

*Routledge Contemporary Perspectives on Urban Growth,
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POST-UTOPIAN SPACES

**TRANSFORMING AND RE-EVALUATING URBAN ICONS
OF SOCIALIST MODERNISM**

Edited by
Valentin Mihaylov and Mikhail Ilchenko



Post-Utopian Spaces

Featuring up-to-date and insightful analyses and comparative case studies from a plethora of countries, this timely book explores 'ideal' socialist cities and their transformation under new socio-economic and political conditions after the fall of communism.

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Mikhail Ilchenko**

First published 2023
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mihaylov, Valentin, editor. | Il'chenko, M. S. (Mikhail Sergeevich),
editor.

Title: Post-utopian spaces: transforming and re-evaluating urban icons of socialist
modernism / edited by Valentin Mihaylov and Mikhail Ilchenko.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2023. | Series:
Routledge contemporary perspectives on urban growth, innovation and change |
Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022007853 (print) | LCCN 2022007854 (ebook) | ISBN
9781032197685 (hardback) | ISBN 9781032197692 (paperback) | ISBN
9781003260769 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Sociology, Urban--Europe, Eastern. | Sociology, Urban--
Europe, Central. | City planning--Europe, Eastern. | City planning--Europe,
Central. | Post-communism--Europe, Eastern. | Post-communism--Europe,
Central.

Classification: LCC HT145.E8 P67 2023 (print) | LCC HT145.E8 (ebook) |
DDC 307.760943--dc23/eng/20220223

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022007853>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022007854>

ISBN: 978-1-032-19768-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-19769-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-26076-9 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003260769

Typeset in Bembo

by SPi Technologies India Pvt Ltd (Straive)

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9 New Belgrade

From a Socialist Ideal to a Fragmented Space of Fashionable Architecture

Zlata Vuksanović-Macura

Introduction

Who would have expected that instead of continued prosperity and efforts to preserve the legacy of the socialist city, the beginning of the new millennium would be marked by its transformation? No cities in Central and Eastern Europe were spared the post-socialist transformation (Hamilton et al., 2005; Stanilov, 2007) and even those considered socialist icons have been affected (Bach and Murawski, 2020). Attentive research shows that, despite their similarities, these processes are often different, with the differences lying in important details (Mrdljuš and Kulić, 2012; Mihaylov, 2020). This chapter highlights the question of how and why the post-socialist transformation of New Belgrade, the icon of the socialist and non-aligned Yugoslavia, has occurred. Today, it is the most populated municipality within Belgrade, the capital of the Republic of Serbia.

New Belgrade was envisioned as a modernist settlement in the heart of the capital, Belgrade, a symbol of the unity of Socialist Yugoslavia (Le Normand, 2014). Although its history had started slightly earlier, under the regime of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, New Belgrade's large-scale development began after World War II (Vuksanović-Macura, 2014a). The post-war construction of this Yugoslav urban utopia coincided with the rise of new exemplary socialist cities in East-Central Europe. Due to the Yugoslav-Soviet split, New Belgrade's architecture and its ideological aspects were not influenced by Soviet planning models, but rather followed the modernist paradigm (Blagojević, 2005), local visions of a perfect socialist space (Djukić, 2015) and global socio-political events (Kulić, 2014).

New Belgrade is recognised as one of the most prominent urban environments in the territory of former Yugoslavia, built according to the planning and architectural ideas of the modern movement (Macura, 1986; Topalović, 2012) and a rare example of a socialist city in Central and Eastern Europe in which the principles of modernism and socialism were intertwined (Hirt, 2009; Kulić, 2014). At the same time, New Belgrade is perceived as a paradigm for the materialisation of the insinuations of the neoliberal market into modernist urban form and space (Waley, 2011, p. 209).

This chapter critically examines one century of New Belgrade's history (1919–2021), with particular focus on its urban transformation since 1986 in response to profound changes in the political and social environment. Although conceived as

a new administrative, economic and cultural hub of the capital, New Belgrade has not conformed to a single unified urban plan that would be carried out over time (Milinković et al., 2019). Quite the contrary, it was continuously developed through repetitive planning and construction sequences. This chapter focuses on urban planning, a field entangled in simultaneous spatial, political, governance, social, economic, and cultural matters, thus opening a broad perspective on the processes of city transformation in diverse socio-political environments. Following the plurality of Lewis Mumford's definition of the city as a 'geographical plexus, an economic organisation, an institutional process, a theatre of social actions, and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity' (Mumford, 1937, p. 60), this chapter analyses how the changing approaches in urbanism contributed to shaping and transforming New Belgrade as a unique place that emerged from the specific Yugoslav and Serbian socio-political context. The analysis also relies on Henri Lefebvre's 'right to the city' concept which asserts that space is created, codified, and used through social, political and everyday processes (Lefebvre, 1991).

Over the decades of its construction, New Belgrade has shifted from a functional socialist neighbourhood to a neoliberal space embodied in fragmented urbanism and expensive architecture. The transformation of its spatial structure and symbolic meanings was not a straightforward sequence of events, but a complex process, including numerous parallel activities. Accordingly, this chapter moves diachronically and synchronously, using a framework – the relationship between the social system, governance, urban planning, and construction – to explain New Belgrade's development.

