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Toward a sustainable urban regeneration? Urban heritage between neoliberal forces and community preferences

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Abstract. The paper discusses a relationship between the neoliberal forces shaping contemporary urban transformations and the social sustainability of recent regeneration projects focused on urban heritage. Analysing two post-transitional cases, based on two different approaches, the paper will provide an insight into the dominant processes influencing both practices, as well as their anticipated/announced social sustainability and its achieved level. The first case is from Serbia - the Power Plant "Power and Light" - which was the first one generating alternating current in Belgrade. Located in the Dorcol area, this ex-industrial setting is situated close to the city center. Since 2005, the entire area has undergone a significant transformation into a luxurious residential and commercial complex, initiated by private investors and directed by city authorities in order to change the previous urban image. The second case, the Contemporary Art Center in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, represents different approach. Created in 1997, the center is a non-governmental organisation of public interest. In 1995 the Municipality of Plovdiv obtained the right to locate the center within the remains of the ancient baths of Rome, which were rebuilt under the Turkish Empire. As the 16th century monument, the building belonged to the municipality and in 2004, the three-year period of support started, provided by the association Art Today (the Swiss cultural program), as well as the National Heritage Fund in Bulgaria. The analysis will be based on the selected principles of social sustainability, simultaneously highlighting the problems of heritage (re)use and regeneration in a challenging global environment of uncertain financial flows and shifting local governmental priorities, which could put on hold or totally ignore the aspect of social sustainability.

1. Introduction

Post-socialist urban transformations have been highly visible during the end of the 20th Century, reshaping the image of most CEE cities. Post-socialist city is highly defined by its unique political and socio-economic heritage [1]. However, such urban (re)development became a result of three different levels of transition – political/institutional, economic and, finally, urban restructuring [2]. Consequently, the reshaped image of the cities that were conducting urban regeneration projects had to address not only the spatial transformations, but the reinterpretation of symbolism that such spaces carried over time. The start of 21st Century introduced broadening the spectrum of sustainable development, mainly emphasizing the social component. Thus, sustainable urban regeneration had to include more holistic approach and increase values that were confronted with (transitory) neoliberal pressures.



This paper discusses a relationship between the neoliberal forces shaping contemporary urban transformations and the social sustainability of recent regeneration projects focused on urban heritage. Analysing two post-transitional cases - the Power Plant "Power and Light" in Belgrade, Serbia and Contemporary Art Center in Plovdiv, Bulgaria - the paper will provide an insight into the dominant processes influencing both practices, as well as their anticipated/announced social sustainability and its achieved level.

2. Setting the boundaries of power – Market vs. Sustainability

At its early stages, urban regeneration was highly appealing as a tool for repositioning and rebranding the cities that were held by either dispersed degrading structures, or whole urban areas – usually deserted and neglected relics of past values. With systematic changes in policies, state owned properties embraced privatization – enabling the introduction of neoliberal framework into political and economic processes [3]. Entrepreneurial approach thrived, as it attracted international investment and construction companies, enabling acquisition of valuable assets and real-estate. In order to preserve architectural, social and environmental values of such sites, most post-socialistic countries, faced with community backlash for nondemocratic processes, declared certain degree of cultural protection. Protected cultural sites thus limited the entrepreneurial approach, shifting the process of urban regeneration towards more socially aware development. Such interventions were mostly visible during the early 2000s. However, government limitations on cultural or industrial heritage, while lessening the negative impacts of market led development, limited options for future reuse. Substantial numbers of such areas were facing degradation, due to imposed constraints.

2.1. Inclusive urbanization

Rapid urbanization and the negative effects of increased consumerism identified the importance of collective decision-making. Democratic principles, especially in post-socialist transition countries required adjustment of governing bodies – ensuring the avoidance of social exclusion and potential obstacles to democratic procedures. The power relation of urban actors usually results in conflict of interests [4], and (early) participation and inclusion needs to be embedded in all phases of the decision-making process [3]. The creation of social values creates higher community engagement, and transmits values that are inherited for future generations, and expresses cohesive narratives of the past [5]. The centrality of community has inspired the development of a new participatory inclusionist approach for safeguarding cultural heritage and benefiting local communities. [6]

2.2. Embracing the EU Context

Urban policies, aligned with emerging sustainability initiatives and imperatives, recognized urban regeneration as one of the key elements of (re)development of cities since the early 1990s. Continuing to promote both cultural identity and design quality [7], the EU funded several projects of regeneration (RESCUE, UPP etc.). Urban pilot projects (UPP) and initiatives emerged (EU URBACT network), homogenizing the key aspects of sustainable regeneration, addressing the issues of current state of European (re)development. Projects that were focused on participation, in the UK (e.g., ROCK— dealing with the link between cultural heritage and sustainable urban regeneration, [8], France and the Netherlands, affected other member countries. However, it heavily shaped the general principles of sustainable urban regeneration, which other countries tried to implement as well. The acceptance of sustainable principles varied, resulting in different pace of their actual application, i.e. Serbian transition towards neoliberal models differs from neighboring Bulgaria. Turbulent 1990s estranged Serbia from the western principles, and the actual transition started in early 2000s. More so, Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007, while Serbia still has the candidate status. Such political context resulted in higher application of sustainable regeneration principles in Bulgaria, while Serbia still struggles to actively implement policies and adjust the legislation.

