

Timeless Modernity, Shifting Ideologies: a Vibrant Street in a Distorted Reality?

Mira Milakovic, Aleksandra Stupar

(Teach. Assistant Mira Milakovic, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Architecture, Blv. Kralja Aleksandra 73/II,
mira.milakovic@gmail.com)

(Associate Professor Dr Aleksandra Stupar, Faculty of Architecture University of Belgrade, Blv. Kralja Aleksandra 73/II,
stupar@afrodita.rcub.bg.ac.rs)

1 ABSTRACT¹

The focus of the paper is on the relation between a traditional and a modern concept of street design and regulation, which have been overlapping and upgrading/degrading for decades.

The case of the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina in New Belgrade will be used as an interesting example of a street constructed during the 1960s. The original modernist idea, reflecting the socio-economic background of the socialist epoch, is still recognizable in impressive prefabricated housing blocks, shaped according to the ideas of the Athens charter and the Modernist movement. The street, originally planned as an important transit artery with surrounding housing and green areas, started to transform its landscape during the period of transition (1990s). The position, available empty space and already provided infrastructure have directed a new tide of changes, attracting attention of city authorities, investors and entrepreneurs. The intensity of activities has increased, new office/commercial/housing units were constructed, but all these transformations have not been supported by the planning concepts which would improve the overall condition and quality of life in this area. Driven by the logic of economic efficiency and profit, the transformation of the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina has also tackled the sensitive issues of spatial organization, social cohesion, redefined urban needs and questionable sustainability.

Therefore, the paper will discuss recent changes and trends which opened some new questions of urban durability, modernity, efficiency and environmental awareness, simultaneously emphasizing a need for an integral approach, adjusted to a new dynamic and multiplying demands of/for the future.

2 INTRODUCTION

New Belgrade, a unique urban entity designed and developed in the ex-Yugoslav capital after the WWII, has been a focus of attention of numerous professionals and researchers since its construction (Backovic, 2009; Blagojevic, 2007; Eric, 2009; Milakovic, Vukmirovic, 2011; Perovic, 1985; Waley, 2011; etc). Built between two historical cores – Belgrade and Zemun, the area was not spontaneously developed as an extension of the urban fabric. Instead, it was supposed to be an example of a total design and a radically different approach which reflected the power of the state and its new ideology. Conceived as a symbol and a spatial manifestation of a young, progressive and multicultural society, New Belgrade occupied the left bank of the river Sava, enabling the expansion of Belgrade on an empty terrain which was not burdened by any mental or physical heritage. The principles of continuous development of the (traditional) city were substituted by the ideas of the Modern movement, but the development and transformations of its structure have been influenced by a complexity and specificity of the general social, political and economic background, confirming the ambivalent character of the Yugoslav society and responding to changes and challenges generated by transition and globalization.

The case of the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina represents a good example of shifts and turbulences on all levels of Yugoslav/Serbian society, a testimony of planning ideas, efforts and failures, but also an expression of urban vibrancy, dynamism and uncontrolled forces which could be identified in a contemporary city.

3 SHAPING A MODERN(IST) FRAMEWORK

Designed under the strong influence of CIAM and the Modern movement, the original streetscape of New Belgrade followed the principles of the Athens Charter. Consequently, the traditional development of street space was 'strictly prohibited', continuously built facades of street corridors were avoided, and open mega-

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blocks with free-standing structures and a lot of ‘sun, space and greenery’ were promoted. This approach changed the basic, traditional morphology and the size/scale of urban blocks and streets, focusing on car-oriented transport. Pedestrian spaces were situated inside blocks, as separated public zones, enabling free movement and recreation of inhabitants.

However, the change of ideological circumstances has influenced significant transformations of the urbanscape of New Belgrade, implanting additional features into purified modernist pattern. Nowadays, we can identify four street forms defined by the level of dependence/correlation between blocks (buildings) and street regulation – (1) building structures perpendicular to a street creating a rhythm with deep penetration of vistas in the block, (2) structures parallel to a street, with large sidewalks and green pathways between buildings and streets, (3) individual, dominant structures built on the corners of blocks and (4) ‘meander’ structures in the central part of a block creating a dynamic secondary routes for pedestrian movement.

The example of the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina represents a specific area of New Belgrade which was designed according to the official plans. However, its development was shaped by conflicting social, political and economic interests. Since New Belgrade occupies the central position of Belgrade, the area around the Boulevard was initially planned as a mostly industrial area, only partially habitable (Урбанистички завод ИОНО града Београда, 1951). However, subsequent amendments from 1965 changed the original idea imposing completely residential development (Figure 1). The main artery – the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina, has become the backbone of the area, which consists of several types of open blocks.

