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Interior Detail as an Artefact, Reflecting Cultural Value and Architectural Style

Alexandrina Nenkova * and Anastasiya Kasheva

Department Interior and Design for Architecture, Architectural Faculty, University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy Sofia, 1164 Sofia, Bulgaria; kasheva_far@uacg.bg
* Correspondence: alexnen_far@uacg.bg

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the importance of architectural details and artefacts as cultural markers within the interior spaces of adaptively reused heritage buildings in Sofia's historic urban centre. A comparative study was performed on three significant early twentieth-century residential buildings: the house linked to the former 'Excelsior'/'Asen Zlatarov' cinema complex at Blvd 'Christo Botev' N85, the former residence at Blvd 'Christo Botev' N75, and the building at Blvd 'Stamboliyski' N36—the latter two have both been transformed into hotels. The research employs an interdisciplinary methodology combining archival research, field surveys, photographic documentation, 3D laser scanning, and comparative stylistic analysis. The study's principal contribution is the development of a transferable analytical framework for classifying interior details by function (constructive or decorative), location (enclosing surfaces, fixed furnishings, vertical circulation), and material—a framework not previously applied to this building stock in the Bulgarian context. The findings confirm that authentic interior details—including stair railings, flooring patterns, gypsum cornices, ornamental plasterwork, heating appliances, and joinery—function as reliable cultural artefacts and markers of historical period and stylistic identity. These details serve as evidence for dating, authenticating, and analysing the evolution of architectural style elements. Preserving and integrating these elements into adapted interiors strengthens architectural identity and supports the sustainable reuse of cultural heritage for contemporary purposes.

Keywords: Sofia residential heritage; historic interior details; early 20th century architecture; adaptive reuse; interior artefact analysis; heritage conservation; interior authenticity

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1. Introduction

From a contemporary point of view, the analysis of interior details is of considerable theoretical and practical value. Changes in habitation patterns, the transformation of inhabitable spaces through heritage-based adaptation, and the development of identities in contemporary environments are major issues that need to be addressed by architects. Interiors are means of establishing a link between history and the present and between historical antecedents and contemporary design paths. Frampton argues that the tectonic potential of a building stems from its capacity to articulate both the poetic and cognitive dimensions of its material substance, and that detailing should never be dismissed as a merely technical means of realisation—it is central to the expressive and cultural character of architecture [1].

Contemporary architecture and interior design can be used to respond to the issues of globalisation, taking into account local cultural values. In this view, heritage supports sustainable development. Its cultural dimension is a critical component of community well-being and diversity [2].

Interior-focused work has identified three main heritage-inspired strategies—historical revival, eclectic historicism, and free historicism—for integrating historic forms and meanings into contemporary interiors while maintaining authenticity [3]. Case studies on adapting historic buildings emphasise exposing and restoring old masonry and, reusing stone and traditional geometries (vaults, domes, and arches) via digital fabrication, often as decorative rather than structural elements [4]. Furniture and interior layouts in historic homes can be redesigned to meet modern ergonomics and technology needs while sustaining architectural integrity and cultural meaning.

The interior architectural detail occupies a singular position in the study of built heritage: it is simultaneously evidence of construction technique, expression of aesthetic culture, and marker of historical identity. Yet despite the growing body of scholarship on adaptive reuse and heritage conservation, the systematic analysis of interior details as cultural artefacts—objects that can date, authenticate, and characterise a building's period and social context—remains underexplored, particularly within the residential architecture of Sofia's historic centre.

This article addresses that gap. It presents a comparative study of interior details preserved in three early twentieth-century residential buildings located in the central area of Sofia, Bulgaria: the building linked to the former 'Excelsior'/'Asen Zlatarov' cinema complex at Blvd 'Christo Botev' N85, the residential structure at Blvd 'Christo Botev' N75, and the building at Blvd 'Stamboliyski' N36. All three have undergone adaptive reuse—two converted into small hotels, one into an office space—and all three retain significant authentic interior elements despite these interventions.

The three buildings were selected for three reasons. First, their shared location within one block of Sofia's historic centre allows for a controlled comparative study, minimising variables related to geography and urban context. Second, their similar construction period—the first two decades of the twentieth century—places them within the same phase of Sofia's architectural development, characterised by the influence of Central European Historicism and Secession, primarily transmitted through Viennese architectural practice. Third, despite their comparable origins, each building presents a distinct state of interior preservation, making the set collectively representative of the range of conditions encountered in Sofia's historic residential stock.

The research responds to a documented need within the field. International frameworks for heritage conservation—including the Venice Charter (1964) [5], the Burra Charter (1979, revised 2013) [6], and the guidelines established by ICOMOS—emphasise the importance of identifying and documenting authentic fabric as a precondition for any conservation or adaptation decision. However, these frameworks are most consistently applied at the scale of facades and urban ensembles. Interior detail, which is often lost or obscured during renovation, has received comparatively little systematic attention in the Bulgarian context.

The study draws on an interdisciplinary methodology combining archival research, field survey, photographic documentation, 3D laser scanning, and comparative stylistic analysis. It builds on a university scientific research project conducted at the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy (UACG), Sofia, in 2018–2019, which established the foundational thesis that the design of interior space in historic Sofia buildings is inseparable from its urban and contextual setting.

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The central argument of this article is that authentic interior details—stair railings, flooring patterns, gypsum cornices, ornamental plasterwork, original heating appliances, doors, and windows—function as reliable cultural artefacts: they can be used to identify style period, authenticate building history, and guide decisions about preservation and adaptation. Preserving and integrating these elements into adapted interiors strengthens architectural identity and supports the sustainable reuse of cultural heritage for contemporary purposes.

The objectives of this study are threefold. First, to identify, document, and comparatively analyse authentic interior details preserved in three early twentieth-century residential buildings in Sofia's historic centre, using a consistent set of analytical criteria applied across all three case studies. Second, to develop and demonstrate a transferable analytical framework for the systematic classification of interior details by function (constructive or decorative), location (enclosing surfaces, fixed furnishings, vertical circulation), and material—a framework not previously applied to this building stock in the Bulgarian context. Third, to assess the cultural and architectural value of these details as artefacts: to show that they can reliably identify style period, authenticate building history, and inform decisions about preservation and adaptive reuse. Together, these objectives respond to the gap identified above and constitute the study's primary contribution to the fields of architectural heritage documentation and conservation practice.

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century interiors in Central and Eastern European capitals are commonly read through a single dominant style—Historicism, Secession, Art Nouveau, or Neoclassicism. In Sofia, this reading is incomplete. The city's emergence as a European capital after 1879 coincided with the rapid importation of architectural ideas, techniques, and craft traditions, mediated principally through Viennese practice and, in decorative and craft production, through Parisian and Italian channels. The resulting interiors are characteristically hybrid: Secessionist linearity coexists with Neoclassical proportioning, both filtered through local interpretations of geometry, material, and craft. The present study treats this hybridity not as a problem of classification but as a defining condition of the period—one that requires a comparative rather than a taxonomic method, reading the Sofia interiors against their closest external analogues (the Viennese tradition of Thonet bentwood furniture, Parisian decorative practice, and the Italian *cementine* cement-tile tradition) to identify both the channels of transmission and the local adaptations that transformed those models on arrival.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the materials and methods; Section 3 provides the architectural detail analysis across the three case studies; Section 4 reports the results; Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to existing scholarship.

2. Materials and Methods

The methodology developed in this study is designed to be transferable—applicable to the assessment of interior details in historic buildings beyond the three case studies examined here, and relevant to practitioners involved in the conservation and adaptation of existing heritage buildings. This study features an interdisciplinary and comparative methodological approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research techniques for the analysis of interior detail in cultural monuments of regional importance in Sofia's city centre. Field surveys were conducted by the authors across all three case study buildings, involving direct measurement of architectural details, photographic recording of all identified elements, and observational documentation of their condition and spatial placement. Damages were encountered at Structure 2, where certain areas could not be fully surveyed, which accounts for the "not available (wooden parts-damaged)" in the tables below.

The methodology comprises five steps, based on the results from the project mentioned earlier in this article; see Figure 1.

