

(Re)Symbolizing the Modern Heritage: A New Identity for a Prosperous Future?

Introduction

Built on the deserted marshlands between the historical cores of Belgrade and Zemun, New Belgrade was transmitting a strong political message of the new post-war Yugoslav society. Therefore, it accepted a ritual pattern well known for centuries and played an important role in a symbolical initiation of the newly established communist system.

As the offspring of the Athens Charter and the huge political aspirations of President Tito, New Belgrade was established upon the principles of the Radian City project and Brasilia, although with its own uniqueness. Besides its competitive advantages over other parts of Belgrade metropolitan area, it was, from the beginning of its construction, the pivotal point of regime propaganda, accepted with great enthusiasm by the masses. Consequently, some of the first proposals for its development and the concept of the final project, clearly underline the importance of this urban entity in the modern life of the State and the Community. At the same time, a number of architectural sketches, models and photographs, used to document the impressive planning and building process, offer an interesting multi-layered story which expresses the ideals, values and imperatives of the state and its leader.

However, after decades of more or less successful existence, this Modern (anti)utopia became a scene for a new 21st century experiment - the (re)symbolization of the modernist vocabulary, this time caused by the strong global forces. The political changes and openness to the new trends in economy caused an interesting process which implanted new activities and users into the modernist grid. Administrative, financial, commercial and housing activities remained but, due to the excellent accessibility, connectivity, good infrastructure and available sites for large development projects, New Belgrade has become a very attractive area for both local and foreign investors. Furthermore, the application of new 'global rules' has instigated numerous changes which turned New Belgrade into a node of connection and regional integration, leaving behind some unsolved problems of spatial, social and economical segregation.

Materializing a dream

The river Sava and the area between Belgrade and Zemun represented for centuries unique natural borders between the West and the East, between the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman Empire. However, after the First World War, this 'vacuum' between two already formed historical entities, became a challenge for the architects and urban planners. Consequently, the Master Plan from 1923 emphasized the importance of its transformation and further development. Unfortunately, except the first Airport and the new complex of Expo pavilions, this area remained an empty field of the Belgrade's matrix, postponing the activation until the end of the Second World War.



Figure 1. The position of New Belgrade - before the construction
(Direction pour la construction de Novi Beograd, ed. (1961) *Novi Beograd - 1961*, Belgrade:
Beogradski graficki zavod)

Finally, in 1948, when the land was almost totally drained out and raised above the level of underground streams and floods, started the construction of the Federal Executive Council building, a new hotel and the residential quarter “Tosin Bunar”. After 1950 and the Master plan of New Belgrade, a new ‘town’ was officially conceived and determined, representing the latest spatial accent and a prominent token of the state ideology. Following a vision about the prosperous socialist future, this unusual building site gathered over one hundred thousand people - workers, villagers, students and engineers, who were working day and night, without necessary technological support but with a great vigor. Therefore, New Belgrade became a reflection and a contribution of one epoch, symbolically announcing the future identity and ambitions of the new society.



Figure 2. New Belgrade - working brigades on their mission
(Direction pour la construction de Novi Beograd, ed. (1961) *Novi Beograd - 1961*, Belgrade:
Beogradski graficki zavod)

The new Master plan also gave the special attention to the central zone which was aimed to be the third center of the Belgrade metropolitan region. It was planned to consist of nine macro blocks and a monumental axis from the Federal Executive Council to the future railway station, suggesting a strict segregation of urban functions. This approach was completely in accordance with the guidelines of functionalism and the Athens Charter – the town center activities were concentrated in the three blocks along the axis, while the rest of space composition (six blocks) was intended to be residential.



Figure 3. Discussing the proposal of the central zone of New Belgrade - President Tito with his associates
(Direction pour la construction de Novi Beograd, ed. (1961) *Novi Beograd - 1961*, Belgrade: Beogradski graficki zavod)

The main idea of this concept was to respond to the practical, cultural and commercial needs of the future citizens, simultaneously creating an expression of power visible in the architectural language and scale. Therefore, the main axis also offered three large squares – the ceremonial square in front of the Federal Executive Council, the central town square and the station square – setting up the nodes of the preferred public life and coloring its layers by ideology, everyday activities and technological progress. However, the central zone was not completely realized (especially its axis), but it remained the focus of the further urban development which continued.

