

Architectural and Cultural Impact of the Church of Saint Sophia on the Urban Fabric of Ohrid, North Macedonia

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Abstract

The Church of Saint Sophia in Ohrid, North Macedonia is a major religious and architectural landmark whose presence has contributed to the character of the surrounding urban landscape. Constructed in the Byzantine period, the church has historically served as both a spiritual center and a prominent topographical reference point within the city. This study examines how the church has remained a cultural and visual anchor amid broader urban change. It documents and interprets the spatial transformations that have occurred in the vicinity of Saint Sophia, focusing on how its monumental form has contributed to the evolving morphology of the city. However, this research does not claim a direct, prescriptive influence of the church on vernacular architecture but instead explores patterns of proximity, alignment, material continuity, and symbolic centrality.

It uses a multidisciplinary methodology comprising archival research, field observation, spatial mapping, photographic comparison, and interviews with local stakeholders. Direct observation of urban transformations was conducted from January to December 2023, with field visits in each season to capture variations in use, atmosphere, and visual conditions. These visits concentrated on the Varosh neighborhood, Ohrid's oldest residential quarter surrounding Saint Sophia

Findings reveal that although commercial encroachment and urban densification have diminished, Saint Sophia's visibility and spatial prominence, its role as a point of orientation and cultural memory endures. These results contribute to a nuanced understanding of how monumental religious architecture participates in shaping both the physical structure and the symbolic identity of historic cities over time.

Keywords: Saint Sophia, Ohrid, urban fabric, Byzantine architecture, cultural impact, architectural analysis, urban morphology, religious architecture, urban development, architectural heritage.

1. Introduction

Ohrid, located on the shores of Lake Ohrid in the present-day North Macedonia, is widely recognized for its layered architectural heritage and long-standing role as a religious and cultural center. Within this historic urban fabric, the Church of Saint Sophia occupies a central place. It is one of the most significant Byzantine monuments of the region and has long been a landmark closely associated with the core identity of the city. Built in the 11th century, the church has endured as a site of religious function, political authority, and cultural symbolism.

While its architectural history has been extensively studied, there remains a gap in the literature concerning the relationship between the church and the spatial development of its surrounding urban context—particularly the Varosh neighborhood. This study addresses that gap by investigating the spatial, morphological, and perceptual dynamics between the Church of Saint Sophia and the vernacular urban fabric that has developed around it. Rather than positing a singular causal influence, this research explores how the church may have contributed to shaping settlement form, street orientation, visual corridors, and cultural memory in the historic core of Ohrid. Its aim is to contribute to the understanding of the influence of the Church of Saint Sophia on its surrounding urban landscape.

Its objectives are:

- To document and map historical transformations in the urban morphology around Saint Sophia;
- To identify spatial relationships between the church and surrounding vernacular structures;
- To examine symbolic and cultural perceptions of the church's role through stakeholder interviews;
- To assess the visual and spatial changes affecting the church's prominence in the cityscape.

Indeed, by grounding these inquiries in both empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks, the study contributes to broader discussions on the interplay between monumental architecture and vernacular urban evolution in historic Balkan cities.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a multidisciplinary theoretical framework to examine the architectural and cultural influence of the Church of Saint Sophia on the vernacular urban fabric of Ohrid. Drawing from architectural sociology, vernacular theory, heritage conservation, and regional historiography, the framework provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how monumental religious architecture interacts with everyday built environments over time. Architecture is treated not solely as a physical structure but as a cultural and symbolic practice.

As Bourdieu (1990) theorizes, spatial forms emerge from and reproduce the *habitus*—a system of embodied dispositions shaped by social structures. In the case of Saint Sophia, its longstanding centrality in the Varosh neighborhood can be read as both reflecting and reinforcing social hierarchies, cultural rituals, and land-use practices. The spatial prominence and symbolic power of the church are interpreted through this lens as products of culturally embedded behavior over time.

Vernacular urban form is examined through the foundational work of Rapoport (1969) and Oliver (1989). Rapoport defines vernacular architecture as that which arises organically from cultural traditions, environmental necessity, and social interactions rather than formal design. He emphasizes how settlement patterns, construction techniques, and spatial use evolve from customary responses to climate, topography, and lifestyle. Oliver (1989) complements this by highlighting the continuous negotiation of space through localized knowledge, materials, and social practices. These theories are particularly useful for analyzing the morphology of the Varosh neighborhood, where narrow passages, irregular parceling, and informal spatial layering reflect adaptive, customary development rather than centralized urban planning.

From a conservation perspective, Stubbs (1996b) argues that historic monuments are not inert artifacts but active participants in shaping urban identity. He contends that conservation must balance the authenticity of historical form with contemporary functional relevance. This idea is evident in mid-20th-century interventions in Ohrid, where the exposure of the exonarthex of Saint Sophia reconfigured surrounding density and circulation while elevating the visibility of the monument. He underscores the way preservation strategies can shape the evolution of the built environment.

In the context of Byzantine and Balkan urbanism, the studies of Chipan (1996; 2000) are foundational. Chipan documents how ecclesiastical monuments functioned both symbolically and materially as urban anchors. He shows how churches such as Saint Sophia influenced street alignment, residential clustering, and spatial hierarchies in Ohrid. This study builds directly on that model to understand the layered interplay between sacred architecture and vernacular form.

To localize these broader theories within the specific context of Ohrid, the research engages with the work of Tomovska (2020, 2022), Cerasi (1999), and Ivkowska (2021). Tomovska emphasizes the aesthetic integration of vernacular dwellings with the topography of Ohrid, and the central role of master builders in constructing architectural identity. In contrast, Cerasi (1999) offers a critical perspective on the socio-cultural forces that influenced the development of urban form in the Ottoman cities. His work provides an analytical framework for understanding how religious structures have been embedded in the civic and vernacular fabric of towns such as Ohrid. He highlights the balance between formal architectural interventions and organic urban growth, arguing that monumental and everyday spaces evolved in mutual interdependence.

Ivkowska (2021), on the other hand, examines the typological evolution of Ottoman-period townhouses in Ohrid. She illustrates how local architectural traditions have been maintained within broader imperial frameworks. Ivkowska (2021) also discusses the spatial layering of the city, focusing on the coexistence of sacred and secular structures and the pressures of modern urban development on the historical fabric. These works offer region-specific insight into the historical layering that defines the urban development of Ohrid.

While broader urban theorists such as Lynch (1960), Jacobs (1961), and de Certeau (1984) are also relevant, their frameworks are applied here only with caution. Lynch (1960) offered the notion of “mental map”: the idea that cities are cognitively organized through elements like paths, nodes, edges, and landmarks. He pointed out that urban spaces become meaningful reference points leading to the construction of images of places. In Ohrid, Saint Sophia functions as such a landmark, though this study does not empirically test the concept through perceptual mapping or behavioral analysis. Similarly, Jacobs (1961) critique of the top-down planning and her advocacy for organic, pedestrian-centered environments resonate with the evolution of Ohrid, yet her evaluative criteria (e.g., mixed uses, short block lengths) are not explicitly employed. At the same time, De Certeau (1984) offers the concept of everyday spatial “tactics” which provides a useful philosophical lens for understanding informal adaptations in the city. However, it does not serve as a primary analytical framework in this research.

In sum, this theoretical framework weaves together heritage conservation, vernacular theory, architectural sociology, and regional historiography to explore how monumental religious structures like Saint Sophia have shaped—and continue to shape—the spatial, social, and cultural dynamics of their urban settings. Viewed through this integrated lens, Saint Sophia emerges not only as a sacred monument but also as a catalyst for urban form, collective identity, and cultural memory within the historic urban landscape of Ohrid.

3. Literature Review

The architectural and cultural impact of individual buildings on the urban fabric has long attracted scholarly attention. Urban morphology, heritage studies, and vernacular architecture frameworks have illuminated how monumental structures shape the spatial, cultural, and social organization of cities. Yet much of this literature either emphasizes aesthetic and historical analyses of landmark buildings or examines broader urban development trends,

often overlooking the subtle interplay between monumental architecture and everyday built environments.

Rapoport (1969) argues that the built environment embodies deep-rooted cultural patterns, and that architecture must be understood not only in terms of form and function but also as a social and cultural product. He demonstrates that urban forms emerge from the dynamic interactions among societal norms, environmental conditions, and human behavior. Building on this, Oliver (1987) shows that vernacular architecture encodes local knowledge and collective memory, serving as a living archive of how communities adapt spatially and materially over time.

Globally, landmark buildings have been shown to act as spatial anchors. Kostof (1991) observes that major religious and political structures often dictate settlement patterns, street alignments, and neighborhood identities. Lawrence (1987) emphasizes their symbolic authority and their role in fostering urban cohesion by serving as focal points for communal life. In Islamic contexts, Akbar (1988) demonstrates that mosques function as religious, social, and economic centers that shape daily rhythms. Similarly, Vale (1992) highlights how civic monuments project collective identity and exert lasting influence on urban form.

Bourdieu (1990) introduces the concept of *habitus* to explain how physical spaces both reflect and reproduce social structures: built environments inscribe societal norms and encode historical continuities and class distinctions. This perspective has been instrumental in understanding the reciprocal relationship between architecture and everyday practice. Stubbs (1996) and Jokilehto (1999) argue that historic buildings should be integrated sensitively into contemporary planning, while Larkham (2000) contends that heritage sites must be examined in the context of their broader urban and cultural significance rather than as isolated artifacts.

Within the Balkan and Eastern European context, scholarship has increasingly recognized the layered nature of urban development, where Byzantine, Ottoman, and vernacular traditions converge. In this connection, Korakj and Shuput (1998) document a hybrid urban fabric in the Macedonian cities, shaped by multiple architectural lineages. Simultaneously, Stojanović (2003) shows how the socio-political transitions often repurpose sacred architecture to reflect new regimes. In North Macedonia, Dimitrova and Korunovski (2006) demonstrate that ecclesiastical buildings have historically functioned as both formal and symbolic centers, guiding physical developments and social organizations, although their analysis remains largely descriptive.

Studies of Ohrid have typically concentrated on stylistic and historical analyses of individual monuments, particularly the Church of Saint Sophia. In this connection, Koco (1956) offers an early architectural survey of the Byzantine features of the church but says little about its urban influence. Chipan (1996, 2000) provides a comprehensive historical account of Saint Sophia as a cultural landmark, yet focuses primarily on the monument itself rather than its relationship with the surrounding city. In contrast, Balabanov (1989) and Petrovska (2015) contribute detailed architectural histories, but neither critically examines how these structures interact with the evolving urban form.

