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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Kucina, I. (2024). The Continuous Reproduction of Contradictions in the Urban Development of New Belgrade's Central Area. *Urban Planning*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.7629>

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The Continuous Reproduction of Contradictions in the Urban Development of New Belgrade's Central Area

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Submitted: 28 September 2023 **Accepted:** 19 February 2024 **Published:** 24 April 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Post-Socialist Neoliberalism and the Production of Space” edited by Gabriel Schwake (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) and Aleksandar Staničić (TU Delft), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.i320>

Abstract

The initial source for the continuous reproduction of contradictions in the central area of New Belgrade's urban development was the mismatch between the dynamics of political and economic reforms and the static urban planning system that has been banded to the most progressive but rigid functionalist ideals that could not adapt to the emergent pace of these reforms. Consequently, during the socialist and post-socialist periods, the central area of New Belgrade grew irregularly by developing contradictory fragments rather than totality. The inconsistency of the socialist authorities in completing the capital city according to the urban plan despite political imperatives has continued with the post-socialist governing tendencies towards irregularity, privatization, and commercialization of urban development. A series of individual, short-term, and profitable urban projects that have opposed the socialist urban structure, have reused inherited socialist urban infrastructure as a fertile ground for their growth. More than presenting a new insight into the history of urban development of the central area of New Belgrade, this study uses it as the prime case to disclose the unsustainability of the urban planning system during the socialist past and post-socialist present. An alternative urban planning system would embrace the challenges of the continuous reproduction of contradiction by affirming an institutional network of platforms for collaboration among citizens, urban planners, authorities, and developers.

Keywords

New Belgrade; platforms for collaboration; post-socialism; socialism; urban development; urban planning systems

1. Introduction

In late January 2021, the Serbian government dedicated the status of spatial, cultural, and historical heritage to the central area of New Belgrade. It was a surprising decision by politicians who favored the revival of national culture and the influx of international capital. They officially recognized the modernist urban development of socialist Yugoslavia as a cultural asset, despite the notorious reputations of all (modern architecture, socialism, and Yugoslavia) in contemporary political and cultural discourse. In addition to these contradictions, the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of the City of Belgrade, which has proposed to the government to protect the central area of New Belgrade, has stated that “the three axials out of nine blocks of the central area have to be excluded from the heritage since they have never been completed according to the original urban plan made at the end of the fifties” (Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of the City of Belgrade, 2021). However, it is evident that other than the incompleteness of these three blocks, there were unplanned changes in all nine blocks. The entire central area of New Belgrade resembles a heterogeneous assembly of planned and unplanned fragments rather than a uniform product of the urban planning system.

This latest incongruity continues to reproduce the contradictions that have followed the urban development of the central area of New Belgrade since the beginning. New Belgrade has been a prime political project, envisioned to represent the best image of the new socialist state. Its development has always depended on the political conditions, and they have been permanently changing following the dynamics of political and economic reforms in socialist Yugoslavia. On the other side, modernist urban planning, linked to the most progressive but rigid functionalist ideals represented by the static visions of the long-term plan, has not been adapted to the emerging pace of these reforms. The inconsistency between the emergent political system and the rigid urban planning system has become the permanent source of the continuous reproduction of contradictions in urban development.

The reproduction of contradictions that occurred in socialism, despite rigorous administration, followed the rise of market-oriented tendencies imposed by the original “self-management” socialist system in former Yugoslavia. Yugoslavian political leadership introduced self-management in the late 1950s to resolve the economic contradiction between a controlled and a free market economy that was a source of the country’s lagging after WWII. The shift towards market management has gradually enlarged the country’s wealth but weakened the emancipatory role of urban planning (Mrduljas & Kulic, 2012). Powerful socialist construction companies, who projected their competitive strategies on the territorial divisions of the city, took key roles in urban development. They split the central area of New Belgrade and developed it according to their profit goals, formally framing it as public interest.

The inconsistency between the urban planning system and the political system survived the destruction of socialism, but the reproduction of contradictions in the urban development of the central area of New Belgrade continued. The political transition that began in the 1990s exacerbated the already established divisions of the socialist period. The post-socialist urban policy that supported profit-oriented private urban developments and the withdrawal of public institutions finally set aside the original plan of the central area of New Belgrade, while continuing to reuse socialist infrastructure as fertile ground (Waley, 2011).

