health geography, including its social and cultural roots, experiences and notions. British researchers have noticed an improvement in mental health in green areas, while degradation of the environment leads to the deterioration of health, depression and the loss of a sense of place (Africa *et al.*, 2014). Over time, studies have also focused on historical places with preserved architectural and natural heritage, showing that cultural heritage can have an important role in enhancing people’s well-being. Staying in a historical place has been shown to evoke positive emotions, serenity and a sense of identity and belonging; thus, Darvill *et al.* (2018) believe that many ancient places, from stone circles to churches, restore the health of the soul and body through ceremonies related to them. Nowadays, many countries use the potential of cultural heritage to improve the physical and mental health of their population. For example, in Great Britain there are 2,400 projects regarding studies of historical environments in which the wider community is involved (Darvill *et al.*, 2018). Examples of therapeutic landscapes related to architectural heritage include gardens, forests, Roman baths, riversides and local nature reserves.

Sofaer *et al.* (2021) studied the impact of heritage on well-being, concluding that architectural heritage increases hedonism and eudaimonia through the possibility of subjective well-being, doing physical activities, awaking the senses and developing a sense of connection with the environment. Their research was conducted before and after closure due to the COVID 19 pandemic, and it is important for its conclusions that historical places became significant after reopening, raising awareness of the value of heritage and its influence on citizens’ happiness. A study on the use of cultural English heritage for improving mental health and well-being was published in “Historic landscapes and mental well-being” (Darvill *et al.*, 2018). Using the example of English heritage through the project Human

Henge, which started with Stonehenge as a historic landscape, Allfreyii (2019) showed a connection between heritage and human well-being, concluding that people felt happier and more connected to each other in a historical landscape. The project, initially focused on archeological sites and landscapes, expanded to include historic cities and cultural monuments. It was determined that these sites positively impact mental and physical health, ultimately enhancing social and sports activities. The physical dimensions of places were analyzed by Bell *et al.* (2018) in relation to the role of “green” and “blue” spaces. The authors claim that green spaces – such as gardens, parks, and forests – demonstrate the healing properties of nature, and they promote health education by encouraging exercise in open areas. Blue spaces are outdoor spaces with water features (islands, cities, rivers, coasts, lakes, seas) that promote healthy living. MacKian (2008) calls for greater respect of the intangible values of landscapes that affect people’s health, while highlighting that creating therapeutic landscapes is partly a political project that gives priority to some aspects and marginalizes others. The paper analyzes the relationship between natural, cultural and architectural elements in order to better understand cultural and therapeutic landscapes through the embodiment of emotional, social and spiritual experiences. This case study of Srpske Toplice employs the phrase “palette of places”, originally introduced by Bell *et al.* (2018) to examine the physical properties of diverse locations – ranging from parks and villages to coastal and suburban areas, as well as hospital yards, plots and gardens – that could be connected in the context of health to benefit diverse citizen groups. The project Between the Barrows (2019) enhanced the understanding of local heritage, education and the engagement of people in the natural environment through volunteering in archeological research (Elmer, 2016). Notably, the University College London Museums Collection (UCLMC) conducted important research on utilizing heritage for human health by allowing patients undergoing medical treatment to touch and handle museum items.

### **3.1. The process of including heritage in therapeutic landscapes**

Certain approaches can enhance the contribution of historical environments and cultural heritage to well-being. Based on experiences with English heritage, Reilly *et al.* (2018) outline six principles to guide these approaches: heritage as a process, heritage as participation (through volunteer projects), heritage as a mechanism (using heritage to gather people through mutual interests), heritage as healing (through cultural inclusion), heritage as a place (return of a sense of place), and heritage as an environment (a connection between the historical characteristics of a place and well-being).

These principles facilitate the inclusion of cultural landscapes and architectural and cultural heritage in the development of healthy cities, thereby increasing citizens’ physical and mental health. This includes, among other things, promoting physical activity in historical sites, fostering new relationships with the past, encouraging social interaction, raising awareness of heritage, cultivating a collective sense of community and developing a sense of place.