Despite these valuable contributions, a significant gap remains: few studies have explored how monumental buildings, especially religious ones, and vernacular urban fabrics influence one another over time. Research tends to treat landmarks and everyday environments separately, neglecting their mutual shaping of spatial practices, neighborhood patterns, and cultural continuity. In Ohrid, this lacuna is especially pronounced: the reciprocal impact of Saint Sophia and its urban context has not been fully interrogated.

In this context, this study seeks to fill this gap by situating Saint Sophia within the broader debates on architectural agency, cultural symbolism, and vernacular urbanism. By engaging critically with both international and regional scholarship, it aims to develop a more integrated understanding of how cultural heritage and quotidian urban life co-produce each other.

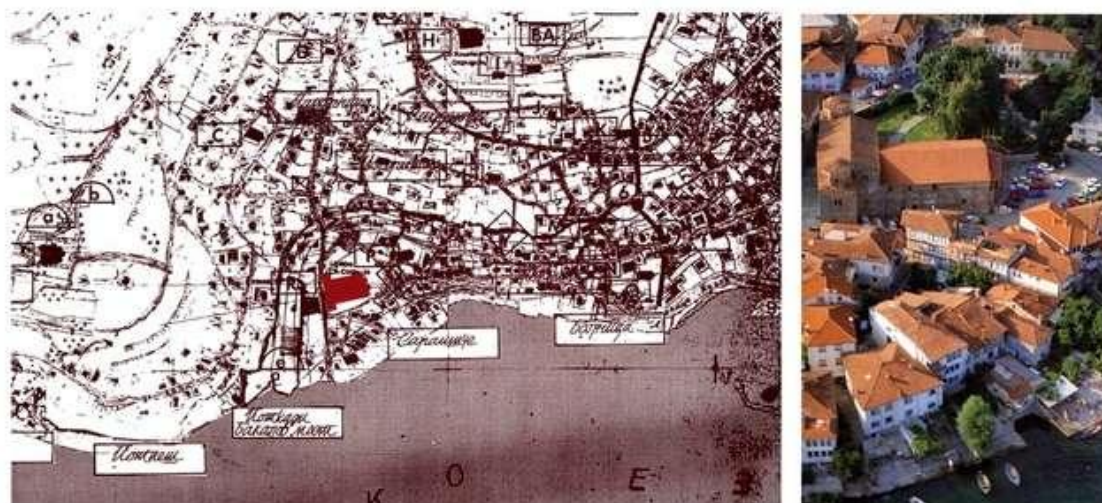


Fig. 1 The Proximity of the Church to the Lake Shoreline.
Source: Left – Chipan (2000); Right – Travellino.net (2024)

3.1 Defining Key Concepts: Monumental, Vernacular, and Urbanscape

To ensure conceptual clarity, this study distinguishes three terms—monumental architecture, vernacular development, and urbanscape—each applied with specific historical and spatial nuance.

Monumental architecture denotes purpose-built structures of religious, civic, or symbolic significance, typically commissioned by the state, church, or elite patrons. Here, Saint Sophia qualifies as monumental both for its scale and formal design and for its historical role as the Archbishopric's seat (Chipan, 1996).

Vernacular development refers to buildings that arise organically from local traditions, materials, and needs, usually crafted by the local builders rather than formally trained architects (Rapoport, 1969; Oliver, 1989). In Ohrid, this term describes the organic residential fabric of Varosh—shaped during Ottoman and post-Ottoman times by terrain, community practices, and artisanal know-how—rather than the original Byzantine forms, which predate these incremental, lived-in adaptations (Tomovska, 2020; Ivkowska, 2021).

To capture the specific spatial logic of the Byzantine period, this study uses historic urbanscape (or urban morphology) for the settlement patterns, axial alignments, and hierarchy imposed by ecclesiastical and imperial authorities (Koder, 1995). This distinction prevents conflating planned monumental schemes with later, organically evolved vernacular quarters.

By applying these definitions, the analysis highlights urban morphology and monumentality in the Byzantine and early Ottoman layers, while reserving vernacular development to describe subsequent domestic adaptations, plot subdivisions, and informal architectural responses around Saint Sophia.

4. Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative paradigm, using a case study approach to explore the complex interplay among architecture, culture, and urban form in their real-world context. By focusing on a single heritage monument—the Church of Saint Sophia—it examines how the church has contributed to the spatial organization and development of architecture and of its surrounding urban environment in the historic city of Ohrid, North Macedonia.

4.1 Basis for the Selection of the Case Study

The Church of Saint Sophia was chosen as the case study for several reasons. First, it is a prominent religious and cultural landmark whose origins date back to the ninth century. Second, the church and its surrounding Varosh neighborhood form a layered historical urban

fabric that demonstrates both continuity and transformation over time. Third, its designation as part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Ohrid underscores its architectural, historical, and symbolic importance. Together, these qualities make Saint Sophia an ideal focal point for examining the reciprocal relationship between monumental architecture and vernacular urban evolution.

4.2 Data Gathering Techniques

The research employs five primary data-collection methods, some addressing the broader historical and theoretical context and others focusing specifically on Saint Sophia and its immediate surroundings. First, a comprehensive literature survey established the intellectual foundations of the study. It consulted print and digital resources at the National and University Library “St. Kliment of Ohrid” in Skopje, the University of St. Clement of Ohrid in Bitola, and online databases including JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Searches used keywords such as “Saint Sophia Ohrid,” “Ohrid vernacular architecture,” “urban history of Ohrid,” “Balkan ecclesiastical architecture,” and “heritage planning,” combined with Boolean operators and filtered by date range and peer-review status. The resulting materials—archival records, architectural blueprints, conservation reports, archaeological studies, scholarly books, and peer-reviewed articles—were then organized into four themes: historical context, architectural evolution, cultural and religious significance, and urban morphology.

Second, direct observation of urban transformations was conducted from January to December 2023, with field visits in each season to capture variations in use, atmosphere, and visual conditions. These visits concentrated on the neighborhood of Varosh, the oldest residential quarter surrounding Saint Sophia in Ohrid. Employing a non-participant observation approach, spatial layouts, building alignments, street widths, façade treatments, and construction materials were recorded in sketchbooks, and annotated printed base maps. Voice memos captured immediate impressions on site, while a custom spatial-mapping template ensured systematic documentation of both temporary and permanent changes to the urban fabric.

Third, a photographic survey provided visual documentation of architectural and spatial elements. Photographs were taken in March, July, and October 2023 within approximately 300 m radius of the church, covering public squares, side streets, and residential corridors. Using a GPS-enabled Canon EOS 90D DSLR, each image was indexed with coordinates and timestamps; both eye-level and elevated perspectives were recorded, including panoramic shots and detail close-ups. To analyze the changes over time, these images were cross-referenced with historic photographs from 1950–1990 sourced from the Ohrid City Museum Archive and private collections.

Fourth, systematic documentation gathered technical, spatial, and regulatory data relevant to the case site. Key sources included the zoning and development plans from the Department of Urban Planning of the Municipality of Ohrid, the National Archives of Macedonia for historical blueprints and cadastral maps, and the Conservation Institute of North Macedonia for building records and restoration histories. On-site measurements of buildings and streetscapes were taken with tape measures and digital laser tools, and condition assessments were carried out using a standardized evaluation form noting material decay, structural alterations, and current usage. These data were digitized, and then mapped in QGIS to overlay historical and contemporary plans. Planning documents were annotated to trace the policy changes from the 1950s to the present. All records were stored in a structured database to facilitate cross-analysis.

Finally, semi-structured interviews added a qualitative dimension to the spatial and architectural data. Between March and November 2023, twelve participants—three urban planners, three architectural historians, two cultural heritage officers, and four long-term residents of Varosh—were interviewed in their homes, municipal offices, or open-air public spaces. Using a semi-structured questionnaire, conversations explored themes of memory and change, heritage value, urban policy, and local identity. Each session was audio-recorded with

informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and coded in NVivo. An inductive thematic analysis then identified recurring patterns, tensions, and contrasting perspectives.

Together, these five methods provide a robust, multifaceted foundation for understanding how the Church of Saint Sophia has contributed to shape—and continues to shape—the architectural form and social life of its urban context in historic Ohrid.

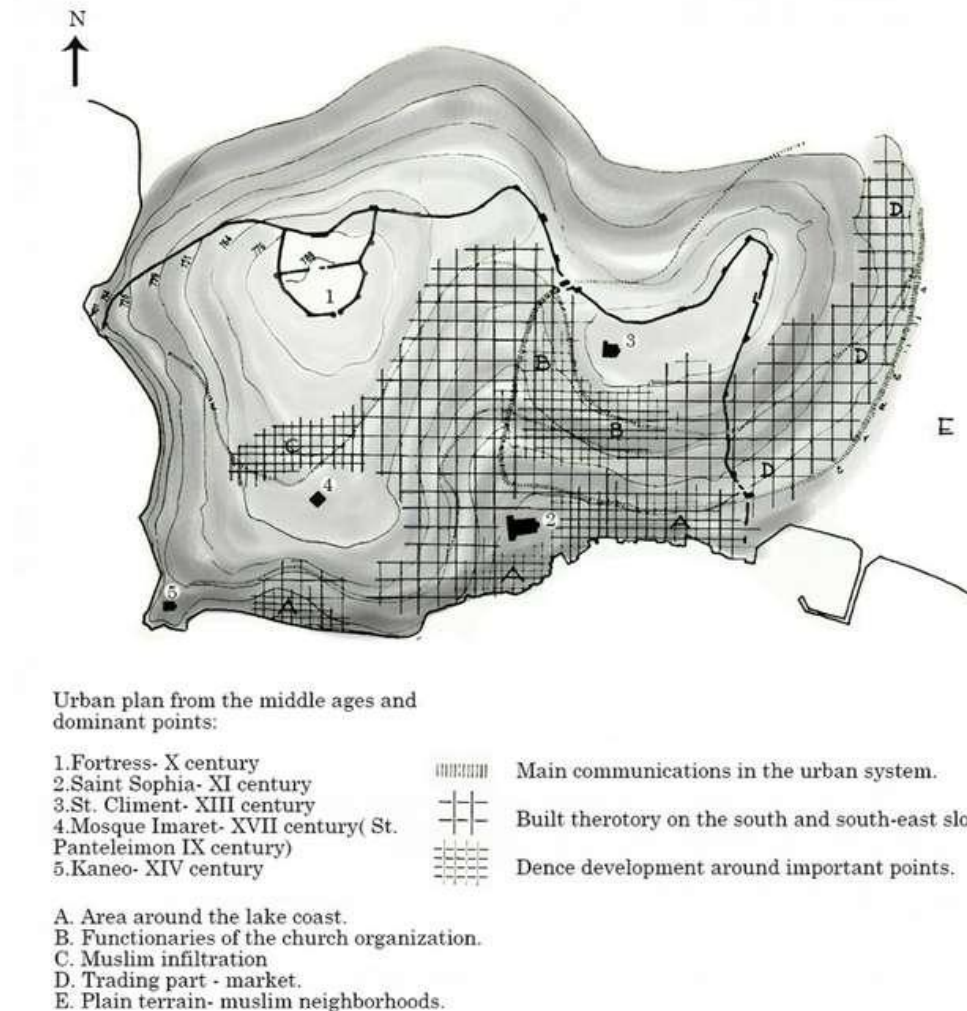


Fig. 2: Urban plan from the Middle Ages and dominant points.