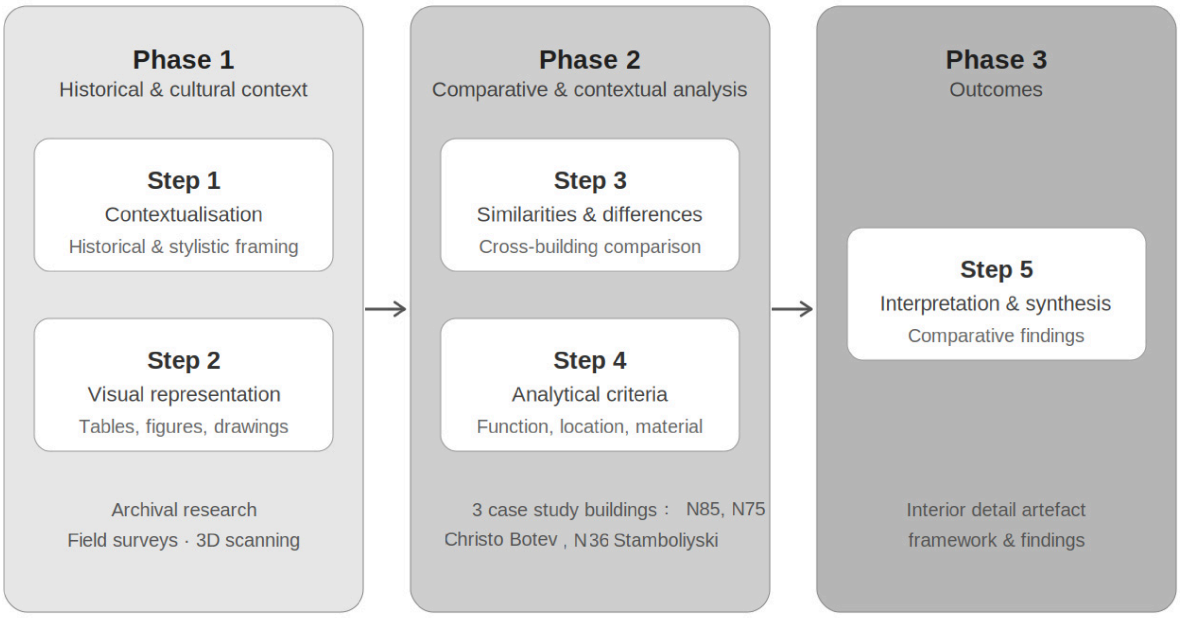


Figure 1. Figure illustrating the methodology for analysing interior details in cultural monuments of regional importance.

Methodology:

- Contextualization: The subject is placed in a specific context which could be historical, cultural, or stylistic.
- Visual Representation: The subject is represented in a table, figure, or diagram.
- Similarities and Differences: The subject is analysed for similarities and differences.
- Analytical Criteria: The subject is analysed in light of specific criteria.
- A synthesis of the comparative data derived from the analysis of the three case study buildings.

Step 1—Contextualization: Each interior detail is placed within its specific historical, cultural, and stylistic context. For the three Sofia case study buildings, this means situating the details within the Central European Historicist and Secessionist currents that shaped Sofia's residential construction during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
Step 2—Visual Representation: Each detail is documented through tables, figures, and diagrams, enabling systematic visual comparison across the three buildings. The archival drawings, field photographs, and analytical sketches presented in Section 2.2 form part of this step.
Step 3—Similarities and Differences: The details of the three buildings are compared to identify shared characteristics and significant divergences. The comparative findings are presented in the tables and discussed in the text of Section 3.
Step 4—Analytical Criteria: Each detail is assessed against a defined set of criteria—function (constructive or decorative), location (enclosing surfaces, fixed furnishings, vertical circulation), and material—applied consistently across all three case studies.
Step 5—Interpretation and Synthesis: A synthesis of the comparative data is produced, identifying the commonalities and distinctions between the three interiors—including the shared constructive logic (Prussian vault floors, granite stair treads, wrought iron railings) and the stylistic differences in the degree of ornamental elaboration.

2.1. Research Context and Urban Setting

This analysis builds upon the findings of a university scientific research project (2018–2019), which established that the design of interior spaces in historic Sofia residential buildings is directly shaped by their urban and contextual setting. For this reason, architectural research data from the archive were retrieved, including maps of the area dating back to 1937 and 1947; clear images of the street names and street numbers are shown in Figures 2 and 3.

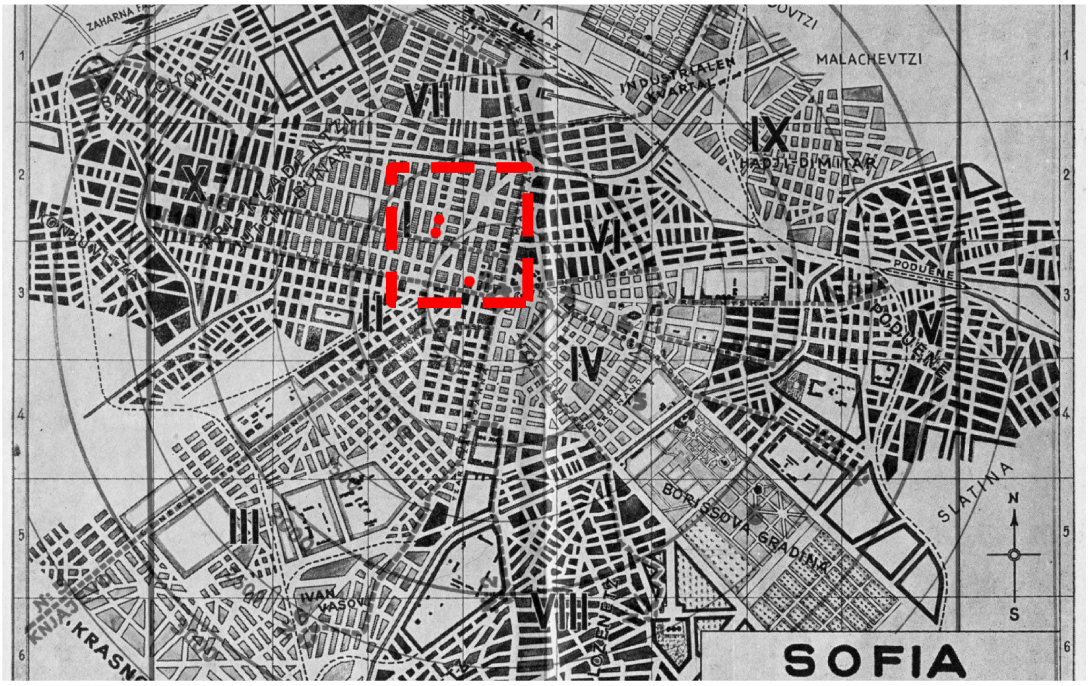


Figure 2. Map of Sofia in 1937-(http://stara-sofia.com/karti.html (accessed on 16 February 2026)). The red dots indicate the precise locations of the three case study buildings within the historic center of Sofia.

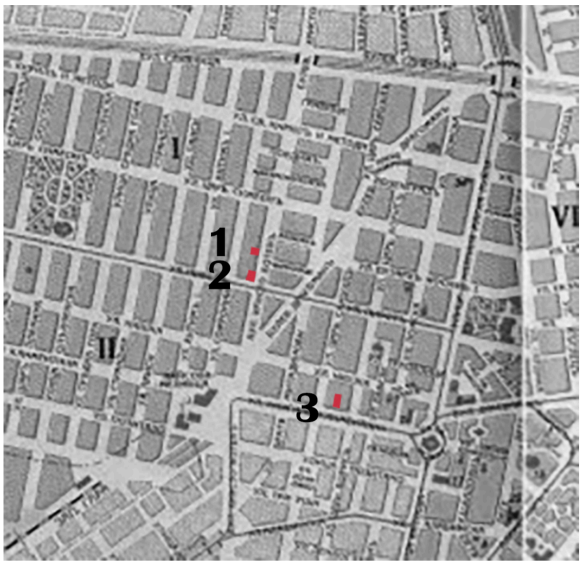


Figure 3. Fragment of map of Sofia from 1937 showing the location of the three structures. 1—Location of house at N85 Blvd. "Christo Botev". 2—Location of house at N75 Blvd. "Christo Botev". 3—Location of house at N36 Blvd. "Stamboliysky". The red dots indicate the precise locations of the three case study buildings within the historic center of Sofia, and the Roman numerals indicate the administrative districts of Sofia as designated on the 1937 map.

2.1.1. Urban Historical Context

The plots' original locations were identified from the archives of the municipal authorities of Sofia. The collected data indicate that many streets in the central area have undergone changes in names and numbering, and some streets disappeared entirely after the 1944–1945 bombings and during the subsequent years of the communist period. The central location of the examined buildings suggests comparable construction approaches and similar proportions, reflecting a broadly consistent engineering approach and building programme for the historic central area of Sofia. The use of Prussian vault brick floor systems and monolithic stone blocks sourced from nearby mountain quarries appears to have been common and, in many cases, unavoidable given local practices and material availability.

2.1.2. Building-Scale Analysis

The closely matched dimensions of the stairs leading to the upper apartment floors are consistent across all three buildings. It was common for the top floor to be used as living quarters for servants, and in all three buildings the stairs to the uppermost level are constructed from timber. Even in these secondary spaces, stair rails include intricately detailed elements, reflecting the attention to decorative quality characteristic of the period. Overall, the results suggest that the buildings were developed for a similar socio-economic group, which is directly reflected in the quality and elaboration of their interior details.

Drawings Analysis and Interpretation

A comprehensive review of the literature, archival documents, and architectural drawings was conducted for the three case study sites: the house linked to the former "Excelsior"/"Asen Zlatarov"/cinema, the building at 75 "Hristo Botev" Blvd., and the adapted structure at 36 "Stamboliyski" Blvd. Key historical phases, reconstructions, and changes in building use were identified. This study aims to prove that the three different structures, in similar locations, reflect both the building culture of the period and good architectural practice. The project started with the very initial research of information and finalises with the preserved selection and implementation of authentic details in the new interior environment.

2.2. Documentary Analysis and Interpretation

2.2.1. Documentary Analysis of Archived and Recent Plans of the House at N85 Boulevard "Christo Botev"

The structure is a part of Bulgarian cultural heritage and has local importance. Table 1 presents images from the 3D laser scanning and digital modelling of the building. During the survey, a point cloud was constructed using a Trimble SX12 Scanning Total Station, characterised by high accuracy (2–10 mm) and high precision (3–15 mm spacing between points), with a low level of noise. Each point in the dataset contains real colour information, enabling an accurate digital record of the building's current condition.