During the next four decades, New Belgrade evolved into an urban area with over 54.000 apartments and a communal infrastructure over some 4000 hectares of land. It was also improved by concentrated service activities and new recreational green areas situated along the riverbanks of Sava and Danube. Simultaneously, numerous residential blocks were filling the monumental urban pattern aligned with the Highway and wide boulevards, creating a huge ‘dormitory’ for the raising working (middle) class, as well as for the employees of the federal army and police. Additionally, the special attention was focused on the student population - New Belgrade also became a site for the new “Student City” complex, able to host a large number of students from all over the country and abroad (especially from the non-aligned countries), promoting the values of mutual respect, multicultural surrounding and integration.

(Re)questioning the idea

The new Master plan from 1972 provided the further elaboration of this exceptional urban experiment, but while the leading urban planners persisted in their efforts to apply the spirit of the Athens Charter, New Belgrade continued spreading out its neatly designed Modernist patchwork, with huge building structures, monotonous appearance and extensive open spaces without the human scale. At the same time, its comparative advantages over other parts of Belgrade stayed unused and its low density influenced unsatisfactory economic parameters. As a result, the citizens considered this part of Belgrade urban tissue as a transit zone, a place without attraction and an interregnum between the old historical cores. Finally, this triumph of Modernism and the endeavors of the post-war society became the total opposite of its original idea – it was no longer the place of connection and progress, but rather the environment of urban ‘hibernation’ and a zone of ‘disconnection’.

However, in spite of its obvious shortcomings, New Belgrade has also introduced some outstanding urban landmarks such as the building of the Federal Executive Council, building of the Central Committee, the Museum of the Contemporary art, the Sava Center, the twin tower "Belgrade gate" and hotels Jugoslavija, Intercontinental and Hyatt Regency. Unfortunately, during 1990s, the economical and political crises of Serbian society influenced a significant stagnation of this area, simultaneously magnifying contradictions, spatial and functional problems, and diminishing its potentials. Apart from the couple of luxurious apartment buildings for nouveau riches, the new gas station "Dayton" (called after the famous peace agreement from 1995) and the unfinished sports hall "Limes" (Belgrade Arena), there was no large-scale construction works. At the same time, New Belgrade, with its so-called "Open market" and "Chinese market", has started to be a shopping 'hot-spot' for the impoverished middle class citizens, enabling them to purchase cheaper goods.

In 1999, NATO bombing brought a further decay leaving behind several damaged buildings (hotel Jugoslavija, main heating station, building of the Central Committee) and the completely destroyed building of the Chinese embassy.

Finally, once a symbol of the state progress, New Belgrade became a grim reflection of the inevitable fall which seemed to be unstoppable. Obviously, this time the state rhetoric was not sufficient to break the vicious circle of degradation.

The step forward

However, since 2001, the situation has started to change and macro blocks of New Belgrade have suddenly become a place of accelerating economic bloom. Stimulated by the flows of globalization, this area has commenced its new building cycle and most of its major disadvantages suddenly turned out to be its new competitive advantages. Consequently, the low index of the built up areas has been recognized as a possibility for the future large development projects, while the good traffic connections, accessibility and infrastructure have become a necessary backup for the new activities.

Following the importance of regional recognition, competition and urban needs of the contemporary users, the new Master plan of Belgrade (2003) also defined a more attractive role for New Belgrade, emphasizing its regional potential for the business activities and launching this area as a new hub, able to respond to the numerous requirements imposed by the process of global integration.

According to the plan, the central zone of New Belgrade should be considered as an area with the highest potential for commercial activities, steadily evolving into the strong business, administrative and cultural regional center. Apart from the main landmarks - the building of the former Federal Executive Council (with around 75.000 square meters of usable space), the new Belgrade Arena (hall "Limes") and the future railway station, this urban segment should incorporate new hotels, business apartments, commercial and office buildings, as well as leisure activities. The Modern architecture of the nine central blocks should be protected, but it is suggested that a new identity for this area should be created and a further construction should be stimulated.

