

[https://doi.org/10.52326/jss.utm.2025.8\(3\).06](https://doi.org/10.52326/jss.utm.2025.8(3).06)  
CZU 72.025.3:008:342+711.4(497.2-25)



## ARCHITECTURE, CULTURAL VALUES AND POLITICS: THE CASE FOR SOFIA

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Received: 07. 15. 2025

Accepted: 08. 29. 2025

**Abstract.** Recalling a doctoral study undertaken at the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, Sofia, this article focuses on architecture, cultural values and politics in contemporary Sofia. It addresses urban landscapes and cultural heritage legislation in Bulgaria with specific emphasis on immovable and intangible culture. It concludes by arguing for mapping the city's monuments of cultural value, addressing its urban challenges, and positioning this capital amongst Europe's leading capital cities.

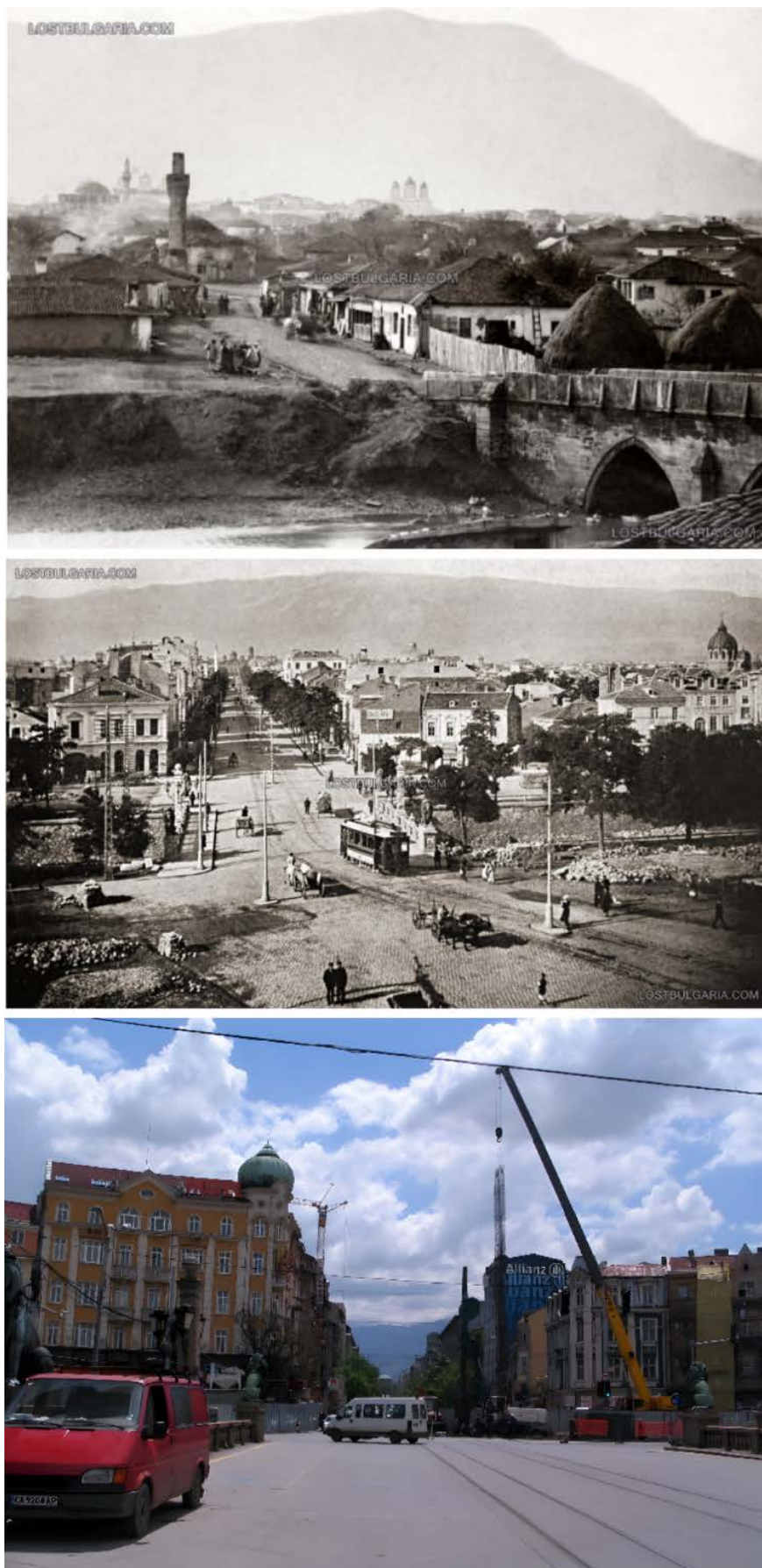
**Keywords:** *Sofia, urban planning, cultural heritage, cultural heritage value, monuments, intangible culture, spirit of place, phenomenology.*