#### 4. DEVELOPMENT OF BANJA LUKA THROUGH HISTORY

The first written data about the city of Banja Luka date back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the Charter of the Hungarian king Vladislaus II Jagiellon. The development of the city started in the Roman period, when the Romans found a location with mineral hot springs in Srpske Toplice on the right bank of the river Vrbas. In Turkish records, Banja Luka is called Eski Banja Luka (Old Banja Luka), that is, Gornji Šeher (Upper Town), as opposed to Donji Šeher (new Banja Luka) (Republički zavod za zaštitu kulturno-istorijskog i prirodnog nasljeđa Republike Srpske, 2007). On the left bank of the Vrbas was the main Roman road that led from Split (Salona) to Gradiška (Servitium).

While the Romans established a fortification called Kastel on the bank of the Vrbas River, it was only with the arrival of the Ottomans in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that Banja Luka's urban development began. The first settlement that was built during the Ottoman Empire was Gornji Šeher, located on the left and right banks of the Vrbas, which stretched to the Suturlija River. The settlement was built according to the principles of oriental cities, meaning that the first building to be constructed was a mosque, and if there was a need to build faster, they would build a musalla for praying, which was cheaper. A musalla with stone walls was built in Gornji Šeher and its position was very important in the context of urbanism since it was situated in the center of the settlement. Later, the Emperor's Mosque and Kuttab (Arabic; a type of elementary school in the Muslim world) were built, around which there was a craft and shopping zone and a residential area, as the first settlement in Banja Luka. The settlement Gornji Šeher had nine *mahalas* (from Arabic/Turkish Mahallah – a section of an urban settlement; mahala is a widely-used term for a neighborhood in Balkan countries (authors' comment)); there were five mahalas on the right bank of the Vrbas, where thermal springs are located, and four on its left bank (Husedžinović and Balić, 2004). At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the economy was located in four craft and shopping zones and residential areas: Donji Šeher, Gornji Šeher, Mala Čaršija (Small Settlement) and Novoselija (Hadžialić *et al.*, 1975). Banja Luka became the center of the Bosnian region, that is, the political, cultural and administrative center of Bosnia at that time (Husedžinović, 2020). The Gornji Šeher settlement developed around the thermal springs between Banj Brdo (Šehitluci) and the Vrbas River. The settlement features recognizable architectural, natural, environmental and historical heritage. After the capital of Bosnia moved from Banja Luka to Sarajevo, the city started to stagnate. The Ilidža mahala, a segment of the Gornji Šehere settlement, was known for its thermal springs, distinctive architecture and *hauzi* (plural for *hauz*), i.e., enclosed baths that existed in almost every house (Husedžinović and Balić, 2004). The design of a *hauz* differs from that of the traditional Turkish bath or hammam; typically, it is a one-room masonry (stone) structure with a perforated ventilation dome made from brick, and it contains a bath or a small pool, whose bottom is covered in pebbles and which is surrounded with wooden benches.

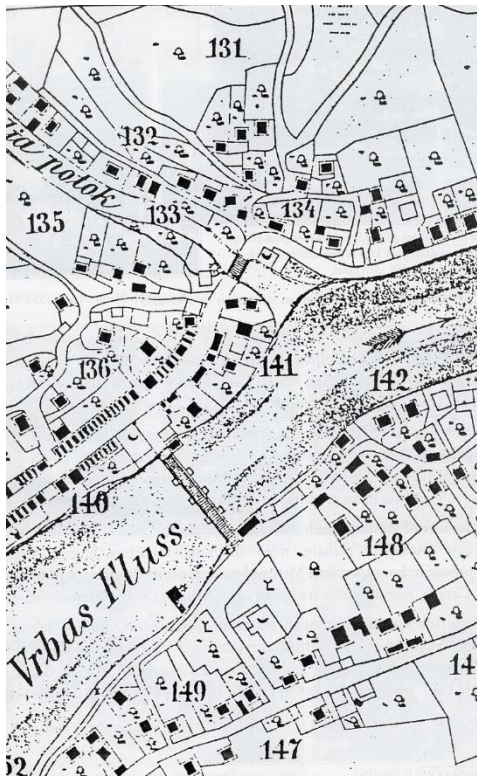


Figure 1 (left). Geodetic map from 1884 – transformation of medieval Banja Luka under the influence of oriental urbanism (Source: Husedžinović, 2005)