Source: Authors.

5. The Case Studies

The case study was carried out in Ohrid, a city on the Northeastern shore of the Lake Ohrid in North Macedonia. Celebrated for its fusion of Byzantine, Ottoman, and vernacular architecture, Ohrid is a UNESCO World Heritage Site valued for both its cultural and natural assets. Its uninterrupted habitation from antiquity to the present provides an exceptional context for examining long-term urban and architectural evolution.

Central to this investigation is the Church of Saint Sophia, situated in the Varosh neighborhood—historically the Christian quarter of the city. Perched at the foot of the Samoil Fortress hill, the church serves as both a spatial anchor and a potent symbol within the urban landscape. Its commanding location (Fig. 1) underscores its dual role as a religious center and as a defining element of the morphological structure of Ohrid.



Fig. 3: A Reconstruction of Medieval Ohrid, Featuring 1) The Fortress, 2) Plaošnik – Clement's University, and 3) The Archbishopric Seat with the Church of Saint Sophia (upper). The Location of Saint Sophia in Ohrid's Varosh Neighborhood and Its Surrounding City Walls Today (lower)

Source: (Upper) Chipan, 2000, (Lower) Authors.

The contemporary urban fabric of Ohrid reflects two distinct historical settlement patterns. The Upper Quarter, known as Varosh, clings to the slopes beneath the Samoil Fortress and preserves its medieval street layout of narrow, winding alleys, irregular plots, and densely packed buildings—a testament to its origins as the Christian residential enclave of the city. In contrast, the Lower Quarter, developed under the Ottoman rule, features a more regularized street grid, wider thoroughfares, and courtyard-centered houses, echoing the Muslim expansion of the city and the concomitant shift in urban planning. Despite the modern pressures, this duality remains clearly legible, and the Church of Saint Sophia continues to dominate both the skyline and the cultural imagination within this layered spatial tapestry.

To contextualize the role of Saint Sophia as an urban anchor, the study also surveyed other key landmarks: the Church of Saints Clement and Panteleimon in Plaošnik; the lakeside Church of Saint John at Kaneo; Samoil's Fortress, which commands the city from above; the Upper Gate (Gorna Porta), a remnant ancient fortifications of Ohrid; and Ottoman-era religious sites such as the Ali Pasha Mosque and the Halveti Teke. Their positions relative to Saint Sophia were documented to gauge its centrality within the topography of Ohrid. Photographic records were systematically collected from a variety of vantage points, including elevated overlooks at Samoil Fortress and Plaošnik, axial approaches along Kuzman Kapidan and Kaneo streets, and pedestrian-level perspectives in the courtyards of Varosh, public squares, and the transitional spaces bordering Saint Sophia. This multi-angle documentation allowed for a nuanced analysis of the visual and spatial relationships of the church within the evolving urban landscape.

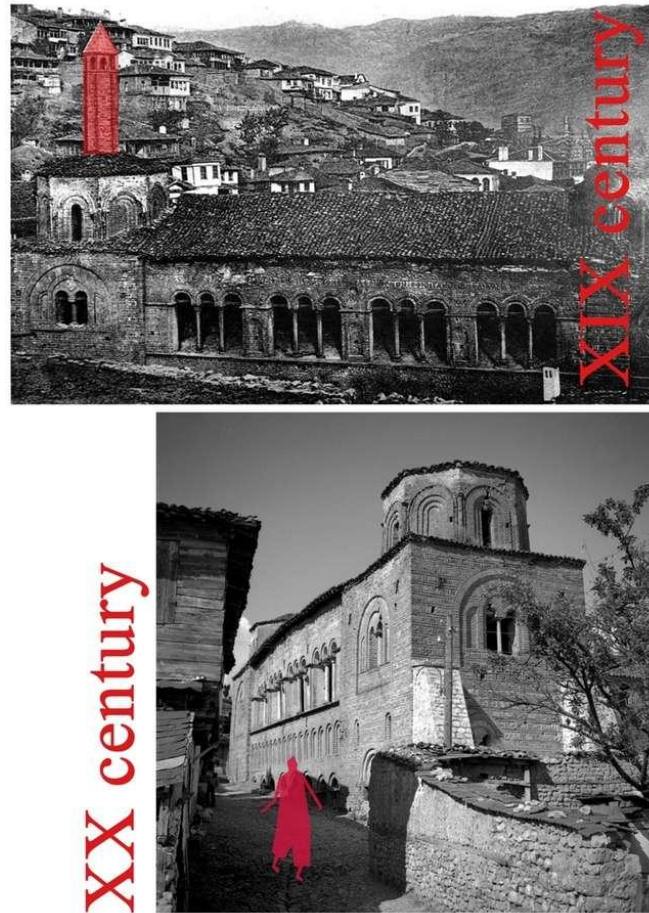


Fig. 2: View of Saint Sophia from the west during the 19th century. The west façade is covered with sediment (bottom); the north tower shows a minaret (top).

Source: Paluba.info (n.d.) [Accessed 29 Apr. 2025].

Each vantage point was deliberately chosen to reveal how Saint Sophia is experienced from diverse parts of Ohrid, capturing shifts in sightlines, degrees of enclosure, and the dialogue between medieval and modern urban forms. By combining site plans, historic maps, and contemporary photographs, this approach illuminates the church's persistent visual and symbolic resonance, underscoring its enduring role in shaping Ohrid's urban identity.

Table 1: Sources and Types of Documentation Utilized for the Analysis of Urban and Architectural Transformations around the Church of Saint Sophia in Ohrid.

Source: Authors.

Source	Type of the Document	Information Extracted
Archival Drawings (1950s)	Architectural Drawings Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments	Original urban layout, pre-conservation changes around Saint Sophia
Chipan, B. (1996)	Historical Study	Influence of Saint Sophia on Ohrid's medieval urban planning
Kondakov, N. (1909)	Historical Record	Condition of Saint Sophia in the early 20th century
Balabanov, K. (1989)	Urban Analysis	Growth of Ohrid's urban fabric from the medieval to Ottoman period
Dimitrova, T. et al. (2013)	Architectural Study	Role of religious structures in shaping urban development

Ottoman Census Records	Population Data National Archives of Macedonia	Religious and ethnic divisions influencing neighborhood formation Demographic shifts in Ohrid and their impact on land use near Saint Sophia.
Conservation Reports (1950s-1980s)	Restoration Documents	Structural changes around Saint Sophia due to preservation efforts
Field Observations (2023)	On-Site Analysis	Present-day urban density, spatial relationships around Saint Sophia
Photographic Archives (Early 20th Century)	Historical Photographs National Museum of Ohrid	Visual documentation of lost structures, historical urban landscape
Modern Photographic Survey (2023)	Site Photography Researcher-conducted	Comparative analysis of contemporary urban conditions versus historical records.
Municipal Urban Plans (20th Century - Present)	Planning Documents Ohrid Municipality	Evolution of zoning and urban policies affecting historic areas
Interviews with Local Residents	Conducted in 2023	Community perceptions of Saint Sophia, its social role, and concerns about modern encroachments.

5.1 Vernacular Adaptation and Urban Layering in Varosh: Influence of Monumental Architecture

The Varosh neighborhood of Ohrid presents a richly layered context for examining how the Church of Saint Sophia has shaped vernacular architecture and the spatial organization. Drawing on the typological and spatial analyses of Tomovska (2020;2022), Cerasi (1999), and Ivkowska (2021), this section demonstrates how the proximity to a monumental religious edifice both preserved and transformed local building practices and urban morphology.

Tomovska (2020;2022) highlights the pivotal role of the master builder in the vernacular tradition of Ohrid, portraying these craftsmen not merely as laborers but as bearers of spatial knowledge. She argues that development around landmarks like Saint Sophia was neither spontaneous nor vernacular in the informal sense, but rather was guided by skilled artisans versed in structural technique and compositional harmony. In Varosh, builders responded to steep slopes and irregular plots by orienting structures to maintain clear sightlines to the church, creating transitional elements—such as stepped streets and modest plazas—that subtly emphasize its presence.

Moreover, Tomovska (2022;2022) notes that these master builders consciously echoed the material vocabulary of the church in residential construction. The field observations corroborate this: houses along Kuzman Kapidan and Ilindenska streets employ stone masonry techniques and roof forms that visually and materially resonate with the fabric of Saint Sophia. This material continuity reflects a shared construction culture rooted in local guild traditions. Likewise, decorative features—thresholds, cornices, and rooflines—often mirror ecclesiastical motifs, suggesting an intentional spatial dialogue between domicile and monument that reinforces the visual and cultural centrality of the church.

The typological framework offered by Cerasi (1999) further enriches this analysis by tracing how the Ottoman-era civic and religious buildings overlaid the earlier Byzantine grid. In the lower and Eastern quarters of Ohrid, one finds the characteristic inward-facing courtyard houses and looser street patterns of Ottoman planning. By contrast, Varosh retains a distinctly Byzantine spatial logic: dense, fragmented parcels and a centripetal network of streets that all converge on Saint Sophia. This juxtaposition illustrates how the medieval core resisted full assimilation under Ottoman urbanism, preserving hierarchies centered on the church.

On the other hand, Ivkovska (2021) examines the domestic architecture in Ottoman Ohrid and demonstrates how this reinforces the pattern of divergent evolution. She documents the hybrid vernacular in Varosh, where traditional materials and asymmetrical forms persist near Saint Sophia. The areas farther afield conform more closely to the Ottoman residential norms—featuring standardized courtyards and symmetrical facades. This gradient suggests that the monumental presence of the church slowed the wholesale adoption of Ottoman typologies in its immediate surroundings: houses closest to the church retain medieval verticality and irregular footprints, while standardized layouts prevail away from the sacred core.