**Rezumat.** Reamintind studiul de doctorat la Universitatea de Arhitectură, Inginerie Civilă și Geodezie din Sofia, acest articol se concentrează pe arhitectură, valori culturale și politică în Sofia contemporană. Acesta abordează peisajele urbane și legislația privind patrimoniul cultural în Bulgaria, cu accent special pe cultura imobiliară și intangibilă. Articolul se încheie cu un argument pentru cartografierea monumentelor de valoare culturală ale orașului, abordând problemele urbane și poziționând această capitală printre principalele capitale ale Europei.

**Cuvinte cheie:** Sofia, urbanism, patrimoniu cultural, valoare de patrimoniu cultural, monumente materiale, monumente imateriale, spirit de loc, fenomenologie.

### 1. Introduction

During the Communist regime, Sofia's urban core was destroyed to make way for the modern city centre which included the Central Universal Store (TSUM), the Sheraton Hotel and the Communist Party Headquarters. Post Second World War developments tore apart the soul of the place, rendering it sterile and replacing humanity with technology. This can be illustrated through urban planning enhancements of major infrastructural works and public buildings. Historical photos of Lions' Bridge (Figure 1), Eagles' Bridge (Figure 2) and the National Theatre (Figures 3 and 4) demonstrate how Sofia developed over approximately a century. The argument put forth is not, and is not intended to be read as, a plea for a nostalgic or a romantic approach to planning. It is a call for a phenomenological approach to urban planning in Sofia whereby, in Norberg-Schulz's words, "human identity presupposes the identity of place" [1, p. 22].



**Figure 1.** Lions' Bridge: (top) former bridge in 1879 [5], (middle) the paving of the bridge in the first decade of the twentieth century [6] and (bottom) the bridge at present (online version is in colour).



