

COMPLEX HISTORY AS A SOURCE OF PLANNING PROBLEMS: OLD BELGRADE FAIRGROUND

Marta Vukotić Lazar, Jasmina Djokić

The Old Belgrade Fairground complex is the large area in the center of Belgrade that is completely isolated from other parts of Belgrade: it is one of the most devastated city areas, populated by poor inhabitants, often by those from the marginal groups, burdened with tragic history and it represents one of the hardest problems for planners to solve. It is situated on the left bank of the Sava River between two bridges and downtown New Belgrade. Opposite to it, the Sava Amphitheatre slopes down the Belgrade Ridge towards the river.

The complex was built in the thirties of the 20th century across the River Sava in the area that was an unpopulated swamp – Belgrade was situated on the right Sava bank. It was meant to be modern extension of oriental city, which could represent the western tendencies of the young state (Kingdom of Yugoslavia) and its capital. Modern and monumental complex of exhibition and commercial pavilions was built, and started its life with national and international fairs and exhibitions.

World War 2 changed its destiny: German occupation forces transformed the complex into the concentration camp, where thousands of people were tortured and killed.

After the war, new republican government, both communist and antifascist, had double frustration regarding this space: it's tragic (during the War) and "capitalist" (before the War) past, so complex that was absolutely ignored in the period of the postwar renewal, and the result is described at the beginning of this text.

This paper discusses the possibility to conciliate historical roles of the complex, and to realize it's potentials in the modern world. Facts of the complex's history are presented in the first part of the paper. Further on, these facts are analyzed in the context of contemporary city development of Belgrade in particular but globally, too..

Finally, some guidelines for crossing the gap between this area and the rest of the city are presented in the third part of the paper.

Keywords: *Old Belgrade fairground, urban identity, history of the city, urban reconstruction*

INTRODUCTION

If we say that history of a city is one of its basic guidelines for its future development, especially in European urban practice, it is not a poetic statement, but the fact so obvious that we don't even mention it. The Planners and architects are trying to preserve historical buildings and ambient, habits and values of inhabitants, everyday life, and the concept of space of the time, in order to plan such urban structures that would be comfortable for citizens and attractive for visitors.

Even more, city's history is nowadays one of the most utilized urban resources. Branding cities and searching for authenticity in globalized world rely on history of the

particular city, or even city area. In search for tourists and investments, the city governments and urban professionals all over the world, especially in Europe, use history as a resource in competition with other cities. Every small difference, anything that makes a city "special" comparing to the others, similar in size, economic and human potentials, is being used for better position in the world cities market.

Sociologist Sreten Vujovic says that "...studying a city requires paying attention on timeness, because history and time are contents of the city, and historical ambient arise from pure temporality". (Vujovic, 1997) Yet, case of the Old Belgrade Fairground is quite opposite. Both, the city government and architectural and planning professionals are

very indisposed to talk about history of the complex, and almost totally inhibited in taking any action about the site. Reason might be found in its very complex history, during which the role of the Fairground has been changing in the most frustrating way. Changes were dramatic, and layers of the past could hardly coexist in the same physical structures. Nevertheless, they have to.

Today, the Old Fairground is completely isolated from the other parts of Belgrade. It is situated on the left bank of the Sava River between two bridges and the New Belgrade downtown area. On the opposite side of the river is the old city central zone. River Sava with several bridges is seen as a kind of a boundary instead of being a connection(s) with

the rest of the city. Also, this area is not functionally integrated in the urban pattern. It is one of the most deteriorated city zones, populated by poor inhabitants, most of them from marginal groups, and burdened with tragic history.

In this paper, we are discussing whether it is possible to conciliate historical roles of the complex, and to realise its potentials in the modern time. The facts about the history of Fairground complex are presented in the first part of the paper. In the second part, we analyse reasons and circumstances for marginalized status and neglectance of the Fairground site since World War Two, trying to find a proper explanation for this very particular area. Finally, in the third part, the new strategies and initiatives for future development are presented.