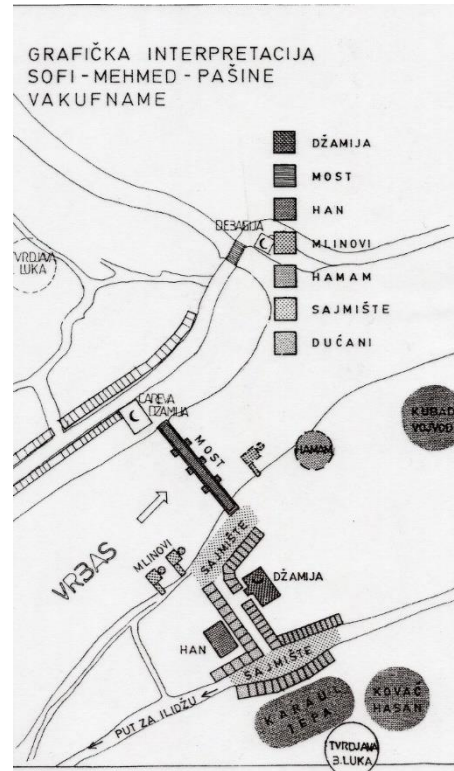


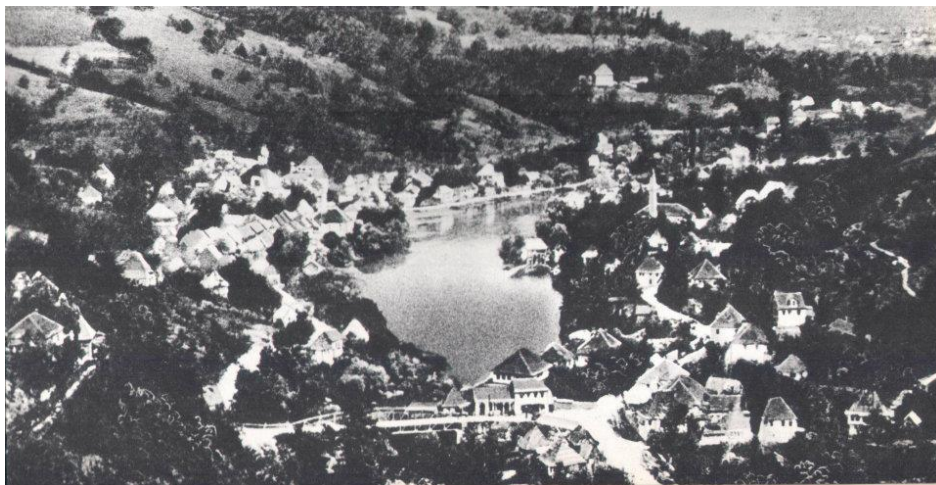
Figure 2 (right). Reconstruction of the Sofi Mehmed Pasha Charitable Endowment (Source: Husedžinović, 2005)

Similar to Central European cities, Banja Luka's urbanization started in Donji Šeher, in its northern part, after the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The part of the city built during the Ottoman Empire started to disappear and a new, European part was added, with the city core moving to the area north of the Crkvena River. Intensive building in the city and its modernization started under Austro-Hungarian authorities; this primarily concerned the area along Carski Drum (Imperial Road) and the facilities built for the needs of the new administration and its troops. Important public facilities, which contributed to creating the recognizable image of the current Banja Luka, were built in the central core in the period between the two world wars (Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture i prirode Banja Luka, 1991; Republički zavod za zaštitu kulturno-istorijskog i prirodnog naslijeđa Republike Srpske, 2007). During the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the settlement of Gornji Šeher did not go through any major changes. It lost its significance after the new city core was built on the model of Central European cities. Under Austro-Hungarian rule, Banja Luka developed as a craft and industrial center. The Crkvina River was the natural border between the area of the city built under the Ottomans and erected by the Austro-Hungarians (Ševo, 1996). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Banja Luka went through the greatest urban development during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, between the two world wars, when it became the center of the Vrbas Banate. In this period Banja Luka developed as



the cultural, administrative and industrial center of Bosanska Krajina (Republic of Srpska Institute for the Protection of Cultural, Historical and Natural Heritage, 2007; Official Gazette of the City of Banja Luka, No. 11/14). After the 1990s Wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Banja Luka became the cultural, university and administrative center of the entity of the Republic of Srpska.