The blocks around the future railway station and the Belgrade Arena are planned to be exclusively commercial, without housing, which is the result of their attractive location. However, the area of the old Expo pavilions, although in close proximity to the central zone and river, has to be transformed in accordance with its historical importance (it was used as a Nazi concentration camp during the Second World War) and therefore it is protected as a cultural heritage, with appropriate cultural, commercial and public spaces.

The zone between the river Sava, the railway and the natural plateau of Bezanija, as an independent urban segment of New Belgrade, should also redefine its identity. This area is very well connected with the central zone and it has a great potential for the further development. Therefore, the main idea of the plan is to create a linear center along one of the main boulevards, which would stimulate a further development of this mainly residential area. At the same time, it is necessary to activate a number of micro-centers along the river

Sava, remove the existing industrial complex and replace the old shipyard with more attractive central activities - adjusted to the needs of future users and suitable for the preferred 'global image' of New Belgrade.

Following the new vision of the urban development, this part of Belgrade is accepting new rules imposed by the globalization logic, modifying its inherited Modernist appearance and intensifying its integration into the regional networks.

The reality of capitalism

Today, New Belgrade is again a huge building site which attracts investors from all over the world. Since 2001, companies from England, France, Austria, the Netherlands, Israel, Greece and Slovenia have been investing hundreds of millions of euros, implementing the ideas of the Master plan which should bring more than a million square meters of new office space. Furthermore, New Belgrade, with more than 230.000 inhabitants, represents one of the most developed municipalities in Belgrade. The number of employed people has grown from 53.000 to 63.000, while the average salary is the highest in Belgrade and the second highest in Serbia.

The area around the Belgrade Arena gradually becomes the Serbian replica of the Wall Street, concentrating the famous European banks such as Raiffeisen, Societe Generale, Zepster, Intesa, Eurobank, Volksbank and HVB. At the same time, the monumental offices of Mercedes, Volkswagen, Peugeot, Fiat, Skoda, DHL, Siemens and Lukoil, together with the local companies, such as Telekom, Genex, Delta, Energoprojekt, Napred, Jat and Energogas, have been shaping new urban scenery, which is no longer an allegeable metaphor of socialism but an evolving picture of capitalism.

Recognized as the future business center of the South-eastern Europe, New Belgrade has been orientating itself towards new clientele, adjusting its 'urban menu' to the needs of the global techno-business elite. Besides the construction of luxurious hotels near the hotel Hyatt and the Belgrade Arena, this part of Belgrade includes several huge shopping malls (Mercator, Super Vero, Merkur, Delta), as well as an increasing number of office buildings, business parks and residential-office complexes. Therefore, one square meter of office space has already reached the price of 2000 euros. However, the construction works continue - filling the voids in the urban tissue and creating the new landmarks for the 21st century. Consequently, one of the most attractive sites - the land between the building of the former Federal Executive Council and the Belgrade Arena - should be the place where the highest building in the East Europe will be erected. The Besix company, which intends to build a 333-meter high skyscraper, gave this offer and it is willing to invest around 250 million euros. At the same time, one of the ex-communist symbols - the tall building of the former Central Committee, was reconstructed and inaugurated in 2005 as a business center which should be accompanied by the "Usce Tower" - a new 130-meter high building, and a mega market.

Currently, there are several sites under construction and their future purpose and shape reveal the logic, aesthetic and concept already applied in numerous cities which were preparing themselves for the global initiation and recognition. Therefore, Belgrade, as one of the announced European 'capitals of the future', is using all the benefits of New Belgrade area, preparing the fertile ground for its further expansion. This time the ideological background is completely different, but the aims are quite the same:

- promotion of the new society - open, democratic, cosmopolitan;
- integration with the global community;
- international recognition;
- acceleration of the progress - economic, technological and cultural.

Consequently, each of these projects highlights at least one of the key words imposed by the globalized society, providing, at the same time, the appropriate architectural landscape.