Although having opposed ideological premises, post-socialism has not suppressed socialism in practice and instead used it for its growth. That could be because both socialism and post-socialism are transitional processes. According to Marxist theorists, socialism is a slow transition from capitalism to communism during which all inherited contradictions, such as the ones between political autocracy and democracy, distributive and market economy, top-down and bottom-up management, traditional and modern culture, nationalism and internationalism, demand gradual resolutions. Post-socialism represents an accelerated transition from socialism to capitalism—a “shock therapy,” as named by American neoliberal economists (Harvey, 2007), during which the political authorities radicalize the reproduction of contradictions to boost the change. In the case of former Yugoslavia, that led to deadly conflicts. Following up on the contradictory manifestations of the transitional processes, I assume the general contradiction between socialism and post-socialism is one of the milestones rather than an exclusive historical turnover.

The ideological divergence between Marxism and neoliberalism has long been recognized. However, both frameworks, in their ways, have critiqued the role of the state as a political agency. Empirical realities reveal a more nuanced picture. Contrary to their initial claims, the state has significantly strengthened, particularly during the socialist and post-socialist transitions. The power of state apparatus, which was established during socialism by development and control over the means of production, increased during post-socialism when it became the manager of the process of privatization of those means. Consequently, political and managerial elites who acquired privileges and wealth during socialism became the main beneficiaries of the post-socialist transition.

Aside from the theory of transition, my research was triggered by the simple observation of the inconsistency between the original urban plan for the central area of New Belgrade and the map of its current reality. To explain the inconsistency, I studied a series of master urban plans for New Belgrade and detailed urban plans for its central area—which are archived in the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade and published in various academic papers—and crossed them with the findings about the relationship between urban planning and political, economic, social, and cultural movements in former Yugoslavia, that are presented in the research project *Unfinished Modernization* (Mrduljas & Kulic, 2012).

As a participant in that research project, I had a chance to do hour-long interviews with three important protagonists of the urban planning of New Belgrade from the beginning to the present time: the first one planned the original traffic system of New Belgrade in the 1950s and 1960s, the second one participated in the planning and realization of some detailed urban plans for various blocks in New Belgrade in the 1970s and 1980s, and the third one was managing the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade in the 2000s. They provided personal testimonies and unwritten facts from their professional archives about the urban development practice in New Belgrade. My records from these interviews have been crosschecked with newspaper and internet articles and proven by the claims from the academic papers by other researchers who studied the urban development of New Belgrade.

The study of the transformation of the actors involved in the urban development of New Belgrade during the socialist and post-socialist period, presented in the first section, reflects the global neoliberal paradigm of urban development to New Belgrade’s post-socialist practice. It is based on the theoretical framework given by Harvey (2007), Waley (2011), and Szelenyi (1996), and social studies done by academics from Belgrade University.

The backward history presented in the second section aims to confuse the seductiveness of the upward historical narrative to highlight the crucial argument behind the narrative—the continuous reproduction of contradiction in each fragment of history as a product of mismatched political and urban planning systems.

The third and concluding section speculates on an alternative urban planning system, based on the empirical learnings from the community projects for urban transformations of the neglected neighborhood in Belgrade that I initiated in 2010. Theoretical frameworks for these projects are the studies of commons and methodologies of social action research and user-centered analysis.

Despite standard historical and empirical methodologies applied, more than presenting a new insight into the history of the urban development of the central area of New Belgrade, this study uses it as a prime case to disclose the unsustainability of the urban planning system that has not recognized emergency of political, social, economic, and cultural agencies in the process of urban development. Alternative open-ended urban planning systems that could embrace the challenges of the continuous reproduction of contradiction should affirm an institutionalized network of platforms for collaboration among these agencies.

2. Casting Post-Socialist Urbanity

Socialism in former Yugoslavia lasted on a belief that the centralized political organization could overcome private interests in the pursuit of universal humanist ideals (equality, unity, and liberty). The breakdown of former Yugoslavia and the proceeding regression toward capitalism brutally shortened the illusion of everlasting prosperity. During the post-socialist transition, political authorities stripped down the concept of collective well-being and left citizens alone to find ways to survive the collapse of the institutional system, the commodification of public services, privatizations of the industries, deregulation of the market competition, and imposed globalization that glorified individual wealth and luxury.