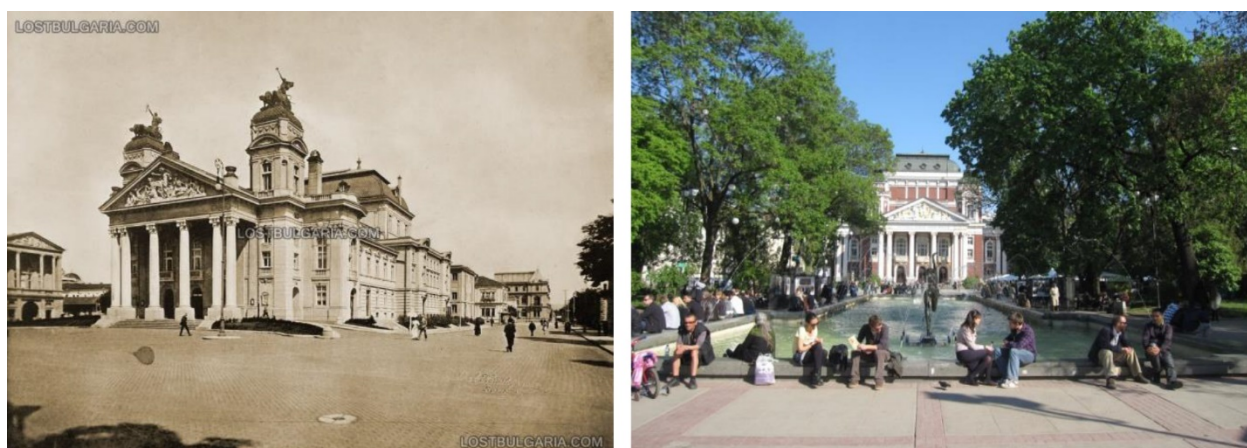
In tackling architecture, cultural values and politics in contemporary Sofia, this article addresses urban landscapes and local cultural heritage legislation, focusing on immovable and intangible culture. It concludes by arguing for (i) the mapping of the city's culturally valuable monuments, (ii) rising to meet its urban challenges, and (iii) positioning Sofia amongst Europe's leading capital cities. This article is a follow up to a recent publication on the phenomenology of urban planning in Sofia [2] whose content formed part of an unpublished doctoral thesis [3, pp. 181–196; 4, pp. 75–83].



**Figure 2.** Eagles' Bridge: (left) in the 1910s [7] and (right) in the 1980s [8] (online version is in colour).



**Figure 3.** National Theatre: (left) between 1910–1920 [9] and (right) at present (online version is in colour).



**Figure 4.** The setting of the National Theatre: (left) between 1910–1920 [10] and (right) as at present (online version is in colour).

## 2. Urban landscapes

There are a number of landscapes within a city. Urban planners talk of townscapes, cityscapes, roofscapes, cultural landscapes, and so on. These are all tangible phenomena which are important characteristics of a given place. They all help to orient and identify oneself within a space. This is an important dimension to the environmental nature of a place. Another significant aspect is generated by intangible cultural assets – costumes, folk dances, games and sports – which are nowadays protected by law in Bulgaria. Prior to the process of globalisation and synchronisation with Western capitalist culture – primarily mass-media driven – less information and peer pressure to conform to stylistic fashions were present. Photos taken during the interwar period (1919–1939) illustrate a typical family from Sofia village (Figure 5, left) and another from the city centre (Figure 5, right). These families can be easily distinguished by their respective dress code. The former is recognisably closer to costumes associated with rural settings, while the latter wore outfits that bore similarities to those worn in the towns and cities of the Balkans. The urban dress code is only remotely associated with that of the vernacular village areas. Figure 6 (left) illustrates a young woman from the city in a sitting room at the turn of the twentieth century. This type of interior is more in line with the new influences from the Continent. The most significant interior, and one which is congruent with those of other royal courts in Europe, is the throne room of the Royal Palace, dating from the same period (Figure 6, right). This throne room – a symbol of power and governance – communicates the values the new political establishment wanted to convey. The significance of folklore and public culture since Sofia was made the capital of Bulgaria was not limited solely to themes such as national costumes; it extended to traditional dance and sporting activities.



**Figure 5.** A Bulgarian family: (left) from Sofia village, 1920s [11] and (right) from Sofia city, 1920s [12] (online version is in colour).

With the establishment of the Kingdom of Bulgaria in 1908, an immediate need was felt to initiate civil engineering works and erect public buildings to support the administrative and social infrastructure of the capital. Priority was given to establishing national monuments, not only to facilitate identification and orientation within the city but also to convey the values of the new political establishment. Two such building works – both of which are existentially tangible but phenomenologically intangible – are Alexander Nevski Cathedral (Figure 7) and the monument to the Tsar Liberator (Figures 8 and 9). The former edifice was ranked in 2009 as the top urban sight in the city by primary school children [15: 24].