Connection - “Airport City Belgrade” (ACB)

This complex, developed by Africa Israel Investments Ltd. in cooperation with Tidhar Group Ltd, is situated less than 900 meters away from the fastest route to the rest of Europe. After completion, it should be the first multi-use commercial facility in Serbia that represents a symbiosis of the latest building technologies and modern needs of the future users. With a direct and easy access from the Euro-Motorway E-75, several lines of the public transportation and a 10-minute drive to/from the Belgrade International Airport, this business park will offer around 126.000 square meters of office and tenant-friendly retail space. Due to its numerous competitive advantages and the close proximity of the emerging Central Business District of New Belgrade, this area should become one of the Belgrade’s attractions, shaped as a city within the city. Consequently, it will be adjusted to the human scale, contemporary way of life, high level of services, business, leisure and entertainment activities, as well as to the required standards of safety.

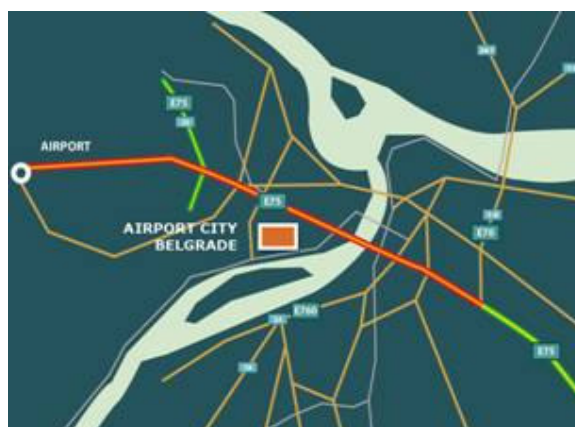


Figure 4. The position of the Airport City Belgrade
(<http://www.airportcitybelgrade.com/location.htm>)

Promotion - “University Village”

Located in block 67, a new “University Village” should be constructed until the University Games in 2009. This international event, used as a economic and media spin off, will certainly enhance the attractiveness of Belgrade and improve its image but it will also provide 2.100 new apartments (for 8.500 participants) and around 22.000 square meters of business space to be used during the event. According to the international standards related to this kind of events, the whole zone will be divided in three parts - residential and commercial area, as well as the area with public buildings. The estimated amount for the completion of this construction is around 200 million euros, and after the Games, these apartments will be offered on the real estate market.

Consumption - “Delta City 67”

Next to the previous complex and situated in the same block (67), this shopping mall - designed in the recognizable ‘globalized’ style - will be the first of its size in Serbia. It can serve 200.000 people within a ten-minute walk, and 600.000 people within a ten-minute drive. With the total floor area of 87.000 square meters, it will consist of three levels with a supermarket, numerous fashion stores, cafes, restaurants, playgrounds, bowling alley, Cineplex and entertainment complex, other retail units, a multilevel garage and a parking

space. It is important to notice that this mall will be just the first node in a future network of similar malls, financed by the local Delta corporation.



Figure 5. “University Village” and “Delta City 67” - block 67 as a new island of globalization in the vast space of New Belgrade
(<http://www.beoland.com/univerzijada/univerzijada.asp>)

Exclusion vs. Inclusion - “GTC Park Apartments”, “Avenue 19” and “GTC house”

The latest GTC mixed-use development, which should be finished during 2007, represents a residential complex and an office building placed in block 19 - in close proximity to international hotels, government and other commercial buildings, the main traffic arteries and sport halls. Composed of two ‘smart buildings’ linked by a pedestrian zone, this complex should fulfill the highest residential and office standards. Therefore, the “GTC Park Apartments” will offer a range of housing units (from studios to duplex condos and luxurious penthouse apartments), two-levels of underground parking, the central atrium with access only to tenants, 24-hour reception desk and security services, 24 hour maintenance and a video interphone. It will also include a variety of retail stores and a fitness centre, which, all together, will create a unique (but introverted) environment of 20.000 square meters. At the same time, the “Avenue 19” - the office building, will be equipped with the high technology telecommunication equipment for the business activities, but it will also contain a restaurant, bar, warehouse, garage and parking lot with 233 parking places.

