

# ASPECTS OF THE PUBLIC DOMAIN IN REGENERATING WATERFRONTS: A CASE STUDY OF BELGRADE'S WATERFRONT, SERBIA

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## ABSTRACT

The paper is a presentation of the evolution of the treatment of urban public land in the urban planning and design of the regenerated waterfront area, in different social conditions. The authors assess the certainty of achieving high quality urban space, by comparing the circumstances and aspects of the public domain. For several decades, urban plans have declared change of land use for the attractive Sava river basin (and the Danube) in Belgrade, with the purpose of relocating industrial warehouses and traffic facilities such as the train and bus stations. In order to initiate the process of regenerating a new area of the city, between the historical core and the newest and most modern part of the city, at the end of the 20th century local and international urban planners and architects were invited to propose uses and forms for the future waterfront skyline in the so-called "Project for the 3rd Millennium". The purpose of the project was to produce a multifunctional connection with the river between two parts of the city, both different in their development concepts. The accent was on the public domain: culture, education, entertainment, and tourism, which included planning new buildings for museums, venues for opera and ballet, and concert halls, as well as scientific centres, hotels, etc., with pedestrian promenades and greenery. Unfortunately, mainly because of the political situation and economic crisis, but also because of unrealistic ideas and foundations of the concept, the implementation failed. The future development depended on political will and demanded enormous investment, and it also had to wait for the next three decades. Belgrade's Waterfront project that started several years ago is based on this general idea to change the area's appearance, but with significant exceptions. It is officially a result of foreign investment, and the concept was not a result of open urban competition, but rather based on a 3D model developed abroad, in addition to which, a percentage of public land was given over for residential and commercial structures, and the height of some buildings changed the skyline of Belgrade's hill completely. All of these issues have been bitterly criticized by the professional and wider public.

*Keywords: waterfront, regeneration, public land, urban competition, urban plan.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Cities that are positioned next to water surfaces (such as a sea, lake or river) have an advantage, and they have been treated differently at different periods of their development. Industrial use, as a port, or for shipbuilding, storage or production, was dominant during the period of industrialization. In modern times, when "dirty" processing has been displaced from cities, empty locations near the central core, with attractive banks and views, have become subject to the regeneration process. New functions, for example as public buildings, or residential, office or commercial space, have taken the place of industrial zones. Planning such a transformation is an excellent opportunity for inserting missing city facilities, reconsidering principles and goals, and designing the desired image and appearance.

### 1.1 Methodological framework

This research presents a case study observing the phenomenon of urban regeneration, and the public domain within the context of the study area, which is limited to the part of the Sava's right bank enclosed by the mega project of the Belgrade Waterfront development. The



academic relevance of the paper is that it contributes to an understanding of the anomalies in the urban planning process which have occurred in this special and significant city location. This research analyses different requirements in the usual integrated urban planning process, including the protection of public goods and the preservation and presentation of cultural heritage, as well as a number of deviations and opportunities.

## 1.2 The study area

This part of the right bank of Belgrade's coastline and the area surrounding it, known as Savamala, just next to the city centre, started to develop and change rapidly in the 19th century, with the enthusiasm of rich merchants interested in building residential buildings, hotels and shops in the drained location of the former swamp. In the 20th century, after WWII, the area was repeatedly considered by means of master urban plans, various projects, studies and competitions, such as the "Centre of Culture – Project for the 3rd Millennium" in 1985 and "Europolis" in 1995 [1], [2]. The common goals of all previous plans and projects included the transformation of the extremely valuable but devastated ambient into something more functional and rational, modelled on experience from other cities, which had also liberated their own coastal areas from industry, transport, ports and warehouses, and turned them into new spaces, primarily for public use, but also for entertainment, trade, business and housing. Urban regeneration, namely the change of land use and interaction between the city core and its rivers, as an essential need for this area, has never been in dispute. But there was no opportunity for any form of implementation, since decades of having a bad economic and political situation precluded any initiative to change the situation, especially having in mind that urban regeneration would demand serious and wide interventions, including location of the rail tracks and main railway station [3]. This neglected city district, at the beginning of the 21st century, started to transform spontaneously, by itself, becoming an alternative and popular scene, occupied by young people, with clubs and start-up hubs in restored warehouses [4].