Inception and the modernist period

The interwar

The terrain of New Belgrade was, for centuries, a marshy alluvial plain lying between the confluence of the Sava River into the Danube and the loess plateau to the northwest, between Belgrade to the east and Zemun, a small town about ten kilometres to the west (Vuksanović-Macura et al., 2018). The rivers formed the border between the Austrian and Ottoman Empires, and later, between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Kingdom of Serbia. Thus the future site of New Belgrade was geopolitically separated from the historical core of Belgrade. After World War I, the border was shifted northwards and this area became part of the newly-established Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The political elite of the time perceived the area on the left bank of the Sava River as a 'peg' to anchor the new state territory and natural ground for the expansion of Belgrade (Bojanić, 2013).

The international competition for the Master Plan for the Beautification and Enlargement of Belgrade in 1921–1922, was the first step in bringing together ideas important for the development of this area. One of the three highest-ranking proposals, submitted by authors from Vienna, under the motto *Singidunum Novissima* (Singidunum was the Roman name for Belgrade), put forward a unique concept of expanding Belgrade's urban fabric westwards, to the future New

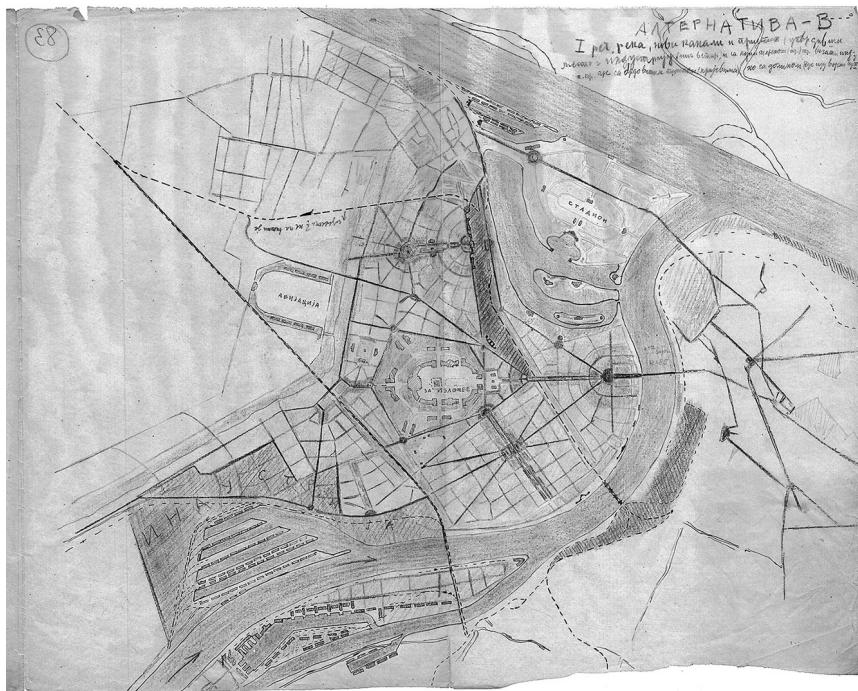


Figure 9.1 Plan proposal for New Belgrade, 1923.

Source: Belgrade City Museum.

Belgrade (Vuksanović-Macura, 2014b). In the subsequent Belgrade Master Plan of 1923, a leading urban planner, George Pavlovich Kovalevsky, an engineer of Russian origin, developed a conceptual solution for New Belgrade, but this was not included in the officially-adopted plan (Figure 9.1). A number of planning proposals in the interwar period treated this terrain as one of Belgrade's suburbs. The planned urban matrix followed the pattern on the right bank of the Sava, while the amenities and functions supplemented, and were compatible with those in the 'old' city (Vuksanović-Macura, 2014a).

However, the event that unified the two river banks was the opening of a chain bridge in 1934, spurring the construction of the Fairgrounds exhibition halls and Airport. At the same time, in the flood lands near the river, an unplanned neighbourhood inhabited by the poor population was emerging. On the eve of World War II, in 1937, the city authorities hired the Danish firm Højgaard & Schultz to reclaim the marshy terrain along the confluence. During the war, the Fairgrounds became a Nazi concentration camp. The remains of pre-war structures, including some Fairgrounds buildings and the enlarged, impoverished neighbourhood near the Sava River, still exist. The interwar construction works did not ideologically or symbolically influence planning in the socialist period, but they shaped the framework in which the space on the left bank of the Sava was indisputably allocated for the erection of New Belgrade.

Beyond a functional city: modern form and socialist content

After World War II, the political division of Europe, into spheres controlled by the great powers, transformed many pre-war kingdoms into new communist countries firmly tied to the Soviet Union through the Warsaw Pact. This was also the case for Yugoslavia, as an underdeveloped agrarian country. In 1948, Yugoslavia left the Eastern Bloc, replacing a rigid communist regime with a reformist project of socialist self-management. Its development towards a modern country was marked by three guiding principles: urbanisation, industrialisation, and electrification. This determined the political and economic context for the efforts to rebuild and develop cities in the post-war period. Immediately after the liberation, reconstruction plans were developed for Belgrade, which had been affected by bombing in 1941 and 1944.