The application of the neoliberal urban development policy within the context of the post-socialist transition has brought about significant economic transformations. This policy prioritizes privatization, market competition, and the commodification of urban spaces. Consequently, post-socialist urban development has become closely associated with economic growth driven by private investments that rely on profit made by sustained consumer demand. Following the post-socialist transition, socialist urbanity underwent a paradigmatic reversal “from an urban space shaped by the public institutions with a focus on public interest to an urban space shaped by unleashed private economic interests” (Topalovic, 2012, p. 170).

The stimulation of consumption necessitates strategic marketing maneuvers, linking basic needs to the belief that an influx of new products in the market will lead to prosperity for all. This marketing approach, often devoid of ethical considerations, is bolstered by political propaganda. As a result, a new social environment emerges in the post-socialist landscape—one where the culture of consumption supersedes the previously celebrated collective well-being of socialist societies. Instead, individual success in market competition becomes the prevailing norm, accompanied by an imperative to assert narcissistic dominance over others.

Post-socialist urban development serves as the fertile ground for the materialization and profitability of this newly established culture of consumption. This phenomenon manifests in various ways, including privatizations of public resources, enclosures, and spatial segregation within urban areas. Additionally, the

commodification of urban land and real estate speculation further reinforces this trend. Consequently, existing urban resources are aggressively exploited, leading to disintegrated urban growth.

In the visual fabric of post-socialist cities, the culture of consumption materializes through a seemingly haphazard collection of glossy buildings strategically positioned in prime locations. These new buildings that appeared in the form of oversized shopping malls, designers' hotels, gated condominiums, expensive storages, and fancy office towers vie for dominance in the cityscape by projecting an alluring image to attract consumers. Consequently, urban spaces transform into illuminated spectacles, catering to the masses' desire for consumption. City centers metamorphose into sprawling shopping malls and historical theme parks, while new commercial zones emerge on the outskirts (Hirt, 2008).

Sandwiched between these vibrant poles lies a vast expanse—the largest urban space—often overlooked and left to languish in gradual decay. These neglected areas are the very neighborhoods where most citizens reside, their lives obscured behind crumbling facades. The predicament faced by these citizens is multifaceted. On one hand, they grapple with the relentless pace of aggressive urban development—in exchange for this rapid transformation that erodes the essence of their city, they are offered commercial spectacles—gleaming structures that vie for attention in the real estate market. On the other hand, institutional negligence compounds their plight, leaving them feeling powerless and marginalized.

In response, their frustration simmers into a form of collective rebellion. The destruction of urban spaces becomes their raw unfiltered expression—a visceral outcry against the forces that marginalized them. Walls are defaced, public spaces vandalized, and the very fabric of the city scarred. This brutal reaction is born out of desperation—a desperate attempt to reclaim agency in a city that is taken away. Yet, within this destructive energy lies a glimmer of possibility that can transform it into a constructive zeal—one that fuels an alternative development model that entails revitalizing neglected spaces, empowering communities, and reimagining urban spaces as shared commons.

The transformation of destructive energy into constructive zeal is not merely an academic exercise but an enduring pledge—one that holds the moral imperative of a more equitable, resilient, and vibrant urban future. Confrontation with post-socialist urban disintegration must start by understanding it as the result of the corrupted urban development practice in which real-estate business companies use public institutions to support their private profit-making agendas. The hierarchy in the process “begins with the developer and moves down to the authorities, and then to the urban planners just for the sake of administering a planning amendment” (Topalovic, 2011, p. 204). Political authorities are always keen on meeting developers' demands and tend to adjust urban regulations to follow their profit expectations. Moreover, they celebrate private investments in urban development as their own success in generating a country's wealth and national progress.

Besides political benefits, these investments created a financial mechanism for converting the public budget into private companies, usually controlled by the leading party members or donors. Political authorities involved in such trading set up the construction tenders in advance for developers who agree to allocate provisions into their personal funds. In this way, the post-socialist political elite establishes its original public-private partnership. The features of this corrupted system are, on one side, the use of authoritarian power mechanisms, such as top-down communication, and, on the other side, the abuse of governing

functions in public companies with accompanying “money laundry procedures” (Vujovic & Petrovic, 2007, p. 366).