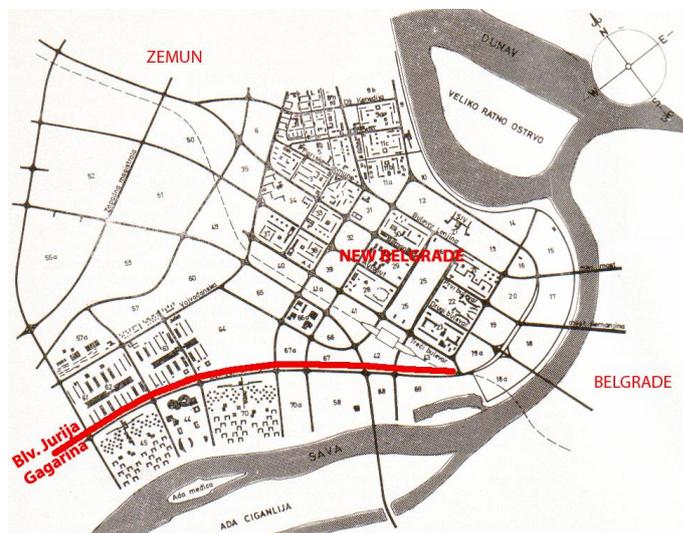


Fig. 1: The position of New Belgrade between two historical cores – Belgrade and Zemun. Red line marks the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina in a zone initially planned for industry, but transformed to a residential area.

Initially, blocks 45 and 70 were the only residential blocks in New Belgrade placed on the river bank, while Block 44, located between them, was built in the 1980's.² Both blocks have identical spatial organization, with two types of elements/buildings positioned (and copied) in a park setting. The part of the block toward the river consists of lower residential buildings (up to 4 storeys) in the shape of a horseshoe, while the other part, next to the Boulevard, is composed of orthogonal, freestanding solitaires (up to 15 storeys). The structures are grouped in four zones, with two main pedestrian passages in between – a promenade parallel to the river and the second one, perpendicular, with clustered services, education facilities (primary school and kindergarten) and a local community center. These additional activities and their structures create a central space, as a focus of social life and interaction. The size of each block is 800x800m, while car accessibility to buildings and parking spaces is provided by few internal streets/blind alleys (Figure 2).

² Competition for these blocks was announced in 1965. The award-winning work is from Slovenia, authors Ivan Tepes and Velimir Gradelj.

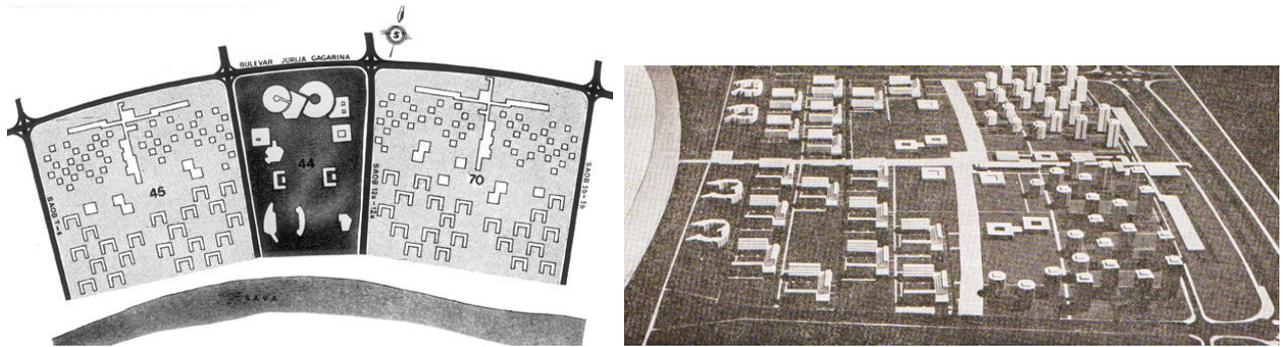


Fig. 2: Initially planned structures along the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina – (left) the model of block 45; (right) the plan of the south part of the street (blocks 45, 70 and 44).

Blocks 61, 62, 63 and 64 have a different composition, but they are all designed in the same manner.³ The basic urban concept represents a symmetrical macro-composition, consisting of two regular series of residential buildings, linked by the axis where the center is planned. The height of buildings decreases from the axis to the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina.

All four blocks have a strict segregation of vehicular and pedestrian traffic – the first one is planned on the ground level, while pedestrian movement is placed above, integrating public/free space with access to residential structures. The connection between the axial center and buildings via passages was also planned, creating micro-ambiances as public spaces for social interaction (Figure 3).