The construction of this A-class building and the “Park Apartments” is financed by EBRD and Raiffeisen Zentral Bank, the investors who have already leased the office space in another GTC A-class office building - GTC House. This building, completed in 2005, has also attracted other international clientele (Nestle, Honeywell, Phillip Morris and L’Oreal) and the entire area of 13.500 square meters was leased shortly after its opening.



**Figure 6. Integration on the global level vs. disintegration on the local level:
“Avenue 19” and GTC Park Apartments**
(<http://www.gtc19avenue.com/meet19avenue.htm>)

Activation - “Sava City”

Designed as a business and residential complex in block 20, this architectural assembly will be situated on the banks of Sava and Danube. Activating the entire block and

raising its attractiveness and value, "Sava City" will also respond to the various needs of new tenants and provide a range of new open public spaces. The business segment will be designed as an inner diagonal, surrounded by two symmetrical objects, while the apartment section will be shaped as a separate building, with an additional tower. These buildings will be equipped with all modern systems that should facilitate their use, while their position should provide excellent connectivity and view.

Leisure - Aqua Park

The Modernist orthogonal framework of New Belgrade is getting one more piece of the transformed urban picture - a new Aqua Park, occupying four hectares of block 44. Placed next to the river Sava, it should be one of the largest parks in our region which will offer various attractions for all categories of users. At the same time, it will also represent one of the places of excellence which should launch New Belgrade as a new local and regional node.

In between - overture or epilogue?

All projects situated in the zone of New Belgrade are introducing new investments, promoting the growth and quality of the primary property market in Belgrade. At the same time, they are creating a new kind of space - from the western grade office buildings to the multipurpose leisure facilities, adjusted to local and international environmental, health and safety standards and requirements. Therefore, their presence is certainly raising the quality of life, offering various environmental opportunities and upgrading the micro and macro area. Simultaneously, the new activities are also playing a role of urban magnets, which should draw the elite consumers and create a fashionable image of this former socialist architectural monument. However, the numerous stimulations are still insufficient to transform the whole area - some parts of New Belgrade are still beyond the reach of globalization flows and they follow their own, almost suburban, rhythm.

Consequently, 'the emerging Central Business District' is nowadays a place full of contradictions, which coexist and overlap, creating a surreal environment. The luxurious hotels back to back with the illegal and unhygienic Roma settlement, expensive cars passing by the chaotic "Chinese market", yuppies mixing with refugees and newcomers from rural areas, stray dogs, poultry and someone's goats wandering across expensive but still inactive building land - these are also pictures of New Belgrade, a forward looking modern City, caught somewhere between its past and present.

Conclusion

Simultaneously decoding the symbolic vocabulary of the socialist plan and revealing the tokens embedded in the recently created global 'envelopes', this paper presents an (un)official story about New Belgrade, its transformations and mutations, uniqueness and clichés.

Announced as the Belgrade's future "City", this area has been rapidly changing its appearance, negating its former ideology and becoming a place of numerous paradoxes. However, under the veil of different values, styles and imperatives, the basic architectural concept remains the same - it is still the 'other' Belgrade, perceived as something artificial, distant and monumental, and that is the label which cannot be easily erased.

Although with increased concentration of buildings and activities, new 'class' of inhabitants and more alluring and stylish 'outlook', New Belgrade continues to be an experimental tissue where power can be tested and imposed without too many spatial and social obstacles. Therefore, it is questionable what could actually be changed - obviously, the new identity will be created under the aesthetic of globalization, again balancing between control and entertainment, openness and isolation, integration and disintegration.

Consequently, this picture of heterotopian urbanism (Foucault, 1984) will differ from the previous (socialist) utopia only in ideological clef.

The Modernist matrix of New Belgrade, with its inherited autocratic expression, definitely proves to be an exceptional framework for every futuristic vision - including the contemporary one. However, this time, the alienated urban blocks and architectural assemblies will not be the result of centralized and functionalist planning but, ironically, the imperative of global integration - based upon numerous nodes of consumption, business, introverted housing, amusement and traffic, floating in the 'space of flows' and connecting the world-wide networks.

New Belgrade, imagined as a triumph of workers' efforts, has (again) become a new stop on our way to the promising future - does the socialist dream continue?

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