Although outside of business partnerships between urban developers and political authorities, the urban planning system became corrupted through the processes of indiscriminate commodification and commercialization of planning procedures. During socialism, urban planning was a professional practice with rigid protocols set up to conduct public interests. In practice, it usually happened that political authorities denied the coherency of urban plans by introducing unplanned changes (D. Manojlovic, interview, April 2010). From the planning perspective, these political interventions were always arbitrary, but urban planners were aware that they could not do anything without political support.

The post-socialist transition radicalized inherited contradictions of the socialist urban development practice. The urban planning system has contributed to its lagging behind the rapid transformation of the post-socialist political system by keeping the socialist model of rigid apparatus, self-impressed with its own visions and order. This has directly contributed to its inability to adapt to the contingencies of the post-socialist urban development that transformed the urban planning public role into an administrative service for private urban development companies. Unscrupulous political authorities together with the managerial system that ran the construction industry downgraded it to a procedure for verifying financial speculations on the deregulated real estate market. Urban planners’ efforts to keep the status of the professional elite while detached from public interest has resulted in their “loss of control on urban development as the constitutive subject and the purpose of their profession” (Topalovic, 2011, p. 204).

The citizens’ capacity to influence urban development was also contradictory in socialism: on one side, the socialist ideology that claimed social equality oppressed the potential diversity of citizens’ interests, but on the other side, it highlighted “citizens’ rights” as their fundamental agency in the “self-management” decision-making protocols. In the socialist urban planning system, these rights take the form of “public hearings” at the end of the planning process. In practice, chances to change urban plans during these public hearings were minimal—urban planners would always provide general bureaucratic responses to citizens’ amendments (Krstic, 2018). Detached from the decision-making and demotivated to participate in further public hearings, citizens’ interests were increasingly moving to the private sphere where they started to invest in their personal prosperity. A market-orientated socialist economy that contributed to the growing standards offered them enough consuming goods and soft loans to meet their dreams of a better life. At the same time, socialist political authorities started to threaten citizens’ engagement to protect their privileges and wealth. Consequently, citizens found peace inside their own homes and left the decision-making protocols to political authorities.

Citizens who were not interested in participating in decision-making processes showed early signs of a lost belief in the proclaimed socialist values. This way, societal integrity was winding down much before the collapse of socialism (Szelenyi, 1996). When authorities finally dismantled the founding socialist dream, citizens became an easy prey for the post-socialist business predators, whose tempting calls to consume more than they need with never enough resources to pay the costs trapped them in the world of neverending desire for the new products on the market. Loans offered as a speed lane to instant satisfaction turned out to be an instrument of post-socialist slavery. Political authorities contributed to enslavement by using strategies to confuse citizens so that they stop believing in anything but politicians who pretend to

know it all. By doing this, political authorities managed to disable citizens' capacity to interpret, think, and make decisions about their future.

Post-socialist urban development is, in fact, a massive urban transformation that is not happening for the sake of the citizens' well-being, but under the pressure of a free-market competition to attract more consumers. A radical reversal of post-socialist urban development signifies an important shift in the history of urbanity—the disappearance of citizenship that has been determining the development of human settlements since ancient times.

3. Backcasting Unforeseen Changes

Urban development of the central area of New Belgrade serves as an ideal case study for understanding post-socialist and socialist contradictions in urban development practice. The central area of New Belgrade represents the heart of the modernist city built from scratch after WWII, on the uninhabited territory spreading over a marchland between the rivers Sava and Danube, across the old city center of Belgrade. The location for the development of the new city had to imply a radical break with the past, a political and spatial “tabula rasa” (Blagojevic, 2007). During the long-term and still incomplete construction works, its urban plan underwent continuous revisions. Unforeseen changes that were reshaping the central area of New Belgrade produced an unplanned heterogeneity made of interrupted attempts to create comprehensive urbanity.

The lasting efforts to reshape the central area of New Belgrade belong to the period of post-socialist transition after political changes in the 2000s. The Master Urban Plan for Belgrade 2021 designated a top priority to the transformation of the central area of New Belgrade into a commercial hub—the idea was that its quality infrastructure and large residential community would easily attract private developers (M. Ferencak, interview, April 2010). The main developers involved were business clusters formed during the 1990s—most of them were direct successors of the socialist managerial elites that got wealthy during the uncontrolled privatization while the state was collapsing. Being unscrupulous, they showed no sense of commitment to New Belgrade's socialist premises. Their urban development agenda relied on “maximum public facilitation—public land, public funding, procedural shortcuts, combined with minimum public control over the development—programming, site design, site development” (Topalovic, 2011, p. 204). Contradictory, the precondition for the success of such a development system is the socialist's technical infrastructure upon which the new buildings were parasitizing.