HISTORY OF THE OLD BELGRADE FAIRGROUND

The Period between two world wars

After World War One, the new period in the life of Belgrade started. Belgrade became a capital of the new state - Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, which lost more than million people during the War, and contributed in victory. Before that war, there were numerous problems in making good relations with some European countries, such as economical disagreements with Austro-Hungarian Empire, as well as a negative image of Serbia, due to the brutal murder of the royal couple in 1903. So, this was a new opportunity to show democratic potentials and gain respect among other countries. Rapid development of the city started: after centuries under Turkish Ottoman jurisdiction, Belgrade got the opportunity to spread across rivers Sava and Danube. It became an important river quay (landing-stage) and a railway crossroad. Also, Belgrade became the administrative, cultural, trade and industrial centre of Kingdom, although its capacities were insufficient and system of the governing was inadequate.

There were two different wholes in the urban pattern of the city: old core, principally oriental but nice and vivid, which was centre of complete public and social life, and on the

other hand the new parts - "amorphous and chaotic agglomeration" (Nedic, 1977). Plans that were made before the War were partial, created with no wider strategy for the urban development. As a result of intensive industrial growth strong migrations were going on and illegal settlements arose along main roads to the city. However, it was not possible to take real action without strategy for the whole city - a master plan was needed.

In 1919 municipality of Belgrade decided to get new master plan, by public competition. Master plan was published in the year 1923. It was a good basis for further development and reconstruction, and included extension of the city centre on the left bank of the Sava river. One of the important decision was the project of Belgrade Fair on the left bank of the river (Maksimovic, 1980).

The arrangements for realisation of Belgrade Fairground started in 1936. The basic concept of the project was radial distribution of pavilions around one central building - tower, which had two main functions: to be an exhibition pavilion, and to be an urban mark, visible from distant parts of the city. It was a monumental modern open plan. Building works were very rapid, and in 1938 the first exhibition was held in seven big pavilions, and in more than 20 small private pavilions.

Beside its economical and representative value, Old Belgrade Fairground was very important for the history of Serbian urban planning for several reasons:

- Process of its planning, designing, building, as well as its financial aspect was organized through transparent



public procedure. Many professionals, private investors and citizens were included in decisions making, despite the organizing and procedural problems. This is a fact of great importance, not only for the success of Fairground realization, but for strengthening the confidence of citizens in the institutions.

- This spatial composition became a metaphor of an urban complex that was completely realised according to the plan. Every single detail was planned and designed by professionals, without improvisations so often used in the previous period.
- The composition and details were modern. Old Belgrade Fairground is still a symbol of modernity, or at least its aspiration for modernizing the whole country, and particularly its capital.
- Previous characteristics are underlined by the fact that the complex is situated across the river, on the new area that previously had not been considered as a part of Belgrade. "Taking possession" of this land was in manner of democracy, economical prosperity and modernity, which was almost



a statement directed both to citizens and to the European countries.

It is exceptionally important to emphasize this modernizing impulse that the complexes provided. The importance of the Old Belgrade Fairground for the urban history of Belgrade is not its architectural excellence, but emancipating efforts and potentials of the society that were represented through the building process.

The construction of the public buildings, particularly for cultural purposes, compliant with the previously foreseen plan for giving shape to Belgrade area, was one of the important objectives of the 1923 year's General plan.

Promoting Belgrade as a tourist city in 1936, as well as the fact that Belgrade – Zemun road had already been made, gave a special inspiration to the preparations for building the Belgrade Fairground on the left bank of the river Sava. It was the first move in city extension of the left bank of the Sava, in accordance with the urban planning conception of the 1923 year's Master plan.

Although the rivers Danube and Sava are the most dominant values of Belgrade's environment, the city was traditionally built and developed, not on the river banks, but on the crag. However, the river banks, together with the Belgrade Fortress are the impressive parts of the Belgrade Panorama. Zemun is partly oriented towards the Danube, so it is also the characteristic part of the city situated on the left banks of the rivers Danube and Sava. In the same period, on the left bank of the Sava river a civil airport with hangars covered with concrete shells, according to the project of Milutin Milankovic, was built, as well as "the Modern Area", the project by architect Mihajlo Radovanovic. It was a triangular shaped residential area, consisting of collective multi-storey buildings and family houses with front gardens drawn up in line, located on the exit of Zemun towards Belgrade. These two cultural and historical areas represented the initial steps towards realisation of "The Old Belgrade Fairground".