The most well-preserved artefacts and details were located at level +5.40 inside the structure N1. All images presented in this study are reproduced at comparable scale, so that the three buildings can be compared directly in terms of overall volume, proportion, and the relative dimensions of their principal interior spaces.

Table 1. Documentary archival analysis from the house at N85 Boulevard "Christo Botev", Sofia.

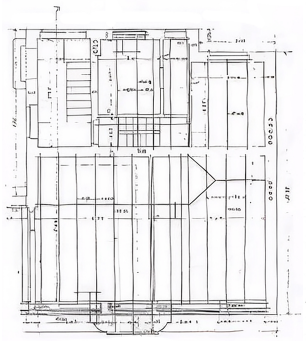
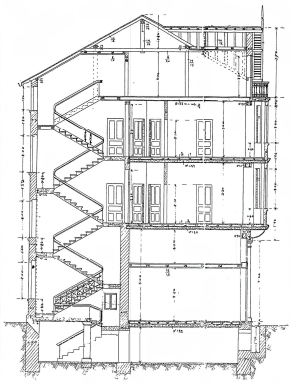
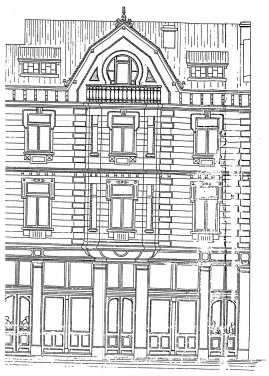
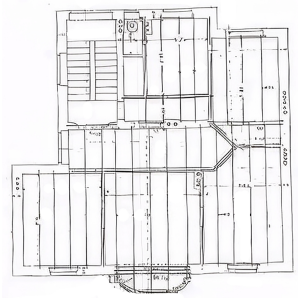
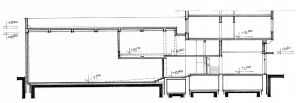
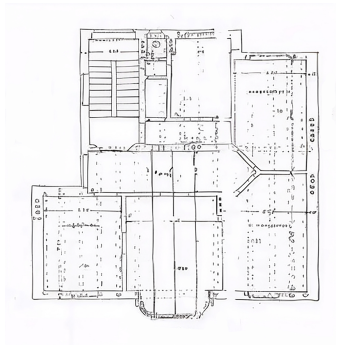
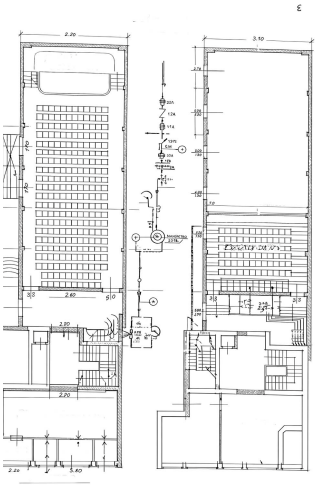
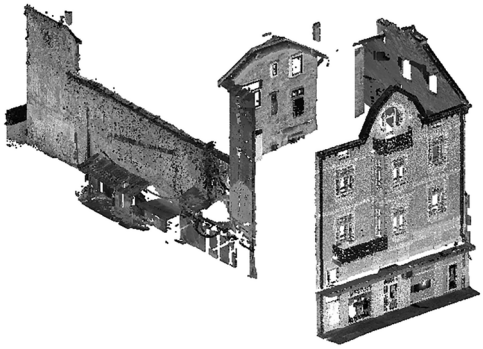
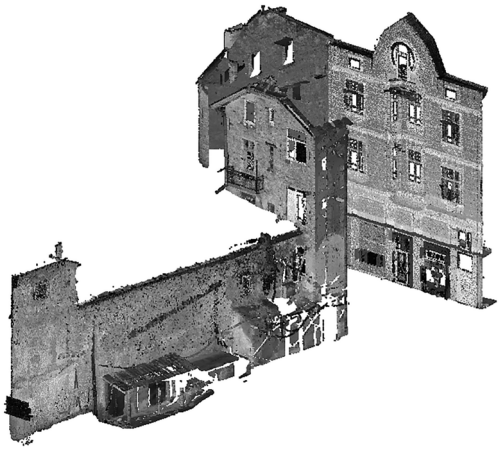
Floor	Drawing	Section	Facade Image
0.00			
	Authentic plan of constructive metal floor beams, approved in 1911	Authentic section of the house, 1911	Facade with original moulding raster and windows, facing Blvd Christo Botev (then Ferdinand), 1911
+5.40			
	Authentic plan of constructive metal floor beams, approved in 1911	Cross-section of reconstruction of level 0.00, approved 1997	Picture from Public Municipality-archives of the structure during the 1970s
+8.60			
	Authentic plan of constructive metal floor beams, approved in 1911		

Table 1. *Cont.*

Floor	Drawing	Section	Facade Image
			
	Authentic plan of scheme of electrical installation, approved in 1911	1a 3D laser scan of façade facing Blvd. “Christo Botev” and digital model, -2025	
			
		2a 3D laser scan of façade facing Blvd. “Christo Botev” and digital model, -2025	
			
		3a. 3D laser scan of façade facing Blvd. “Christo Botev” and digital model, -2025	

3D laser scanning of the building at Blvd 'Christo Botev' N85 was carried out in 2025 by an external specialist company using a Trimble SX12 Scanning Total Station. The building was selected for scanning for two reasons: first, the owner granted permission for the survey, which was not obtainable for the other two case study buildings; and second, the scanning was required as part of a parallel construction observation project for the structure. The Trimble SX12 is a robotic scanning total station capable of capturing 26,600 points per second, with a scanning range of up to 600 m and a field of view of 360 × 300 degrees. It operates with an EDM accuracy of 1 mm + 1.5 ppm and uses a pulsed laser (1550 nm) with a green laser pointer (520 nm) for precise targeting. The scanning covered the principal façade of the building facing Blvd 'Christo Botev' and produced a point cloud characterised by high accuracy (2–10 mm) and high precision (3–15 mm spacing between points), with a low level of noise. Each point in the dataset contains real colour information, enabling an accurate and detailed digital record of the building's current external condition. The key finding from the scanning data is the confirmation that the principal façade retains its original moulding profile and fenestration pattern, consistent with the 1911 approved drawings held in the municipal archive. No 3D scanning was carried out for Structures 2 and 3, as access permissions were not obtained; these buildings were documented exclusively through field survey, photographic recording, and archival research.

The 1911 archival drawings confirm that the building was constructed using metal floor beams as the primary structural system. The original façade drawing documents the moulding profile and window arrangement as originally approved, providing a reliable baseline against which the current state of the building—confirmed by the 2025 3D laser scanning—can be directly compared. The most complete survival of authentic interior details was identified at level +5.40, the principal floor.

2.2.2. Documentary Analysis of Existing and Recent Plans from the House at N75 Blvd. "Christo Botev"

The structure is part of Bulgarian cultural heritage of local importance. No architectural plans remain in the state archives. The former commercial spaces at the pedestrian level 0.00 faced towards two of the most important commercial streets, and were separated into smaller properties with additional secondary height levels. Together with the reconstructive works, new supportive layers were constructed and the total condition of the tectonic structure was clear. It was adapted via a reinforcement project and developed as a small hotel building. The future development project was based on exposing the original materials and preserving original details.

The absence of original architectural plans in the state archive reflects the extent of transformation the building has undergone. The restorative survey drawings presented in Table 2 were produced by the authors to reconstruct the original spatial configuration. They confirm that the ground floor commercial spaces were substantially altered—subdivided and extended vertically—during later interventions, while the upper floor levels retain a more legible relationship with the original building layout.

Table 2. Documentary analysis from the house at N75 Boulevard "Christo Botev", Sofia.

