

# Ask the People – Building Tourism Policies from the Perception of Residents – the Case of Novi Sad European Capital of Culture 2022

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## Abstract

*Tourism destinations need to actively engage all their stakeholders that apart from tourists, service providers, investors, and other, also includes residents that are not always in the focus of decision-makers. However, they can be a strong opponent when showing resentment towards the tourism development or the proposed plans. Therefore, the paper analyses the perception of residents towards the urban spaces of Novi Sad. The city is awarded as the European Capital of Culture for 2021 and therefore reassess its urban settings and tourism policies with respect to the wishes of residents. Data for the research was collected by in-person interviews with 797 local residents. The results show the residents are primarily satisfied with the green/recreational areas, and the most visited point is the city centre. The essential urban markers are Petrovaradin Fortress, The Name of Mary Church, The Matica srpska, The Danube, and Serbian National Theatre. From the practical perspective, the results can enable authorities and tourism officials to identify spatially dependent attributes that are important for the destination image and residents' quality of life.*

**Keywords:** urban spaces, residents, place image, Novi Sad

## Introduction

It has been shown that understanding the image of a place perceived by its inhabitants is relevant and linked to the successful development of marketing activities for the tourist destination (Blešić et al., 2014; Styliadis et al., 2018). In particular, Styliadis (2020) emphasizes that determining residents' destination image is beneficial for a variety of reasons including the following: better identifying a place's strengths and shortcomings assists in strategic planning improves the quality of life for residents; image is closely linked to community satisfaction, pride, sense of place, and community and place attachment, all of which are essential for a place's existence; residents frequently act as "tourists" in their own communities, attending

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attractions, hosting guests and spending more than usual on such visits; locals shape the destination image through influencing tourists' cultural experience and providing information while some locals go even deeper into social media sites that offer local expertise, helping to co-create value and differentiate destinations. Failure to identify the residents' perception may have negative implications, including resistance to tourism development, followed by opposition to proposed plans. (Pavluković et al., 2019). Thus, unlike visitors, the relations of residents with the tourist place are more complex and long-lasting (Stylidis et al., 2016; Stylidis et al., 2018). Furthermore, their micro-location within the test area should also be taken into account (Vujičić et al., 2018), which in turn can be necessary for the perception of urban spaces, which form the common denominator of all inhabitants.

It should not be forgotten that the destination's image could be directly related to the quality of life of the local population (Armenski et al., 2018; Stylidis et al., 2016). In this paper, we are primarily interested in the subjective dimension of quality of life, which, among other things, includes the experience of the space that the destination occupies and that makes it specific. Namely, the perception of public urban spaces is one of the elements in shaping the community's identity (both on an individual and collective level).

On 23 December a formal decision was made by the European Parliament and Council, on postponing the title-year to 2022 due to the coronavirus pandemic. This decision came into force on 1 January 2021, meaning Novi Sad will now be the European Capital of Culture in 2022, together with Kaunas (Lithuania) and Esch (Luxembourg).

Novi Sad, Serbia's second largest city, is made up of 15 outlying settlements. The Danube River, as well as the internationally significant road sections E-70 and E-75, travel through the city's gravitational zone, which also crosses two vital corridors: Corridor 10 and river Corridor 7). According to the 2011 census, the city has a population of 341,625 people. Novi Sad received an average of 89,663 tourists per year in the preceding 12 years (2002-2013), with 46,415 domestic visitors and 43,247 international visitors. The average length of stay for the time period specified is 1.9 days, which is typical of city locations. Foreign tourists have a higher average length of stay (2.1), compared to domestic tourists (1.7 days). The number of tourists has been steadily increasing over the last five years (2014-2018), with an average of 156,826 tourist arrivals and 313,025 overnight stays (Vujičić, 2020). The Petrovaradin Fortress, a complex tangible cultural monument representing a sophisticated military defensive system built throughout the 17th and 18th centuries for the aim of diverting Turkish invasions and rampart, is Novi Sad's most famous feature. Today, and for the last 20 years the famous music festival Exit is present (Besermenji et al., 2009; Cimbalević et al., 2021). Mentioned Novi Sad's major event provides the opportunity for experiencing the destination's culture and increasing visitor's knowledge about Novi Sad and Serbia (Zakić et al., 2009).

This paper aims to analyse the perception of the local population about the urban spaces of Novi Sad, which has been declared the European Capital of Culture for 2021 and is in the process of reviewing the settings of its urban spaces (Vasiljević et al., 2018). In addition to the general perception of urban spaces, the paper will look at the similarities and differences in perception between residents from urban, suburban, and rural areas within the same official administrative unit - the City of Novi Sad.