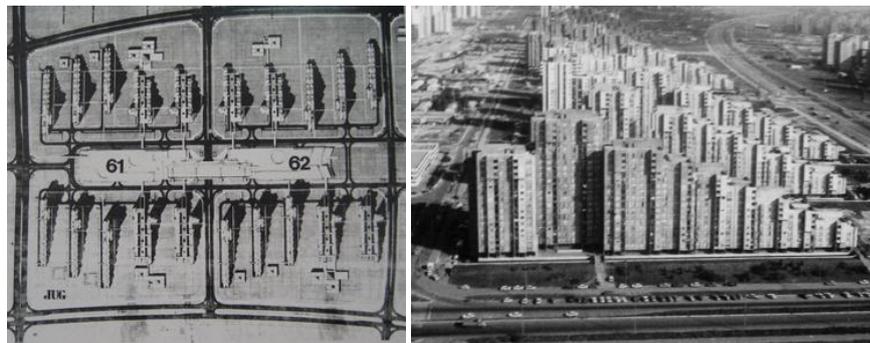


Fig. 3: The initially planned structures along the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina: (left) blocks 61 and 62 – plan, (right) typical block.

Since it was envisioned as a transit route, the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina is wide 60 metres, with 6 car-lanes, 2 tram-lanes and large green buffer zones between roadway and buildings (Figure 4). However, since this area remained on the outskirts of the city, with prevailing residential activities and without construction activities around/at the end of the street, it actually acts as a highly frequent access road to existing residential buildings.



Fig. 4: The Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina before the transformation.

³ The competition was announced in 1971. The winning proposal was designed by Darko Marusic, Milenija Marusic and Milan Miodragovic.

From the environmental point of view, the concept was made to fulfill main needs of comfort for the residents. By decreasing the building height towards the river, the majority of apartments are facing the south, and the basic laws of insulation and ventilation are met. From an economic aspect, the realization of this comprehensive project was possible only by industrial type of construction, i.e. prefabricated buildings. Within the socialist system, which existed before the 1980s, the state was the only and principal investor.

4 FACING THE TURBULENCES

The beginning of the 1980s was marked by the crisis of economy which also influenced the efficiency of the Yugoslav self-management socialism. Changed conditions and general instability of the system and society also triggered a number of other processes which finally led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991. Simultaneously, the economy started its shift to an open market, introducing privatization, decentralization and deregulation. Urban planning lost its centralized character causing a hyper production of detailed plans by different offices, without the influence of the Town Planning Institute of Belgrade. New architectural and planning paradigms were embraced by the professionals inclined to post-modern flows, while modernist models lost their importance in a changed socio-economic context (Vujošević, 2004).

Local authorities ignored previous models of development, refusing to define long-term strategies and visions. They mostly accepted and followed ad-hoc decisions enabling uncontrolled commercialization of urban space. The architectural and planning profession lost its significance affecting a degradation of urban environment with increased social and spatial segregation (Petrović, 2009). Consequently, during the last decade of the 20th century, the process of transition was visible in urban planning as a unique paradox – decisions were actually centralized, but their implementation (and legitimacy) was achieved by a number of decentralized decisions from various actors/participants in a planning process. This situation created a fertile ground for different malversations and uncontrolled private accumulation while the importance of public good was neglected (Vujošević, 2004). Therefore, urban planning represented an uncoordinated set of fragmented interventions, ‘justified’ by the lack of funds, regulations, tools for implementation and, above all, well-defined, comprehensive development concepts. The contradictions of the new system were reflected in architecture as well, shaping a new landscape for transitional flows.

New Belgrade, as a valuable and well-positioned urban resource, became one of the targets which attracted attention of numerous investors. Offering empty (unused) spaces and well-developed infrastructure it gradually reshaped its socialist image and generated a new identity. The urban tissue was invaded by new activities and structures which were not in accordance with the original concept, but in spite of its inconsistent, hybrid style, this part of Belgrade increased its significance and value (Petovar, 1989). The morphology of New Belgrade was changed, the inherited modernist legacy was negated but the current situation confirms the transformation potential of the space, as well as its flexibility for the future economic, social and spatial challenges.

Streets of New Belgrade changed their physiognomy too. The Boulevard of Juriša Gagarina was no longer considered a transit street, but as a social arena, which needed a formal and functional continuity. The construction of new buildings started during 1980s, when first small-scale shopping malls appeared along the street, in the former green areas. However, the significant transformation started after 2000, when foreign investments were intensified and a number of European and global corporations arrived to Serbian market. New Belgrade was recognized as a perfect site for business, services, exclusive residential buildings and – new shopping malls.