The idea of constructing New Belgrade became relevant as early as 1945, with the first activities related to the new Belgrade Master Plan (Djordjević, 1961). According to Ljubo Ilić (1948, p. 789), Assistant Minister of Construction in Yugoslavia at the time, ‘the decision to build New Belgrade was made by Comrade Tito and the People’s Government at the moment when we switched to a planned economy; when all the conditions for building socialism were met’ (Figure 9.2). The intention was to create the administrative centre of the new state, a symbol of Yugoslav unity, and a model socialist city (Kulić, 2014).



Figure 9.2 President Josip Broz Tito in front of the model of New Belgrade, mid-1960s.

Source: Historical Archives of Belgrade.

Translating these ambitions into urban structures was at the centre of a series of urban planes that were developed in the following decades. The initial draft plan was made in 1946, by the architect Nikola Dobrović and his team at the Belgrade Institute of Urban Planning, where he was appointed as director (Milinković et al., 2019). The plan put forward conceptual questions about the future layout of the governing city, defining locations for key political and representative buildings that were supposed to symbolise the triumph of socialism – the Federal Government (later the Executive Council), the League of Communists of Yugoslavia headquarters building, and a luxury state-owned hotel, named the Yugoslavia. The urban matrix, featured in this early concept as a radial system, never materialised, while the buildings were erected as planned.

The construction of New Belgrade officially began on April 11, 1948; the year of the Yugoslav–Soviet split. This political event lent a shift in approach towards urban planning of the socialist city under construction. A new Conceptual Plan for New Belgrade, designed by Nikola Dobrović and Milorad Macura, conformed to the modernist principles laid out by the CIAM in a document known as the Athens Charter (Djordjević, 1961). This plan embraced a functional city concept, based on the premise of efficient traffic, forming a grid of high-speed roads outlining large blocks. In addition, the idea of a central axis, along which major state complexes alternate with a series of open public spaces, was inaugurated. The 1950 Belgrade Master Plan, developed under the leadership of Miloš Somborski, included the main idea from the Conceptual Plan to establish New Belgrade as a modernist city on the left bank of the Sava (Vrbanić, 1951). A grid of major roads formed a rectangular framework; large city blocks, about 400 × 600 m in size, with distinct functional zones reserved for administrative and political authorities, cultural institutions, housing, industry and recreation. The recognisable numbering of New Belgrade's urban blocks dates back to this period and has remained unchanged to this day (Jovanović, 2018). In the early post-war years, construction of the Federal Government building, heavy infrastructure, amelioration and filling the terrain with sand from the Danube was started. Due to the scarcity of modern construction technology, most of that extensive work relied largely on mass, volunteer, youth labour brigades assembled from all over the country. The enthusiastic work of about 140,000 young people rounded off the emblematic scope of their efforts to build a symbol of Socialist Yugoslavia (Furundžić, 1964–1965). However, due to the economic crisis caused by the split with the USSR, the construction of New Belgrade came to a halt due to a funding shortage.

Yugoslavia found new allies in the countries of the Western Bloc. The process of establishing new political ties fostered an economic recovery in the early 1950s. A distinct political and economic model, known as socialist self-management, was introduced, leading to political decentralisation and social and economic liberalisation. This also provided the context for reviving the planning and construction activity in New Belgrade according to new functional and symbolic needs. In the process, urban planning was supposed to reassert both the aesthetic and ethics of the social engagement of modernist architecture and the unique position of Yugoslavia in the global geopolitical setting (Kulić, 2014).

In 1957 the New Belgrade Master Plan was adopted, which departed slightly from the ideas of the Athens Charter, seeking to establish better integration of urban functions (Djordjević, 1961). In other words, the plan embraced the conceptual settings of a functional city but sought to redefine the strict zoning pattern. Within the outlined large city blocks with multi-storey residential buildings and open spaces between them, a network of public buildings, local centres and parks were introduced. The belief in the interplay between socialist values and functionalist urbanism – most apparent in the plan for New Belgrade's Central Zone by Uroš Martinović, Milutin Glavički, Leonard Lenarčić, Milosav Mitić, and Dušan Milenković – reappeared, although embodied in different architectural forms and organisation of open spaces, from one urban block to another (Glavički, 1965). The buildings of the Federal Government (built in 1962) and the League of Communists of Yugoslavia headquarters building (1965), contributed to the political symbolism. The Museum of Contemporary Art (1965), one of the buildings in the planned cultural complex, had a prominent position close to the confluence (Stojanović, 1974).

Housing was an integral part of New Belgrade's development, aiming for better living conditions for everyone, including the provision of green spaces and accompanying urban services. In the early stage of the construction of residential blocks, the practice of establishing a neighbourhood centre within each habitation zone, based on an adaptation to the concept of Soviet microrayons, was introduced (Jovanović, 2017). Neighbourhood centres were established in the earliest blocks, numbered 1 and 2 (Figure 9.3). The planning design, formulated by the architect



Figure 9.3 Residential towers and low horizontal buildings in Block 1, late 1960s.