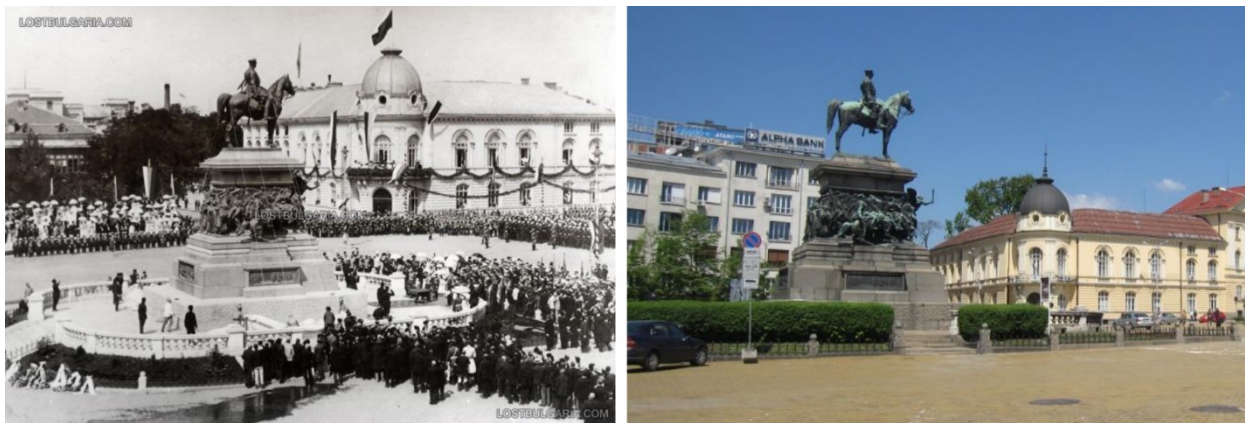
**Figure 6.** (Left) A young woman in an early twentieth-century interior [13] and (right) the Throne Room, Royal Palace, Sofia, early twentieth century [14] (online version is in colour).

Both buildings are physical landmarks which symbolically convey the traditions and values the Bulgarian nation had long yearned for, namely the country's liberation from half a millennium of despotic foreign oppression under the Turkish yoke and suppression of the culture and spirit of Bulgarians. Both successive governments and the public, local and foreign, respected these monuments and what they stand for. They were not imposed on society but reflected the collective memory and identity of all Bulgarians. National monuments erected by the state during the socialist period also serve as landmarks which the locals and foreigners associate with Sofia. Two such examples are the National Palace of Culture (Figure 10, left) and the Monument for the Soviet Army (Figure 10, right). In 1993, Sofia City Council resolved to destroy the latter, but it was saved from destruction – a fate which had previously fallen on other national monuments from the same period – mainly due to opposition mounted by the Bulgarian Socialist Party, although the monument was partially removed in December 2023. The mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov (Figure 11, left) was demolished in 1999 (Figure 11, right), while the statue of Lenin (Figure 12, left) was replaced by a statue of Sofia, the symbol of the city (Figure 12, right). The removal of these monuments – in particular the destruction of the mausoleum, which took place a decade after the fall of communism (although it was presented through the media as a collective impulsive decision) – reads more like a political agenda of members of government at the time.



**Figure 7.** (Left) Aerial view of Alexander Nevski Cathedral in 1926 [16] and (right) Alexander Nevski Cathedral at present (online version is in colour).





**Figure 8.** Monument to the Tsar Liberator: (left) at its inauguration on August 30, 1907 [17] and (right) as it stands today (online version is in colour).



**Figure 9.** Aerial view of the Monument to the Tsar Liberator (circled in red) which is located in front of the National Assembly: (left) as in 1926 [18] and (right) as at present (© Google Earth) (online version is in colour).



**Figure 10.** (Left) The National Palace of Culture and (right) the Monument for the Soviet Army as in May 2021 (online version is in colour).





**Figure 11.** Georgi Dimitrov Mausoleum: (left) in the 1980s [19] and (right) during its destruction in 1999 [20] (online version is in colour).