Together, the insights of Tomovska, Cerasi, and Ivkovska form a comprehensive theoretical and empirical framework for understanding the built environment of Varosh. Their work confirms that architectural adaptation around Saint Sophia was an active, skilled response to a powerful spatial anchor, not a byproduct of passive preservation. In this light, Saint Sophia emerges not only as a religious and symbolic focal point but also as a catalyst of material and morphological innovation, its influence evident in the form, materials, and orientation of the surrounding vernacular residences.

6. Findings

This section synthesizes our core empirical findings according to the five methodological strategies—archival research, field observations, photographic comparisons, spatial analysis, and stakeholder interviews. Each approach yields distinct insights, yet all converge on a shared aim: to evaluate how the Church of Saint Sophia has contributed to shape the spatial development, architectural character, and cultural identity of Ohrid. By integrating these diverse data sources, a layered narrative that positions Saint Sophia as both a historical urban anchor and a focal point of ongoing tension between heritage conservation and contemporary urban pressures is constructed.

6.1 Archival Survey

Archival sources—among them 1950s municipal plans, Ottoman census records, and early twentieth-century architectural surveys—demonstrate that the Church of Saint Sophia has long served both as a sacred monument and as a spatial anchor for Ohrid. Historic drawings reveal a pre-modern landscape of open spaces radiating outward from the church, corroborating the account of Kondakov (1909) demonstrating the unobstructed visual dominance along the lakeside axis. Ottoman census data further documents a persistent divide between the densely clustered Christian Varosh district and the more systematically laid-out Muslim quarters to the North and the East.

These patterns align with the notion proposed by Chipan (1996, 2000) that religious monuments act as “spatial generators” that organize street orientations and public realms—an urban logic rooted in Byzantine planning ideals (Mango, 1976; Koder, 1995). It posits that the ecclesiastical buildings reinforce social hierarchies and morphological order. Viewed through the concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990), it can be argued that the physical prominence of Saint Sophia became ingrained in the social fabric of the city: its placement shaped daily routines, reinforced communal boundaries, and inscribed cultural norms into the built form of Ohrid.

Together, these archival findings substantiate the central claim that Saint Sophia has profoundly influenced the morphological evolution of its surroundings, embedding symbolic zoning and a radial street network that continues to privilege the visibility and access of the church.

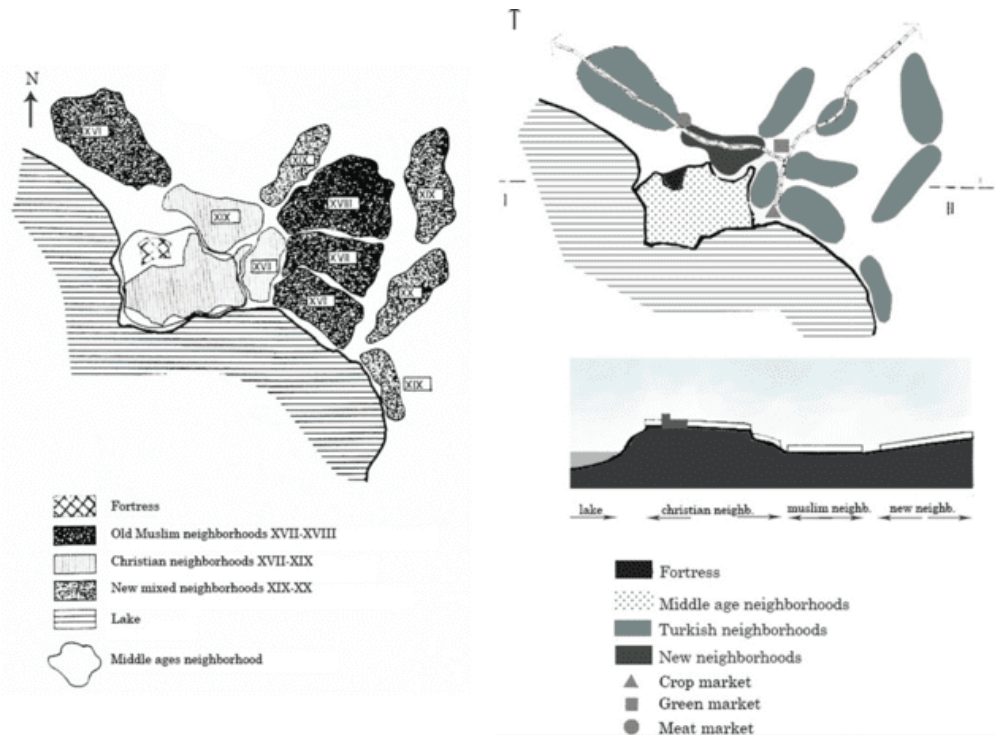


Fig. 3: The position of the neighborhoods and the periods. (left) Topographic location of the neighborhoods in Ohrid. (right)

Source: Authors.

6.2 Field Observations and Spatial Analysis

Between January and December 2023, systematic fieldwork in the Varosh neighborhood revealed persistent architectural and spatial patterns radiating from Saint Sophia. Key thoroughfares—Tsar Samoil, Ilindenska, and Kuzman Kapidan—converge on the church, demonstrating a clear centripetal organization that aligns with theory of vernacular adaptation (Rapoport, 1969), whereby local materials, topography, and cultural imperatives shape building form.

Parcel sizes decrease closer to the church, and house footprints transition from courtyard-centered layouts—typical of Ottoman influences—to irregular, terrain-adaptive configurations that negotiate steep slopes and pre-existing circulation routes. Within roughly 150 meters of Saint Sophia, many houses employ rubble-stone masonry techniques and roof profiles—modest single-pitch or simple gabled forms—that visually and materially echo the façade and the volumetric language of the church.

Window proportions similarly mirror ecclesiastical templates in a simplified vernacular idiom. In fact, these observations are consistent with Tomovska (2020, 2022) and Ivkowska (2021) whose findings on dual attention to symbolic cues and topographical constraints of the master builders, suggest that residential architecture around Saint Sophia evolved through active spatial dialogue with the monument rather than in isolation. The enduring convergence of streets and the material continuity of stonework, rooflines, and asymmetrical plans substantiate the claim that Saint Sophia functions as a persistent spatial anchor, guiding both the morphology and the lived experience of the Varosh quarter.

6.3 Urban Plan Analysis

The comparative review of historical photographs (circa 1925–1950) and modern imagery (2023) alongside archival and contemporary urban plans highlights shifts in the visual legibility of Saint Sophia. Early images frame the church against open ground and lake views, exemplifying the concept of a landmark (Lynch, 1960) within the mental map of the city. In contrast, recent photographs document commercial infill, signage, and temporary structures—

particularly on the southern and lakeside frontages—that fragment key approach corridors and obscure once-clear sightlines. Urban plans confirm that the radial street alignments persisted into the mid-twentieth century but are now partially severed by tourism-driven densification: lakefront vistas essential to the prominence of the monument have been interrupted by cafés and kiosks.

Nevertheless, spatial overlays (Fig. 6) demonstrate that the fundamental axial orientation of Varosh continues to point toward Saint Sophia, underscoring its long-term role in orienting movement and structuring urban form. The convergence of circulation routes, the clustering of religious and civic landmarks, and the stark contrast in plot density between Varosh and adjacent districts all testify to the enduring influence of the church as a generator of spatial logic—shaping street hierarchy, zoning patterns, and density gradients in a manner that echoes Byzantine planning traditions (Koder, 1995; Mango, 1976).

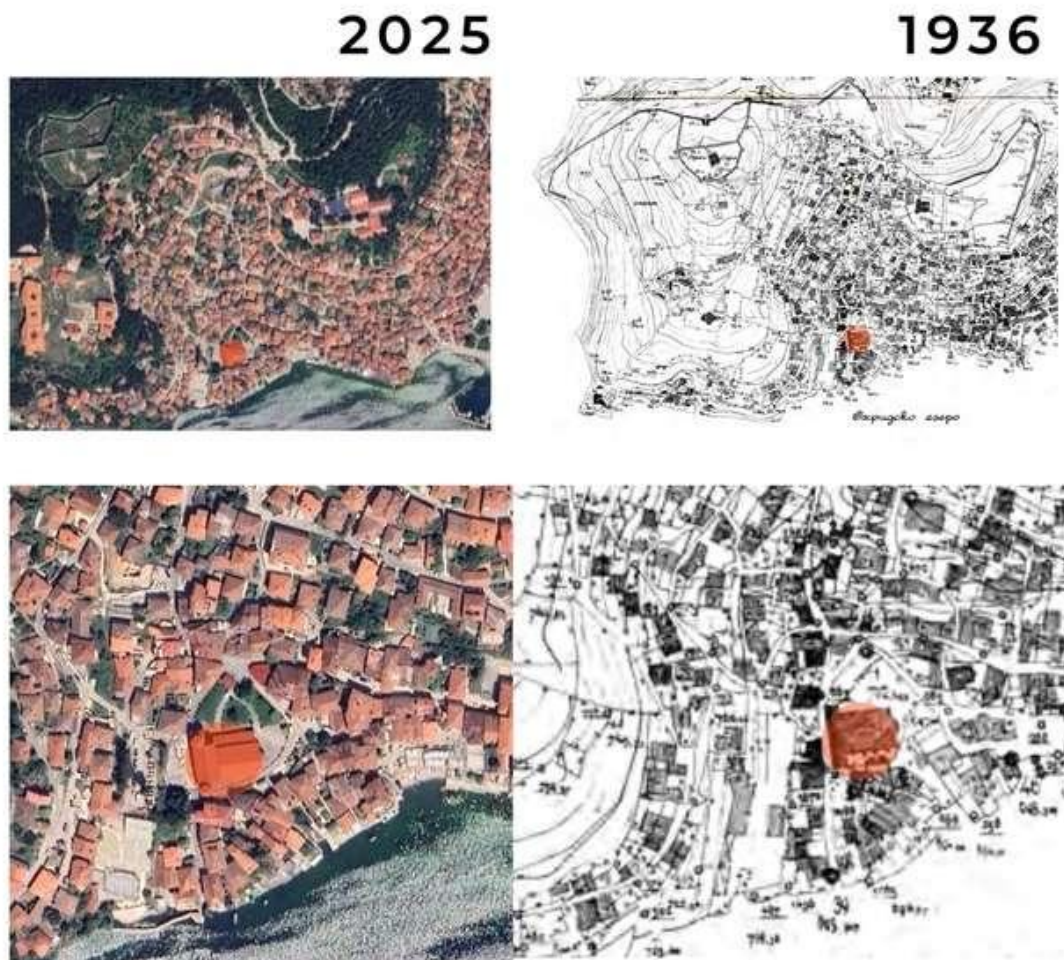


Fig. 4 Growing Density around Saint Sophia.