## Theoretical Background

### Destination image from the perspective of residents

A unique character or image is crucial in attracting tourists to a destination. The destination's image includes attributes such as uniqueness, sights, scenes, quality of the environment, safety, level of services, and friendliness of people (Gallarza, Saura, García, 2002). The importance of the image of a tourist destination is universally recognized (Stylidis et al. 2017; . It affects the subjective perception of tourists and the consequent behaviour and choice of destination. Thus, image plays a major role in destination competitiveness (Dwyer, Kim, 2003; Dragičević et al., 2012, Vujičić et al., 2020; Ćulić et al., 2021; Kovačević et al., 2021). However, a destination should actively and constantly engage all stakeholders (tourists, service providers, investors, etc.) to develop a positive image to attract visitors, provide funding from relevant institutions for tourism development activities and seek support from residents in connection with tourism development projects. (Armenski et al., 2018; Kovačević et al., 2018). Although there are many studies on the destination image from tourist's perspective, we can find fewer studies on this concept by the local population, which again are not usually grouped into meaningful and homogeneous groups (Merrilees et al., 2009; Stylidis et al., 2018). In particular, Stylidis (2020) emphasizes that studies that deals with residents' destination image do not provide a common definition, an interchangeable use of "destination image" and "place image" is also noted together with a vast variation in the measurement items used to capture the image

### Perception of urban spaces

Urban (public) space is an area where anyone can go and participate freely in a variety of activities (Nasution, Zahrah, 2014). In a person's imagination, urban spaces are known to develop a point of view of a place and a complete image of urban space is resultant of both the activities taking place and the enclosed characteristics such as facades, character of buildings, etc (Perovic, Folic, 2012; Pandey, 2020). Physical features and activities in urban space provide numerous benefits to one's quality of life, including improved health, increased social contact, and increased economic value. Thus, a good perception to urban public space could influence a good quality of life (Nasution, Zahrah, 2014).

Urban spaces do not have the value of cultural heritage in themselves, but because of the expression of cultural identity, that value is also attributed to them. At the same time, urban spaces are shaped by different cultural development processes and record the evolution of identity and can be a valuable cultural heritage (Munasinghe, 2013; Jurkovič, 2014; Wojciuk et al., 2016). There is a growing recognition of the importance of built cultural heritage for the social well-being of different groups living in rapidly developing cities (Tweed, Sutherland, 2007).

Forming a positive image of urban public spaces among the local population positively affects the sense of belonging to the community. At the same time, it is common knowledge that cities face challenges such as spatial segregation and suburbanization and that urban and suburban life are different from each other (Pisman et al., 2011). This spatial dimension of urban tourism is often neglected, although it can affect both the satisfaction of the inhabitants of the community and the image of the place among the inhabitants (Vujičić et al., 2018).

## Methodology

Data collection was performed by personal survey research on a sample of citizens living in the municipalities of Novi Sad and Petrovaradin. The research was conducted during April and May 2018. The sample was stratified by sex, age, and spatial distribution (according to local communities). A total of 797 respondents participated in the study. It was decided that the lowest age limit for the selection of respondents is 18 years (respondents must be of legal age). The final sample size is 2% of the total population of the analyzed area, and it meets the standards of statistical analysis.

**Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (By residential area)**

Characteristics	Urban area	Suburban area	Rural area
Male-Female distribution	1:1.15	1:1.03	1:1
Average Age	45.2	47.2	44.7
Employed	56.4	49.2	51.0
Unemployed	8.1	22.1	15.3
Retired	20.4	19.7	16.3
Households with salary as the main source of income	73.5	60.7	76.5
Respondents with elementary school	3.5	3.3	3.1
Respondents with high school or higher education	46.2	41.8	34.7
The average number of household members	2.9	2.9	3.6
The average number of children in the household	0.8	0.7	1.1
Households with an income of up to RSD 45,000	23.7	37.7	24.5
Households with an income of over 135,000 RSD	5.1	4.9	2.4
The average length of living in town/village (years)	18.0	26.9	31.1

Of the total number of respondents, 52% are female. The average age of the respondents is 45.6 years old. The majority of respondents are employed (55%), which corresponds to their age structure. The largest number of respondents have completed high school (52.4%), with no significant difference in the education of women and men. Almost two-thirds of the respondents cite salary/earnings as the main source of household income. The share of respondents living on social assistance is negligible, while other sources of income most often include financial assistance from parents/friends, scholarships, alimony. Almost three-quarters of the respondents live in an urban zone. On average, respondents have lived in their current location for about 20 years, which indicates that a significant number of respondents have lived in a certain part of the city since birth. Specific differences are noticeable in some socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents according to the residential zone (Table 1).

The data collection instrument consists of an original questionnaire consisting of a total of 92 questions that can be classified into three basic units (socio-demographic characteristics; characteristics of community life, characteristics of community culture).