This post-socialist version of the parasitizing “plug-in city” appeared firstly in the form of a massive small-scale informal urban intervention following the rise of the grey economy that exchanged the collapsing state economy during the war in Yugoslavia and UN sanctions in the 1990s. Unregulated individual building interventions produced innovation in every urban domain—from housing production to commerce. The series of informal attachments that complemented missing amenities appeared as building fragments plugged into the existing urban structure and buildings. In the central area of New Belgrade line of shops sprung up on the empty ground floors of the modernist residential buildings, new apartments appeared on their flat rooftops using them as convenient plots, and a cluster of kiosks occupied the empty green spaces among buildings and along the wide boulevards (Prokopijevic, 2014).

The informal building flood owed its potency to the powerless institutional urban planning system that had been marginalized at the beginning of the 1980s by the political decision to stop its institutional financing. Following Yugoslavian constitutional changes and the proceeding business legislation from the mid-1970s, urban planning jobs were delegated to professional market-orientated companies. Supported by the new investment banks, powerful socialist construction companies started to establish their urban planning departments to place urban development under their control (D. Manojlovic, interview, April 2010). They divided the central area of New Belgrade and started to develop it in parts, according to their financial interests.

Even the untouchable unity of the unbuilt axis of the central area was broken after that. Its gradual colonization began with the development of the downscaled residential block near the New Belgrade railway station and proceeded toward the Palace of Federation at the head of the axis. In the next move, city authorities suddenly decided to build a huge sports arena in the central block of the axis, to host proceedings and later postpone the World Basketball Championship 1994. This massive sarcophagus, whose finishing had been delayed for 20 years due to the wars in the 1990s, buried the ambitions to make a city center open to public activities and instead offered a public spectacle. It was not the first act, but it was a massive declaration of the end of the socialist era and the beginning of post-socialism.

Such urban interventions that did not show any respect to the modernist heritage were based on the professional argument of the ambitious study for the reconstruction of the central area of New Belgrade, that was proposed by the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade, financed by the City Government, and supported by the intellectual authority of the Serbian Academy of Science and Art (Perovic, 1985). Starting with the widely established post-modernist critique, which among other things attacks the inflexibility of New Belgrade's block concept, the lack of articulation of large green spaces, the uniformity of urban fabric, and the social and economic problems caused by the divisions of urban functions, the study argued that the monumental buildings and open spaces of the central area of New Belgrade are leading to the loss of the human scale and an urbanity without vitality. The study identified a framework for a different process of urban development in the return to historical urban forms (Topalovic, 2011). What followed was in stark contrast to the initial romantic vision. Urban planners merely juxtaposed the fragments of a quasi-historical city with the fragments of the modernist city wherever there was space left, no matter if it was an unfinished block or an unused space between the roads and the buildings.

These large-scale interventions were possible because most of the central area of New Belgrade was unbuilt due to the delays in infrastructure development due to insufficient public financing. The major shift in infrastructure development that was made only in three years, at the end of the 1960s, was possible due to the manipulations of the public budget aside from regular procedures (D. Manojlovic, interview, April 2010). During this short period, the Belgrade Airport, which was situated next to the central area of New Belgrade, was moved further away from the city; the railway tracks, that were diagonally cutting the central area, were shifted to the direction defined by the urban plan 15 years before; and the Third Boulevard of the central area together with the new bridge over Sava River was transformed into a transcontinental highway (Glavicki, 1983). Peaceful residential neighborhoods of the central area of New Belgrade that were suddenly cut by the heavy traffic reflected the newest unplanned contradiction between New Belgrade's local and global status.

Two years after being finished, these large infrastructural works were confirmed by the Master Urban Plan for Belgrade 2000. The sad destiny of that plan was that only a few years after its inauguration, most of its developing goals were compromised due to the Yugoslavian constitutional changes. Its major revision had to be done already at the beginning of the 1980s to register unplanned urban interventions (D. Manojlovic, interview, April 2010). The breakdown of the Master Urban Plan for Belgrade 2000 shows that political authorities in socialism never fully comprehended urban plans as ultimate resolutions but rather as a list of opportunities.