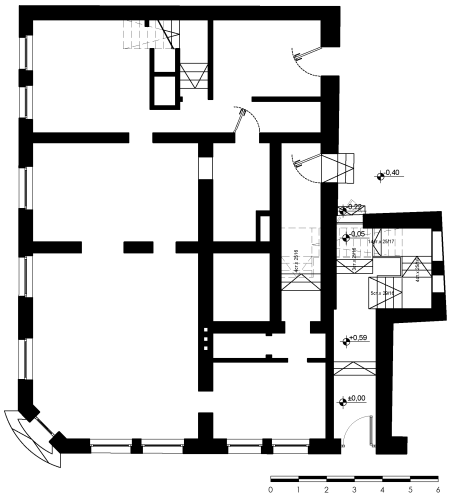
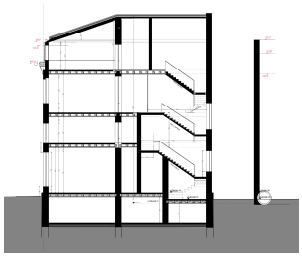
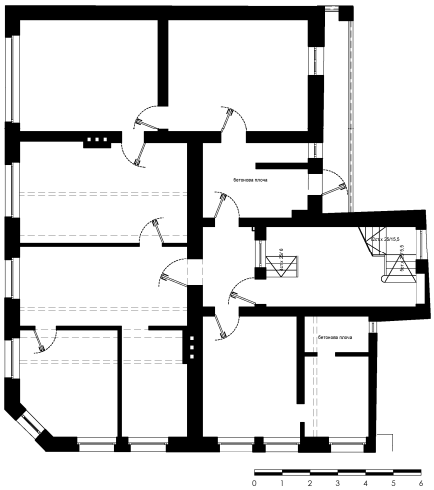
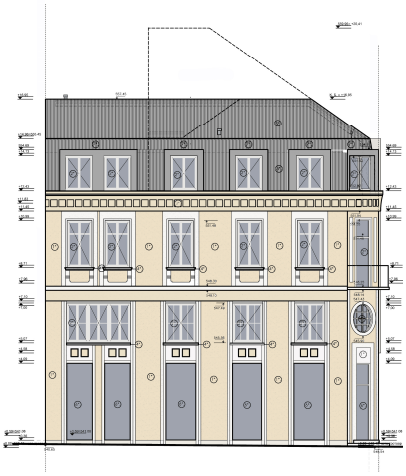
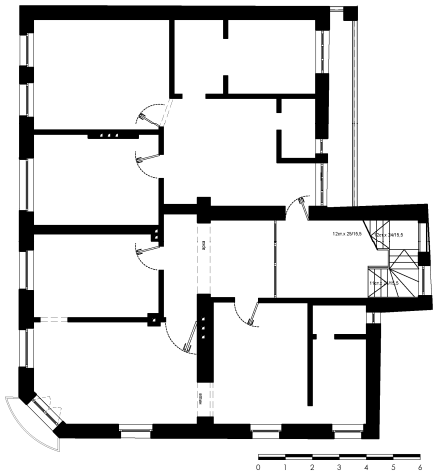
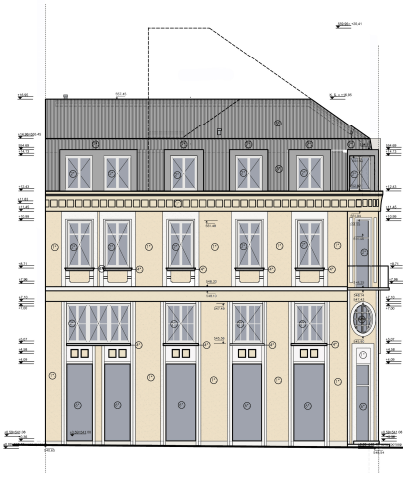
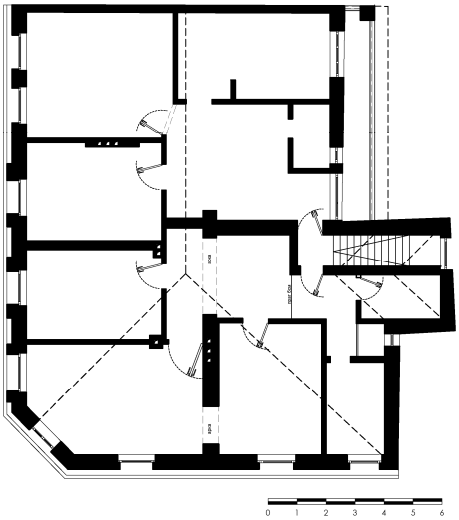
Floor	Drawing	Section	Facade Image
0.00			
	Restorative architectural survey plan level 0.00	Restorative cross section	Archive photography from- the 1980s https://nag.sofia.bg/ (accessed on 26 January 2026)
+4.58			
	Restorative architectural survey plan level +4.58		Elevation at the "Christo Botev str."—Project
+7.60			
	Restorative architectural survey plan level +7.60		Elevation at the "Pirotska str."—Project

Table 2. *Cont.*

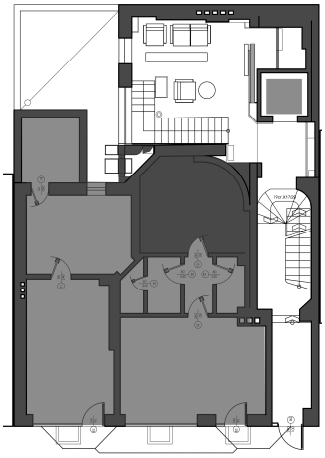
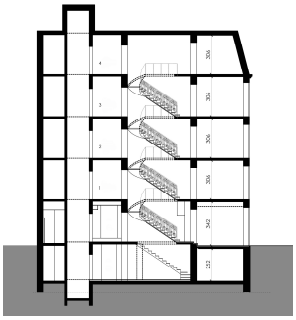
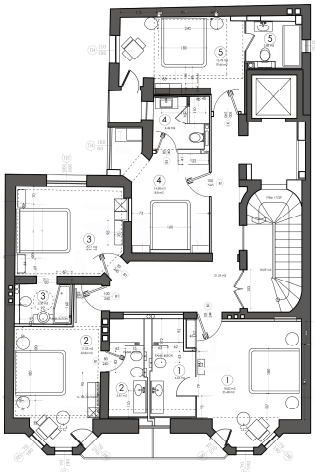
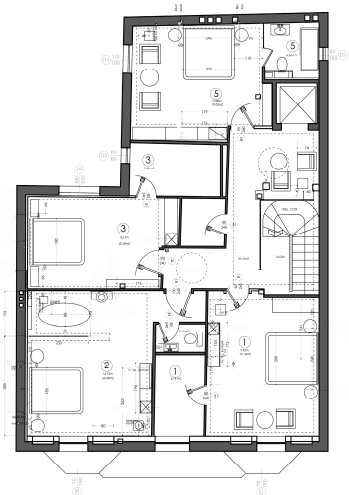
Floor	Drawing	Section	Facade Image
+11.45			
	Restorative architectural survey plan level +11.45		Adaptive visual project for structure N1

All drawings were made by the authors towards the restoration of the original structure.

2.2.3. Documentary Analysis with Recent Plans from the House at N36 Blvd. "Stambolyisky". Structure 3. Project for Repurposing the Building as a Small Hotel

The adaptive architectural plans presented in Table 3 document the building in its current state following conversion to a small hotel. The drawings confirm that the adaptation involved significant intervention at all floor levels. The archival photograph from the 1980s provides the primary visual evidence of the building's pre-intervention condition and serves as the key reference point for assessing the degree of change the interior has undergone.

Table 3. Documentary analysis with recent plans from the house at N36 Blvd. "Stambolyisky".

Floor	Drawing	Section	Facade Image
0.00	 Adaptive architectural plan elevation 0.00	 Restorative cross-section	 Archive image from the 1980s
+3.59	 Adaptive architectural plan +3.59		
+6.50	 Adaptive architectural plan +6.50		

All drawings were made by the authors towards the restoration of the original structure.

2.3. Architectural Detail—Analysis

Interior details should be conceived from the start as space-specific, functional and identity-bearing elements.

Interior details are key identifiers at multiple scales. Traditional residential interiors reflect social and economic values through crafted surfaces and furniture details, not just decoration. Studies of residential identity show that such details balance the architect's concept and the inhabitant's self-expression, strongly shaping attachment to home and neighbourhood [7].

Field survey of interior architecture was carried out to identify characteristic interior details, and these details were also measured. Characteristic interior details are architectural features in the interior space that are typical or representative of a style or period. Typical features include mouldings, cornices, stair railings, door and window frames, wall and ceiling finishes, flooring patterns, furniture, ornate plaster work, integrated appliances for heating. These features can be differentiated from each other based on the materials used for construction, their style or design, the craftsmanship, and their decorative motifs. They are representative of the aesthetic and historical identity of the interior environment of a building and are used as markers for identifying interior spaces based on their historical period or style. This helps us understand the technology, artistry, and philosophy of the period in which they were created. Conserving characteristic interior details is important for the preserving the architectural heritage and the genuineness and authenticity of a building. It also helps to create a sense of place.

Analysis of Details According to the Function of the Space in Which They Are Located

The detail within the interior of a former residence, whether added during the initial design phases or after completion may be part of the enclosing surfaces—and thus fixed and formative—or part of the movable furnishings, revealed in characteristic furniture. The interior designer should be involved in the creation of specific details tailored to a particular space from the very outset of the conceptual stage. Beyond serving as an expression of the inhabitants' identity, the presence of well-executed details is, in essence, a hallmark of the architect's ability to realise the design identity [8].

From the standpoint of interior specificity, a detail can be understood as the manner in which the objects and surfaces within the interior environment interact. The presence of architectural detail is inevitable; poorly conceived interior projects, result in a disjointed and mechanically assembled collection of details that fail to relate in scale or character to the space in which they are situated [9].

The location of architectural details in a building can be summarised as follows:

- Within enclosing surfaces (either related to the material and logic of the entire building or serving a decorative function);
- Within fixed furnishings;
- Within elements of vertical flow (such as railings, stairs, or ramps).

Table 4 reveals that all three buildings share the same primary constructive system: Preussische Kappe brick vaulting for floor construction and granite treads for the stair flights. This consistency confirms that the buildings were produced within a shared local building culture governed by common material supply chains and construction practice. The metal stair railings present in Structure 1 and the wooden railings in Structure 2 represent the most significant constructive difference between the three buildings at this level of analysis. The "not available (wooden parts-damaged)" entry for Structure 2 reflects loss of details during reconstruction.

Table 4. Characteristic constructive interior details.