The Spatial Plan for the Special Purpose Area (SPASP) of the Sava coast for Belgrade's Waterfront project was prepared in accordance with the Decision on the Development of the Spatial Plan (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 34/10) [5], in addition to the previously adopted conclusion of the Government of the Republic of Serbia that the particular project has significant importance for the state and the City of Belgrade. The specificity of the plan, covering a total area of 177 ha, is certainly its theme, namely, the development of part of the prominent coastal urban area of the central zone of Belgrade, which comes out of common topics of interest for this kind of plan: protected areas with natural, cultural and historical or ambient values, the exploitation of minerals and mining, the development of mountain tourist locations, or the possibility of using of hydro potential. However, it refers to the last two possible options that the law provides as the basis for carrying out projects that the government determines as relevant to the Republic of Serbia and for constructing buildings for which permits are issued by autonomous provinces. At least one of them can be considered undefined to the end, free in interpretation and arbitrary in evaluation, used as an option as needed.

## 1.3 Theoretical framework

Numerous academic papers concerning Belgrade's Waterfront development have been published since the urban reconstruction was announced. They all have in common a deep criticism of the project, beginning with the procedure and the absence of professional



influence in the creation of the area's identity and its relationship with the hinterland [6]–[8]. It has been stressed several times that urban and architectural competitions are a crucial, but missing, factor for this kind of location, program and volume of intervention [9], [10]. Creating and displaying an anonymous model of the future project, even before a plan had been developed was particularly annoying and offensive for the majority of authors. Another issue is public transparency in the decision-making process and the lack of awareness among citizens that extremely valuable urban land will be privatized for exclusive residential, office and commercial buildings, instead of providing space for public uses that are currently lacking, like museums and galleries, an opera house, a concert hall and similar, with plenty of open public spaces [11]–[16]. The visual aspect of the project, with extremely high skyscrapers, raises the question of the skyline and the disrespect of the views and scenery relating to the old part of the city, first and foremost, the interruption of Belgrade's Fortress as a symbol of the city. The announcement that the mega project is a foreign investment from the United Arab Emirates, but hiding all of the contract details, including the obligations of the city government with regard to preparing the location for building, together with the proposed appearance of the architecture, has provoked an association with Dubai's development, in a negative context [17], [18]. Other papers have reviewed issues related to transport logistics and climate change in the context of the new development [19]–[21]. There are also several studies about the organization and management of the large-scale project [22], [23], and participation in it [24], [25], and above all, about civil sector rebellion and protest [26], [27].

## 2 THE REGENERATION IMPULSION

There are many examples of the reconstruction of coastal city zones on the global level. In the industrial era these areas were used for ports and docks, industrial zones, shipyards, storage space and similar, but with technological change they have become valuable space for public use, culture and leisure time. Some cities, like Montreal and Vancouver in Canada, Cape Town in South Africa Republic, London and Glasgow in the UK, and Barcelona and Bilbao in Spain, have applied new master plans for regeneration, with mixed-use development, and the most prominent structures in them were designed by well-known architects and their teams [28]. That was the basic idea, and desire, for Belgrade's river shore, too, at least in the minds of urban planners. The final realization of the aspiration to connect city with the rivers in a qualitative way suddenly accelerated, but some crucial steps were neglected.

What became contentious and difficult to accept in the case of Belgrade's project, first and foremost by the profession, but also by citizens, is the way it was being implemented, because of the enactment of the Law on the Determination of the Public Interest, and special procedures of expropriation and issuance of building permits. Therefore, this legal act was called in the media *lex specialis*, meaning that is stronger, special and more detailed, with higher priority than regular urban planning acts. What the profession had persistently sought for decades, for example an international competition for the urban and architectural shaping of this valuable and unrepeatable part of the city, was avoided in 2012. Then there have been questionable deals with foreign investors, especially with regard to the level and dynamics of foreign investments, conditions of implementation, and the high level of city investment for clearing the present uses and infrastructure equipment from the site. Particularly contentious is the final shape and appearance of the structures, because it became clear that the new buildings would change the silhouette of the city and jeopardise some of the most beautiful views of the old part of the city, especially of Belgrade Fortress.



