

#17



On Paper I
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Differentiated Neighborhoods of New Belgrade

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The production of neighborhoods is always historically grounded and thus contextual. That is, neighborhoods are what they are because they are opposed to something else and derive from other, already produced neighborhoods [The] context-generative dimension of neighborhoods is an important matter because it provides the beginnings of a theoretical angle on the relationship between local and global realities.

—ARJUN APPADURAI

WHAT IS THE CENTER FOR VISUAL CULTURE AT MoCAB?

The Centre for Visual Culture at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade (MoCAB) was established already in the mid-1970s out of the museum's educational department. At that time, the Centre's programmes were guided by the methodology of permanent education and grounded in an ideological conviction regarding the social role of the arts. The main aim of the Centre was "education through art", and its activities comprised of a series of public seminars and lectures, held both inside the Museum and also in cooperation with schools, faculties, factories and public companies, with the goal to reach broadest public. In the 1990s, when the socialist Yugoslavia dissolved into ethnic clashes, MoCAB (as many other institutions in Serbia) was run by representatives of the hard-core nationalist movement and its role was to reproduce the dominant ideological matrix of "Serbian cultural Renaissance". The director "appointed" at the beginning of 1990s forced out his predecessor, threatening him with a gun. A man without the proper legal credentials to obtain this position, Radislav Trkulja, was not interested in the role and function of the Centre and this department almost disappeared throughout the decade. With the political changes in

Serbia in 2000, a new director, Branislava Andelkovic, and management came to the Museum and revitalized the role of the Centre, albeit with the limited resources of just one person, appointed to run a department previously consisting of three curators.

When I assumed this position in late 2005, I started working towards a profile of the role of the Centre, which had to be understood for it to adjust to the actual socio-political situation, but also to recent developments in art practices. The new strategy of the Centre was intended to continue local as well as international cooperation with educational institutions and professionals of various profiles and to create a platform for all of the contributors: an open laboratory where they could discuss issues surrounding contemporary art and its social function in relation to the contemporary art system and socio-political context that frames it. The Centre would thus be oriented towards both research on annually suggested topics developed and profiled by the engaged team, and towards education through public presentations and talks by team members and guest experts of the program. Above all, the idea of this working methodology was to create a melting pot for individual or group production, wherein research or artistic projects would critically address the issues suggested with the general annual topic of the Centre. The main challenge for Serbia transitional society, with its new ideologies and systems of value—manifested in the perverse “marriage” of neo-liberal “predatory” capitalism and aggressive Orthodox Christianity as two driving forces—is finding how to engage in critical and discursive thinking about the formation of this kind of social space and about the inscription of art and social sciences in its public sphere.

The first annual topic, put forward to the initial research group in 2006/2007, was titled *Differentiated Neighborhoods*. It espoused a very broad perspective, but its theoretical subtext was Henri Lefebvre’s idea about the possibility to create differentiated spaces (neighborhoods) in opposition to neo-capitalist homogeneity. The context of transition in Serbia was important for the choice of Lefebvre as a reference, as the onset of neo-liberal capitalist ventures in the urban core of Belgrade, and especially in New Belgrade, had the side effects of homogenisation and segregation in urban spaces, which effectively produced a situation that was similar to Lefebvre’s examples for our reflection.¹ The idea was to have a topic that would provide a good platform for the development of different approaches within the interdisciplinary working group—an ‘empty signifier’ to be filled with content throughout the working process.

SUGGESTED TOPIC – DIFFERENTIATED NEIGHBORHOODS

An important step in the conceptualisation of the project and its further profiling within the working group was to analyse the common connotation of the term ‘neighborhood’ as derived from the vocabulary of architecture, urbanism and sociology and related theoretical concepts.² The landmark theory of neighborhood change was developed in the Chicago School of Sociology as early as in the 1920s by Robert Park, Ernest Burgess and Lewis Wirth. Their first theoretical concept was based on comparisons with natural systems; it was therefore called the ‘ecological theory of urban development’.³ Because the model took up the analogy of life cycles, the prospect of a neighborhood was its inevitable decline over years.