The heritage of Gornji Šeher was compromised by social degradation due to the city's urbanization in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The loss of the authentic character of this neighborhood was caused by the earthquake that hit Banja Luka in 1969. Uncontrolled reconstruction and the loss of interest in investing in local communities in this area decreased the value of the historical part of the city. The 1990s Wars and the departure of its citizens contributed to Gornji Šeher's marginalization in the urban structure of the city. The enclosed baths or *hauzi* were preserved only in some facilities. The size and style of Srpske Toplice's newly built architecture compromised the environmental value of the neighborhood. Today, this area is underutilized in terms of its economic potential and other resources.



*Figure 3. Former center and settlement Gornji Šeher (Source: Arhiv Republike Srpske (1953-1993))*

#### **4.1 Environmental and landscape properties of the Srpske Toplice neighborhood**

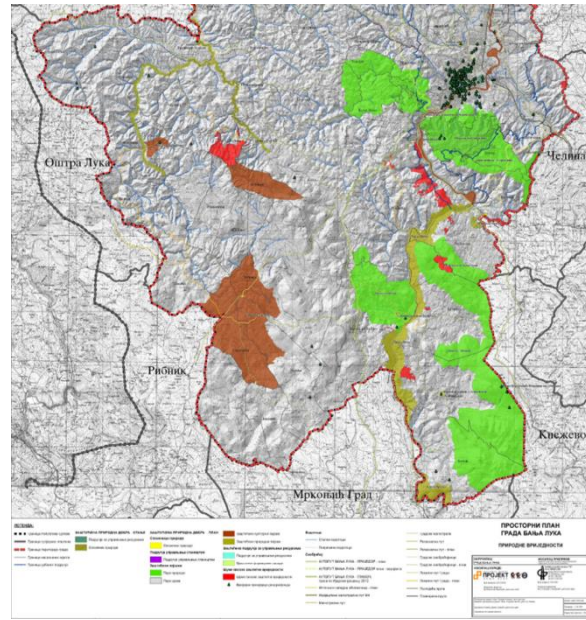
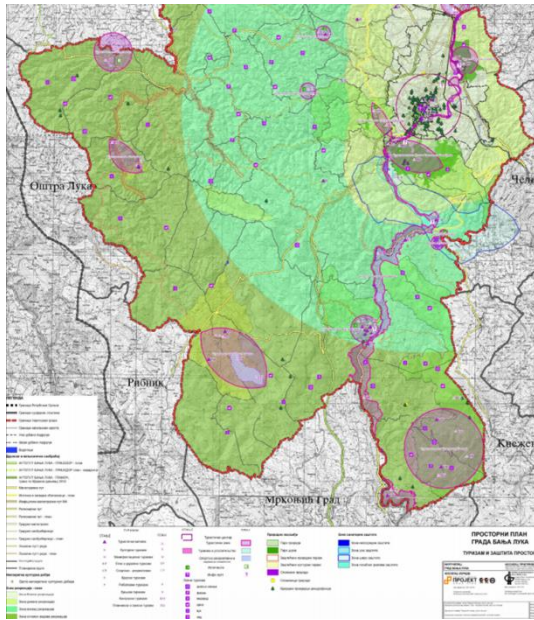
The Ilidža mahala formed in the area between the Brbas River and Banj Brdo and was named after the hot springs in it and a warm stream that ran between these springs on its way to the river. The earliest structures built in the mahala were hauzes and two small mills, which stayed in operation even in the harshest of winters. In common with any other oriental urban unit, a mosque was built and became the centre of the mahala, where locals met to converse. Since the area was sloping, the family houses, the dominant architectural element of the mahala, stood one above and behind the other, receding to ensure they all had a view of the river and received maximum insolation. In addition, the neighborhood was anthropometric, with man as the measure of both the housing units and the urban unit as a whole (Husedžinović, 2020). The peculiar combination of oriental architecture and environmental characteristics, including the climate and the adjacent forest, give the area a special ambience.