Source: Belgrade City Museum.



Figure 9.4 Collective housing, a view from Block 61 toward Block 45 and the Sava River. Photo: Milica Ševkušić.

Branko Petričić, encompassed free-standing residential towers and long, horizontal buildings (*lamela*) immersed in greenery, and a neighbourhood centre with various social and commercial amenities, including a post office, nursery, elementary school, and supermarket (Petričić, 1975). Other blocks built in the 1960s conformed to a similar urban scheme (Stojanović, 1974).

In the early 1970s, mass housing became the dominant construction activity in New Belgrade, with annual production of around 10,000 new apartments (Figure 9.4). The establishment of a self-management system led to the decentralisation of state responsibility in housing provision. As a result, socially-owned enterprises became responsible for the provision of housing for their employees. Therefore, more economically and politically powerful enterprises had the opportunity to build and invest intensively in housing. As a result, many of these prominent socially-owned companies were given construction sites in New Belgrade. Despite the predominant use of prefabricated construction systems, local engineers and the construction industry developed new technical solutions and more sophisticated structural elements, enabling architects and urban planners to create a diversity of building forms (Jovanović, 2018). Namely, residential blocks became an arena for new types of housing, ‘packed with high-standard apartments for the time’ (Perović, 2008, p. III). In this regard, the apartment’s organisation was well-designed and quite functional, with an average size of 67 square metres. About 92% of all New Belgrade apartments were fully-equipped with urban services, including public heating, compared to the Belgrade average of 47% (Backović, 2010, p. 61).

The quality and high spatial characteristics of residential buildings and apartments reflected a twofold framework. The first was triggered by the general

intention to build a model city adequate for the life of a socialist man. The second reflected the significant economic and political power of the socially-owned enterprises that became the main investors, thus echoing the socio-economic structure of the future residents. In these years, New Belgrade was inhabited mainly by the middle class, civil servants, state and party administration employees, the army, the police and keyworkers. In line with the level of education as a factor in social position, the New Belgrade population's educational level was above the average for Belgrade as a whole (Backović, 2010). However, the origin of the inhabitants was not homogeneous. Regarding the national structure, a significant number of newcomers from other Yugoslav Republics settled in the territory of New Belgrade; so, the share of Croats, Slovenes and Montenegrins was higher than in other Belgrade municipalities (Petrović, 1986). Unlike most new industrial cities in socialist Eastern Europe, the inhabitants of this Yugoslav urban utopia mainly came from other cities and considerably less from rural areas.

Living in New Belgrade was not perceived as prestigious in the same way it was for the neighbourhood in the old city centre. However, the high quality of the apartments in the new part of the city contributed to a high degree of satisfaction among residents with the housing conditions. The early inhabitants perceived it as a safe and secure location, and appreciated the close relations with neighbours, as well as the healthy environment and green areas. Sociological research from the mid-1980s showed that most respondents would not choose to leave New Belgrade. The quality of the housing and the layout of the apartments, which met the needs of the family, were the predominant factors for this attitude (Petrović, 1986).

At the same time, the growing population required better urban services: kindergartens, schools, commercial and cultural amenities. Their construction, as a rule, lagged behind housing construction and New Belgrade was pejoratively referred to as 'Belgrade's dormitory', fostering the trend for swapping apartments in New Belgrade for those in the old centre of Belgrade (Perović, 2008). A particular aspect of this trend was the residents' attitudes towards the way of life in a modern city. Namely, for the people with experience of living in a historic city who received apartments in New Belgrade, the logic of living in an open city block, with its large green spaces and long, wide boulevards unsuitable for walking, could be strange and distant (Blagojević, 2009). Some scholars cite sociological studies showing that young people were 'more adaptable to such an environment and could identify much more easily with [...] the specific image of New Belgrade' (Maričić and Petrić, 2009, p. 47). Nevertheless, the perception of New Belgrade as a dormitory was distorted. Only a few urban blocks were predominantly occupied by housing, while working, housing and urban services were included in most of them. All these conflicting perceptions blurred the identity of New Belgrade.

Housing also became a field for the political and economic influence of leading state enterprises and institutions on urban planning events. Due to the policy of self-management, there was early decentralisation of state responsibility for housing provision. The direct housing providers became socially-owned enterprises that gained responsibility for providing apartments for their employees. In the

1980s, the position of large state-owned enterprises, which demanded better locations for their housing developments, was strengthened. The architect Borislav Stojkov (1986, n.p.) highlighted that New Belgrade had become ‘a great arena for the interests of various stakeholders [...] and the responsibility of those who make decisions about construction on this terrain’. The subjective and short-term interests of stakeholders and decision-makers led to partial changes to the urban plan. One of the three blocks with public facilities, initially conceived as part of the aforementioned monumental central axis, was converted into a housing block (Block 24) at the request of the Yugoslav People’s Army, a major investor in housing in Yugoslavia (Jovanović, 2018). The concept of a central axis, which had for long remained the major milestone in the planning of New Belgrade, was thereby annulled, announcing a period of postmodern transformation and, further, the entry of the market economy into the sphere of the ‘Yugoslav state-led political project’ (Miletić–Abramović, 2007, p. 37) and the ‘planning and architectural symbol of Yugoslav Socialism’ (Damljanović Conley, 2021, p. 71).