**Figure 12.** (Left) The statue of Lenin [21] and (right) the statue of Sofia as it stands today (online version is in colour).

### 3. Cultural heritage legislation

The criteria regulating contemporary and future spatial planning policies for Sofia, as in other settlements, is regulated by the country's political priorities. The relationship between planning and politics reflects the agenda of the government. The same applies to the city's heritage. The significance of monuments of culture runs through the political agenda.

One development which affected spatial planning in Sofia was the introduction of the Cultural Heritage Act in 2009 [22]. This legislation, which "introduced a new integrative concept for cultural heritage and sets up a new national system for protection, management and sustainable use" [23], replaced the Cultural Monuments and Museums Act [24] and reflected the priorities of environmental protection. What is significant in this act is the introduction of the notion of "cultural values", a concept included in international charters and conventions relating to protection and sustainability of cultural heritage.

In the context of Bulgaria, it suggests an interesting conceptual leap in dealing with culture. The Bulgarian government started to take into consideration both tangible phenomena (buildings and monuments) and intangible phenomena such as oral traditions, folklore, popular games and sport. The cultural heritage values stated in the Cultural Heritage Act, categorised in terms of tangible and intangible phenomena, are tabulated in Table 1. As

can be inferred from this list, the Cultural Heritage Act identified eighteen cultural heritage values. With respect to immovable cultural heritage values, each is in turn classified in terms of its cultural and social significance into one of the following four categories: global significance, national, local and ensemble value. The criteria for inclusion in each of these categories are given in Table 2. Some of the significant tangible and intangible cultural heritage values were discussed in [2] whereby conclusions were drawn about their role and meaning in the context of the city of Sofia, both with respect to its image and its history.

#### 4. Immovable monuments of culture

The list of immovable monuments of culture as acknowledged by the Cultural Heritage Act currently and in use by the Old Sofia Municipal Enterprise – an enterprise founded in 1998 “to investigate, collect, preserve and manage any movable and immovable cultural heritage in Sofia Municipality” [25] – includes monuments of culture within the territory of Sofia Municipality and in the historical centre (the historical centre of Sofia – ancient Serdika and the medieval Sredets – was declared an archaeological reservation in 1976 [26]). The categorisation of these monuments, in terms of their significance and the number of monuments in each classification, is given in Table 3. The criterion used by Old Sofia Municipal Enterprise for defining the historical centre of the city was used to complete the tabulation. The list of monuments of culture of national value in Sofia city is included in [27]. From this list it is evident that the concentration of cultural assets is in the city centre. Knowing accurately the area occupied by these sites and their buffer zones one can compute

1. the density of monuments of cultural heritage in Sofia,
2. the effective area occupied by said monuments, and
3. their buffer zones as a percentage of the total superficial area of the city.

Only the medieval-dating Boyana Church, located on the outskirts of Sofia, is listed by UNESCO as a site of world heritage significance [28].

Table 1

#### Cultural heritage values listed in the Bulgaria's Cultural Heritage Act of 2009 [22]

Tangible Phenomena	Intangible Phenomena
1. On land, underground, underwater archaeological sites and reserves	1. Oral traditions and language
2. Historical sites and complexes	2. Literary and fiction heritage
3. Architectural sites and complexes	3. Customs, rituals, ceremonies, feasts and beliefs
4. Ethnographic sites and complexes	4. Music, songs and dances
5. Park art and landscape architecture	5. Folk medicine
6. Natural heritage*	6. Cultural ethnologic traditions
7. Industrial heritage	7. Folk games and sports
8. Works of fine and applied arts	
9. Folk crafts	
10. Documentary heritage	
11. Audio-visual heritage	

\* including anthropological remains discovered during field research, and remains of paleozoology and cultivated plants.