The most significant outcome of the emergent urban development practice of the socialist political authorities was the Congress Center Sava which was erected in only one year under the highest patronage of the Yugoslav State. It is not only that it was made aside from any urban plan, but it also ignored all the plans previously done. Moreover, the Sava Center with its additions (the largest Concert Hall in Belgrade and the Hotel Intercontinental) could attract thousands visitors, becoming a new business landmark for the socialist managerial elite, who started to build their companies' headquarters in the neighborhood. In a short period, the wasteland next to the central area of New Belgrade was occupied with luxurious office buildings and hotels. A program that was originally planned to be developed along the main axis of the central area of New Belgrade shifted aside a few hundred meters away while the main axis stayed undeveloped.

The rigid urban planning system that could not adapt to the pace of political emergencies was the reason for the continuous changes in the urban plans for New Belgrade during its construction. The 1940s General Urban Plan for Belgrade interpreted New Belgrade's functionalist zoning division of housing, work, leisure, and traffic that were subordinated to the central axis with trading, cultural, and governmental facilities focused on the Palace of Federation set up on the head of the axis (Stojanovic, 1975). This way, the contradiction between the modernist open-plan and socialist eclectic formalism was laid in its founding scheme. By that time, the high priority to provide residential facilities had overcome ideological demand, which led to the situation where the development of the main axis and attaching boulevards were extensively delayed and indefinitely postponed (B. Jovin, interview, April 2010).

The first delay in planning New Belgrade happened only a year after the General Urban Plan for Belgrade was adopted due to the political split with the Soviet Union. The split reflected not only an economic crisis that caused major delays in a country's post-war development but also a political emergency to formulate a new ideological paradigm that was later named Yugoslav "self-management socialism." Discussions about a new cultural model that had to reflect an ideological shift culminated in the mid-1950s when leading intellectuals and artists, members of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, declared a local version of international modernism as the most appropriate representational form for Yugoslav society. A new model began to emerge, mixing elements from the West and the East into a particularly Yugoslav form of what was named "socialist modernism" (Kulic, 2014).

Following the change of cultural model, competition for the urban plan for the central area of New Belgrade was issued in 1959 (Stojanovic, 1975). The Detailed Urban Plan for the Central Area of New Belgrade that was developed according to the winning proposal was finally set up at the beginning of the 1960s, while the constructions were already ongoing and one of the blocks was finished and inhabited according to the loose regulations from the General Urban Plan for Belgrade.

The Detailed Urban Plan for the Central Area of New Belgrade followed the traffic scheme made of four longitudinal boulevards and four transversals that were determined in the General Urban Plan for Belgrade. This traffic scheme formed nine blocks of the central area—three central blocks, 400m × 400m each, with central functions that were spanned along the axis connecting the future New Belgrade Railway Station and the, already completed, Palace of Federation, and other six residential blocks organized around both side of the axis, 400m × 600m each, that were planned for 5,000 residents each. Since the central area of New Belgrade was imagined to represent the power of the new socialist state, residential zones had to uphold the monumentality of a capital city. Groups of residential towers, 20 stores high, were set up at the corners; 250 meters long and 10 stores high residential slabs were set up along the four boulevards; while the middle parts of the blocks were reserved for lower and more discrete four stores of housing clusters (Petricic, 1975).

The size of the blocks in the central area of Belgrade was linked to the size of the local community, as defined in the socialist self-management territorial organization. There had been further articulated careful design of public amenities inside the blocks, including kindergartens, primary schools, playgrounds, parks, medical facilities, supermarkets, stores, craftsmen's shops, and so forth. They were connected by a variety of pedestrian promenades surrounded by artificial topography, landscaping, and public art. Spaces for cultural, social, and political gatherings in each block were assembled in a special complex—the local community center, a new building typology within the housing production (Topalovic, 2011).

Building standards for various indoor and outdoor spaces were regulated by quantitative norms, presented in the form of an analog parametric system that was always the constitutive chapter of each urban plan. Although restrictive, these norms served as a keeper of social justice and collective well-being in the newly built residential neighborhoods. Following the overall growth of the social standards, the building standards were gradually upgraded (Krstic, 2018). The improvement of the building standards, innovations in the organization of the apartments, changes in architectural styles, and advancement in construction technology, together with long delays in the development, reflected in the diversities among the blocks, which had not been foreseen by the original drawings of the Detailed Urban Plan for the central area of New Belgrade.