Crossing a functional space

Walking through a functional city

The functionalist orientation in further planning New Belgrade was considerably shaken by a number of comparative theoretical contributions that emerged in mid-1980s. Two significant actions stood out: the International Competition for the Improvement of New Belgrade’s Urban Structure, prepared in 1984, launched in November 1985, and completed in July 1986 (*The Future of New Belgrade*, 1986); and three research studies conducted between 1975 and 1984 by the architect Miloš R. Perović, under the auspices of the Institute for Development Planning of the City of Belgrade. In his research, synthesised in the book *Iskustva prošlosti (Lessons of the Past)*, Perović (1985) started pursuing a way out of the functionalist concept of the city. He believed that the findings of urban geographers’ scholarly research should be incorporated into urban planning processes, particularly highlighting two scientifically-based models: the theory of corridors (Whebell, 1969) and the theory of waves (Boyce, 1966; Morrill, 1974). This is how Perović (2008, p. XII) explains these geographical theories: ‘The construction and development of the city are cyclical and open processes that take place in waves.’ Applied to the central part of New Belgrade, it was reasonable to expect the ‘dormitory city’ (the first wave) would gradually transform into a ‘city-centre’ (the second wave); into an urban fabric, rich in content, forms and events, typical of a traditionally formed city. An attempt was made to formulate a macrostructural architectural proposal that could serve as the basis for an articulated new wave of life for New Belgrade. Unlike the previous urban phase, where terms such as *open block*, *social land*, *boulevard*, and *park* were dominant, the new approach analyses features such as *urban block*, *building lot*, *street*, and *square*. This was a major fundamental and formal change. Perović proposed New Belgrade’s reurbanisation towards an urban space that would have typically resulted from ‘planned-spontaneous’ urban growth (Figure 9.5).

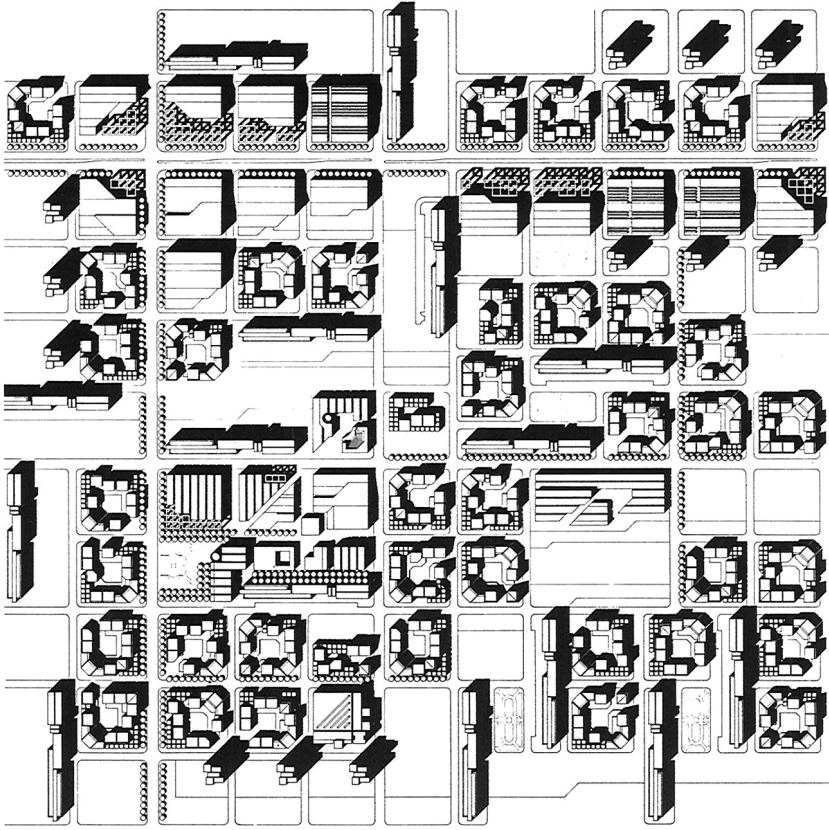


Figure 9.5 Simulation of the reurbanisation of the city built in the spirit of the Athens Charter, project by Miloš R. Perović.

Source: Perović (1986, p. 47).

In 1986, the International Competition for the Improvement of New Belgrade's Urban Structure was completed. Ninety-four projects by local and international teams proposed diverse approaches and preferences (Jovanović, 2017). As regards the future of New Belgrade, the projects were almost unanimous in incorporating elements of the traditional city – 'points and axes', 'block-street-square' – into open blocks; the same topics Perović experimented with. The idea was simple: New Belgrade would gradually become denser and efforts should be made to create an appropriate urban basis for this process, rather than relinquishing it to the interests of individual groups. All previous events were a great impulse and were accompanied by many articles, books, and exhibitions, but they did not lead to the reurbanisation of New Belgrade's core based on the ideas rooted in 'learning from the past'.