## Results and discussion

The subjective quality of life in the community is shaped by the perception of urban public spaces (individually and as a whole), as well as by the assessment of the quality of public transport (which is one of the ways of communication between public spaces). The perception of public urban spaces implies not only a positive/neutral/negative attitude about some aspects of that space but also the frequency of its use, as well as the expected and desired changes/interventions in the public space. The results of the research indicate the relative satisfaction of citizens with urban public spaces (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Perception of urban public spaces

Attitude	Average rating	St. deviation	I do not agree at all	I totally agree
Novi Sad parks are very nicely decorated.	3.92	0.947	1.5	26.7
The city invests a lot in the development and protection of the Fortress.	2.95	1.129	12.0	9.0
I am very satisfied with the contents on the Štrand (public beach).	3.66	0.912	2.4	16.7
There is enough greenery in Novi Sad (parks, lawns, tree lines).	3.46	1.251	8.9	21.0
There are plenty of different facilities for visitors of Kej (Danube River bank).	3.47	1.066	4.3	16.3
The facades of public buildings are in excellent condition.	2.67	1.233	18.7	7.9
Novi Sad is a very clean city.	3.33	1.241	9.9	15.4
Overall average value	3.35			

Different characteristics of the respondents influence the attitudes about the perception of urban public spaces:

- there is a statistically significant difference in the satisfaction of respondents by gender in relation to the development of the Fortress and the facilities on the Strand - women are more satisfied with these urban areas than men;
- the age of the respondents is negatively correlated with the attitude “I am very satisfied with the contents of Štrand” ( $r=-.115$ ,  $p=.001$ ), which indicates that senior citizens are less satisfied with the facilities on the beach;
- education correlates with six of the seven stated claims about urban public space, namely: - positive with one statement (“I am very satisfied with the content on Strand” –  $r=.097$ ,  $p=0.01$ ) - negative with five claims (“The city invests a lot in the development and protection of the Fortress”, “There is enough greenery in Novi Sad - parks, lawns, tree lines“, “The facades of public buildings are in excellent condition.”, “Novi Sad is a very clean city”), which means that fellow citizens with higher education are more critical of the characteristics of public urban spaces;
- the level of total monthly income in the household correlates positively with two attitudes (“I am very satisfied with the contents on the Štrand”, “Novi Sad parks are very nicely arranged”) difference from persons with the lowest, and especially the highest total household income;
- housewives more often than other respondents positively evaluate the elements of public urban space (especially, Petrovaradin Fortress, greenery, Kej (Danube River bank)

- and cleanliness); in contrast, unemployed respondents are most dissatisfied with the appearance, facilities, and equipment of the city's public space;
- the suburban population shows the least, and the rural population the most satisfaction with some aspects of urban public space (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Perception of elements of public urban space, by the residential zone of respondents

Attitude	Average Value		
	Urban population	Suburban population	Rural population
Novi Sad parks are very nicely decorated.	4.01	3.61	3.77
The city invests a lot in the development and protection of the Fortress.	2.97	2.75	3.08
I am very satisfied with the contents on the Štrand public beach.	3.67	3.70	3.49
There is enough greenery in Novi Sad (parks, lawns, tree lines).	3.52	3.11	3.54
There are plenty of different facilities for visitors of Kej (Danube River bank).	3.51	3.25	3.47
The facades of public buildings are in excellent condition.	2.67	2.50	2.85
Novi Sad is a very clean city.	3.35	3.15	3.49

In addition to experiences, an essential element of the overall perception of public urban spaces is the frequency of their visits. The research showed that the respondents rarely visit public spaces intended for exercise and recreation (for example, outdoor gyms, running/walking trails, etc.). The city centre is the most visited, which is expected given the concentration of public services that citizens use every day. While men most often visit the city / rural settlements in the municipality, as well as the city centre itself, women, in addition to the city centre, are more present in public spaces intended for entertainment and socializing (for example, parks, beaches, playgrounds and other). This is especially true for those respondents who have children, which indicates the importance of adapting these public spaces to this category of the population (both in terms of accessibility and content).

All respondents gravitate towards the city centre, regardless of their education, while when it comes to economic activity, as expected, farmers gravitate to rural areas more often than other categories of the population. This also applies to the rural population. Respondents with higher middle property status have the highest frequency of stay in the analysed public spaces, although it is noticed that the farther the destination is from the city centre, the higher the share of the wealthiest citizens who visit. Conversely, citizens with the lowest household incomes are also the least mobile.

Finally, citizens experience space through aspirations, that is, desired interventions in its appearance, organization, contents, etc. The primary intervention that the respondents incline concerns communication in space - the construction of a pedestrian crossing over the Danube - namely, as many as 46.8% agree entirely that Novi Sad should have such a bridge. This can be related to the desire of the respondents that the suburbs of the Petrovaradin Fortress be turned into a pedestrian zone that would be intended for the development of tourism. Also, the respondents saw space for the development of an alternative mode of transport - bicycle transport.