For ideological purposes, socialist political authorities insisted that the development of New Belgrade started after WWII, while the fact is that the first urban plan for the urban development across the Sava River had been presented much before the war, by the end of the 1920s. The only significant constructions from that time were the “chain bridge” over the Sava River, which was destroyed during WWII and then rebuilt as the “beam bridge” leaned on the preserved supporting pillars of the old bridge, and the “Belgrade Fairground” opened in 1937. for Belgrade's First International Technical Exposition. In a contradictory turn, shortly after the start of WWII this complex that was celebrating technical progress was turned into a Gestapo extermination camp, that was hardly demolished by Alliance forces in their bombardment campaigns during the war and never fully rebuilt after the war due to more urgent constructions in the neighborhood. However, one of the preserved fairground's pavilions was reused by the Directory for the Planning and the Developing of New Belgrade for its operative headquarters.

Even the major buildings of the political institution of socialist Yugoslavia in New Belgrade that were built with the ambition to last forever could not avoid emergent changes. The construction of the main one among these buildings—the Palace of Federation, located at the head of the axis of the central area of New Belgrade, started in 1947 before the central area was planned in detail (Kulić, 2014). Its construction was

then prolonged until the end of the 1950s due to the split with the Soviet Union. Following up on it, the monumental original “Stalinist” facade of the Palace of Federation needed to be modernized while its voluminous body that had been already built could not be changed. A practical and elegant solution for the modernist “face-lifting” replaced the originally designed facade. Since that time, the largest Yugoslavian state building in Belgrade, currently named the Palace of Serbia, has become too large for the downsized Serbian political structure. It is semi-used as an office building for the anonymous departments of various state ministries and as a vintage background for the rear international political ceremonies.

A few years after the interventions in the Palace of Federation, on the sandy field between the Palace of Federation and the rebuilt bridge that was connecting the central area of New Belgrade with the old city center, the Headquarters of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was raised. Confirming the latest political and cultural tendencies of socialist modernism, the main building of the leading ideological force took the image of the most updated Western office building (Kulić, 2014)—a monolith tower wrapped in a curtain glass facade with an aluminum frame. Standing alone in the wasteland next to the future central area of New Belgrade this building instantly became a new urban landmark. Many years after, during the collapse of Yugoslavia it was damaged by the NATO missiles and then sold as a ruin to the private developer who reconstructed it. The building was shortened by three floors, fixed with the newest reflecting glass curtain facade, and converted into a rental office space. Instead of an oval assembly hall in front of it, that was originally designed but never built, a large shopping mall and the twin office tower were added to it as if they wanted to stamp its corporate origin.

In the 1960s, between the Palace of Federation and the Headquarters of the Communist Party, construction of an avant-garde project for the building of the Museum of the History of Socialist Revolution in Yugoslavia started. It was imagined as an institution for keeping “the true story about us” for the upcoming generations. The construction of the Museum was stopped soon after and never continued beyond the huge concrete basement and the platform above it. The abandoned construction site today is telling a different story than expected—its dark and humid underground space has become an informal shelter for homeless citizens, losers of the post-socialist transition. This unfinished building symbolizes the interrupted dreams of the socialist society and the emergent nightmares of the post-socialist society, that demands daily confrontation with these emergencies.

4. Instead of a Conclusion: Forecasting an Alternative Future

Although failed as the original planning vision, the central area of New Belgrade is highly respected by its citizens (Petrovic, 2008). Incompleteness and heterogeneity of its urban space are not an important issue for them since their spatial experience is fragmented and identified with the block where they live. It is connected to the fact that the central area was slowly built, block by block, in front of their eyes. Since they have grown up together in the city and socialized with those who share the same living experiences, they have become the most persistent deniers of the critics of socialist and post-socialist urbanity. Socialist urbanity was the one that made their living environment comfortable—flexible apartments, diversified residential buildings surrounded by aged greenery, efficient traffic system, social equilibrium, and riverbanks accessible to all (Dragutinovic & Pottgiesser, 2021). Post-socialism complemented them with business developments, shopping malls, and a multiplicity of missing services. Changes in urban development policy did not bother them since their influence on these changes had been successfully suspended from the beginning.