While major debates about transformation were in full swing, the architect Vladimir Macura (1986) was the first to put forward the idea of protecting the

authenticity of New Belgrade's urban ensembles and units. According to Macura (1986, p. 3), New Belgrade 'is a turning point in urban planning in the territory of Belgrade' and 'the Central Zone of New Belgrade – that square of nine blocks [...] – is one of the highest achievements of Yugoslav urbanism, resting on the premises of the Corbusian value system'. A respectful approach to the heritage from the modernist period was also incorporated in the 1990 urban plan, designed under Macura's leadership, aimed at reconstructing Block 21, one of the Central Zone residential blocks. According to the plan,

Block 21, just like the rest of New Belgrade's Central Zone, is a hallmark of a time, a way of understanding the city, a type of architecture. [...] therefore, the entire Central Zone of New Belgrade should be placed under protection as a cultural and historical contribution to Belgrade's urbanism, to the urban planning of Yugoslavia, and the whole world. Accordingly, Block 21 should be completed along the same lines that guided its construction.

(quoted after Bojanić, 2013, p. 60)

Three and a half decades since the first initiative for its protection, New Belgrade's Central Zone was granted the status of a heritage asset, as a spatial cultural-historical ensemble (SGRS, 2021).

However, theoretical observations of the functional city and punctual planning and construction practice were performed in parallel. Still, interventions aimed to 'correct the shortcomings' of the functional city mainly put in the forefront the interests of powerful state-owned enterprises involved in housing development. In other words, while experts re-examined the humanity of modern New Belgrade and advocated for the protection of its urban, socio-spatial and architectural achievements, the reality was primarily shaped by the particular financial interests of emerging, quasi-liberal developers who filled the 'gaps' of the undeveloped sites of the functional city, hinting at a future, profit-based, spontaneous reconfiguration of New Belgrade.

Space of transition and informality

By the early 1990s, thanks to its position and good connections with the historical part of the city, its open spaces and infrastructure, New Belgrade began to acquire the attributes of one of the most valuable and desirable development sites in the city and was viewed through the prism of huge economic potential. The same years also saw the disintegration of Yugoslavia through war. The Serbian economy collapsed with hyperinflation, United Nations sanctions, isolation under the rule of an authoritarian regime, and the resurgence of a centralised state. The transition process lagged behind many countries in the former Eastern Bloc. The socio-political framework arising from this situation brought uncertainty to the city's spatial and physical development. Urban planning was almost neglected. In the absence of an adequate housing policy, a rapid housing privatisation was carried out, with less than 2% of apartments remaining in public ownership, while illegal construction flourished.



Figure 9.6 In front, a middle-rise gated community from 1999 in Block 12 opposite the socialist collective housing in Block 30.

Photo: Zlata Vuksanović-Macura.

In New Belgrade, the privatised housing stock collapsed due to lack of maintenance, whereas public and open spaces were usurped by ‘temporary’ facilities with various service amenities. Green areas and lanes along boulevards were suddenly converted into car parks. Lefebvre’s (1991) thesis, that cities are projections of society, was clearly manifested in the emergence of new representational buildings and housing types that reflected an ideological shift and a deep socio-economic gap. Due to the housing crisis and extreme poverty in the neglected locations of New Belgrade, neighbourhoods with improvised shelters, completely lacking any infrastructure, were taking shape (Macura, 2002). In contrast, residential Block 12, built in the late 1990s, in the spirit of postmodern architecture, was a ‘Middle-rise gated community’ (Waley, 2011, p. 224). The apartments in this complex were purchased by members of the *nouveau riche* (Figure 9.6). This symbolic turn was also marked by the beginning of the construction of the Church of Holy Martyr Dimitrije *vis-à-vis* the former Federal Government building. In that sense, New Belgrade’s morphological structure changed through new projects and the denial of inherited forms, strongly reflecting the ideological construct of the emerging ‘religious-financial oligarchy of Serbian turbo-capitalism’ (Dimitrijević, 2009, p. 117). At the end of the millennium, during the 1999 NATO bombing, a number of landmark buildings were damaged.

Over the past three decades, market interests have become the sole guidance for development, while open, public and undeveloped spaces have been filled with various forms and amenities. Due to its increased attractiveness, New Belgrade has become a desirable home for a new service class, for whom housing based on

different spatial and functional concepts has been provided (Waley, 2011). New Belgrade is witnessing a continuous fragmentation of the urban fabric, as a consequence of formal and informal planning practices, i.e., discretionary decision-making. With the privatisation of public spaces, business interests converge with public interests, since commercial facilities offer a wider range of goods and greater diversity of content, which is perceived as a positive feature for a neighbourhood (Milaković, 2013).