Source: Authors.

6.4 Photographic Documentation and Comparative Analysis

Comparing 2023 photographs with the archival images from the National Museum of Ohrid (1925–1950) reveals two critical shifts in how Saint Sophia is experienced. First, there has been a marked loss of visual permeability. In early twentieth-century views, the church stood as a freestanding landmark, its silhouette framed by open terrain and unobstructed lake vistas. Today, however, dense building fabric, signage, and commercial kiosks encroach upon those same sightlines—especially along the southern and lakeside approaches—confirming the

warning of Stubbs (1996) that preservation efforts lacking comprehensive urban planning can inadvertently erode the broader spatial identity of the monument.

Second, the function of public and sacred forecourts has transformed. September 2023 images document temporary cafés and vendor stalls immediately adjacent to the South entrance of Saint Sophia, signaling a shift from primarily spiritual and communal functions toward commercial use. This evolution echoes the observations of Çelik (1992) in other Ottoman cities, where historic religious sites gradually became integrated into everyday economic life. Nevertheless, unlike many of those cities, the more recent zoning regulations of Ohrid have tempered this process, preserving at least a measure of the original urban prominence of the church.

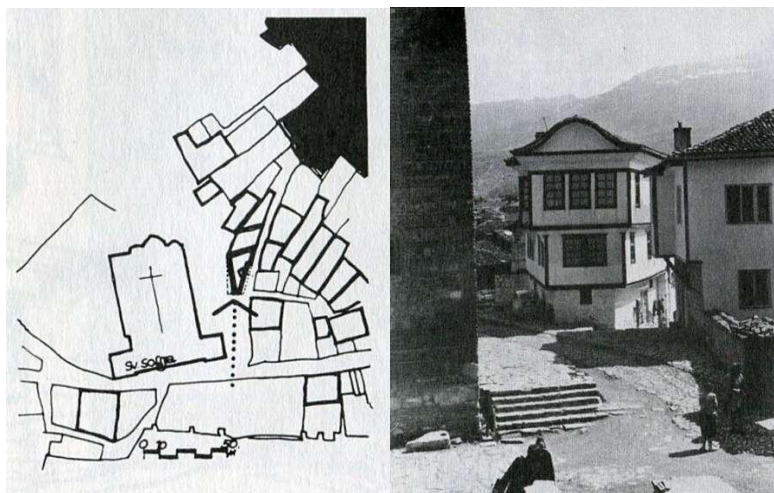


Fig. 5: Preserved Traditional Architecture in the Surroundings of Saint Sophia: A Study of Dense Urban Development Without Yards on Sloped Terrain.

Source: Chipan, 2000.

This curated collection of historic photographs captures the architectural and spatial character of Ohrid from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, highlighting the interplay between the monumental and vernacular urban forms. The images reveal the narrow streets, densely packed houses, and the vibrant street life of Varosh, reflecting the organic, high-density morphology that developed around the Church of Saint Sophia. A striking 1913 photograph shows the church repurposed as a mosque, underscoring both continuity and transformation in its religious and civic role.

Together, these visual records provide critical insights into Ohrid's material culture, topographic layering, and spatial organization, reinforcing the function of the church as a spatial anchor and empirically validating the architectural and cultural dynamics identified in our archival and field analyses.

However, a comparative photographic analysis—drawing on the archival images from 1925–1950 and contemporary surveys from 2023—reveals a marked decline in visual access and overall legibility of Saint Sophia. Once framed by the clear axial corridors along Kuzman Kapidan Street and the lakefront, the church is now partially obscured by kiosks, commercial signage, and infill buildings. Historic views that once offered uninterrupted sightlines to its façade and dome have become fragmented, while modern street furniture and foreground clutter further distract from its monumental form.

In fact, this transformation can be understood through the concept of “mental maps,” (Lynch, 1960) in which landmarks act as navigational and symbolic anchors. Despite the physical erosion of these sightlines, interviewees continue to describe Saint Sophia as “the heart of the neighborhood,” using it as a primary reference point for orientation and community identity. In Lynchian terms, the church remains both a “node” and a “landmark” within the cognitive landscape of Ohrid—proof that the symbolic power of a landmark can endure even when its visual prominence is compromised.

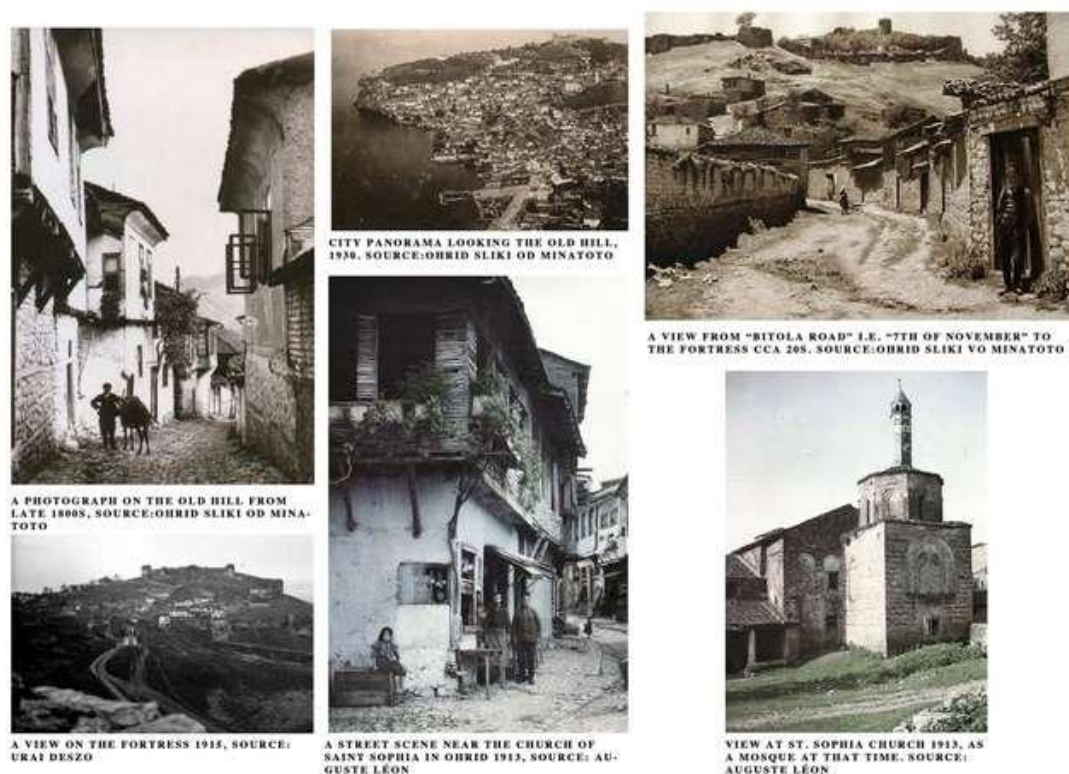


Fig. 6 Historic Photographs Illustrating the Vernacular and Monumental Landscape of Ohrid (Late 1800s–1930s).

Source: Various sources provided under each photograph.

Thus, while modern interventions have diminished the material visibility of Saint Sophia, its enduring role in the collective spatial memory of the city underscores the central argument of this paper the influence of the church persists not only in the built form but also in the shared mental maps of its inhabitants.

6.5 Interviews with Local Stakeholders

Between March and November 2023, twelve semi-structured interviews with conservation professionals, urban planners, long-term residents, and local historians yielded rich qualitative insights into the lived experiences, collective memories, and professional challenges surrounding Saint Sophia and its urban setting. Across all conversations, participants emphasized the deep cultural significance of the church as both an orienting landmark and a familiar presence woven into everyday life in Varosh.

One resident captured this sentiment vividly: “Growing up, we always knew where the church was—you could see it from almost anywhere. Now, it’s hidden behind roofs and wires. You have to look for it” (Interview 9, July 2023). This statement exemplifies the notion of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990), in which spatial practices and visual conventions become internalized across generations; Saint Sophia thus operates as a spatial referent embedded in communal memory, guiding how the residents navigate and interpret their surroundings.

However, several interlocutors have noted a marked decline in the legibility of the church within the urban landscape. As one long-term resident observed: “In the 1970s, regulations aimed to preserve the sightlines to Saint Sophia, but enforcement was weak. Now you see kiosks and tourist signage where there used to be open paths” (Interview 5, April 2023).

This evolution illustrates how commercial pressures and shifting development priorities have disrupted the inherited spatial order once maintained by the prominence of the church. Nevertheless, the symbolic power of the church endures. An urban planner lamented,

“The city wants to develop, but it doesn’t know how to do that without sacrificing its character. Saint Sophia gets caught in the middle” (Interview 2, March 2023).

These narratives confirm that the urban habitus shaped by historical architecture remains surprisingly resilient, even amid rapid change. More than a mere architectural landmark, Saint Sophia functions as a cultural schema—a nexus where memory, spatial behavior, and social identity converge, sustaining its foundational role in the urban life of Ohrid.

Table 2: Application of Key Theoretical Concepts to Empirical Findings in the Study of Saint Sophia and Varosh Neighborhood.

Source: Authors.

Theorist	Key Concept	Application in the Study	Supporting Evidence
Bourdieu (1990)	Habitus	Interview data showing generational attachment to Saint Sophia; daily routines shaped by proximity to the church	Quotes from Interviews 5 and 9; orientation of communal spaces toward the church
Lynch (1960)	Mental Map	Photographic analysis showing changes in visual corridors and sightlines; mapping of converging paths toward the church	Historic and contemporary images (1925–2023); annotated diagrams showing blocked and preserved views
Rapoport (1969)	Vernacular Adaptation	Field observations of building forms, materials, and spatial adaptation in Varosh responding to topography and the church	Material use (stone masonry), layout adaptation in steep terrain, typological continuity with religious architecture

Interview insights from residents, planners, and conservationists underscore the dual function of Saint Sophia as both a spatial referent and a vessel of cultural memory. Many participants referred to the church as the “heart of the neighborhood,” a description that echoes the concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), in which spatial practices and communal identities are forged through long-standing interactions with place. Although new developments have obscured sightlines and have also disrupted traditional street patterns, Saint Sophia remains deeply embedded in the collective orientation and meaning-making of the inhabitants of Ohrid. These testimonies bolster the argument that the impact of the church transcends its physical form, operating instead as a mental, symbolic, and spatial landmark that continually shapes how the residents of the city perceive and experience their urban environment.