Through a persistent campaign, the public has been assured that Belgrade will get exactly what it needs, that there is no other or better solution, and that this megalomaniac project has no alternative. The 3D model (Fig. 1) of the project was presented even before the plan was finalized, and that was moment when it became obvious that some decisions had already been made, especially those about land use, spatial organization, height of the structures and architectural design. There was no place or time for urban competition, gathering, evaluating or choosing the best ideas and solutions. The future will show the advantages and disadvantages of the whole enterprise, but the fact is that experiments in urbanism have a high price, that guarantees of success are often lacking, and that mistakes are very difficult to fix or cannot be fixed at all. The second, devastating fact is the lack of continuity in decision making, and changes in the selection of the capital's strategic goals, which is not just a feature of contemporary society, but a cancer of this society in general. Initiated urbanisation constantly suffers changes, deviations, and the influence of external and internal uncertainty factors. The public's role in the planning process should not be circumstantial, but rather decisive and direct [29]. Citizen movements have organized protests, performances against the project and debates, but there has been no interaction with decision makers. With regard to the plan, everything else has been done professionally and very correctly, by an experienced team, who have made every effort to maintain a high level of expertise and professionalism. In this sense, it is called a spatial plan for a special purpose area, but in terms of its form and content, and level of detail, it is completely comparable to an urban plan of detailed regulation. The team has had the thankless and unenviable position between two opposite sides, with pressure to conclude assigned job and to justify their knowledge and professional attitude.



Figure 1: D model. (Source: <http://rs.n1info.com>.)

### 3 GOALS AND FALLACY

The declarative goal of the plan for the 177 ha was to define the planning basis for the use, regulation and protection of the area of part of the Sava coast in the city of Belgrade, in

accordance with sustainability principles. In addition, the needs and obligations for determining the development of strategic preferences, planning solutions, conditions and guidelines were established by other documents: The Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia, Regional Spatial Plan of the Administrative Area of the City of Belgrade, General Plan of Belgrade 2021 and Development Strategy of the City of Belgrade. One of the main prerequisites was the displacement of the main railway station and the continuation of the railway node at a different location, in order to release this area for the construction and formation of a new complex of business and commercial zones and buildings for public purposes. The goal was to produce planning documents that can be applied directly and easily, primarily in the organization and landscaping of the space, as well as in the construction of facilities, in order to attract and implement investments.

The special principles for the future development of this part of the River Sava's coast in the area of the City of Belgrade are based on strengthening competitiveness as a potentially strong regional and European metropolis, by activating unused, inadequately used or devastated spatial potential, as well as enabling the diffusion of development, and the equal and rational use of resources. The plan mentions several principles, such as:

- Cohesion – the integrity of the coastal zone within the whole of Belgrade, based on accessibility, infrastructure equipment and connectivity. The great advantage of the city's position on European corridor VII has not been adequately used. The key task is strengthening cohesion by increasing accessibility and developing the coastal area as a complete and diverse entity.
- Polycentrics – one of the most important policies, which aims to use territorial capital and untapped potential in the best way possible. The polycentric and balanced development of individual content in the coastal zone, as a whole environment within Belgrade's urban space, and the strengthening of relations between central and fringe areas, will reduce disproportionate development in certain parts.
- Accessibility – to important points in the area and aquatoria, which provides citizens with ease of communication and availability for tourists. It is necessary to ensure that all points are connected to traffic and technical infrastructure, while strengthening and improving the links with an emphasis on activating all forms of river traffic.
- Identity – is an important basis in support of the development of the economy, especially tourism, expressed through the sense of citizens' belonging to the city in which they live.

Respecting the above general and special principles should lead to liberation from inadequate content and the formation of multi-significant space and the preservation of identity, values and potential of space. The zone, in the projection of future development, is the potential generator for developing new activities, thanks to the existing and planned traffic connections with the city centre. In accordance with the analysis of the existing state, the overall goal of the plan was to transform and completely reconstruct the dilapidated area into a new, modern city centre – socially acceptable, economically viable and spatially integrated into Belgrade's existing cultural and historical spirit. Based on the stated general goal, several operational goals were stated, of which the most important are: harmoniously fitting into the natural environment, with a special emphasis on flood protection; the formation of a new public transport system, with a focus on railways; complete regeneration of infrastructure; the protection of cultural objects of particular importance; forming new gathering places; creating a new tourism brand.

In the chapter of the plan regarding rules for detailed regulation and construction, the planned land use was given, divided into surfaces for public and other purposes, and then divided into characteristic units and blocks (Table 1).



Table 1: Land use area [5].