Space of fragmentation: economics, consumerism, and scenography

Although the democratic and socio-political changes after the 2000s had been expected to bring new opportunities and open up new spaces for high-quality urban life, the events to come shattered both the functionalist and postmodern concepts of New Belgrade. The Belgrade Master Plan until 2021, adopted in 2003, developed under the leadership of Vladimir Macura and Miodrag Ferenčak, was the only planning document that covered New Belgrade as an integrated whole. In the context of channelling the strategic and urban development of New Belgrade as part of the ‘central city zone’, the efforts to ensure the continuity of its planning character, as well as the continuity of the existing type of construction, housing standards and infrastructure, respecting the concept of open blocks, while preserving internal green areas, and enriching the area with commercial, business, and service amenities and public services (schools, childcare, social and health-care institutions), are identified as the most important spatial and programming elements of the Master Plan (SLGB, 2003). The Master Plan also introduced an innovative planning tool called ‘Belgrade’s Lasting Values and Assets’, consisting of natural, human-made and intangible assets (Vuksanović-Macura et al., 2020). In New Belgrade, these were individual buildings (e.g., Hotel Yugoslavia), urban ensembles (e.g., Central Zone, the block where the Sava Centre is located), and a system of green spaces (e.g., Ušće Park).

However, the planning system has failed to ensure long-term certainty for developers. Instead, politicians satisfy their demands without taking into account planned land-use, infrastructure, and urban beauty (Zeković, 2008). The leading force at the time was investor interest as the main driver of development. The tendency to activate a wide range of amenities and activities in the open blocks of the functional city, similar to those in a traditional urban scheme, stemmed from the concurrence of internal pressures to strike a balance between the public and the private (Arandelović, 2020) and global factors (Hamilton et al., 2005; Bach and Murawski, 2020), leading to the transformation and reshaping of New Belgrade’s physical structure.

Pursuant to the formal and informal alliances of the city administration and developers, a chaotic city of fashionable architecture was emerging. In this process, open spaces and built structures that used to be recognisable urban landmarks have turned into dramatically different environments, packed with ‘commercial images, signs and objects’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 125). A complete spatial, functional and symbolic transformation of Block 16 is a paradigmatic example (Figure 9.7). Block 16 is located near the confluence of the Sava River into the Danube, and the first one



Figure 9.7 Block 16 with the League of Communists of Yugoslavia headquarters, late 1960s. Source: Belgrade City Museum.

encountered by a visitor coming from the centre of the old city to New Belgrade. Originally, one of the landmarks of socialist Yugoslavia, the headquarters of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, was erected in 1964 in this open block in a ‘sea of greenery’. Shaped as a simple rectangular prism, with a height of 106 metres, the building became the dominant centrepiece in the urban landscape-in-making. (Kulić, 2014). The building was severely damaged in the 1999 NATO bombing, which was the immediate reason for its privatisation and the consequent repurposing and renaming to the Ušće Multifunctional Centre, and it has now been turned into a mechanism for the accumulation of profit. The development of the urban plan for Block 16 (adopted in 2003) was preceded by a public competition. The winning project by the architect Branislav Redžić put forward the reconstruction of the existing tower, as well as the construction of another tower and a lower annex, while preserving, to a great degree, the green areas in the block (Marić et al., 2010). However, during the construction, there were large deviations, and the built space was significantly larger than planned. The response of the city authorities to this illegal construction was paradoxical and disastrous for the public interest. The public space in which the building is located was rapidly converted into private property in a non-transparent way. A new urban plan was adopted (in 2007), which in fact legalised the ruthless privatisation of land and illegal construction of a giant shopping centre, which was opened (in 2008) by representatives of the city and the national leadership. The preparation of the design for the second tower (built in 2018) bypassed local architects and was entrusted to the international company Chapman Taylor. This was another step in a series of informal practices that marked the construction of Block 16.

In the context of the increased commercialisation of urban space, there have been two major trends in the construction of new business and commercial facilities (Milaković, 2013). One was the spotty construction of megamarkets and shopping malls, dispersed within the existing blocks, throughout the territory of New Belgrade. In this way, the focus of social interaction in open and public spaces has shifted to closed spaces of individual consumption. Another type was construction on green lanes and undeveloped areas along important roads that are treated as greenfield. Adequate infrastructure, easy and fast accessibility by car at these locations, has attracted foreign investment and encouraged the mass construction of headquarters and business premises of large corporations.

The concept of the corporate conquest of space has been consistently implemented in five blocks: 40, 41a, 41, 42, and 43, along Milutin Milanković Boulevard, between the railway and the residential blocks of the Central Zone. These blocks were the subject of an architectural and planning competition (1996), the results of which were partly included in a later detailed regulation plan (adopted in 2003) (Milaković, 2013). In accordance with the new Law on Planning and Construction (2003), the plan did not interfere with the blocks' spatial-morphological structure, but rather determined zones with construction parameters. Another novelty was the introduction of zones with mixed or predominant land use (usually commercial-residential complexes), enabling developers to take a flexible approach in organising space, but also to apply informal planning practices that mainly protected the particular interests of investors and politicians. Thus, the central block in this area, which had been part of the central axis in earlier plans and a counterpoint to the building of the Federal Government (today's Serbia Palace), was left vacant in the new plan. However, through partial changes to the plan and discretionary decision-making, over the following few years, several business buildings and headquarters of national and international companies were built in the block (Holiday Inn, Hyundai, Škoda, Gorenje, etc.). The fragmentation of the area was further increased through the most recent construction (in 2021) of the Green Heart business complex by GTS, a real estate investor and developer, in Block 41a. The fashionable architecture of this complex, including its gleaming façade, conveys the message of self-sufficiency and closedness, additionally emphasising the contrast to the open block of the functional city on the opposite side. Or, in Lefebvre's (1991, p. 125) words, resulting 'in the advent of the pseudo-concept of the environment (which begs the question: environment of whom or of what?)'.