What made this neighborhood special was its direct connection with the natural resources of the area. The existence of hot springs across such a relatively small area impacted the organization of human activity. In building houses, the local inhabitants took the springs into account and put them to use: they brought warm water inside the houses and installed baths in separate indoor rooms, or they erected houses next to the pools with thermal water, sometimes even incorporating them in the houses, or built pools in their gardens to be filled with thermal water. These private baths, which are one of Gornji Šeher's most prominent features, show how wellness has historically been associated with the environmental characteristics/geographic features of the area.

Gornji Šeher was first listed as a monument under the name of Stara Banja (Old Spa) in Banja Luka in 1950 (Official Gazette of Bosnia and Herzegovina 90/06). This decision stipulated the obligation to define special measures for its urbanization in line with strategic documents. The 1975 Banja Luka Urban Plan stated that, in addition to its historic and environmental properties, this area represented an urban landscape, i.e., that it was characterized by a special connection between its built structures and natural surroundings. This document recognized the importance of the whole neighborhood, including its surroundings, not only of its area featuring thermal springs.

While the elements of great value in Gornji Šeher include hot springs and thermal baths, the neighborhood is also notable for the size and location of its houses and buildings; namely, they show that the right of view, a construction principle strictly adhered to in the Ottoman Empire, was also respected here. The 1975 Urban Plan thus listed the neighborhood of Gornji Šeher as Category III Heritage, and the 1980 Spatial Plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina listed Stara Banja as a Category II Cultural and Historical Monument (Službeni glasnik BiH, br. 90/06). A spatial planning decision declared the Ilidža Mahala in Gornji Šeher protected natural and cultural heritage, forbidding all construction in it beyond maintenance and landscaping. Gornji Šeher became a special cultural and historical heritage area that should only develop according to decisions and solutions specified in the above listed plans. Most recently, the cultural landscape of Srpske Toplice was listed as a national monument of Bosnia and Herzegovina according to the Decision of the Commission to Preserve National Monuments of Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the same decision, the Government of Republika Srpska is obliged to provide legal, scientific, technical, administrative and financial measures for the protection, conservation, restoration and presentation of the complex (Službeni glasnik BiH, br. 57/20).

The 2014 Urban Plan of Banja Luka lists Srpske Toplice as a tourist area, including Banj Brdo, the thermal springs, the Šeher Spa and Recreation Center, and the Banj Brdo Hill picnic site. The thermal springs of Srpske Toplice, along with its other resources – such as religious architecture, natural features and the picnic site – greatly enhance the city's tourist potential. The 2014 Urban Plan proposes the development of food service, wellness and sports-related economic activities in the area. It aims to utilize the rich local landscape and both natural and built resources to ensure sustainable economic, social, and urban development.



Figures 4 and 5. The connection between the built and natural environments of Srpske Toplice, including Banj Brdo Hill: the area as a tourist site (left) and a cultural landscape and nature park (right) (Source: Službeni glasnik Grada Banja Luka, br. 11/14)

The Gornji Šeher neighborhood is not sufficiently promoted by the Tourist Organization of Banja Luka. Banj Brdo Hill is the only part of the area accessible to tourists, who can take scenic buses from the foot to the top. The Vrbas River as a protected natural landscape is known for rafting and dayak (a special local kind of canoe-like boat) riding. Currently, there are no organized visits to Gornji Šeher; however, it, along with other tourist attractions, could certainly be included as potential activities for visitors. For instance, developing Gornji Šeher as a wellness area ought to include the rebuilding of the hammam and the regeneration of other historical places and functions.

#### 4.2 Palettes of places – the wider surroundings of the Srpske Toplice (Gornji Šeher) neighborhood

The area around the spatial and environmental unit of Srpske Toplice contains a range of “green” and “blue” spaces. It is a recreational zone lying along the Vrbas River, as its central geomorphological and visual element, and it has walking trails, picnic sites, architectural heritage and rich forests. The forest and picnic sites analyzed in this paper belong to zone two vegetation and are part of the green ring surrounding the city, as specified by the urban plans. The peculiar environment and the architectural heritage of the neighbourhood can be connected to add to the wellness agenda. The paper analyzes wider spaces based on units defined in the Spatial plan of Banja Luka. These places are perceived as having the potential to attract locals and tourists alike, as long as their shared interests are identified and the area developed accordingly.