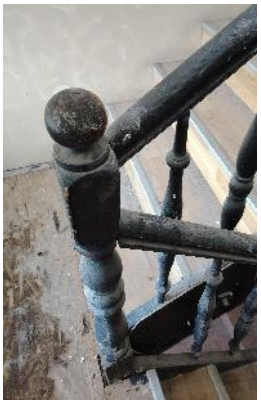
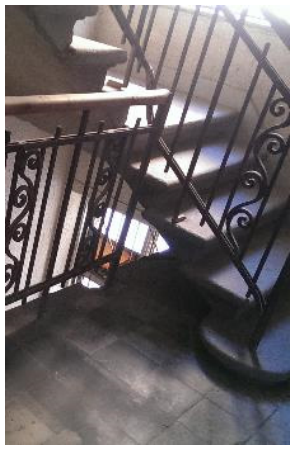
Type of Construction on Detail	Pictures of Structure 1 N85 Blvd. Christo Botev	Pictures of Structure 2 N75 Blvd. Christo Botev	Pictures of Structure 3 N36 Blvd. Stambolyisky
Stair rail—metal			
Stair rail—wooden		Not available (wooden parts—damaged)	
Stair step—/granite/			
Floor construction	‘Preussische Kappe’ (Prussian Vault)	‘Preussische Kappe’ (Prussian Vault)	‘Preussische Kappe’ (Prussian Vault)

Table 4. *Cont.*

Type of Construction on Detail	Pictures of Structure 1 N85 Blvd. Christo Botev	Pictures of Structure 2 N75 Blvd. Christo Botev	Pictures of Structure 3 N36 Blvd. Stambolyisky
Wall construction			

All photographs were taken by the authors with the aim of restoring the original structure.

Decorative Architectural Detail in the Enclosing Contact Zones of Surfaces

The design of details at the contact zones between enclosing surfaces or elements of the interior is of exceptional importance for the overall spatial impact. The way these details are resolved significantly influences the perception and character of the space [10].

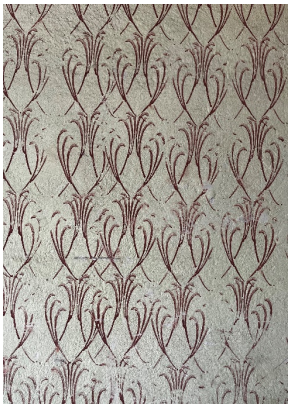
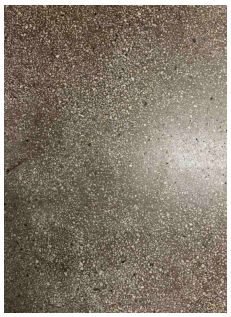
The following table presents the main types of surfaces and the kinds of details that arise in their contact zones (connecting elements)—see Table 5.

Architectural Detail in the Fixed Furnishings of a Space

Table 5 demonstrates a marked disparity in the survival of decorative surface details across the three buildings. Structure 1 retains the most complete record, including original wall finishes, gypsum cornices, flooring patterns, and ornamental plasterwork. Structures 2 and 3 show no surviving gypsum cornices or ornamental plaster, indicating that these elements were lost during later renovation works. The only surviving flooring patterns in Structure 1, where the ceramic tile designs on the stair landings, provide the most legible evidence of the geometric original decorative programme. The floorings in Structures 2 and 3 are closer to a terrazzo technique, with no patterns.

Table 6 documents the surviving fitted elements and furniture across the three buildings. The pattern of survival is consistent with that observed in Tables 4 and 5: Structure 1 retains the greatest number of authentic elements, including original heating appliances and furniture pieces, while Structures 2 and 3 show extensive replacement or loss. The ceramic tile stove identified in Structure 2 is the most significant surviving fitted element in that building and is discussed in detail in the comparative analysis that follows.

Table 5. Characteristic surface interior details.

Type of Surface Detail	Pictures of Structure 1 N85 Blvd. Christo Botev	Pictures of Structure 2 N75 Blvd. Christo Botev	Pictures of Structure 3 N36 Blvd. Stambolyisky
Wall finishing			
Gypsum cornice		Not available (damaged)	Not available (damaged)
Flooring patterns			
Flooring patterns			

All photographs were taken by the authors with the aim of restoring the original structure.

Table 6. Characteristic fitting and furniture interior details.

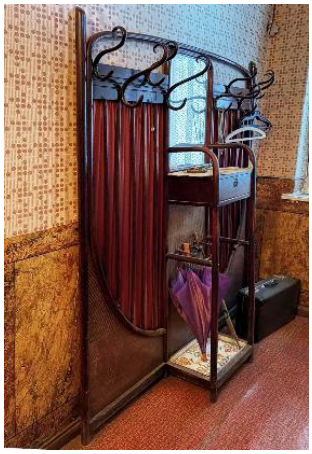
Type of Detail	Pictures of Structure 1 N85 Blvd. Christo Botev	Pictures of Structure 2 N75 Blvd. Christo Botev	Pictures of Structure 3 N36 Blvd. Stambolyisky
Furniture		Not preserved	
Furniture		Not preserved	
Furniture, Heating			Not preserved
Furniture, Heating			Not preserved

Table 6. *Cont.*

Type of Detail	Pictures of Structure 1 N85 Blvd. Christo Botev	Pictures of Structure 2 N75 Blvd. Christo Botev	Pictures of Structure 3 N36 Blvd. Stambolyisky
Furniture, Heating			Not preserved

All photographs were taken by the authors with the aim of restoring the original structure.

Table 7 shows that authentic door and window elements survive almost exclusively in Structure 1. The corner window retained in Structure 2 is the sole surviving original fenestration element in that building and represents a formal characteristic consistent with Secessionist influence. Structure 3 retains no original joinery of any kind. The pattern across all four tables confirms that Structure 1 is the most completely preserved of the three case study buildings, and that the degree of interior transformation correlates directly with the intensity of the adaptive reuse interventions each building has undergone.

Table 7. Authentic constructive elements—doors and windows.

Type of Detail	Pictures of Structure 1 N85 Blvd. Christo Botev	Pictures of Structure 2 N75 Blvd. Christo Botev
Window		Corner window
Window		

Table 7. *Cont.*

Type of Detail	Pictures of Structure 1 N85 Blvd. Christo Botev	Pictures of Structure 2 N75 Blvd. Christo Botev
Inside Doors		
Inside Doors		
Entrance Double Doors		Not preserved

All photographs were taken by the authors with the aim of restoring the original structure.

A comparative analysis of the findings from Structure N2—the house at N75 Blvd. "Christo Botev"—is illustrated in (Figure 4).

The compared objects share similarities with regard to construction technique and the treatment of corner elements, yet they differ in proportion. The specific influence behind the object and the identity of the maker cannot be determined through photographic assessment alone; however, the visual evidence indicates possible lines of influence and the contribution of these features to the character of the interior space.

A comparative analysis of the findings from Structure N1, the house at N85 Blvd. Christo Botev, regarding furniture, is illustrated in (Figure 5).



(**A**) (**B**)

Figure 4. Images of objects in Sofia and an object from Meissen from 1902, with clear classicistic elements: (**A**) ceramic stove found inside Structure 2, at N75 Blvd. "Christo Botev"; (**B**) Kachelofen, 1902, Meissen Teichert, H 260 × B 77 × T 56 cm. (https://www.invaluable.com/ (accessed on 13 January 2026)).

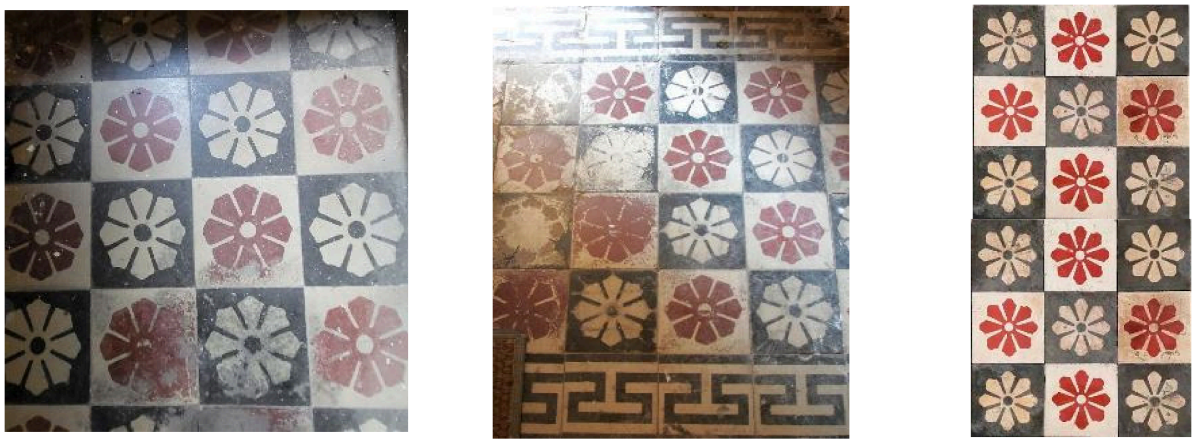


(**A**) (**B**) (**C**)

Figure 5. The rocking chair in the photograph is very similar but still different to Thonet's bentwood rocking chair: (**A**) rocking chair artefact from second floor of the structure; (**B**) Thonet rocking chair 10 By Jacob Josef Kohn (**C**) Sample page copy from Thonet kathalog, from the site of museum-boppard.