Conclusion

Places never remain unchanged over time, but rather reflect the social, economic, political or cultural transformation of society. With the changes in the political and socio-economic sphere, New Belgrade has become an arena for constant change to its urban functions, structure, symbolism, and the general narrative. The transformation of New Belgrade discussed here was presented in the context of the changing urban planning approaches and practice, which were determined by social, political and economic processes, taking into account the position that these processes affect the exercise of the peoples 'right to the city'.

In the period of one century, New Belgrade has been transformed from a vacant, flooded terrain to the home of several thousand people. From the official beginning of its construction in 1948, New Belgrade has transformed from a socialist model city, a symbol of a Yugoslav, non-allied path and multinational unity, to a business district and place of consumption.

The socio-economic and political meaning attached to the geography of New Belgrade and its urban matrix exemplifies the fact that although physical structures contribute to the shaping of social processes, they do not in themselves determine these processes. Housing development is a paradigmatic example. To leaving the stamp of social equality in the form of a modern city built on land filled with sand from nearby rivers and by the volunteer labour of youth brigades was a proclaimed goal of the unique Yugoslavian self-management socialist system, and was envisaged to be materialised through the provision of affordable housing for all within the significant development in New Belgrade. Although there are no longitudinal studies on the social structures of its residents, our general observation is that the inhabitants mainly belonged to higher social strata. But, over time, this social structure has changed as have general social trends. In the first decades of construction, the percentage of residents with higher education was above the city average. In socialist Yugoslavia, higher education also meant a better position in society. During the transition from socialism to capitalism, in the 1990s, members of the *nouveau riche* increasingly became residents of New Belgrade. However, they did not inevitably have a high level of education. These social processes also initiated the change in the perception of the neighbourhood from 'Belgrade's dormitory' into a desirable place for housing in reality.

The perception as 'Belgrade's dormitory' also raised professional doubts about the success of the concept of a modernist socialist city. Between 1975 and 1985, the protagonists of postmodernist criticism perceived the social and physical space of New Belgrade as an unsuccessful modernist project (Milaković, 2013). Historical and geographical theories, such as wave theory and corridor theory, were the basis for the claim that it would be transformed from a dormitory town into a city-centre. In a series of studies, the architect Miloš R. Perović experimented with the idea of introducing traditional types of blocks, streets and squares in modernist free spaces (Perović, 1985). These initiatives were later interpreted as a pragmatic rationale and a formal idiom for the future market economy, while highlighting that the post-socialist events were the exact opposite of the postmodernist ideas pursued by their proponents (Topalović, 2012). In parallel with the ubiquitous, postmodernist critique, the idea emerged of protecting its modernist ensembles, consisting of characteristic open blocks and public spaces, as cultural and historical heritage (Macura, 1986). The first modernist ensemble was protected as heritage only much later, in 2021, while the recommendations and procedures for its reconstruction are still unclear.

What remained constant was the urban matrix set in the initial urban plans of the early 1950s. In that respect, the urban concept of New Belgrade was based on a functional city, designed according to the principles of the modernist movement and the Athens Charter: large city blocks, wide boulevards, and housing surrounded by greenery. Although accomplished only partially, mainly through the

dominant function of housing, the geography of the site, with its flooded flat terrain that required prior melioration, allowed for the establishment of urban structures that supported the social equality of the city's residents. This same urban matrix readily welcomed completely new content, social and cultural patterns imposed by introducing the free market and the capitalist system. Here we see, repeated in the past and in the present, the operation of politics and economic organisation through urban landscape. The materiality of New Belgrade, its physical geography witnessed by its urban pattern and architecture, continues to inform the socio-political order.

At this point, we return to the question highlighted at the beginning: what constitutes the potential and capacity of New Belgrade to continuously accept different concepts and spatial structures? The modern space that emerged from the original design for New Belgrade was an open system, and this made it suitable for various interventions and concepts. The modernist spatial structures were sufficiently flexible to readily accept both postmodernist and the latest neoliberal interventions. This affirms the urban space of New Belgrade as a settlement with a wide range of possibilities for additional upgrades and reshaping in line with global and local trends. It is right to say that New Belgrade is now a space full of differences, which overlap and coexist, forming a unique urban structure. Perhaps this is the right moment, similar to when the critique of the modernist city was 'brought to the level of an axiom' (Macura, 1986), to 'take a look from a different angle' and start pursuing solutions and devising strategies for the recovery of New Belgrade with the support of the existing (and justified) critique of neoliberal and discretionary practices.

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