In recent theory Arjun Appadurai has made an important distinction between locality—understood as a phenomenological quality that is relational and contextual rather than scalar or spatial—and the neighborhood, which is understood to actualise existing social forms, spatially or virtually.⁴

Synthesizing analytical readings of different aspects of the notion of neighborhood, very useful terminology has been coined by Ray Forrest and Ade Kearns who discerned four major aspects of

the neighborhood:

- *community* —the neighborhood as a meeting place for local inhabitants.
- *consumption niche* —indicates differentiation regarding lifestyle or consumption choices.
- *context* —mostly has negative connotation, wherein social behaviour is biased by segregation and exclusion through the naming and defining of social groups.
- *commodity* —understood to foster the inner spatial isolation and bonding of citizens with similar viewpoints and prospects for creating an “oasis” of security and shelter.⁵

Having this and many other theories in mind I was above all interested in the contribution of Henry Lefebvre's thought to the analysis of the 'neighborhood'.⁶ Lefebvre suggests that, in spite of all attempts of modernity and modernization to homogenize and commodify space, the project of 'normalization' conducted by the state ultimately provokes opposition and negativity. The consequence, in his view, is a plurality of what he calls 'differentiated' spaces that continue to persist under neo-capitalism, wherein difference is registered and linked to the clandestine or underground side of life. Thus, one of the most important theoretical issues put forward to the analysis was that of disclosing societal processes driving towards homogenisation and segregation in the urban realm in different social systems and historical contexts, and finally of detecting them in the actual situation of the case study, i.e. neighborhoods of New Belgrade.

From the historical perspective of many European countries, one could argue that two major forces—religion and economy or trade—have guided the process of homogenisation in urban structures. In multi-confessional environments and cities, the quarters were clearly marked between communities of different religion. With the rise of capitalist mode of production, and the attendant secularisation of the public life, class and economic motive became the primary drives of urban segregation in the city. The social (class) segregation through the process of homogenisation in urban environment created different extreme 'neighborhoods' such as isolated 'residential' areas and even gated communities on one side and illegal settlements and ghettos on the other, all creating different socio-spatial environment.

On the other hand, in the countries of 'Real socialism' (as Soviet propaganda referred to the Eastern Bloc under its sway), the idea of the socialist city created a different kind of urban/social stratifications and neighborhoods. The 'socialist city' does not necessarily imply social housing, but most cities that could be designated as such eventually developed into big (suburban) settlements of blocks of skyscrapers, (in East Germany, these were called "plattenbau") that were often perceived similarly to dormitories. In the period of post-socialism, the resulting thorough urban changes affected these city blocks as well, be it in the direction of gentrification, or as it often happened, towards socio-spatial transformation into "urban ghettos".

LOCAL CASE STUDY

One of the main questions to be addressed by the Centre for Visual Culture research group was that of the term and concept of 'neighborhood', and specifically what this represented in socialist Yugoslavia, keeping in mind the social concept of 'workers selfmanagement' and what this means now, in the period of rapid urban transformations and transition within the recently formed country of

Serbia.

The initial concept behind the building of New Belgrade, which was first conceived after WWII, was the creation of a capital for the new socialist society in a completely unpopulated space, actually a swamp, which was ideal for inscription with new social projections and ideological constructs.⁷ The post-war idea of a new society had to be materialized in the form of new urban structures and the architectural shapes of the socialist city thus constituting a new administrative, economical and cultural capital of Socialist Yugoslavia. The first urban plan of New Belgrade was adopted after the public competition in 1947, which had as its goal functional organization within an orthogonal urban structure with two dominant buildings of the Palace of Federation and Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. This “contemporary socialist architecture” as it was defined at that time, quickly gave up the idea of socialist realism, with the conflict between Tito and Stalin in 1948. The idea of social modernization and modernist orientation was thus proclaimed. Already in the 1950s, the entire concept of constructing an administrative centre for the socialist country was abandoned and in next two decades social housing prevailed in New Belgrade. The failure to create a complex multifunctional spatial-urban structure produced a central space in the capital city which remained as an economic, social and finally a spatial void. New Belgrade thus never managed to fulfil either the physical or the symbolic space envisioned by the ‘socialist society of workers’ self-management’.