The architectural complex located on the right bank of the Vrbas River in the Ilidža mahala, part of the Srpske Toplice neighborhood, whose identity is marked by springs of

thermal water represents a “blue space”. This area includes three archeological sites excavated at different times and enjoying different levels of protection, despite being in the same location. These three sites refer to places where a Roman spa, 3<sup>rd</sup>-century coins and 4<sup>th</sup>-century coins were found. In the adjacent area, there are remnants of two fortified settlements, so-called *gradine*, one above the Suturlija near Vrcina Glavica and the other at the confluence of the Suturlija and Vrbas Rivers. There are also remains of a town called Pletengrad (Pletingrad) at the top of the hill. The mahala was constructed in harmony with natural resources, with hot springs incorporated into residential facilities. Thermal baths were enclosed in separate rooms or located in distinct facilities within the gardens. The majority of houses in Iliđža had hot baths in the ground hall (Husedžinović, 2005). The use of thermal water contributes to the architecture that makes this neighborhood distinctive, with half-dome facilities, so-called *hauzi*, found in almost every house. These take the form of separate structures or rooms added to family houses. The authenticity of this neighborhood contributes also to the oriental architecture of the residential facilities.



Figure 6. Residential architecture in Gornji Šeher (Source: Authors)



Figure 7. A “hauz” beside a residential facility and Ebin’s hauz (Source: Republički zavod za zaštitu kulturno-istorijskog i prirodnog nasljeđa Republike Srpske, 2007)

The neighborhood is not sufficiently promoted in for the purpose of tourism, neither is its potential sufficiently used due to poor infrastructure, difficult access and ruined spas. Currently, Banjsko rekreativni centar (Spa and recreational center) is being reconstructed, and within it there is a plan to organize recreational activities in addition to therapy.

The Vrbas River and its banks, as a protected natural landscape, is a “blue” space that can be potentially used for health improvement. The Spatial plan of Banja Luka (2014) defines this space as an opportunity for developing the Vrbas as a tourist zone which, due to its falls, rapids, steep rocks and rich biodiversity of flora and fauna, provides lots of possibilities for the development of sport and recreational activities (rafting, swimming, dayak, kayak-canoe, sport fishing), adventure, fishing, scientific and picnic tourism. Water sports such as rafting, dayaking, kayaking, canoeing, and sport fishing are all special features of this river. It is therefore ideal for introducing sport and recreational zones focused on water sports.

The Suturlija-Šibovi Nature Park, which is located on the left bank of the Vrbas, is a protected natural landscape. According to the spatial plan, this area was planned as the Suturlija tourist zone, which includes the Suturlija River and Šibovi picnic site. This area should be adequately arranged and adapted to tourist purposes, with content including walking, cycling and trim trails, sport fields, and a children’s playground. It could also be upgraded by developing accommodation capacities and restaurants with national cuisine (Službeni glasnik Grada Banja Luka, br. 11/14).

The green space also includes Banj Brdo with the Trešnjik picnic site, which is a recreation tourist zone. During the COVID 19 pandemic, citizens used this space as a safe walking zone. There are no exact indicators that show the difference in using therapeutic landscapes before and after COVID 19, but there has been an apparent increase in interest in this space since COVID 19.