6.6 Synthesis of the Findings

The integrated review of archival documents, field observations, photographic comparisons, and interview insights confirms that Saint Sophia still anchors the historic core of Ohrid both culturally and spatially. Yet the surrounding vernacular fabric—once a product of organic growth and the centrality of the church (Rapoport, 1969; Chipan, 2000)—now faces mounting pressures from unregulated commercialization and urban densification. Although the medieval Christian quarter of Ohrid has shown remarkable resilience, the spatial hierarchies and visual coherence that once reinforced the prominence of Saint Sophia are eroding. These findings underscore the value of hybrid heritage frameworks (Stubbs, 1996), vernacular theory (Oliver, 1989), and regional scholarship (Tomovska, 2020; Ivkowska, 2021) for understanding how collective memory and urban identity can be preserved amid modern development challenges.

Thus, it can be argued that Saint Sophia remains a potent generator of urban form, symbolism, and communal identity in Ohrid. Despite encroachments that threaten its visibility and integrity, the imprint of the church endures in the morphological DNA of the city and in the shared consciousness of its residents. By weaving together historical, spatial, and experiential evidence, this study affirms the role of Saint Sophia as a multi-scalar landmark—one that continues to shape the form, memory, and meaning of the historic urban landscape of Varosh.

7. Discussion

The following discussion situates the findings within the broader scholarship on urban transformations around religious monuments in historic Balkan cities, identifying both parallels and divergences and exploring the forces that underlie them.

7.1 Spatial Organization and Morphological Anchoring

The 2023 field observations, corroborated by 1950s municipal plans and early twentieth-century photographs (National Archive of Ohrid; Chipan, 1996), reveal that the urban form of Varosh remains shaped decisively by the Church of Saint Sophia. Streets such as Tsar Samoil, Ilindenska, and Kuzman Kapidan all converge on—or visually frame—the church, creating a centripetal network that channels movement and sightlines toward this focal point. Positioned at the nexus between the elevated Samoil's Fortress and the lakeside core, Saint Sophia acts as both a literal and figurative anchor, demonstrating how Byzantine planning principles deliberately situated ecclesiastical structures at the key urban intersections to assert religious and civic authority.

Indeed, this pattern mirrors similar arrangements in other Balkan cities, where medieval churches functioned as organizing nodes within the organic street systems. Nevertheless, it also underscores the unique topographical and historical context of Ohrid, in which terrain and longstanding Christian identity have preserved this morphology through successive cultural and political changes.

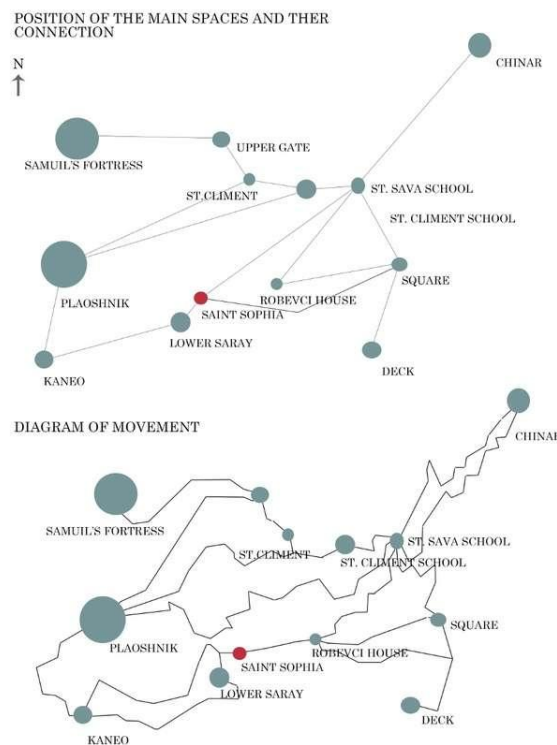


Fig. 7: Network of Urban Spaces Around St. Sophia and Their Spatial Connectivity.

Source: Authors.¹

¹ This diagram illustrates the spatial hierarchy and movement network among key public and cultural landmarks in the historic core surrounding the Church of St. Sophia. Positioned centrally and marked in red, St. Sophia serves as a pivotal urban node that connects a range of significant destinations including Plaoshnik, Kaneo, Robevci House, Lower Saray, and further out to educational institutions and historic sites such as St. Clement School, Upper Gate, and Samuil's Fortress.

In the diagram at the top, the spatial relationships are visualized through proximity and node size, indicating relative importance and frequency of interaction. St. Sophia is strategically linked with several major spaces, highlighting its integrative role within the urban structure.

This spatial logic aligns closely with Byzantine planning principles, in which religious monuments functioned as focal nodes within the urban hierarchy. Chipan (2000:112–130) observes that Byzantine churches were deliberately sited on elevated or central sites at the confluence of major thoroughfares, thereby asserting both religious and civic authority. In Ohrid, Saint Sophia occupies such a position—perched between the lakeshore and Samoil's Fortress—commanding views, accommodating processions, and structuring pedestrian flows through the city.

Adding to this, Koder (1995) notes that early Christian and Byzantine urbanism integrated monumental architecture with street orientation and parcel layout. Roads would curve or incline to preserve sightlines to key ecclesiastical structures, reinforcing both symbolic and spatial bonds. In Varosh, detailed spatial measurements reveal highly irregular lot orientations that nonetheless consistently respect the footprint of the church—particularly within a 100-meter radius—thereby framing Saint Sophia as the organizing centerpiece of the neighborhood.

At the same time, Mango (1976) points out that urban procession routes and visibility corridors amplified the symbolic dominance of the religious buildings. Archival photographs from the 1920s through the 1940s confirm that the western and southern flanks of Saint Sophia once remained open and unobstructed, preserving its visual prominence from multiple vantage points. Although these corridors are now partially blocked, the role of the church as a radial terminus and visual anchor endures—distinguishing the street network of Varosh from the orthogonal grids and inward-facing courtyard systems introduced in the Ottoman-era expansion of the lower quarters of Ohrid. Kojic (1976) characterizes Ottoman urbanism as favoring maze-like lanes and private courtyards over monumental alignments, a contrast that underscores the resilience of pre-Ottoman spatial grammar of Varosh centered on Saint Sophia.

In fact, Tomovska (2020) reinforces this interpretation by showing how the master builders in Ohrid aligned vernacular dwellings and access routes to accommodate both topographical constraints and symbolic cues, effectively embedding religious landmarks into the everyday fabric of the city.

7.2 Cultural and Spatial Integration of Saint Sophia

The findings of this research confirm that Saint Sophia has long functioned not only as a religious center but also as a cultural and urban focal point—a role that has evolved gradually over centuries. This pattern echoes trends in other Balkan cities (Çelik, 1992; Jireček, 1918) where sacred monuments have anchored urban growth. Yet unlike places such as Thessaloniki or Dubrovnik, where rapid modernization either subsumed or marginalized religious landmarks, transformation of Ohrid has been comparatively measured and restrained.

The persistence of medieval Christian core of Varosh sets Ohrid apart from cities like Bitola and Sarajevo, which experienced extensive Ottoman-era restructuring of Christian quarters (Kojic, 1976). The analysis of archival documents and cadastral maps shows that Varosh maintained its dense, small-parcel fabric well into the twentieth century. This continuity likely reflects a combination of the modest scale of Ohrid, its steep and constraining terrain, and a strong communal attachment to Saint Sophia as a living heritage site. Consequently, rather than being overridden by later planning regimes, the cultural and spatial centrality of the church has remained a defining element of the urban identity of Ohrid.

The movement diagram at the bottom maps the actual pedestrian paths, underscoring the organic flow of movement. The dense web of connections through St. Sophia confirms it as a central convergence point within the broader network. Its accessibility from both cultural landmarks and community spaces (like schools and squares) emphasizes its function not only as a religious site but as a connective civic hub.

Together, these diagrams reinforce St. Sophia's historical and urban significance as a spatial anchor, facilitating movement, orientation, and interaction within the urban fabric.



Fig. 8: Simplified spatial map of the Varosh neighborhood.
Source: Authors.

Figure 10 offers a simplified spatial map of Varosh, showing how the principal thoroughfares—Tsar Samoil, Ilindenska, and Kuzman Kapidan—radially converge on the Church of Saint Sophia. This visual representation underlines the assertion of Chipan (1996) that Byzantine ecclesiastical centers operated according to a deliberate spatial logic, with religious monuments serving as both morphological and symbolic anchors.

The combined spatial analysis offered in this paper—drawing on field measurements, archival maps, and a comprehensive photographic survey—reveals quantifiable patterns that attest to the formative influence of Saint Sophia on the vernacular development of Varosh. In Varosh itself, parcels are compact, houses face inward toward the shared courtyards or narrow lanes, and setbacks are minimal, producing a dense, centropetal urban grain. By contrast, the Ottoman-influenced districts to the East display larger plot sizes, detached courtyard homes, and a more regular, grid-based street network. These divergent typologies—as evidenced by plot configurations, building orientations, and density gradients—correlate directly with the proximity to the church, highlighting the pull of Saint Sophia on the form of the neighborhood.

In fact, the photographic archive reinforces these conclusions: early twentieth-century street views consistently exhibit uninterrupted sightlines and façade alignments oriented toward Saint Sophia, while modern images show how these visual corridors remain perceptible even as infill has altered the fabric. Taken together, the convergence of roads, the compact nature of the parcels of Varosh, and the persistence of axial views all testify to the active role of Saint Sophia in defining both the physical hierarchy and the urban morphology of its immediate surroundings.

7.3 Changes in the Spatial Context of Saint Sophia

Photographic surveys and archival documents reveal that the area around Saint Sophia has evolved from a distinct sacred precinct into an embedded landmark within an increasingly dense urban fabric. This progression echoes observations of Çelik (1992) in Thessaloniki and Plovdiv, where religious centers have been gradually enveloped by commercial and residential

development. In Ohrid, however, commercial encroachment has remained relatively restrained. Interviews with municipal planners and longtime residents underscore a strong communal commitment to safeguarding the historic character of the site, resulting in a more measured transformation than in the other Balkan cities influenced heavily by mass tourism.

Mid-twentieth-century conservation initiatives in Ohrid sought to enhance the visibility of Saint Sophia by creating open spaces, most notably through the demolition of buildings on its western flank. This approach parallels heritage management strategies in Veliko Tarnovo and Mostar, where clearing around monuments prioritized visual prominence over the integrity of surrounding medieval streetscapes. Yet in Ohrid, these interventions have been deliberately limited in scope, allowing the traditional street network of Varosh to remain largely intact. By balancing monument exposure with respect for the existing urban grain, the conservation efforts of Ohrid have preserved both the prominence and the character of the church of its historic neighborhood.