The differences in the chair indicate that it is neither of the above ((Figure 5B) or (Figure 5C)). It has no marks of the producer, so this is a replica of a Thonet Brothers rocking chair. The details identified in Structure 1, displaying formal characteristics consistent with Thonet-style production; attribution to a specific maker or period cannot be confirmed from visual evidence alone.

The visual correspondence between the three examples, illustrated in Figure 6, confirms that the tiles in Structure 1 are consistent with the wider Central European and Mediterranean production and trade networks that supplied Sofia's residential construction market during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



(**A**) (**B**) (C)

Figure 6. Evidence of shared decorative tile traditions across Central European and Italian production of the early twentieth century. (**A**) Ceramic floor tiles preserved on the stair landings of Structure 1 (Blvd 'Christo Botev' N85), documented during field survey. (**B**) Comparable tile pattern identified in a European heritage interior, illustrating the widespread use of identical decorative motifs across the region. (**C**) Decorative floor tiles from an early twentieth-century Italian producer, Milan, displaying the same geometric and floral compositions as those found in Structure 1. The Sofia artefact—measuring exactly 20 mm in total thickness, with a denser surface layer of approximately 5 mm—is fully consistent with the production standards of the Marche and Sicilian workshops of the period. The absence of a maker's mark is characteristic of the smaller regional ateliers whose output reached Bulgaria through the trade channels operating from Ancona, Trieste, and Budapest.

Comparative study of details

As illustrated in Tables 5–7, the analysis revealed similarities and differences, as well as stylistic influences associated with a specific period and region. The analysis is relevant for architectural and interior design. The interior design of the three buildings in Sofia was analysed using specific stylistic influences documented in the historic record, primarily Historicism and the Secession movement, which were the dominant architectural currents shaping Sofia's residential construction during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The similarities and differences were revealed along with specific characteristics associated with these Central European stylistic traditions.

Sofia's historic central area underwent rapid urban development following the Liberation of 1878, during which the city was planned and built largely by architects and engineers trained in Vienna, Prague, and other Central European centres. The three case study buildings are representative examples of this typology and their interior organisation—with principal floors at +5.40, servant quarters at the uppermost level, and timber stair construction in secondary spaces—is consistent with this Central European model.

The analysis identifies the following shared characteristics across all three buildings: the use of Preussische Kappe brick vaulting as the floor construction system and granite treads on the primary stair flights—confirming a shared constructive logic rooted in common local building practices, material supply chains, and building regulations prevalent in Sofia's historic centre during the early twentieth century. The principal differences relate to the degree of preservation of decorative interior elements. Structure 1 (Blvd 'Christo Botev' N85) retains the most complete decorative programme, including original wall finishes,

gypsum cornices, flooring patterns, ornamental plasterwork, and original joinery across all categories. Structure 2 (Blvd 'Christo Botev' N75) retains selective elements of high significance—in particular the corner window and the ceramic tile stove—but has lost most surface finishes and joinery. Structure 3 (Blvd 'Stamboliyski' N36) has undergone the most extensive interior transformation and retains the least original material of the three buildings, with "not available" entries across almost all categories in Tables 5–7.

The analytical criteria applied consistently across all three case study buildings are: (1) function—whether the detail is constructive (serving a structural role) or decorative (applied for aesthetic purposes); (2) location—classified as enclosing surfaces, fixed furnishings, or vertical circulation elements; and (3) material—identifying the substance and finish of each detail. These criteria are introduced visually in Figure 7 and applied systematically in the analysis presented in Sections 3 and 4.

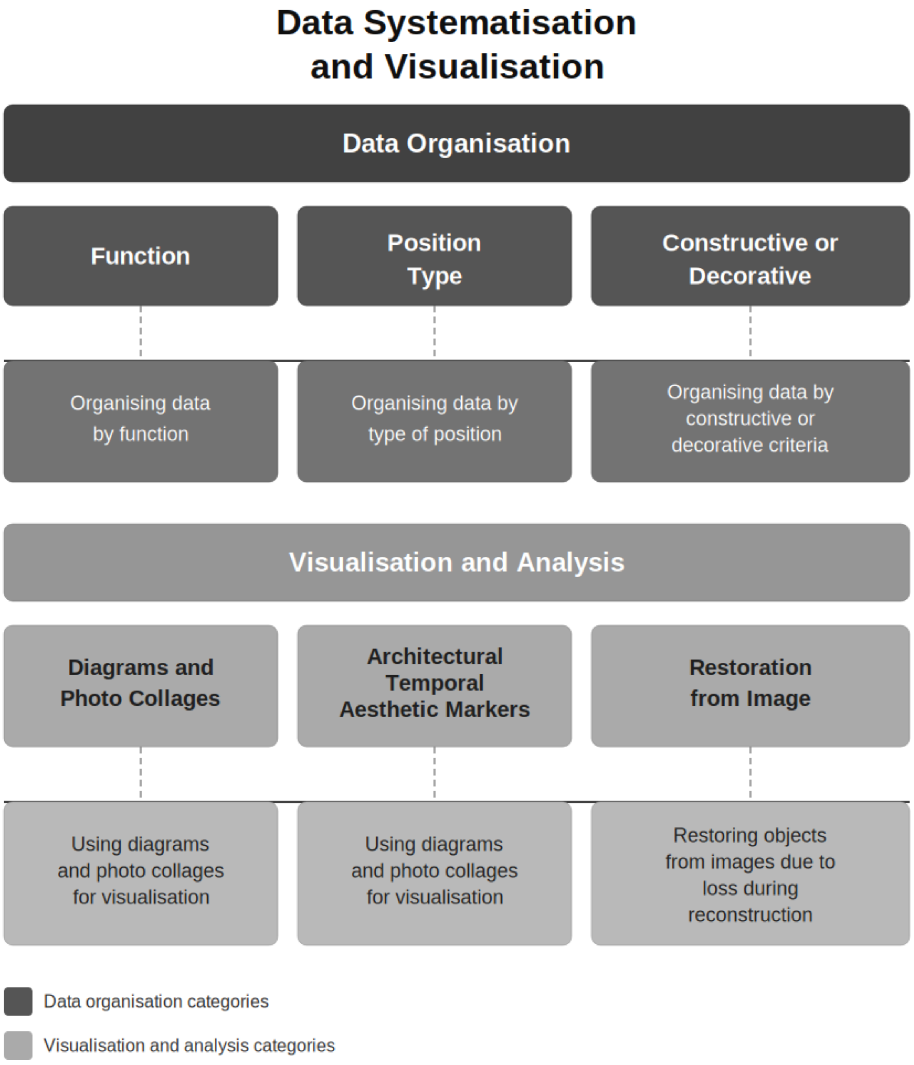


Figure 7. Figure illustrating the systematisation of data and visualisation.

The aim was to identify similarities between these three interiors in Sofia through identifying repetitive parts of the building, for example, in the logic of construction, corners, stair handrails, material, and decorative language. The patterns observed in all these three buildings suggest that these commonalities are not random but are a result of common local building practices, a set of regulations, common local building material supply chains, and a local socio-economic model of building that was prevalent in Sofia's historic centre [11,12]. All these factors contribute to building interiors that are specific to a particular place and

time period. The next step is to compare these interiors of Sofian buildings with a set of Central European Historicist and Secessionist architectural references [13] to assist with not only intra- and inter-site analysis but also with positioning Sofia within a broader cultural and historical framework. This analysis would also support broader arguments related to the significance, authenticity, and flexibility of these building interiors.

2.4. Systematisation and Visualisation of Data

The collected data were organised in tables and graphs according to the following three criteria:

- Function;
- Position;
- Constructive or decorative: whether a detail serves a primary structural function (e.g., a load-bearing element with ornamental treatment) or is purely decorative in nature (e.g., applied plaster ornament with no structural role).

To support the comparison and visualisation of key trends and relationships, diagrams and photo collages were constructed to highlight details and their roles in the interior composition.

This procedure is part of an extensive analysis of interior details as cultural, temporal, and aesthetic markers, supporting recommendations for the sustainable preservation and adaptive reuse of cultural heritage in the contemporary urban context. Some of the objects were restored from their images as part of the design process after being lost during reconstruction. Figure 7 presents the data systematisation and visualisation framework applied in this study for the analysis of interior details in the three case study buildings. The framework is organised into two main categories: Data Organisation and Visualisation and Analysis.

The Data Organisation category comprises three analytical criteria through which each interior detail is classified. The first criterion is function—each detail is identified as either constructive (serving a structural or load-bearing role) or decorative (applied for aesthetic purposes without a primary structural function). The second criterion is position type—the detail is located within the spatial hierarchy of the interior, distinguishing between enclosing surfaces (walls, ceilings, floors), vertical circulation elements (staircases, railings), and fixed furnishings. The third criterion is constructive or decorative character—a more refined assessment of whether the detail integrates both structural and ornamental qualities simultaneously, as is frequently the case in the Historicist and Secessionist interiors examined in this study.

The Visualisation and Analysis category organises the methods through which the collected data are represented and interpreted. Diagrams and photo collages are used to document the current state of each detail and to present comparative evidence across the three buildings. Architectural temporal aesthetic markers are identified through the analysis of stylistic characteristics that can be attributed to a specific historical period—in this case, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—enabling the dating and contextualisation of individual details. Finally, restoration from image refers to the method of reconstructing the original appearance of details that have been partially lost or altered, using archival photographic evidence and period drawings.