3. Polarized urban heritage transformation approaches

Urban transformations currently aim to include elements of sustainable principles in order to prevent decay and decrepitude of heritage. The social component and the user-environment relation should be highly considered in regeneration of cultural heritage [9], while regeneration of urban industrial heritage should balance and integrate the preservation-conversion-refurbishment process [10]. In post-socialist countries, such relations are usually turbulent, and remain heavily affected by the market led development. The power balance between the needs of the public, and the entrepreneurial drives affecting the regeneration often remain to be equalized within the governmental/municipal bodies. Socially sustainable regeneration requires strong governmental leadership, in order to apply the goals defined in the main international agendas included in the EU policy and practice. Therefore, crucial principles such as high quality and flexible urban design, local cultural identity and inclusive and participatory approach will be used to derive the indicators of anticipated transformation in two different paths of urban regeneration in Serbia and Bulgaria.

3.1. Power Plant "Power and Light", Belgrade, Serbia

Located in lower part of historic city center in Belgrade, the power plant "Power and Light" was the first built power plant with altering current in 1932 – according to the project of Swiss Society for Electrification and Traffic from Basel. Lower parts of the Danube right bank were industrialized during late 19th and early 20th Century - however, the power plant was active until 1967. The former industrial zone stretches 3 km from Marina Dorćol to Pančevo Bridge. The power plant was fueled by lignite from Kostolac city, using purpose-built river port for its transport. The complex of the ex-power plant and the nearby river port form spatio-functional unit known as "Marina Dorćol". It consists of 8 zones (figure 1): 1) power plant building, 2) power plant cadastral plot, 3) power plant crane, 4) water pump, 5) filter facility, 6) Marina Dorćol cadastral plot, 7) multi-family housing, 8) heat plant complex. The complex currently has limited access and activity. Nautical club and its boats on the river are accessible, while the rest of the complex is mostly gated and has forbidden access. The power plant occupies three cadastral plots and has a cubic shape with a rectangular base of 2800 m². The gantry crane, which uses two electric motors to overcome the 140m distance between the pumping station and the Danube.



Figure 1. The complex of Marina Dorćol and the ex-power plant: (1) power plant building; (2) power plant cadastral plot; (3) power plant crane; (4) water pump; (5) filter facility; (6) Marina Dorćol cadastral plot; (7) multi-family housing; (8) heating plant complex. Source: Authors.

Its architectural features reflect the influence of the Bauhaus style [11] (flat surfaces with modern glass and steel materials). The architectural features of the power plant form a dominant landmark on the Danube bank (figure 2), and they have become the industrial heritage symbol of the lower Dorćol area. However, the power plant significance surpasses the architectural and landmark features – it represents the key change in electrification, thus ensuring its role in urban and social development of Belgrade.



Figure 2. The power plant “Power and Light” during the 1930s (left), current state of the power plant and the gantry crane (right) source: <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/београд.491.html:579346-Београдске-приче-Прва-струја-за-расвету-и-трамваје>; <https://www.in4s.net/tesli-mozda-izmakne-snaga-i-svetlost/>.

The first plan for future regeneration was announced in 2005 by the city government. Degrading for almost four decades, the complex was finally recognized by the city authorities as an extremely valuable zone, intended for business and luxurious housing. The first step of transformation was set in detailed urban plan of the central zone of the spatial unit of the Marina Dorćol, made by Planning Institute of Belgrade. The plan envisioned protection of the crane and the pumping station facilities, while the housing (maximum of 12 floors) should be developed east and west from the power plant. It was in accordance with the Master Plan of Belgrade and it had strict protection regulations from the Institute for the Protection of Monuments of the City of Belgrade. However, the following year introduced ambitious ideas of regeneration by private developers. In 2006, private Israeli company proposed building over 140,000 m² – twice than the original plan. In 2010 the company obtained a new owner and the building of luxurious residential and business complex was scheduled for 2011 with shortened building permit procedure. The extensive development plan was suspended in 2012 due to the unpaid obligations lawsuit initiated by Belgrade Land Development Public Agency. The following years revised the goals of the regeneration of the Marina Dorćol complex. Political synchronization on both national and city level resulted in the adaptation of the Decision of the government of the Republic of Serbia, where the power plant complex was declared a cultural monument (2013).