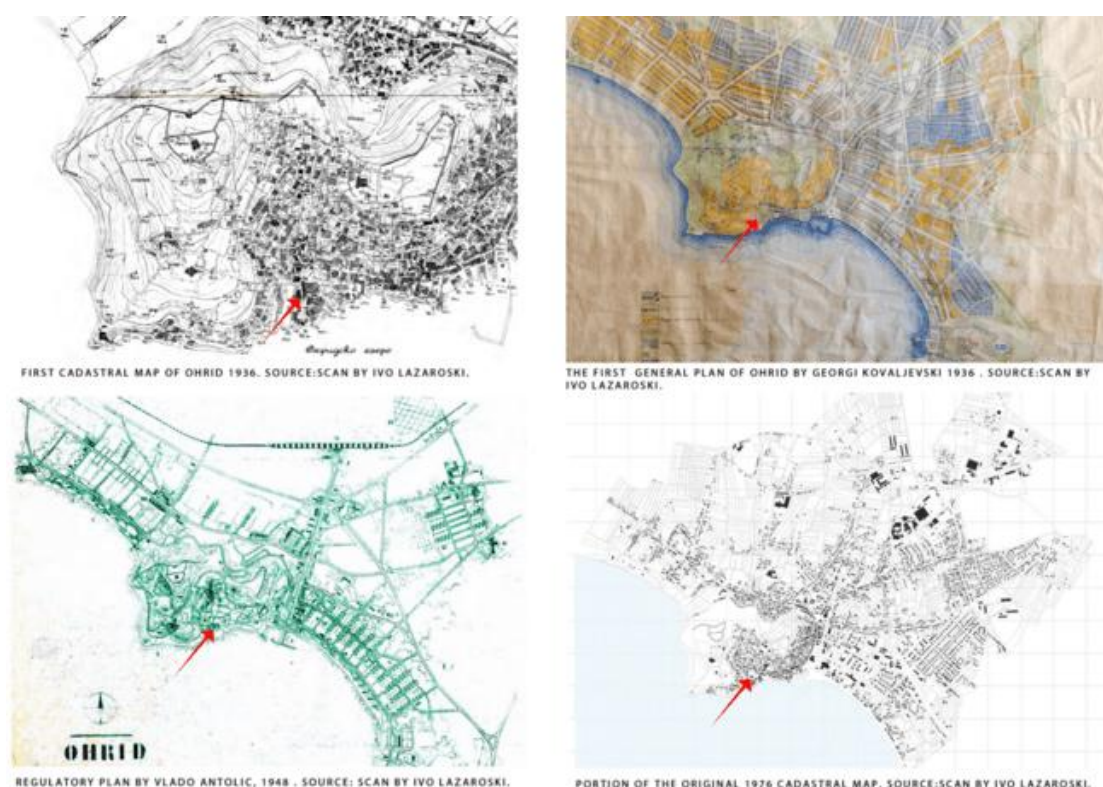


Fig. 11: Evolution of Urban Planning of Ohrid: 1936–1976 Cadastral and Regulatory Maps.
Source: Scans by Ivo Lazaroski, compilation by authors.

Figure 11 compiles four pivotal urban planning documents—spanning the initial 1936 cadastral and general plans through the 1948 and 1976 regulatory and cadastral updates—that collectively chart the morphological evolution of Ohrid over forty years. In each map, the Church of Saint Sophia is denoted by red arrows as an immutable spatial landmark, underscoring its enduring centrality in the layout of the city.

In fact, these documents provide essential evidence of how street alignments, parcel arrangements, and building densities in Varosh have shifted over time. Despite successive regulatory interventions—such as street realignments, plot consolidations, and zoning changes—the position of the church as the focal point of the neighborhood has remained constant. At the same time, the maps reveal the nuanced ways in which mid-century planning policies have both reinforced the prominence of Saint Sophia (by protecting sightlines and buffer zones) and have altered the medieval street network through selective widening and clearance.

Together, these plans form a vital baseline for analyzing long-term morphological change, validating the assertion of this paper that Saint Sophia has continuously contributed to shape—and has indeed been shaped—by the urban fabric of Ohrid.

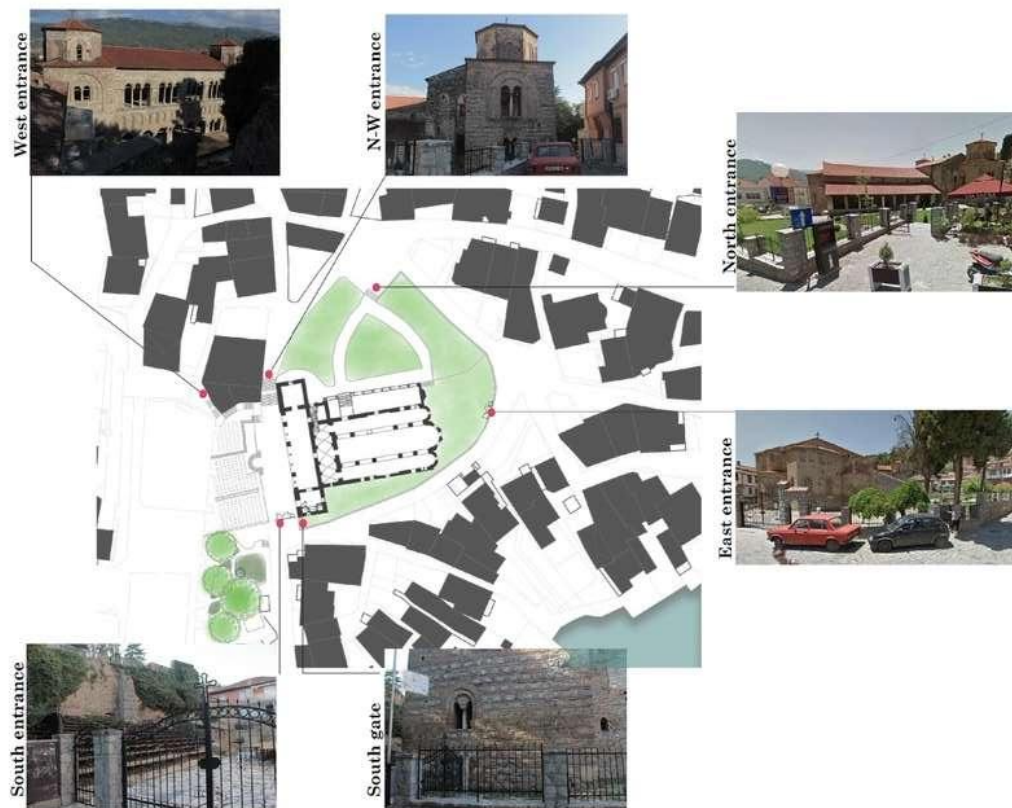


Fig. 9 Entrances and Spatial Interfaces of St. Sophia: Access and Urban Integration²
Source: Authors

7.4 Socio-Political Factors and Urban Transformation

This evidence suggests that the historical development of Ohrid diverged from the typical Ottoman planning model seen in the other regional centers. While the city's lower-lying districts have been transformed into Muslim quarters—with wider thoroughfares and detached courtyard houses characteristic of Ottoman urbanism—Varosh has retained its compact, irregular medieval form. This pattern partly corroborates typologies of Balkan urbanism

² This diagram presents the entrance points and spatial context surrounding the Church of St. Sophia, revealing its rich connectivity with the urban environment through six distinct access points: North, East, South, South Gate, West, and North-West entrances.

Each entrance is visually documented with corresponding street-level imagery, providing insight into the physical character, architectural features, and public experience of approaching the church. The map at the center highlights the spatial permeability of the site, showing how the church is embedded within a densely built urban fabric yet remains accessible from all cardinal directions.

The North and East Entrances are more open and integrated into the surrounding pedestrian zones, suggesting high visibility and frequent public interaction.

The South Gate and South Entrance appear more enclosed and fortified, indicating historical control or private access, reinforcing the church's layered civic and religious roles. The West and North-West Entrances frame views of the church façade, emphasizing its monumental character and historical presence.

The central green area surrounding the church acts as a buffer and gathering space, reinforcing its identity as both a sacred precinct and a public urban landmark. The diagram illustrates how St. Sophia functions not just as a destination, but as a central node in the urban network, accessible from multiple pathways and experienced through varied spatial thresholds.

(Kojic,1976) but also highlights a notable local exception. The deeply rooted ecclesiastical heritage of Ohrid and the prominence of Saint Sophia likely safeguarded the medieval street network from the more systematic restructuring that Ottoman rule imposed elsewhere. Consequently, Varosh resisted the homogenizing effects of Ottoman planning, preserving its distinctive spatial character around the church.

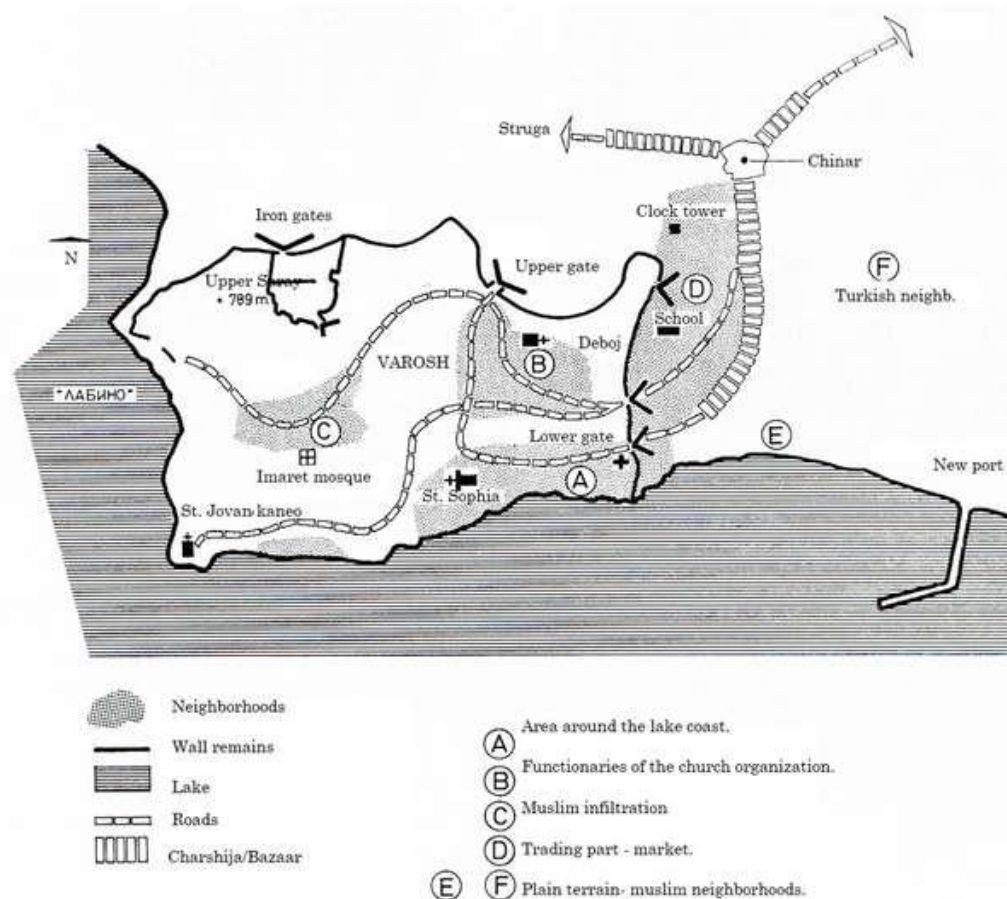


Fig. 10: Key morphological patterns that reinforce the centrality and organizing influence of the Church of Saint Sophia within the layout of the city.