Together, the six criteria of this framework constitute a systematic and repeatable instrument for the documentation and comparative analysis of interior architectural details in historic buildings. Its application across all three case study buildings—Blvd 'Christo Botev' N85, Blvd 'Christo Botev' N75, and Blvd 'Stamboliyski' N36—ensures that the findings are directly comparable and that the conclusions drawn are grounded in a consistent analytical methodology.

Analyses:

Architectural Analysis: Materials and Dimensions of Architectural Details

Materiality is an essential element in the study of architectural detail, especially in the interior environment. Architectural materiality refers to the use and application of materials in a specific space and is a reflection of the technology, aesthetic qualities and cultural trends that define a specific period in history. According to Kenneth Frampton's analysis of architecture, "materiality endows architecture with ontological depth, allowing it to embody the time and culture in which it was created" [1]. The use and application of architectural detail in terms of materials can reveal the level of technology and social changes within a specific period in history [14].

Spatial Placement and Proportion of Detail in the Interior Environment

The spatial relationship between architectural detail and other elements in the interior environment plays a critical role in the perception of space. The spatial placement of detail plays a critical role in shaping the spatial structure interpreted by users of the interior environment. According to Le Corbusier, "proportion is the key to architectural harmony; it sets the rhythm and balance of any space" [15]. This spatial placement directs movements and sequences in the space, while the proportion of detail can reveal similarities and differences with other elements in the interior environment. The created relationship facilitates the perception of space. According to Peter Zumthor, "a detail must exist in dialogue with the space it inhabits, while conserving its own individuality" [16]. Hence, architectural detail plays a critical role in the legibility of space. Proportion plays a critical role in establishing rhythm and harmony in an interior environment, and is not just a physical relationship but also a subjective and aesthetic concept that influences completeness. The spatial placement of detail plays a critical role in shaping the atmosphere in the interior environment.

Constructive Detail and Decorative Ornaments

It should be noted that there is a clear difference between constructive and decorative details in design. As can be observed in the aforementioned examples, interior design details can be derived from the structural elements such as brickwork, Prussian vaults (Preussische Kappe), and staircases.

On the other hand, design details can be derived from finishing elements such as furniture, fenestration, doors, heating elements, and floor and ceiling finishes. Constructive details include load-bearing elements such as the structural grid, the intersection of vertical and horizontal elements, and the intersection of different materials. The aforementioned elements show a clear connection to structural elements. In modern-day architecture, in design details, both constructive and decorative elements can be found in a single entity. According to Kenneth Frampton, "the most successful architectural solutions are those where construction and decoration merge into a unified language of architectural expression" [1], indicating that the decorative component is part of the constructive component. Throughout the history of architecture, the use of ornaments, through incorporating elements such as columns, frizzes, and anchors, has played a crucial role in highlighting structural components. Ornaments in modern architecture are chosen based on logic related to construction, not just on their superficial value. In most cases, the most coherent and logically sound architectural design results from the integration of ornamentation and construction, which allows the interior environment and the building to function as a whole.

Modern architecture is characterised by a fusion of constructive details and decorative details. As emphasised by Frampton, "the most successful architectural solutions are those where construction and decoration merge into a unified language of architectural expression" [1].

Constructive details include:

- Load-bearing elements (structural grid, Preussische Kappe vaults);
- Intersection of vertical and horizontal elements;
- Intersection of different materials;
- Staircases.

Decorative details include:

- Furniture and fixed furnishings;
- Fenestration and doors;
- Heating elements;
- Floor and ceiling finishes.

The Contemporary Interior and Authentic Details: Establishing a Temporal Reference Point and Optimal Adaptation

The sustainable management of heritage based on value-oriented principles, particularly architectural details, provides a holistic framework for the identification, conservation, and repurposing of important architectural details that reflect the cultural, historical, and aesthetic values of a heritage site [17]. Value-oriented heritage management focuses on the architectural details of heritage sites, including mouldings, plaster decorations, joinery, and fixtures, not only as integral parts of a heritage site but also as a reflection of its cultural and historical value. In this framework, the identification of architectural details is of primary importance [18], with major stakeholders being the conservation team, the architect of the heritage site, the local community, policymakers, etc. The major strategy promoted by this approach is the conservation of architectural details [19]. This framework, based on value-oriented principles, is not only important for determining the relevance of architectural details but also for determining their relevance in the future, and thereby making them an important part of the heritage site [20,21].

3. Results

This section presents the empirical findings derived from the field surveys, archival research, and comparative analysis of the three case study buildings: Blvd 'Christo Botev' N85 (Structure 1), Blvd 'Christo Botev' N75 (Structure 2), and Blvd 'Stamboliyski' N36 (Structure 3). The findings are organised by feature type, allowing a direct comparison across the three buildings for each category of interior detail.

3.1. Stair Railings

Stair railings are classified under the vertical circulation location category and assessed as elements combining both constructive and decorative function—they serve a structural safety role while simultaneously expressing the stylistic character of the building through their ornamental treatment.

All three buildings retain metal stair railings of wrought iron with cast decorative elements. Structure 1 presents the most complete and well-preserved example, with continuous ornamental scrollwork consistent with late Historicist production from the first decade of the twentieth century. Structure 2 retains partial original railings on the main stair, with later interventions visible on the upper flights. Structure 3 retains original railings on the primary stair only; the secondary stair has been replaced. In all three cases, the railing design functions simultaneously as a structural support and a decorative element, confirming the synthesis of structural logic and aesthetic effect characteristic of the period.

3.2. Stair Materials

Stair materials—including treads, risers, and structural stair elements—are classified under the vertical circulation category and assessed primarily as constructive in function, though their material choice (granite, timber) carries significant aesthetic and cultural meaning, identifying the style period and socio-economic context of the original occupants.

Granite treads were identified in all three buildings on the primary stair flights. In Structure 1 and Structure 3, the granite is original and retains its surface finish. In Structure 2, several treads have been replaced with a non-matching stone. Timber stair construction was found in the uppermost flights of all three buildings, consistent with the common practice of the period of using timber for secondary and service-level circulation.

3.3. Floor Construction

Floor construction systems are classified under the enclosing surfaces category (floors) and assessed as constructive in function. The Preussische Kappe brick vault system identified in all three buildings represents a constructive solution that also carries historical and technological significance as a cultural artefact.

The Preussische Kappe brick vault system was identified as the floor construction method in all three buildings. This system, typical of Sofia's early twentieth-century residential construction, uses shallow brick vaults spanning between metal beams. Its consistent presence across all three buildings confirms the use of a shared local building technology and supply chain during this period.

3.4. Wall Finishes and Gypsum Cornices

Wall finishes and gypsum cornices are classified under the enclosing surfaces category (walls and ceilings) and assessed as decorative in function—applied elements that define the aesthetic character of the interior space without serving a primary structural role.

Structure 1 retains the most complete decorative wall finish, including original gypsum cornices at ceiling junctions on the principal floor (+5.40). The cornice profiles are consistent with Historicist ornamental conventions, featuring egg-and-dart and dentil motifs. Structure 2 has lost its original cornices entirely; no evidence of original wall finish survives above the ground floor. Structure 3 also shows no surviving cornices, though traces of original plaster are visible beneath later coatings.

3.5. Flooring Patterns

Decorative floor finishes are classified under the enclosing surfaces category (floors) and assessed as decorative in function. The ceramic tile patterns and timber flooring identified in the case study buildings represent the most legible surviving evidence of the original decorative programme in their respective interiors.

Decorative ceramic floor tiles were identified in Structure 1 on the stair landings. The tile patterns—geometric and floral compositions in terracotta, cream, andred—correspond to production types documented in Italian and Central European catalogues of the 1900–1920 period. A comparable tile type has been identified in Milanese production of the same era. Structure 2 retains original timber flooring in one room at the upper level. Structure 3 has undergone complete floor replacement and retains no original flooring.

3.6. Ornamental Plasterwork

Ornamental plasterwork—including ceiling medallions and cornice enrichments—is classified under the enclosing surfaces category (ceilings) and assessed as decorative in function. As applied ornament with no structural role, it represents the most directly expressive layer of the historic interior.

Ornamental plaster ceiling medallions and cornice enrichments were identified only in Structure 1. These are located at the principal floor level and are in a state of partial deterioration but remain legible. Structures 2 and 3 show no surviving ornamental plasterwork.

3.7. Heating Appliances

Heating appliances are classified under the fixed furnishings category and assessed as elements combining constructive function (heat generation) with significant decorative character. As large-scale objects that were integral to the original interior layout, they constitute some of the most significant surviving cultural artefacts in the case study buildings.

A ceramic tile stove (kachelofen) was identified in Structure 2. The stove displays formal characteristics consistent with Central European production of the early twentieth century, with classicistic corner pilasters and panelled body proportions comparable to documented Meissen workshop production of c.1900–1910. Attribution to a specific maker cannot be confirmed from visual evidence alone; however, the object is clearly an authentic period piece and a significant cultural artefact within the interior. Two additional heating elements—decorative cast iron radiators—were identified in Structure 1. No original heating appliances survive in Structure 3.

3.8. Furniture

Furniture is classified under the fixed furnishings category and assessed as primarily decorative and social in function—objects that reflect the taste, period, and socio-economic status of the original occupants. Where original furniture survives, it functions as a primary cultural artefact and dating reference.