In August 1936, the body named the "Technical Bureau", organized within the Association, made new plans for pavilions, enabling a beginning of the preparatory works

on the left bank of the Sava. The architects Miliivoje Trickovic, Djordje Lukic and Rajko Tatic, the members of the Technical Board of the Belgrade Municipality were engaged to examine the existing plans of general disposition and pavilions on the fairground, and to submit their opinion in the form of official report.

The complex was opened in 1937. by the "First Autumn Fair". At that time the space was dominated by four big and two smaller pavilions that were under the auspices of the Society for Organizing Fairs and Exhibitions, with the Central Tower, as well as the exhibition pavilions of the several foreign countries: Germany, Italy, Romania, Turkey, Czech-Moravian Protectorate and Hungary. Beside



these, one has to mention the pavilion of "Nikola Spasic Foundation" and more than 20 private pavilions. (Pravda, Beograd 14.X 1936.)

Belgrade press reported about all the events concerning the construction of the pavilions as well as the preparations and realisations of the numerous exhibitions: international automobile fair, concerts, sport competitions, fashion shows etc.

In short time not only that Belgrade became the meeting point of businessmen from Yugoslavia and foreign countries, but it also hosted one of the leading fairs in the South Eastern Europe.

Breaking out of the war in September 1939, and the state of emergency in the North and the West of Europe effected the situation in Yugoslavia. However, in the period between 1939 and 1941, the Technical Board published "The Statutes Draft for Realisation of the Belgrade City Regulation Plan According to the Regulation Draft" and "The Plan of Belgrade and Zemun". But, the German air attack in April 1941 dramatically destroyed Belgrade and cut all the activities in its economic, social and cultural life.

The World War Two and communist period

The World War Two changed destiny of this complex in the most tragic way. The Sava river became a border between Serbia, occupied by Germans and ruled by puppet government, and Independent Croatian State, the Nazi country with numerous concentration camps in which hundreds of thousands people were killed. The occupation forces transformed Belgrade Fairground complex into the concentration camp. At first, it was mostly for Jewish people (Judenlager Semlin), who were brutally killed, and later Serbs, Romanies and political prisoners were taken there.

More than ten thousand Jews, thirteen thousand Serbs and people of other nationalities were killed in this camp, but precise number and names of victims had not been recorded. Also, the majority of victims was never

buried properly in a tomb, and there were assumptions that some of these bodies could be anywhere in the complex still now. These facts strongly determine future use of this area.

During the Alliance bombing in spring 1944, all buildings of the "Old Belgrade Fairground" were destroyed except the Central Tower and "Spasic Pavilion", that were used as the camp hospital.

Several years after the war, the area was no man's land. At the beginning of the sixties the pavilions, that were not ruined during the war, were adopted and given to the artists to use them as ateliers. Today, they are still there, but dilapidated, unkept and surrounded by storages, garages, car repair services, workshops, illegally built poor housings etc.

PARADOX OF TOO MUCH IDENTITY: STOP THE WATCHES

This short historical review shows how difficult it is to obtain a decision on future plans and to determine the future vision of this important area in Belgrade. The problem is complex and has many aspects: social, economical, even political, but crucial points are cultural and ethical. While urban communities in the modern world are struggling to create clear and strong urban identity, the Old Belgrade Fairground has too much of it.