Figure 12 situates Saint Sophia at the heart of the Varosh neighborhood, immediately adjacent to the Lower Gate and anchoring the city's southern quarter. From this locus, roads radiate outward to other key landmarks—the Charshija bazaar, the Imaret Mosque, the Church of St. Jovan Kaneo, and the Upper Gate—demonstrating a clearly centripetal circulation logic.

The map also delineates Christian and Muslim quarters: Varosh, clustered around Saint Sophia, represents the medieval Christian core, while the eastern plains host the more orthogonal, lower-density Ottoman neighborhoods. This spatial duality illustrates how religious identity shaped urban form. Around the church itself, related facilities—monastic spaces, clergy residences, and administrative buildings—cluster tightly, reinforcing the role of Saint Sophia as both a sacred and civic nucleus. As the Fig 13 shows, by visually delineating Ohrid's historical neighborhoods, circulation networks, religious landmarks, and socio-functional zones, the diagram reveals the key morphological patterns that reinforce the centrality and organizing influence of the Church of Saint Sophia within the layout of the city.

In contrast to the grid-like Turkish districts to the East, Varosh exhibits a compact, organic grain: narrow, irregular lanes envelop key ecclesiastical sites. These typological differences align with theories of vernacular spatial evolution (Rapoport,1969; Oliver,1989), demonstrating how proximity to a monumental religious structure could foster high-density

parceling, adaptive street alignments, and fragmented lot patterns consistent with medieval Christian urban traditions. Moreover, the plan confirms that Saint Sophia occupies a prominent visual corridor along the lakeshore, creating an uninterrupted line of sight that underscores its symbolic and spatial dominance—a deliberate Byzantine strategy for situating churches to command their surroundings (Chipan, 1996).

By revealing these patterns cartographically, the map moves beyond general assertions to provide concrete evidence of the formative influence of Saint Sophia. Its fixed position, the radial orientation of surrounding roads, the contrasting morphologies of Christian and Muslim quarters, and the strategic distribution of civic and religious functions collectively demonstrate the central role of the church in shaping the architectural and urban logic of the historic core Ohrid.

7.5 Impact of Tourism and Modernization

Other comparative studies reveal that many historic Balkan cities—such as Dubrovnik and Kotor—have incorporated their medieval centers into thriving economies of tourism, often compromising historical authenticity (Jireček, 1918). In Ohrid, tourism has unquestionably reshaped the urban landscape—visible in the proliferation of commercial kiosks and cafés around Saint Sophia—but these changes have been comparatively restrained. Interviews with local officials and residents indicate a deliberately cautious municipal strategy, informed by the UNESCO World Heritage status of Ohrid and a strong civic commitment to safeguarding the historic character of the city even as it welcomes visitors.

Table 3: Summary of Similarities and Differences.
Source: Authors

Aspect	Findings on Ohrid	Comparison with Other Balkan Cities	Explanations
Medieval Core Persistence	Strong, especially around Varosh	Weaker in cities like Bitola and Sarajevo	Geographic constraints; cultural importance of Saint Sophia
Commercial Encroachment	Moderate	High in Thessaloniki, Dubrovnik, Kotor	Stronger heritage protection policies in Ohrid
Ottoman Urban Influence	Partial, mainly in lower areas	Stronger elsewhere	Resistance due to religious and social factors
Conservation Strategies	Selective exposure of monument	More aggressive in cities like Mostar	Prioritization of historic authenticity over visual exposure

Thus, it is argued that the Church of Saint Sophia continues to shape the urban form of Ohrid and identity through its strategic location, powerful symbolism, and deep resonance in communal memory. Unlike many Balkan cities where medieval religious monuments have been sidelined or repurposed, Saint Sophia remains seamlessly woven into a living vernacular framework that reflects centuries of adaptive practices.

These findings underscore how monumental religious architecture can serve as a stabilizing anchor amidst ongoing urban change. They also demonstrate the importance of an interdisciplinary approach—integrating architectural analysis, sociological theory, and conservation principles—to fully grasp the dynamic relationships between built heritage and urban transformations.

8. Conclusions

This research aimed to explore the spatial, architectural, and symbolic roles of the Church of Saint Sophia in the historic core of Ohrid, with particular attention to its interaction with the surrounding vernacular fabric of the Varosh neighborhood. By integrating archival

records, systematic field observations, spatial mapping, photographic comparisons, and semi-structured interviews, the research illuminates how a single monumental structure can both shape and be shaped by its urban context over successive eras.

The conclusions emerge from a synthesis of qualitative insights and spatial evidence, framed by regional scholarship and theoretical perspectives. Rather than positing a singular, deterministic influence, the study reveals the role of Saint Sophia as a dynamic ensemble of interwoven processes—spatial, cultural, and morphological—that have unfolded across multiple historical layers. In this light, the church functions not merely as an isolated relic of the past but as an active participant in the ongoing evolution of the urban form and collective identity of Ohrid. The specific conclusions of this research are as follows.

8.1 Conservation Efforts Have Reshaped the Spatial Context of Saint Sophia

Archival maps and mid-twentieth-century planning documents show that conservation-driven demolitions reshaped the western edge of Varosh, carving out an open buffer around the exonarthex of the church to enhance its visibility. While this clearing reflected contemporary heritage-management practices (Stubbs, 1996), it also interrupted the organic street network and dense residential fabric of the neighborhood, creating a spatial rupture. Today, this cleared zone stands as a testament to the delicate balance—and persistent tension—between preserving monuments and maintaining the integrity of the historic urban grain in Ohrid.

8.2 The Neighborhood Retains Elements of Pre-Modern Urban Morphology

Field observations and spatial surveys confirm that Varosh still embodies its medieval roots: narrow, irregular streets; small, tightly packed plots; buildings stepped into steep terrain; and extensive use of rubble-stone masonry. These persistent features demonstrate that, despite transformative interventions elsewhere in Ohrid, Varosh has safeguarded its vernacular character. This resilience echoes the concept of vernacular adaptation (Rapoport, 1969) as an ongoing dialogue between environmental constraints and cultural needs, and it reinforces the argument of Tomovska (2020, 2022) that the master builders of Ohrid sustained a local architectural grammar—one attuned both to the topography of the landscape and to the presence of monumental landmarks like Saint Sophia.

8.3 Urban Transformations Reflect the Layered Historical Processes

The area around Saint Sophia has been shaped not by a single developmental impulse but by a succession of interventions layered over centuries. Early Byzantine planning has established the church as both a visual focal point and an organizational core—a framework that persisted, albeit imperfectly, through the Ottoman period as new religious and civic buildings introduced alternative spatial hierarchies. In the twentieth century, state-led conservation efforts sought to reassert the pre-eminence of the church by altering its immediate context. The result is a complex palimpsest of religious, cultural, and political influences: tightly clustered vernacular housing abuts intentionally cleared heritage zones, exemplifying the ongoing tension between continuity and rupture in the evolving urban fabric of Ohrid.

8.4 Photographic Evidence Demonstrates Shifts in Urban Legibility

A comparative photographic analysis—spanning the early twentieth century to the present—reveals a pronounced decline in the visual accessibility of Saint Sophia. Archival images frame the church as an uncluttered silhouette against the lakeshore horizon, set within the open terrain. Contemporary photographs, by contrast, show its form fragmented by commercial kiosks, signage, street furniture, and infill development. According to the theory of “mental map” (Lynch, 1960), landmarks like Saint Sophia function as essential nodes in urban cognition. The partial erosion of its clear sightlines threatens to diminish its role in spatial orientation and collective memory, even as its symbolic resonance endures among the residents.

8.5 Saint Sophia Remains Symbolically Central to the Identity of Ohrid

Interviews with long-term residents, urban planners, and conservation professionals consistently portray Saint Sophia as far more than a historical monument—it is a social and emotional anchor deeply embedded in the collective memory of Ohrid. Although its immediate surroundings have changed, the church retains a central place in the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990) of the community. Residents refer to it as the “heart of the neighborhood,” and planners acknowledge its ongoing influence on spatial policy and civic self-image. These testimonies demonstrate that the symbolic power of historic religious architecture can outlast—even transcend—its physical prominence.

8.6 Strengths and Limitations of the Research

The strength of this study lies in its multidisciplinary approach, which combined architectural analysis, spatial mapping, historical documentation, and qualitative interviews. This allowed for a multi-layered understanding of the relationship between Saint Sophia and its urban context. Moreover, by integrating the insights of regional scholars such as Chipan, Tomovska, Cerasi, and Ivkowska, it was able to position the development of Ohrid within a broader Balkan urban tradition.

However, the research was constrained by several limitations. Some historical records were fragmentary, and comparative photographic materials availability were uneven. The focus on Varosh, while necessary for depth, limited the ability to compare development patterns across the other parts of Ohrid. Future studies could expand this approach through GIS-based spatial analysis, broader oral history collection, and the examination of policy implementation and urban regulation frameworks.

8.7 Concluding Reflection

The layered transformations around Saint Sophia underscore the challenges of heritage management in historically stratified urban environments. While the church remains a potent cultural and symbolic anchor, its spatial authority is increasingly mediated by modernization, tourism, and fragmented planning interventions. This case study suggests that preserving urban identity requires more than safeguarding individual monuments; it calls for integrated strategies that respect vernacular continuity, honor spatial memory, and empower local stakeholders. Monumental architecture must be understood not in isolation but as an active node within a living urban ecosystem—one where everyday practices, collective memory, and material adaptation converge. As Ohrid faces future development pressures, the experience of Saint Sophia offers a cautionary yet instructive model for balancing conservation imperatives with the need for urban vitality and change.

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