Table 2

<b>Categories of immovable cultural heritage values</b> (based on [22])	
Category	Criteria for inclusion
Global significance	Monuments included in UNESCO World Heritage List
National value	Archaeological reserves and other cultural heritage values with exclusive importance for the culture and history of the country
Local value	Monuments connected with the culture and history of settlements, municipalities and regions
Ensemble value	Monuments that support the spatial characterisation and architectural typology of the group of cultural heritage values to which they belong

### 5. Intangible manifestations of culture

Important manifestations of intangible heritage (Table 1) are nowadays protected by law. The implementation of the Cultural Heritage Act was entrusted to the Ministry of Culture, the National Institute for Monuments of Culture and other agencies such as the Old Sofia Municipal Enterprise. These bodies are responsible for compiling data on such manifestations for eventual inclusion of a thematically itemised list. This requires political commitment beyond the enactment of legislation. A budget must be allocated (i) to recruit people with a range of expertise, (ii) to fund scholars from various disciplines to undertake professional studies and assessments, and (iii) to compile a database of the findings. These are the foundations required to compile a list of intangible cultural assets. The development of a cadastre for intangible cultural heritage, in parallel with the list of immovable monuments of culture, will make it possible to plot them all on a basemap of Sofia. This will facilitate greater appreciation and a more inclusive comprehension of the soul of the Bulgarian nation as it has evolved through history.

The Cultural Heritage Act should be read in the spirit of the law, namely that of preserving and conserving immovable and intangible heritage. In this context, this legislation should be allowed to cater for immovable heritage which is associated significantly with intangible cultural values, such as Alexander Nevski Cathedral and the Tsar Liberator monument.

Table 3

<b>Monuments of culture in Sofia</b> (based on [29])		
Level of significance	Number of monuments (Municipality) (Centre)	
International	3	Boyana Church with a reserve and guarded zone surrounding it
National	323	142
Local	771	706

Continuation Table 3

For information	166	96	12 of which have been removed from the list
Group	61	61	3 of which have been removed from the list
Landscape art	39	39	
Declared monuments <sup>#</sup>	393	65	3 of which have been removed from list

<sup>#</sup> without preliminary defined category of significance.

## 6. Concluding remarks

To conclude this article, it is worth referring to three recommendations which will prove useful for the future position of Sofia in Europe: i) mapping the city's tangible and intangible cultural heritage, ii) addressing urban challenges and iii) positioning the city amongst Europe's leading capital cities.

1. **Mapping monuments of cultural value:** The plan for protecting and developing cultural and historical heritage within Sofia centre is reproduced in a map entitled Cultural and Historical Heritage, originally plotted at a scale of 1:5,000, which can be found in the *Masterplan of the City of Sofia and Sofia Municipality* [30]. This map records individual and groups of sites of cultural heritage at three levels of significance: national, local and "for information value". It covers ensembles and groups of ensembles of cultural heritage sites, landscape art, declared monuments without a preliminary defined category of significance, territories with development protection for the historical and archaeological reserve 'Serdica-Sredets' and Prince Boris's Garden, and protected underground public spaces of cultural and historical significance. The masterplan also includes a map of green areas within the city centre together with cultural and historical heritage [31]. This map plots landscape art and protected territory for the preservation of cultural and historical heritage for guarded and other group monuments of culture. It further includes reserves which are categorised under seven themes:
  - i. specific territorial and development protection for historical and archaeological sites;
  - ii. protected areas of historical and archaeological reserves;
  - iii. protected territory containing groups of culture heritage monuments but which are not designated as reserves;
  - iv. territories with particular settlement structures;
  - v. protected open spaces of cultural and/or historical significance;
  - vi. protected territories of spatial structures with high cultural and historical value; and
  - vii. open public spaces, "the green memory of Sofia", which comprise of parks and gardens.

These maps were rendered more useful by Old Sofia Municipal Enterprise, which organised the data thematically into separate layers, which made it far easier to analyse.