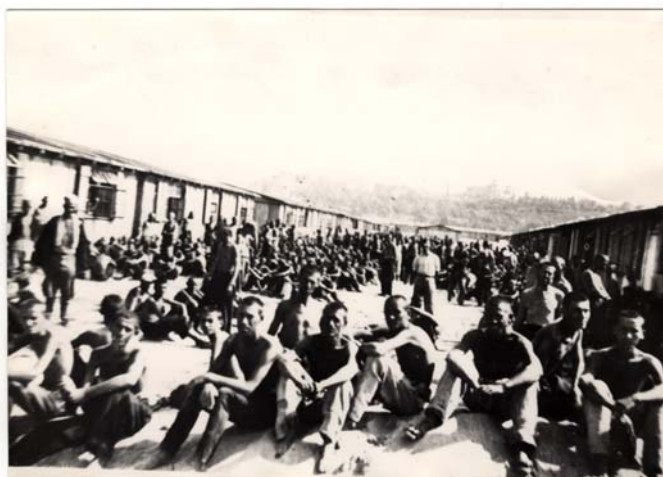
In short, the first phase of complex's history, as well as an idea of its realisation, was induced by strong will of state and the city to encourage the modernisation of the city life. It was about economical and cultural growth, and about

adopting values of western, democratic world. The following statement well illustrates the impulse of modernization: "The Old Belgrade Fairground complex is situated on the left bank of the Sava, between two great steel bridges connecting Western Europe with Balkan and East. The developers gathered, not only from Belgrade and other Yugoslav cities, but from many European and Balkan countries..." (S.M. Beogradske opstinske novine april – jun 1937)

This phase was interrupted by the War. The brutal policy that was taken at that time left unchangeable consequences: Jewish community has never recovered after this disaster. Today the number of Jews in Belgrade is considerably smaller comparing to the period before the War. The tragic destiny of thousands people tortured, humiliated and murdered has not been properly honoured and marked.

Structures which survived war became a shelter for poor people. Homelessness as known in western countries was rare in the socialist Yugoslavia, but this kind of housing - illegal use of different kind of buildings for home, could be compared with it. These buildings were not appropriate and without adequate infrastructure for living... Artists, painters and sculptors, used to live there among the others. Even when recognised as eminent some of those artists still continued to work in the ateliers. This was not an insult for victims, but whole situation insulted these new inhabitants and their right to decent house.

The absence of any planning activities was, and still is, the result of deep frustration about identity of this place. What is to be identified as basic point in area's history? Identity, according to Encyclopaedia Britannica, is (a) sameness of essential or generic character in different instances, and (b) sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2002). The question is: what is essential, constitutive character of this place? Character is based on the concept of use, idea and values that were transposed on this city area, but how to conciliate components in character which



are not only incompatible, but totally opposite. How to integrate memory on tragic period for city and its citizens into the urban pattern? And finally, is there any possibility to keep some hope for alive and respect for the dead, and materialise both in the same structure?

Not an easy task for planners and the government to do, but something has to be decided. For many decades, this area was an ignored space, planning-free zone; all city governments were pretending that problem does not exist.

THE STRATEGY OF THE CITY GOVERNMENTS IN THE SOCIALIST ERA

After the War, the priorities in reconstruction of destroyed city were infrastructure and housing. Roads, railways, bridges, water supply, industry, public administration and cultural capacities, and the majority of housing were completely destroyed during the war. Total renewal had to be done, and human resources were seriously damaged: thousands of people killed, refuges and orphans, people without homes and families burdened with war traumas. It was obvious that problem of monumental complex was not a priority on the list. There was a lot of work to be done before: build infrastructure, start industry, rebuild economy. But, the questions how is it possible not to intervene for decades and why, could not be avoid.

After the World War Two, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was transformed into republic, as a result of socialist revolution which took part in that period. The new communist political elite government imposed various priorities: rebuilding the country, creating new institutions, making a position in a polarized world, as well as making the attitude towards "capitalist" history and previous regime. To our opinion, the destiny of the Old Belgrade Fairground after the World War Two reflects some attitudes of the new political elite and its policy towards the historical background, both social and symbolical of this site. We will present several reasons in order to understand why decision about future of the area was so difficult.

Firstly, the new political elite were both antifascist and communist at the same time. It had great respect for all war victims, regardless of their ethnical origin – the communist regime was strictly against any kind of nationalism. At the same time, there was a strong opposition toward anything related towards ex-regime. In other words, problem as well as potential solution was frustrating for the new political elite, as it was not possible to separate memories of tragic past from political and social structure (environment) in which it had happened. Most of concentration camps all over the Europe were reconstructed exactly as they were during war, with intention to memorise these terrible moments of mankind history, or as Edwin Heathcote said "not to allow people to forget" (Heathcote, 1999). For the new political elite, this meant reconstruction of bourgeois complex, and consequently probability of support to bourgeois habits of citizens.