The space in the community is recognizable by specific buildings, locations, monuments, people, and others which represent undoubted references to urban specificity and are an integral part of the urban image. Urban markers are part of a unique urban design. They are often hubs in the urban fabric that attract the urban/domicile population but also visitors. At the

same time, urban markers do not necessarily have a positive connotation - there are possible points in the urban space that do not evoke pleasant associations but again represent what makes a particular space recognizable and unique. In this research, the respondents clearly singled out five urban markers: the Petrovaradin Fortress, Name of Mary Catholic Church, The Matica Srpska, the Danube, and the Serbian National Theater. These are also the expected urban reference points. They maintain the continuity of urban tissue in the temporal but also spatial (physical and social) dimensions. The choice of the Petrovaradin Fortress as the most critical urban marker of Novi Sad clearly indicates that the citizens do not distinguish between the administrative borders of municipalities. Also, this urban marker shows consistency regardless of the respondents' residential zone. In addition to the above, citizens recognized as important urban markers and city parks, EXIT, the Synagogue, the City Hall, the Monument to Svetozar Miletic, Dunavska, and Zmajjovina streets, Fruska Gora, as well as bridges on the Danube.

Apart from the subjective feeling of personal social exclusion from the social life of the community by others, exclusion can also be manifested through the characteristics of space. In this case, the exclusion is reflected in the inaccessibility of public spaces (parks, squares, pedestrian zone, public spaces for recreation, etc.) to specific categories of residents. According to the respondents, public spaces are the most inaccessible to people with disabilities. All respondents agree on this, regardless of their socio-demographic characteristics and residential affiliation. In relation to residential affiliation, there are statistically significant differences in the attitudes of respondents about the (in) availability of public spaces to other categories of the population:

- respondents from urban areas believe that in the parts of the city where they live, there are the least barriers in public spaces for mothers with prams / small children, the elderly, and children;
- Respondents in rural areas point out that public spaces in these residential areas are most inaccessible for mothers with prams / small children and the elderly;
- Respondents in suburban zones are most dissatisfied with the availability of public spaces in these zones for children.

In addition to accessibility, elements of public space are characterized by other features. It refers to the presence of some aspects of public space in specific communities, as well as their organization. The total average score of the features of the elements of public spaces is 3.00 and varies depending on the individual element - the most positive is the public lighting (3.89), while the respondents are most dissatisfied with recreational elements / running tracks (2.26). There is a significant difference in the overall average score of selected elements of public space depending on the residential zone of respondents - while respondents in urban areas give the highest average score of elements of public space (3.11), the total average score of respondents in suburban zones is 2.81, and those in rural areas give the lowest average score of the elements of public space - only 2.66.

## Concluding remarks

This research aimed to contribute to the understanding of the elements of the perception of the local population about the image of the place, with special reference to urban spaces of Novi Sad. Two conclusions emerge:

1. Public urban space is not uniform, but narrower spatial units stand out in it (in physical, social, functional, aesthetic, communicative sense), so that, in fact, in the research of this problem, we should talk about public urban spaces; in addition to plurality, public urban spaces (no matter how diversified and specific) have a very significant common feature - they shape the overall quality of life of the local population,
2. As the local population is not a homogeneous category, its perception of public urban spaces differs; what determines the formation of specific characteristics of the experience of these areas are the socially mediated characteristics of the local population, such as age, gender, educational capital, economic activity and, of course, residential affiliation.

Behind the presented results is the author's intention to draw attention to the need to enable the local population to clearly and publicly articulate their views regarding interventions in public spaces. This refers to the need to recognize the interests "from below", as well as opportunities/resources for their realization. In this way, the authors consciously advocate the application of a participatory approach in research and planning the development of public urban spaces. As a consequence of this approach, potential problems can be avoided, and conditions can be created for urban spaces to participate unhindered in the development of tourist attractions and contribute to respecting the preferences of the population in the contemporary cultural context of urban tourism (Bellii et al, 2016; Gospodini, 2001; Pivac et al., 2019). A more detailed insight into the analysed problems could provide the scientific public with a better understanding of the way the local population perceives public urban spaces, not only physically but also socially, which is crucial for forming knowledge about the way communities function and develop. In addition, a more detailed, especially qualitative analysis of public urban spaces would provide a better understanding of the factors and dimensions of the city's image as a tourist destination, as well as the specifics of the local / recipient population and tourists in these public spaces. In addition to scientific, research on the perception of public spaces can also have multiple structures of practical significance. If practically oriented research on the perception of public urban spaces is set as participatory, then it is easier to avoid the "traps" of professional error and excessive expectations, and their results can be applied in shaping local tourism strategies and plans and defining measures to improve the quality of life. population.

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