After the political changes in the early 1990s, the earlier failure to realise the concept of full urbanization in New Belgrade made possible the creation of new social paradigms to be inscribed in this space and its urban structures. New Belgrade could be now seen as “the city within the city” and as one of the biggest and most populous counties of Belgrade that continues to face fast urban restructuring, both in terms of gentrification and ghettoisation. On one side, there is a problem of a loss of the public space that was never fully developed in New Belgrade and is now overtaken by big supermarkets and shopping malls. On the other side, the new segregation, which is driven mostly by economic, social or even racial distinctions, has created new homogenized neighborhoods and even new “urban ghettos”. This recent socio-political context of New Belgrade is putting into focus urban issues such as: social migration, “crises of identity”, processes of homogenisation and de-homogenisation, the impact of neo-liberalism and processes of gentrification, to name the most prominent. Particularly important, are the difficult questions facing urban areas with marginalized social groups like refugees, Roma people that were not accepted to certain blocks in New Belgrade, or the Chinese community.

A VENUE FOR THE FIRST PUBLIC PRESENTATION OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The initial idea of the team was to have the first public presentation of the project in one of the two old cinemas of New Belgrade called Fontana. The entire centre of the Local Community under the title “25th of May” (referring to Tito’s birthday) was built in Block 1 of New Belgrade from 1963–1965 and it was popularly called Fontana, after the cinema. It was also comprised of basic amenities such as the offices of the Local Community, a restaurant and a small socialist version of a department store. This was one of the rare public spaces in New Belgrade and also a vital meeting place in a yet to be defined area where a neighborhood could be formed. At the time when it was opened, Fontana was one of two cinemas in the whole of the municipality of New Belgrade, that by the end of the 1970s had just under 100,000 inhabitants; now it has officially almost 250,000. Its symbolic

importance for young generations was crucial, and many people from this part of the town say that they grew up in cinema Fontana. Besides this cinema-as-nexus, the other possibilities to “hang around the hood” were the basketball courts or nuclear shelters where local rock bands often held rehearsals. In the course of recent urban transformations, it has transpired that the cinema Fontana (as with many other cinemas) has been closed for years. It has been privatised and it waits for the new owners to decide what to do with it. Most of the old Fontana centre is “privatised” by the biggest company in Serbia called Delta. In this situation it was impossible even to enter the old cinema, not to mention to get the permit to do a project inside, even though the Municipality of New Belgrade mediated in this process and tried to help us to reopen the cinema.

The logical choice was to find another space whose symbolic connotation relates to the socialist period and whose role was important for the concept of workers self-management—a uniquely Yugoslav contribution to the Marxist theory. That space could be found in each housing block in the form of a basic municipal administrative unit called Local Community (*Mesna zajednica*), where the workers would exercise their rights. It was also a meeting place for local inhabitants, the space where balls for the military officers or other festivities and celebrations would take place.

The spaces housing Local Communities still present a big opportunity for citizens and all organized groups of Serbia’s new and fragile civil society to meet and raise public debates on many issues regarding the socio-spatial aspects of life in the neighborhoods. They have managed to “survive” in the new social system but their visibility and importance is diminishing in spite of the local population’s need for new kinds of self-organization. They have a similar organizational structure (of employed people and the board) to that developed under socialism, but they now serve mostly as voting stations or spaces for rent for different sporting and folklore activities.

After going around New Belgrade and meeting the secretaries of several Local Communities I suggested to the group the staging of our presentation in Block 30, where the Local Community space and furniture were quite old, not renovated and thereby resembled the atmosphere of some thirty years ago. Its location was central in New Belgrade. A particular point of interest in terms of spatial organization within its neighborhood is that this bloc is situated immediately next to the new building of Radio and TV B92 (a symbol of civil resistance to Slobodan Milošević and his regime in the 1990s, now a commercial corporation) and the very new GTC “Class A” office building, that symbolizes the tendencies to transform New Belgrade into a business centre or else a big shopping mall.

INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Throughout the course of the development of the project, two working meetings of the entire working team, each four to five days long, were organized to discuss: the concept of the project, how to profile it and scan the area of New Belgrade, and how to get acquainted with some already produced art/architectural projects and research addressing the local context. In the resulting debates individual positions and areas of research interest were expressed and the decision was made to continue with all individual projects that were presented to the group.

After the first public presentation of the project organized in Local Community Dunavski Kej on the 29th of November 2007 it was possible to discern three conceptual clusters based on the focus of respective individual projects.⁸ The first one concerned revisiting the concept of New Belgrade as the administrative capital of Socialist Yugoslavia and the development of its neighborhoods under socialism. The basic question that could be asked in this respect was how to deal with socio-spatial

homogenisation vs. differentiation?

The second one referred more to urban transformations in New Belgrade and the (im)possibilities of avoiding socio-spatial segregations and the overpowering spread of neo-liberal capitalist forces into the “empty” spaces in New Belgrade. Here the main question posed was how differentiated neighborhoods, as opposed to shopping malls and business districts, could be formed and who decides about this?

The third conceptual cluster dealt with the “inside view”—from within subcultural, marginalized and segregated neighborhoods and meeting places in New Belgrade and a sense of belonging to the “hood”. The most relevant question for this cluster was how to initiate the creation of a community or neighborhood?

The Neighborhood in Socialist Modernism

Sabine Bitter and Helmut Weber, an artist-duo from Vienna have produced a documentary film entitled *New: Novi Beograd 1948–1986–2006*. The film revisits a never published text by Henry Lefebvre from 1986, which was his contribution, together with two French architects Serge Renaudie and Pierre Guilbaud, to the “International Competition for the New Belgrade Urban Structure Improvement” held that year.

Bitter and Weber filmed participants of the project reading parts of Lefebvre’s text in the interiors of various buildings that were very important for the socialist society of Yugoslavia and that relate to the idea of socialist self-management and the nonaligned movement. Through this retrospective view of the architecture of a former society, the artists ask the question of what has happened in the last twenty years since Lefebvre submitted his text with propositions for the urban restructuring of New Belgrade with its emphasis on Yugoslavia’s potential to realise the idea of a new socialist city and new modes of self-management and self-organization.⁹

New ideology in old neighborhoods

Stefan Römer, an artist and theorist from München, produced the documentary film or road-movie *Boulevard of Illusions: Learning from New Belgrade* (2007) which, as its title suggests, focuses on one of the main Boulevards in New Belgrade whose name was changed from Boulevard of Lenin to Boulevard of Mihajlo Pupin, after the famous Serbian scientist. While driving along the Boulevard, in the direction of New Belgrade, one can see the remains of the socialist plan of an administrative axis of the new capital city with just two realized buildings, Central Committee of the Communist Party, now business centre Usce, and the Palace of Federation, the function of which is yet to be determined. On the way back to the city, on the other side of the Boulevard, the situation has changed and one after another, new corporate buildings and banks are rising.

What was once a common traffic flow of workers/citizens going from their apartments in New Belgrade to work in the old city is shown to have recently changed direction, as the New Belgrade is turning into the business district or “City”.

With his car gliding smoothly along the boulevard, as in a classic road movie, Stefan Römer uses a combination of voice-over narration by four interviewed persons and text animations using sentences taken from graffiti seen in New Belgrade to tell stories of life in a local neighborhood—its urban development, social history, the local graffiti artists and the art context in general—capturing the spatial manifestations of the two ideological constructs facing each other over one boulevard.