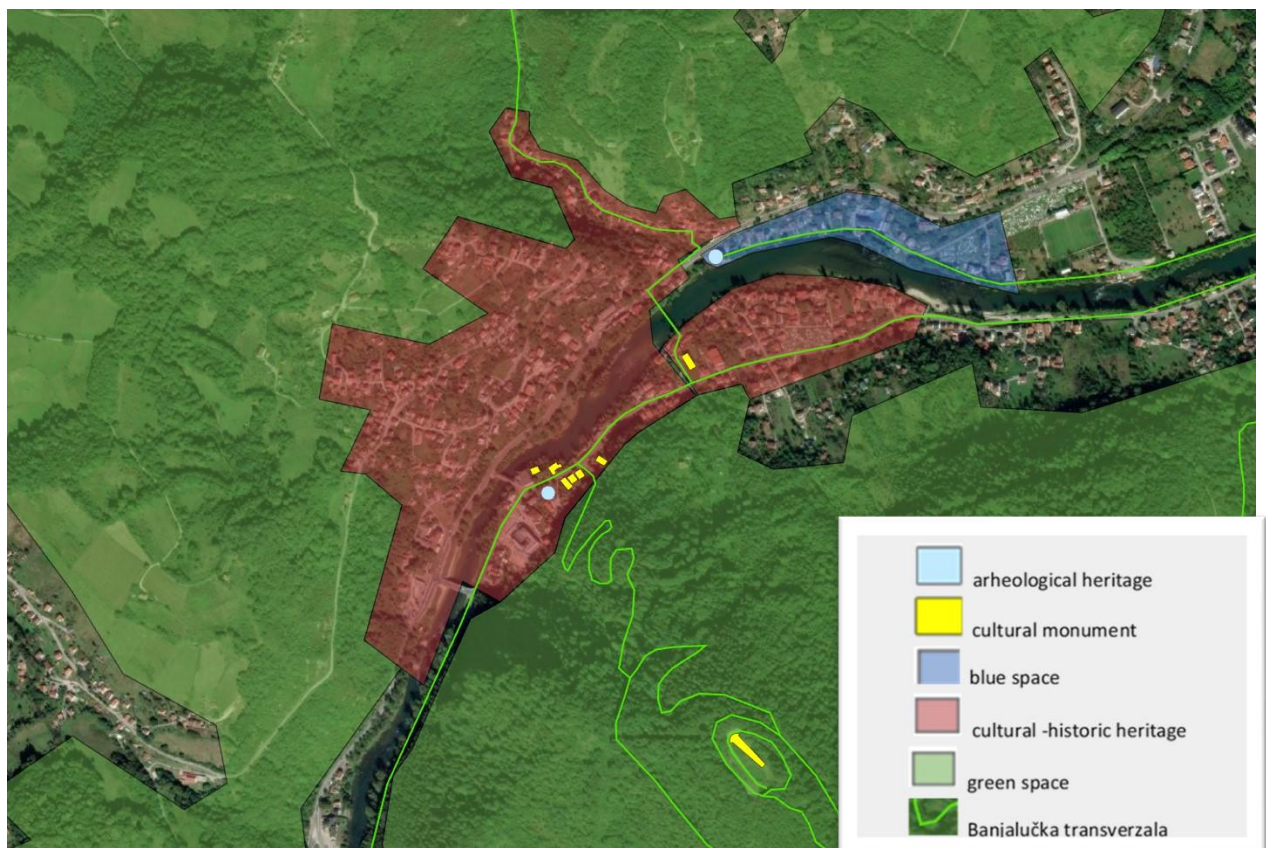


Figure 8. Palettes of spaces in Srpske Toplice (Gornji Šeher) (Source: Authors)

### 4.3. Protection of values and recommendations for further research

While discrete elements and places around this area hold a lot of potential, they do not work in synergy. These individual spaces are presented in the spatial plan as tourist zones, nature parks, and natural or cultural landscapes. It is necessary to look at these spaces as a unique therapeutic landscape with blue and green places. Gornji Šeher, with its thermal springs and hammams (Turkish baths), should be connected to the surrounding forest hammams. The Srpske Toplice neighborhood is an architectural complex of exceptional features and an environment listed as natural heritage. Treating this area as a therapeutic landscape would put architectural heritage in the service of citizens' healthy habits. Tangible and intangible heritage has a positive influence on mental health. In order to activate this zone, it is necessary to have health education and to promote outdoor activities.