Land use	Planned surface coverage (ha)	%
<b>1. Public land</b>		
Transport	50.14	28
River basin	39.38	22
Public services, public facilities and complexes	9.81	6
Public open spaces and greenery	24,59	14
Infrastructure utilities	0.69	0
Sum 1	124.61	70
<b>2. Areas of other purposes</b>		
Housing and residential area	32.11	18
Commercial zones and offices	20.44	12
Sum 2	52.55	30
Sum 1 + 2	177.16	100

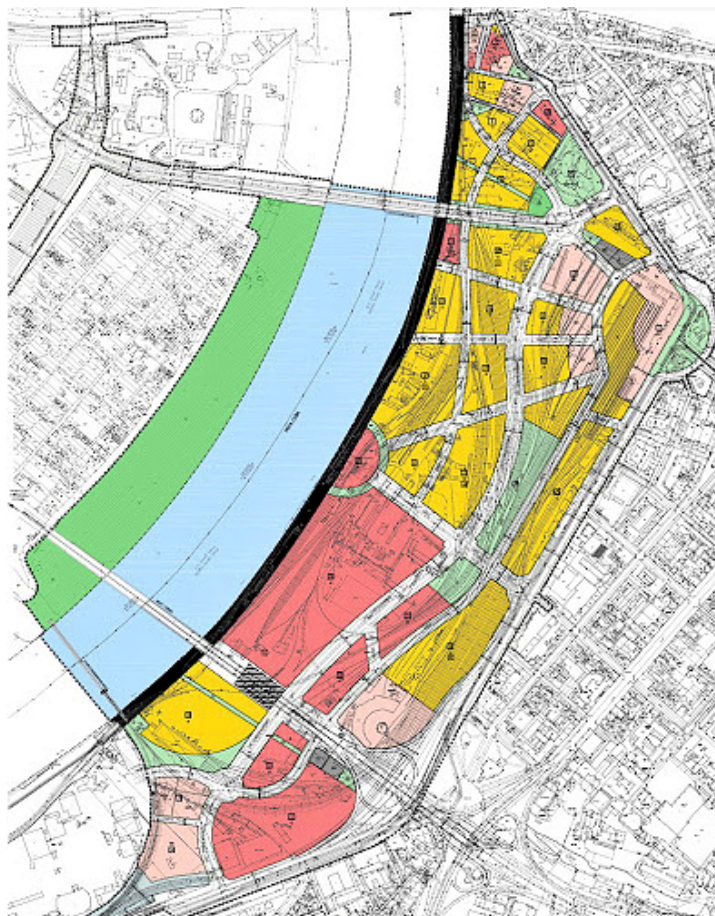


Figure 2: Planed land use. Yellow = residential; Pink = commercial use [5].

In the general division of land use, public land is presented as a 70% share and other (residential and commercial) uses as 30%. However, the border of the plan includes the water surface of the River Sava, greenery and planned streets on the opposite bank (Fig. 2). This means that percentage of public land in the planned development is not exactly as calculated, but much smaller. Besides the already-built residential blocks and shopping mall, with a skyscraper under construction, the only public use is the pedestrian promenade by the river with several playgrounds (Fig. 3). The position and urban design were not debatable, but it soon became a new gathering place for citizens, although the promenade is on a higher level above the river bank, in order to protect it from flooding. But other issues like the position, shape and height of the buildings and the blocked views of the city and its skyline, and the proposal to remove the old tram bridge across the Sava and build a new one, have once again raised protests by citizens' groups.



Figure 3: Promenade. (Source: <http://beobuild.rs>.)

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

Based on all of the above, there is a single conclusion that the Belgrade Waterfront plan, except for the name, formal content and procedure that followed it, absolutely does not correspond to any other spatial plans for special purposes, but rather has a built-in component that represents a very detailed and specific set of rules, from which about 90% of the area covered by the plan is given directly for implementation. Checking the planning solutions through competitions, analysis, etc. for certain locations offers stability, and highlights any further planning work envisaged, primarily, for possible changes and amendments. However, the urban and architectural competition, as a form, was not used at all in the precondition phase, not even for a single building design. The formal procedure for public insight and hearing the opinion of the citizens was carried out according to the law, but transparency and the possibility of having any influence to produce change was impossible. The professional position was that the urban reconstruction and regeneration of the coastal area was essential and should be carried out in the correct way, but in this case the political establishment took the main role, ignoring the experts. The imported design, with no identity or originality, has become the biggest contemporary controversy in Belgrade. Certainly, the biggest

disappointment is the missed opportunity to take advantage of this location for more mixed-use development and including public buildings such as museums, venues for opera and ballet, and concert halls. On the other hand, in these difficult circumstances, the expert team has managed to fulfil its obligation to include as much development as it possibly could for public use. This can be observed in the segments of open green spaces with promenades, in accompanying educational facilities (kindergartens and schools), in the idea for reconstructing the old railway station as a museum, and in streets with infrastructure, some of them with city significance, like bridges, tunnels, flood protection systems and electrical substations.

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