A bentwood rocking chair was identified in Structure 1. The chair displays formal characteristics consistent with Thonet-style bentwood furniture production, though it bears no maker's mark and cannot be attributed to a specific manufacturer or date. It may be an authentic period piece or a later reproduction; this remains an open question that visual analysis alone cannot resolve. The rocking chair in Structure 1 was documented across three axes: frame, cane infill, and overall dimensions. The bentwood frame has a 22 mm circular cross-section, with joints executed without visible metal fasteners—consistent with early Thonet-tradition production, in which later reproductions are typically identifiable by the presence of star-headed screws. The original organic surface finish survives, with no later synthetic coating. The seat and backrest are infilled with natural rattan, woven in a pattern characteristic of the period and surviving in worn but unreplaced condition. Its overall dimensions are −100 cm total height, 42 cm seat height, 45 cm seat width. No original furniture was identified in Structures 2 or 3.

3.9. Windows and Doors

Windows and doors are classified under the enclosing surfaces category (openings) and assessed as elements combining constructive function (enclosure, light, ventilation) with significant decorative character. Original joinery is among the most visible and legible markers of a building's stylistic period and is frequently lost during adaptation works.

Structure 1 retains original interior portal frames with decorative overmantels and double-leaf panelled doors on the principal floor. Structure 2 retains a distinctive corner window—a formal gesture consistent with Secession influence—and partial original door frames. Structure 3 has undergone complete replacement of all windows and interior doors; no original joinery survives.

3.10. Comparative Summary

The comparative analysis reveals a clear pattern: Structure 1 (Blvd 'Christo Botev' N85) has the highest degree of authentic interior preservation across all feature categories. Struc-

ture 2 (Blvd 'Christo Botev' N75) retains selective authentic elements of high significance—the ceramic stove and corner window in particular. Structure 3 (Blvd 'Stamboliyski' N36) has undergone the most extensive interior transformation and retains the least original material. Despite these differences in preservation state, all three buildings share the same constructive logic (Preussische Kappe floors, granite stair treads, wrought iron railings) and the same broad stylistic orientation toward Central European Historicism and Secession. This confirms that these buildings were produced within a shared local building culture, shaped by common regulation, material supply chains, and professional practice. Through analysis and preservation, authentic interior details can act as reliable markers for temporal identification, supporting both restoration strategies and contemporary architectural interventions in heritage environments.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that authentic interior architectural features function as reliable cultural artefacts—primary indicators of the historical period, reflecting technological advancements in building construction and supporting the dating, stylistic characterisation, and authenticity assessment of historic buildings.

The first research objective—to identify and document authentic interior details using a consistent set of analytical criteria—has been achieved. The field surveys, archival research, and 3D laser scanning collectively produced a systematic record of surviving authentic elements across all three buildings, classified by function (constructive or decorative), location (enclosing surfaces, fixed furnishings, vertical circulation), and material. The results confirm that Structure 1 (Blvd 'Christo Botev' N85) retains the most complete authentic interior record, Structure 2 (Blvd 'Christo Botev' N75) retains selective elements of high cultural significance, and Structure 3 (Blvd 'Stamboliyski' N36) has undergone the most extensive transformation, retaining the least original material.

The second objective—to develop a transferable analytical framework—has been demonstrated through its consistent application across three buildings of varying preservation state. The framework proved effective even where survival of authentic material was partial or fragmentary, generating structured and comparable findings across all three sites. This confirms its potential as a transferable instrument applicable to interior heritage surveys beyond the three buildings examined here.

The third objective—to assess the cultural and architectural value of the identified details as artefacts—is confirmed by the findings. The shared constructive logic across all three buildings (Preussische Kappe floors, granite stair treads, wrought iron railings) reflects a coherent local building culture shaped by Central European, and particularly Viennese, professional practice of the post-Liberation period. The specific decorative elements—gypsum cornices, ceramic tile floors, ornamental plasterwork, the ceramic tile stove, and original joinery—function as primary historical evidence, capable of dating the interior and characterising its stylistic identity with precision.

For heritage conservation policy, the findings point to a significant gap in the current Bulgarian framework. All three buildings are designated monuments of local importance under the Bulgarian Cultural Heritage Act [22], yet the degree of interior preservation varies dramatically between them. This study illustrates the consequence directly: the three buildings share the same protected status, but their interiors range from near-complete survival (Structure 1) to almost total loss (Structures 2 and 3). The variation follows not from their designation, which is identical, but from the intensity of the interventions each underwent. The loss of authentic material in Structures 2 and 3 was therefore not unlawful but unrecorded—and is now irreversible.

A further tension arises at the planning stage, where preservation must be reconciled with structural safety, fire standards, and accessibility, which do not always favour the retention of original interior elements. The framework offers little guidance on weighing such conflicts when authentic fabric is at stake.

The study therefore supports three recommendations: that systematic interior documentation become a mandatory precondition for approving adaptation works on designated buildings, on a par with the treatment of facades; that the framework provide explicit criteria for resolving conflicts between interior preservation and safety or accessibility requirements; and that, where retention is impossible, a record-before-removal be required so that lost elements survive as documentary evidence.

The question of subsequent functional and aesthetic changes to the interiors is significant for the course of research. In Structure 2, the ground floor commercial spaces were subdivided and their finishes entirely replaced during later renovation works. In Structure 3, the interior was comprehensively transformed during its adaptation to hotel use. These changes do not eliminate the research value of the surviving authentic elements, but they do complicate their interpretation and require careful stratigraphic reading during survey. Future research should develop protocols for recording and assessing the cumulative impact of successive interventions on interior authenticity.

A limitation of the present study is the reliance on visual and photographic analysis for the attribution of specific objects—in particular the bentwood rocking chair and the ceramic tile stove. More precise attribution would require material analysis, archival catalogue comparison, and in some cases dendrochronology or thermoluminescence dating, which were beyond the scope of the current project and represent clear directions for future investigation.

The adaptive reuse of heritage buildings depends on the integration of expertise from various professionals—architects, conservators, historians, and engineers. This integration results in a more comprehensive framework for understanding the values embedded in interior details and for developing effective strategies for their retention within contemporary uses [19].

5. Conclusions

This study set out to examine authentic interior details as cultural artefacts in three early twentieth-century residential buildings in Sofia's historic centre, and to assess their value as markers of historical period, stylistic identity, and local building culture. Interior details are a crucial component in practical and theoretical architecture, combining visual and functional value. In the context of Sofia's architecture, the interior details reflect the transitional flow from Secession to Eclectic local systems and the respective cultural eras, preserving the unique identity of the buildings. The findings confirm all three of the study's central theses.

First, authentic interior details—when preserved—are reliable markers of historical period and cultural value. The stair railings, flooring patterns, gypsum cornices, ornamental plasterwork, and original joinery identified in the three case study buildings carry specific formal, material, and technological characteristics that situate them within a defined period (c.1900–1920) and a defined stylistic tradition—Central European Historicism and Secession, transmitted primarily through Viennese architectural practice. Architecture in this sense is a mediator between art, culture, history, and contemporary development [23]. The interior details do not merely decorate; they communicate the values, technologies, and social conditions of the period in which they were made. The interior parts of the buildings—stairs, railings, heating equipment, ceramics, furniture, and openings—reflect the era of

their creation through their volume, material, form, and style, reinforcing the identity of the entire building.

Second, the three buildings share a common constructive logic—Preussische Kappe floors, granite stair treads, wrought iron railings—that reflects a coherent local building culture shaped by shared regulation, professional practice, and material supply. The study, documentation, and presentation of these genuine architectural details are key components of any serious heritage assessment. Multidisciplinary groups of experts—conservators, architects, architectural historians, and survey engineers—work together to determine which architectural details best express the site's history, spirit, and story, and to develop site management strategies that ensure their survival or incorporation into a new context [24].

Third, the analytical framework developed and applied in this study—classifying interior details by function, location, and material—is a practical and transferable instrument for heritage survey applicable beyond the three buildings examined here. When the value of architectural details is acknowledged in the decision-making process for the conservation of heritage sites, the survival of architectural details that are an essential part of the site's character and meaning is ensured, sustaining the dynamic relationship between past and present for future generations [25,26].

For conservation practice, the principal recommendation is that interior detail assessment should become a standard and mandatory component of any heritage survey preceding adaptation works on designated buildings. The current pattern—in which exterior fabric is systematically documented while interior detail is assessed inconsistently—results in irreversible losses of authentic material, as demonstrated by the condition of Structures 2 and 3 in this study.

For future research, three directions are identified: the extension of this methodology to a larger sample of Sofia's historic residential buildings; the application of material analysis techniques to enable more precise attribution of specific artefacts; and the development of protocols for assessing and recording the cumulative impact of successive interior interventions on authenticity.

Recommendations and lessons learned. This study does not propose a standardised conservation protocol, but the three projects yield several practical lessons. Heritage designation alone does not protect interiors: all three buildings are monuments of local importance, yet interior survival varied widely, governed by the intensity of the adaptive-reuse works rather than by protected status. Interior survey should therefore become a mandatory step before any adaptation of a designated building. Authentic material survives only in fragments and must be read against an archival baseline, so documentation should begin early and proceed carefully. Where attribution is uncertain, it is preferable to situate an element within a documented tradition rather than name a specific maker, preserving accuracy without diminishing its value.

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