*Table 1. Six principles that can help historical environments and cultural heritage improve people's well-being (Source: Authors, according to Reilly et al., 2018)*

Heritage as a process	Community involvement is minimal without cultural heritage projects. Heritage as a process requires voluntary community involvement to foster well-being. Due to the lack of data, it is impossible to determine the number of visitors to this historical environment.
Heritage as a mechanism	Cultural assets are the mechanism that bring people together: Banj Brdo (walking), the Vrbas River banks (picnicking) and the Vrbas River (rafting). The architectural ensemble of the Ilidža mahala that contains thermal baths is only rarely visited by tourists. Its reconstruction and revitalization would increase its use.
Heritage as healing	The Srpske Toplice/Gornji Šeher neighbourhood, with its blue and green spaces, helps to improve physical and mental health. The use of natural resources is extensive, but they need to be connected to cultural assets. The hiking trail widely known as "Banjalučka transverzala" is a good example of how natural and historical heritage can be connected for health and recreational purposes.
Heritage as a place	The "sense of place", i.e., the historical character of places in Srpske Toplice/Gornji Šeher holds promise for emotional connection, which can be strengthened if the cultural and historical character of these places is brought into focus. This is a way to unlock the potential for living with nature in urban areas.
Heritage as an environment	Some parts of the area can play a more important role regarding health habits (Banj Brdo, Suturlija, Šibovi). Knowledge about and reimagining architecture and natural heritage can change one's experience of a place. This is achievable in other places in the area through education about history (Ilidža mahala, Gornji Šeher) and the natural environment.



*Figure 9. Natural swimming pools with thermal water are located by the Vrbas River, in the Srpske Toplice neighborhood (Source: Authors)*

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

Research into the historical neighborhood of Srpske Toplice (Gornji Šeher) as a therapeutic landscape contributes to our understanding of places and their impact on social and cultural well-being. Cultural and therapeutic landscapes can be studied as part of contemporary life and cultural tradition. This paper examines the relationship between local citizens and this area as a whole. Its natural and architectural heritage was studied by exploring the palettes of places it contains. Cultural heritage can be a mechanism for attracting visitors. It can be concluded that Banj Brdo (walking), the river banks (picnicking) and the Vrbas River (rafting) are greatly used for improving physical health. The other “blue” and “green” spaces in the neighborhood are underutilized due to negligence, lack of infrastructure and lack of content. The hot spring architectural complex in the Ilidža mahala is infrequently visited by tourists and its nine baths, so-called hauzi, are used only very rarely. Their reconstruction and revitalization would increase the extent and frequency of their use. Developing this landscape as a therapeutic one would add holistic value to it, building a stronger connection between individuals and this spatial complex as a framework for the future. The blue and green spaces around the Srpske Toplice neighborhood should be developed as a unique therapeutic landscape, aligned with the principle of sustainable development, and the thermal baths in private houses should be activated through organized

support and promotion. There is a local tradition of using thermal springs dating back to the Ottoman Empire. Hence, saunas, called hammams, should be connected to green spaces and surrounding forests as “forest hammams”. All of this is an area of contemporary complementary medicine that includes forest medicine and aromatherapy as important aspects for preserving public health. This way, emotional connections with this place can be strengthened, reflecting a cultural and historical legacy and offering a new possibility for living with nature in urban places. Being able to access hot springs, the natural environment and the river bank in Srpske Toplice will enable the citizens of Banja Luka to improve their mental and physical health. Therapeutic landscapes can be understood as multilayered spaces, with diverse heritage, both tangible and intangible, which includes historical, socio-cultural and architectural monuments. The combination of tangible and intangible heritage in Srpske Toplice can thus directly influence the health and well-being of citizens. Certain parts of this landscape could be used more frequently and intensively to promote healthy habits (Banj Brdo, Suturlija, Šibovi), while education, studying history and obtaining knowledge about its environment can take place in its other places (Ilidža, Gornji Šeher). Reimaging architectural and natural heritage by giving them a therapeutic purpose can change the experience of the characteristics of a place. The hiking trail widely known as “Banjalučka transverzala” is a good example of how natural and historical heritage can be connected for health and recreational purposes. Spaces should be designed according to users’ needs, with a focus on intergenerational socialization. The whole space can contribute to healthy living, an improved lifestyle, and education, which can lead to a new way of thinking about the landscape, reconnecting with citizens, and preserving its urban identity. This is a new type of research intended to improve our understanding of landscapes as architectural, ecological, social, cultural and economic settings. The sense and meaning of a place are strengthened when its resources are combined to create a unique therapeutic landscape. Creating healthy cities is a challenge for contemporary planning, which can be ensured with the help of technology, for the improvement of the life of all citizens. While these goals are achievable, they will most easily be attained through public-private partnerships.

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