2. **Urban challenges:** In the 1990s, a number of urban planning concepts were introduced in Eastern Europe. The most notable were the Europe of Regions (a concept advanced "through public discussion and has been widely used since to give an image of the ongoing development of the united and more democratic Europe" [32, p. 97], the notion of governance (i.e., co-operation and sharing of responsibilities between all stakeholders), public-private partnerships and support for small and medium enterprises. Similarly to other members of the former Eastern Bloc, in this period urban development in Bulgaria was market driven rather than government controlled. The construction of typical socialist housing ceased and public social housing programmes were shelved. Pre-1989, centralised



urban planning regimes were discarded and replaced by a *laissez-faire* market-oriented philosophy as the city shifted from a monocentric to a polycentric structure. This led to quasi-anarchic developments which did not respect the existing environs, in particular their natural and cultural surroundings. The former is characterised by the numerous developments at the foot of the mountains surrounding Sofia Basin. Significant aspects which were not possible during the Socialist period include public and/or private participation in urban projects and the re-urbanisation of Sofia and Sofia Municipality. Sofia had already shifted to a polycentric structure prior to 1989, with the establishments of residential complexes at Lyulin and Mladost. These two districts are in effect satellite towns supporting a population of about 120,000 and 200,000 inhabitants, respectively; they have their own secondary centres with parks, schools, clinics and other social and cultural infrastructure.

3. **Positioning of Sofia amongst Europe's leading capital cities:** The *Masterplan of the City of Sofia and Sofia Municipality* acknowledges that "despite Sofia's considerable potential for becoming an urban centre of European importance, it faces a strong competition for that role from neighbouring large cities" [30, p. 25]. The role of cities in the European, and indeed global, urban network is enhanced by the presence of multinational corporations. The presence of such companies' headquarters has a significant impact on the cities in which they are located. However, attracting such corporations places a number of demands on cities, including the ability to guarantee political stability, efficient central and local administration, an attractive tax system, a good range of (cross)cultural activities, high-quality real estate, schools for foreign nationals, and good healthcare facilities [30]. Following EU accession, the significance of capitals in former Warsaw Pact countries expanded from a national to a European dimension. Besides a good general investment climate, Prague, Budapest and Warsaw have fared well in regional and international competition for foreign investment through the introduction of a range of incentives, from financial assistance programmes to zero-interest loans and tax incentives.

Local and European professionals talk of Sofia as the emerging capital of the Balkans. However, other capital cities in the region are challenging Sofia for this title. Notwithstanding the relatively positive forecasts for the city provided by research in Western Europe, Sofia lags behind in terms of both general development of the city and, more specifically, attracting foreign investment [30]. Indeed Sofia, and Bulgaria in general, has the resources, human and otherwise, and the expertise to transcend its current conditions and mature into a leading prosperous country in southeast Europe. Its vision should not be limited to a capital city in line with other EU capitals but to be a unique, flourishing city, the capital of the Bulgarian nation and a cradle of European civilisation. The crucible for the national spirit is rooted in the times of ancient antiquity, when this region formed the hub of world empires which extended to Asia.

**Acknowledgements.** This article is based on the PhD thesis of the author, undertaken and successfully completed under the academic supervision of the late Prof. Dr Arch. Vesselina Rousseva Troeva at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, Sofia [33]. Thanks are also due to the University of Malta, which financed the doctoral studies, and Peyo Kolev (proprietor of Lost Bulgaria, <http://www.lostbulgaria.com/>) for permission to images included in Figures 1 to 9, 11 and 12. Final thanks go to architect Joeaby Vassallo for his help extracting the image from Google Earth, reproduced here as Figure 9 (right).

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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**Citation:** Bianco, L. Architecture, cultural values and politics: the case for Sofia. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 8 (3), pp. 74-86. [https://doi.org/10.52326/jss.utm.2025.8\(3\).06](https://doi.org/10.52326/jss.utm.2025.8(3).06).

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