Belgrade-based Aleksandar Dimitrijevic meanwhile reflected on changes in ideology and the

consequences for the “Brave New Neighborhoods of New Belgrade” as he calls them. He questions what has happened to the ideals of socialist revolution that were imbedded in the very process of building the new socialist city and new capital, ideals like humanism and the social equality of all people which were manifested in the very names of the streets of New Belgrade such as ‘Proletarian Solidarity’, ‘Brotherhood and Unity’ or ‘The Antifascist Council of the Peoples of Yugoslavia’. As a result of the failure of the old system to produce a “revolutionary space”, many (both physically and ideologically) empty spaces remain waiting to be filled with new concepts of socio-spatial organization. As Aleksandar Dimitrijevic has pointed out, by eliminating the unwanted ideological points from the context, and preserving solely what is deemed neutral because it is “new” and “modern/contemporary”, Serbian turbo-capitalism has succeeded, using a parasite tactic, in entering the empty spaces of New Belgrade.¹⁰ In the prints produced by Dimitrijevic, he juxtaposes the old and the new ideological constructs and their attendant manifestation in public space using their visual (landmark office or bank buildings vs. workers actions) or textual (revolutionary poems and slogans) representations.

Building a neighborhood

Dusan Šaponja and Dušan Cavic, the Belgrade-based journalists and authors of series of short documentary films on city for TVB92 produced a documentary film titled PRC: *Recreational Centre for Retired*. In it, they captured the atmosphere of one of the last social clubs of its kind in New Belgrade—spaces that are disappearing with new urban transformations and that are mostly being turned into shopping spaces. The film shows a strong sense of belonging on the part of the senior citizens to their neighborhood and to the small space of the recreational centre, an oasis where they spend their entire days.

On the foundation of the Museum of Revolution in a park near the Palace of Federation in New Belgrade, the Rotterdam-based artist-duo Bik Van der Pol organized an event under the title *Art is either Plagiarism or Revolution, or: Something is Definitely Going to Happen Here*. The story of this unfinished building reflects the entire process of development in New Belgrade. The institution of the Museum of Revolution was formed in 1959 and two years later a large Yugoslav architectural competition was opened for its new building. The project chosen for realization was by the architect Vjenceslav Richter and the process of building started in 1961. Due to the lack of finances, the building was not realised and only the foundations were laid. This limbo situation persisted until 1981 when the entire process was definitively aborted. In their project, Bik Van der Pol invited the public to join them on 1 December 2007 from 2PM to 6PM to take part in activation of the Museum of Revolution. The projected event on the site was treated as a “making of ” and everything that actually happens on the film set was created for the occasion: all the participants that come and go, eat, talk and walk on the foundations of the Museum of Revolution become “actors” in a film that Bik Van der Pol subsequently edit. One of the questions the artists wanted to raise with this “event” is that of how a community or neighborhood can be formed, what can be its initiation. The other issue that the event wanted to deal with was how to present, show, conserve and exhibit experience, and also how to cherish memory.

CONCLUSION/CONTINUATION

While trying to sum up the content of the project in one sentence for the flyer announcing its first

public presentation, I wrote that it explores different connotations of the term neighborhood, in the vocabulary of its urban, architectural and social contexts, and that it analyses the historical development and actual dynamics of urban transformations of the neighborhoods of New Belgrade. This sentence could be seen as a common denominator and a platform for all different approaches to the topic developed in the course of more than a yearlong process of working within an international and interdisciplinary team. However, there is one particular topic that I would like to underline as a possible future focal point of the public debate that projects of this kind could potentially raise; namely how to build on the local socio-political legacy of workers selfmanagement and reaffirm this concept in the new context where different kind of selforganization would be desirable?

In the turmoil of the rapid and wild urban transformations of New Belgrade the questions that Henry Lefebvre himself has posed when he reflected the idea of “new citizenship” linger on.¹¹ How to find new relations between the individual, society and the State? And how to redefine citizenship within the vagaries of globalisation (or “mondialization” as he called it), taking into account both immigration and migration, which continue to shape the urban/social landscapes and new forms of belonging? Lefebvre’s plea for new citizenship itself relied strongly on the right to difference and self-management. He was seeking new rights for the citizen. This included the rights to: information, free expression, culture, identity within difference (equality), self-management, city-space and its services, among others yet to be defined.¹² In the text submitted for the “International Competition for the New Belgrade Urban Structure Improvement” Lefebvre elaborated on this new role for the citizen in the following way:

The right to the city comes as a complement, not so much to the rights of man (like the right to education, to health, security, etc.), but to the rights of the citizen: who is not only a member of a “political community” whose conception remains indecisive and conflictual, but of a more precise grouping which poses multiple questions: the modern city, the urban. This right leads to active participation of the citizen-citizen in the control of the territory, and in its management, whose modalities remain to be specified. It leads also to the participation of the citizen-citizen in the social life linked to the urban; it proposes to forbid the dislocation of that urban culture, to prohibit the dispersion, not by piling the “inhabitants” and “users” one on top of another, but by inventing, in the domains and levels of the architectural, urbanistic, and territorial.

In the local context, one of the crucial aspects for the development of possible *differentiated neighborhoods*—as opposed to economic, ethnic or racial socio-spatial segregations fostered by the “predatory capitalism” of today—is the potential for new types of self-organization in local communities. If Lefebvre defined self-management (autogestion) as: *knowledge of and control (at the limit) by a group—a company, a locality, an area or a region—over the conditions governing its existence and its survival through change*, it is through this notion of self-management that different social groups may be able to influence their own reality and even to fight for spatial justice as Edward Soja suggested.¹³

NOTES

1. In the course of the project, the group decided to focus specifically on New Belgrade

and its neighborhoods.

2. In brief elaboration of the year's conceptual theme, I revisited some of the key points (elaborated in this text) in the development of theories on the 'neighborhood'. I also distributed the related theoretical literature on the topic to all participants of the initial research group as a kind of reader.

3. The first major publication was Park, R. (ed) 1916. *The City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

4. Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

5. Forrest, R. and A. Kearns. 2001. 'Social cohesion, social capital and the neighborhood', *Urban Studies*, Vol. 38, No.12, p. 2142.

6. Interestingly enough, Lefebvre was well known in socialist Yugoslavia since the translation of his books as early as the 1950s; this is unlike Anglo-Saxon literature where he was more recently "discovered". He was also present in the journal for Marxist theory *Praxis* and at the Korcula Summer School where philosophers and social critics from the entire world have gathered. Because of the Mediterranean atmosphere of the island of Korcula, and the open air debates, Lefebvre has described the Summer School as "Dionysian Socialism".

7. This concept was best elaborated in the unpublished Ph.D. of Ljiljana Blagojevic, an architecture theorist from Belgrade. See Lj. Blagojevic, 'Strategije modernizma u planiranju i projektovanju urbane strukture i arhitekture Novog Beograda: Period konceptualne faze od 1922. do 1962. godine' (Ph.D. diss., Belgrade University, Faculty of Architecture, 2004).

8. More detailed information on the presentation of the project and all individual contributions can be found on the website www.nbhoo.org

9. The unpublished text by Lefebvre was introduced to the research group by Professor of Architecture, Ljiljana Blagojevic. She had located it in the archives of the international competition.

10. Paraphrase of an unpublished statement of the artist.

11. We ought to keep in mind that, in the above-mentioned text for the competition in New Belgrade, Lefebvre claims that, as with many other cities, Belgrade failed to realise the idea of the "The Socialist City". This was mainly due to its zoning which was based on conceptual and morphological schemas that could have led to nothing but failure, both in social and urban terms. He stated that the decision to "authoritatively separate, disjoint and disarticulate" the parts of a city would eventually kill it, as could be expected with any other "complex living organism".

12. Elden, S., E. Lebas and E. Kofman (eds) 2003. *Henri Lefebvre Key Writings*. London, New York: Continuum, pp. 218–219.

13. Regarding Lefebvre's definition see *Ibid*. The right to selfmanagement that Lefebvre was writing about involves the rights to democratic control of the economy, and therefore of companies, including national or nationalized companies, i.e. those that have, up to now, remained under some degree of state control. Interesting for the local context is that Lefebvre was arguing that exactly because of self-management Yugoslavia was one of the

rare countries to be able to concretely pose the problem of a New Urban. Edward Soja was one of the guest experts contributing to the project; he gave two public lectures, one in the Museum of Contemporary Art and one at the National Library in Belgrade.

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