Introduction of a postmodern paradigm launched a different design concept which promoted a traditional model of street. However, a gap between planning profession and economy produced a specific scenery which followed the original plan from 1965 but adjusted to new regulations and indicators generated from contemporary trends and economic turbulences. Therefore, the Boulevard of Juriša Gagarina was gradually transformed into a compact urban tissue, with high density and decreased green areas/open spaces. These changes do not represent the outcome of planning visions, strategies and procedures which should improve a general environmental quality (Bajic Brkovic, 2009). Instead, they are a consequence of different investments which used the flexibility (i.e. insufficient determination) of the uncompleted modernist framework.

5 OVERLAPPING THE PATTERNS

The present constellation of power, interests and needs in the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina mirrors ‘the crisis of non-concept’. The new development is clearly visible along the street and the open spaces of housing blocks are occupied by the commercial drive of private capital, expanding its boundaries into the public areas (Figure 5). Demarcation lines are set between physical structures that represent two epochs creating a distorted image of this area. It is nowadays full of contradictions, which coexist and overlap, creating a surreal environment (Stupar, 2006).

The streetscape of the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina has changed its density, function and overall narrative which had been visible for almost half a century. In search for a new continuity, its empty land has been filled with buildings which created a scenery for a traditional urban streets, but without any pattern or organized scheme it is hard to achieve a unity of architectural expression (Milakovic and Vukmirovic, 2011). Furthermore, there are several problems which could be identified in the main aspects of urban life – (1) physical – referring to spatial and functional organization; (2) social – implying a different use of space and the attitude of users toward change, and (3) economic – related to the validity of new structures and a balanced development.



Fig. 5: The Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina after the transformation.

In terms of physical environment, the construction of new buildings mainly threatened both the public space along the Boulevard and the space inside blocks. The current and planned construction activities are already beyond originally proposed capacities, while the new high rise buildings do not respect original rules of positioning, orientation, vertical regulation and environmentally responsible morphing. The level of comfort and the ecological quality of urban life is decreased. Meanwhile, the higher density of inhabitants and users caused a significant increase of the number of cars which made the existing parking capacities insufficient. Consequently, the open public spaces and pedestrian areas have been used as informal parking spaces which – to a certain extent – have even been legalized.

From a social perspective, the main problem is related to the altered use of open public spaces where we can identify a clash of two opposing concepts – the modernist model, which promotes the internal space of a block as a gathering place suitable for contacts, relaxation and recreation, and the post-modern model, which underlines the importance of a street for public life. The opinions of users are also divided – for some of them the usurpation of public space and a conflict between old and new structures only degrades physical, social and environmental quality of the space, while other users support introduction of new structures and activities which would complement already existing residential character of the area. In spite of this ambivalent perception of the space, the general opinion is positive because both groups appreciate a new daily dynamic which enables a simultaneous functioning of both spatial elements – blocks and streets.

The sustainability of the Boulevard and its surrounding area is also questionable. The intensification of activities has increased employment possibilities and enabled higher dynamic of economy and market, but the introduced activities are not evenly distributed and they still do not provide a satisfactory balance and a variety of services. Consequently, some office and commercial spaces remain without tenants which only confirms the lack of spatial and economic strategies which would stabilise supply and demand.

Finally, the factors of environmental quality and energy efficiency are mostly neglected which represents a serious warning and a problem for all users and space-consumers. Obviously, the ad-hoc shaping of a space does not consider problems generated by climate changes, which is also a result of low environmental consciousness. Therefore, the imperative of the future development of the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina

should be adjustment to current climate conditions and global environmental trends, which is – again – a mission achievable only via comprehensive strategic plans and actions. In the meantime, ad-hoc approach could be used for environmental vibrancy as well, especially for the application of various biophilic elements which increase a general environmental quality and create new competitive advantages for this area.

6 CONCLUSION

The transformation of the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina has been the metaphor of discontinuity and a materialization of all turmoils which ex-Yugoslav and Serbian society have faced since the 1990s. The overlapping concepts, unsynchronized actions and conflicting interest have shaped the morphology of this space, creating a confusing urban landscape and a distorted image of anticipated modernity. Disregarding original ideas and urban regulation, but benefiting from their generous spatial formations and available empty space, the latest phase of aggressive and often uncontrolled urban intensification has also brought an unexpected vibrancy to previously dormant residential area. However, the newly created urbo-economic system is not a stable one and it needs a proper tuning to contextual changes which should guarantee its long-term sustainability.

During the last two decades, the flexibility of the ‘modernist’ space has been brutally tested and – confirmed, but the accumulated problems and actual local and global challenges demand immediate, resolute and forward looking strategies and actions. Therefore, the future of New Belgrade, its mega-blocks and boulevards, should be defined in a well-balanced framework able to provide enough environmental and social benefits for different categories of residents and users, while remaining a hot-spot for all contemporary, innovative and creative impulses able to ensure its further ‘modernity’.

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