In addition, citizens of the central area of New Belgrade profited financially from the post-socialist transition. During socialism, their apartments were owned by the companies who were investing in the construction using the special company fund for housing their employees who then got the status of permanent tenants. The crisis in the 1990s allowed them to privatize these apartments from their bankrupting companies for a privileged sum. The planned transformation of the central area from a residential settlement into a commercial hub after the 2000s immensely increased the property value of these apartments.

What citizens of the central area of New Belgrade perceive as a problem is the marginalization of public institutions that reflects in a slow but continual decay of public spaces (Dragutinovic & Nikezic, 2020). These spaces were made during socialism, following the norms of collective well-being, and they are too large today to be maintained by the weak post-socialist communal institutions. The great commercial potential of these spaces, on the other side, is used by the political authorities to attract private developers who tend to appropriate and exploit them. Recent conflicts caused by the reckless appropriation of the public space in New Belgrade show that the only line of defense left is self-organized citizens' resistance. The resistance gets citizens together and by getting together it gives impetus to the regeneration of the lost communal values—such as solidarity, empathy, and collaboration (Bobic, 2014). Defense of the public space thus becomes an opportunity for reclaiming a lost sense of community.

Against such opportunity, political authorities apply a spectrum of threats for controlling social behavior developed by the state security and proven in the marketing industry, such as seducing, discrediting, faking, confusing, distracting, escalating, polarizing, bullying, and oppressing. In the best scenario, such long-term treatments can develop immunity of self-organized citizens who will then upscale local defense of the public space into a long-lasting fight for the “right to the city” (Harvey, 2007).

The “right to the city” in post-socialism is a utopian discourse that starts with the use of defended public spaces as places for boosting community exchange. When working persistently, these places stimulate citizens to get together and propose alternatives for the maintenance and development of their neighborhoods (Stavrides, 2016). By this time, self-organized groups of citizens can become so powerful that they can change the dominating urban development practice by demanding collaboration among citizens, urban planners, authorities, and developers. Unimaginable collaboration among confronted actors offers a chance for everyone to thrive—citizens to participate in the protocols that address the urban future, urban planners to mediate collaborative processes, authorities to manage public interest, and developers to practice human-centered development. They can all work together for the good of all.

Initial capital for the collaboration among citizens, urban planners, authorities, and developers lies in the self-organized citizens' groups that are ready to evolve into the development of the “platform for collaboration.” “Platforms for collaboration” are urban agencies that encourage confronted actors to join and contribute their skills as equal participants in the societal field. Building by building, street by street, block by block, a series of proposals for urban interventions that are coordinated by the local “platforms for collaboration” can unfold an ongoing urban development process in which bottom-up initiatives meet top-down frameworks. It is an uneasy confrontation of contradictory interests, competencies, and responsibilities, who struggle to get along and eventually manage to find ways to agree about viable proposals.

An updated urban planning system will no longer aim for success in any vision of a new urban order but for the institutionalization of the “platforms for collaboration.” Its systematic support can help local “platforms for collaboration” to further evolve into the institutional network of places distributed within each neighborhood for citizens, urban planners, authorities, and developers to meet, talk, plan, and negotiate on how to make the city together. Besides practical outcomes in the form of common proposals for urban development, an institutional network of “platforms for collaboration” can gradually revitalize mutual trust and contribute to the reintegration of the community at large (Levitas, 2013).

Built upon the institutionalized network of “platforms of collaboration,” the alternative future of the central area of New Belgrade is imagined as an ongoing series of step-by-step urban transformations. In the best scenario, authorities will play the role of the catalyst in promoting collaboration that will be coordinated by urban planners, whereby citizens will commit based on self-organized groups that are supported by developers who will find their interest in the incremental constructions. Their collaboration will produce a variety of proposals that correspond to the citizens’ needs, demands, and resources. Together these proposals will trace the urban development that recognizes the continuous reproduction of contradictions as an opportunity for overlapping and merging confronted interests. The emergent urban structure will become the present form of expression for all future potentials.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks the academic editors and the reviewers for their comments on this article.

Funding

The author acknowledges support from the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft DFG)—project number 491460386—and the Open Access Publishing Fund of Anhalt University of Applied Sciences.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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