Secondly, new regime wanted to monopolize the modernization processes of the country. Any previous effort regarding modernization was minimized, if not completely denied. The industrialization and urbanization were imperatives, and a kind of continuously repeated mantra of communist regime. As whole industry was ruined during the war, there was a simulation that everything should start from the very beginning. Also, pre-war urbanism was considered as conservative and anachronous, even if falsification of historical facts was necessary. Such an attitude led to ignoring Master plan from 1923, and few realized complexes in the territory known as New Belgrade (old airport designed by famous physician, astronomer and civilian engineer Milutin Milankovic, as noted above), including Old Belgrade Fairground.

On the other side, as antifascist associations preserved memory of the War, destroying structure relicts and reuse was out of question. At the end, nothing has been done about the Fairground for many years. New Belgrade arose around it, planned and designed in manner of modernism. New Fairground was built on the other bank of the river, opposite to the old one, so Old Belgrade Fairground lost the function and became just a toponym.

In communist/ socialist period, two master plans for Belgrade were made. In the first one (from the 1950.), the concept of Belgrade extension on the left bank of Sava was dominant and based on the principle of modern urban planning: wide, straight streets - axes, opened plan due to Charte d'Athenes.

Some basic characteristics of communist society enabled such deterioration of the area, and preservation of status quo for decades:

- Every aspect of economy was planned and centralized. In the market economy, there are many participants in city development, and it would be hardly possible to keep the area in the central part of the city without any developmental concept. Centralized economy may tolerate such "black holes" in urban fabric. The private or civil initiatives were not permitted in the field of memorial architecture and protection. In spite of that, the Old Belgrade Fairground was of the importance for the history and memory of Belgrade; it was neither protected nor marked as an important city memorial and historic site.
- The city land was in state ownership. So, legally this area belonged to the city, and the city government managed it.
- Urban planning was also centralized, with the city government, or more precisely Communist Party as the main factor in the planning process. All decisions were made at the Party Committee level and professionals just had to implement them.

TRANSITIONAL PRESSURE

It is hard to recognise the precise moment when socialist era ended and transitional period started. In other socialist countries of eastern block it is easy to define the breaking point, but in former Yugoslavia, this process was parallel with brutal decay of country, wars and nationalism. However, for Old Belgrade Fairground the radical change happened in 1987 when the complex was pronounced a cultural heritage of Belgrade. This meant new treatment regime for the area, which included protection and conservation. The decision was rather formal, as there was no particular action, but it was of enormous importance because it



protected the area of illegal building or other kind of intervention by private investors.

Although we can not specify exact start time of transitional processes, one should recognize that liberalization of market could hardly devastate complex. In the circumstances of free market, within the state with a high level of corruption and criminalization of public services, and unsuitable law and juridical systems, there are many wealthy investors interested for these pieces of land. For this paper, it is irrelevant how they got their funds: legally, illegally, or, perhaps, by war profiting, but they were and still are looking for space. They are interested for gaining the profit from the investment, and do not take care on historical and symbolic meaning of the site.

The demand for the building land in Belgrade is very high. The position of Old Belgrade Fairground is very good: on the bank of the



river, in the central zone, and infrastructural corridors passing nearby the complex area.

Another very important aspect of possible misuse of the Old Belgrade Fairground considered public asset. Public assets are, at the same time connected to laws, economy and mentality. In western countries that were without system discontinuity, mechanisms for

protection and reproduction of public assets have been established and have been continuously improved. The legislative about this topic is precise and moderate developers are considering it, and citizens are aware of its importance. In Serbia, none of these exists: laws about the protection of public assets are not specifically defined, instruments for their implementation are insufficient, and state is too weak to realise even these laws. Developers, on the other side, are aggressive in making profit. Nevertheless, prime problem is absence of citizen's consciousness and emancipation on this topic. People are not aware of their own responsibility for the preservation of the public asset.

The tradition of personal and community engagement disappeared during socialist regime. Centralized governing and decision making at the Communist Party level resulted in total exclusion of citizens in matters about city's future. The hierarchy was extremely rigid and inflexible, and non-institutional effort could not give any result. Partly, it was caused by ideological motto that Party already knew people's needs, but crucial reason was procedural.

Also, many people in Serbia and other countries of ex Yugoslavia, identify anti-

fascism and communism. Hundreds of thousands Serbian citizens lost their lives as victims of fascism, and most of them were not communists. The historians, sociologists and other researchers are already studying this phenomenon, and it is far too complex to be explained in this paper, but its reflections are recognizable in people's behaviour and treatment of historical monuments from period of World War Two.

The city parliament verified *Detailed Urban Plan for Monumental Complex Old Belgrade Fairground* in year 1992. The reason for this was "to enable reconstruction of monumental complex and building a memorial object. This is to be done in order to reconstruct complex as it was at the time of transformation into the concentrate camp..."

THE WAY OUT

The first impulse for preservation and reconstruction of the Old Belgrade Fairground was strictly individual. Art historians, planners, architects and journalists progressively realised imperative of personal engagement in struggle for such objectives. Previous regime did not leave any space for individual action or initiative, so some time was needed for people to take a new role – the role of active and conscientious citizens.

The institutions were too rigid and indolent, regarding bureaucratic inertia which is immanent to every system: ideological or democratic. Gradually, idea of historical and urban importance of the Fairground was developed through separate activity of intellectuals and enthusiasts. Then, their practice was articulated in series of public discussions, panels, exhibitions. Finally, this became a wide action which mobilized not only professionals interested in this topic, but citizens who want to keep the memory and different layers of urban identity.

The basic indicator of possible planning solution was, ironically, half life of the complex in post-war period. Art is the only human effort that does not insult the dead and is a stimulus for alive. And, historically, ateliers and artists' activities are referred to this space. On this basis, Belgrade Master plan 2021 acknowledged Old Belgrade Fairground as an area for

general reconstruction. Actually, it means that the Fairground is considered the cultural heritage to be protected as a whole, ambience treated integrally due to previous structure, use and memories. This is implemented into the Plan, and it is a matter of time when Detailed Plan for the area is going to be made.

CONCLUSION

After all, it is rather obvious there are two complex historic stories about the Old Belgrade Fairground. The first one is the history of the Fairground itself, from grandiose and modernistic idea, to ruined structure which is source of planning problems. Another one is the story of politicians' and planners' trouble to decide what to do with it. Result of both is The Fairground as it is today: devastated, inhabited with poor, although urban population, excluded from city's life, but with potential to be reconstructed and renewed. The possibility to keep memory of every important phase of the Fairground is its most precious item. At the same time, that is the only implication of the planning process that lasted for decades. Paradoxically, it is not negligible.

The case of Old Belgrade Fairground proves that in some situations it is preferable not to make a decision than to make a wrong one. Political and other social circumstances did not allow treating the Fairground in manner that could incorporate all layers of its complex history into solution, but made possible to keep status quo.

Also, there is another verdict that ensues after analysing case of the Old Belgrade Fairground. It concerns eternal question about "ideal planning circumstances". The planning of Fairground's reconstruction took many years, and in that period the completely opposite systems were on. The nature of socialism is complete centralization of political, legislative, financial power and still it was not environment

that allowed creation and implementation of good and lasting arbitrage. The limitation factor was ideology: power was there, but paths of its usage were directed by ideology.

Total and wild liberalization of the market is major characteristic of period that came after. The best possible action was to protect the complex of possible disturbance caused by private financial capital. Slowly, as legislative was consequently constituted and social awareness grew, the procedures for creating worthy solution were established.

The inheritance and the history can not be treated appropriately in extreme social and economical conditions. Ideological socialist government was crucial at the time, but selective in order to keep own supremacy. Afterwards, during transitional period, developers in the free market have their own priorities. Only socially aware society and society emancipated through democratic procedure is capable to recognise and protect historical and other values and public assets. Moreover, we will have an opportunity to test this statement in the case of Old Belgrade Fairground and its future.

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