In 2016, the city terminated the contract with the private development company, returning the Marina to the city disposal. In 2019, Belgrade Land Development and Public Agency published a new advertisement and this time the owner became Czech company as the only bidder. The function remained a mix of business and housing complex, however, Commission for the Plans of the Belgrade City Assembly was introduced in the plan approval process (figure 3). During this period, the Marina development was affected by the new Linear Park plan (figure 4), which included Marina area as a part of their wider regeneration project. Unlike in previous projects, the office of the city architect

cooperated with the Belgrade Society of Architects launching competitions for conceptual solutions of the linear park. Sustainable development and participation were the key elements this time, and external consultants were hired (CEUS and BELLab) [12, 13] in order to organize sessions with all the stakeholders. The public reactions to this plan were mixed. The participatory process was welcomed, although the critics argued that the plan is viewed primarily through their commercial potential, far more than as a park and green oasis for the needs of citizens and their free use.



Figure 3. The proposed regeneration of Marina Dorćol (2019). Source: <https://www.gradnja.rs/projekat-marina-dorcol-fiala-kuzmanovic-sebre/>



Figure 4. The Linear Park plan and Marina Dorćol complex (section 5). Source: <https://www.gradnja.rs/linijski-park-beograd/>

Urban design quality presented in projects for Marina Dorćol and the power plant “Power and Light” varied during the course of its vision. Although the first detailed regulation plan established building parameters, not much attention was given to integration of facilities within the complex. Well designed, but mostly generic public spaces failed to implement the elements of environmental sustainability. In addition, the new architectural elements lacked the symbolic interpretation of existing ones, and were seen as inconsiderable. Future projects included greater diversification of activities, using contemporary design for improvement of spatial identity. In particular, the current proposed project introduces “fourth nature”, linking nature and technology and adding new symbolic value to the space.

The local cultural identity of the complex was not defined in the first plans. The creation of new iconic image of the Marina Dorćol was dominant. However, the retained industrial heritage and contemporary architectural forms were not in cohesion, thus local identity was endangered. The introduction of the Museum of Nikola Tesla in the following project contributed to the local cultural identity increase, proposing a potentially iconic public space around the power plant building. With the introduction of linear park, the proposed transformation of the power plant complex included more diverse public spaces and typologies, thus incorporating more “green” approach which aims to reconsider the issues of local cultural identity.

The democratic elements in urban planning in Serbia were present even in socialist period, however the first process of urban regeneration of the power plant complex (2005) was exclusive. The detailed plan excluded numerous stakeholders. Therefore, it was perceived as a two-way process between local government and investors. After the shift of power and synchronization on both national and city level, the further projects lacked diverse professional inclusion. However, improvement can be seen after 2018, when the investor and city initiatives resulted in production of the linear park plan. The participation was present from the conception, and it was highly diverse during the process of the creation of the detailed regulation plan for the linear park.

3.2. Chifte Banya - Contemporary Art Center in Plovdiv, Bulgaria

Plovdiv city in Bulgaria dates back to Ancient Greek Era and it is one of the oldest cities in Europe. Large numbers of historical legacies can be found in the city, mostly dating from Ancient Roman to Ottoman rule time (1364-1878). Surviving ruins in the city reflect the importance of Plovdiv during the ancient times, due to its strategic position. Over the course of history Plovdiv remained cultural, economic and political centre, and is currently the 2nd city in population and importance in Bulgaria. During the Ottoman rule, it was one of the major centres for Bulgarian culture and tradition. However, the transformation of the city fabric was highly influenced by Islamic architecture. Public baths were being built, and according to 17th century records, Plovdiv had 8 public baths and over 100 private ones. Their function has been lost over the centuries, and most of them have faced either demolition or the loss of their initial use. The biggest public bath was Takhtakale Bath, with over 1000 daily users, demolished in 1910. The second largest bath, Hunkyar Hammam, was transformed to accommodate Eastern Rumelia Assembly, and in 1885 the archives of the court. However, it was heavily damaged in the earthquake in 1930. Of all the public baths in Plovdiv, only two survived the unfortunate events of time. Eni hamam witnessed several name changes, due the shifting political climate, and after 1925 it endured two decades of municipality initiatives for its demolition. No longer a public bath, but a furniture warehouse, it was almost destroyed in the fire. The second remaining public bath is Chifte Banya (figure 5), formerly called Chelebi Kadia. It is the largest public bath in the Balkans, however its construction period varies in literature. The officials state that it was built in 16th Century, while some argue that it was built in 1460, by Isfandiyaroglu Ismail Bey. It was called Chifte (pair) due to presence of separate male and female sections. The stern and elegant style, with animated wall masonry belongs to the typical Early Ottoman period. Archaeological studies indicate the existence of an early medieval church in the vicinity. The slab from an altar of the public bath is currently curated in the City Archaeological Museum. The Chifte bath house was partially restored during the European Month of Culture in Plovdiv, and it is currently Contemporary Art Center [14]. In 1995 the

Municipality of Plovdiv obtained the right to locate the center within the remains of the ancient baths of Rome, which were rebuilt under the Turkish Empire. As the 16th century monument, the building belonged to the municipality and in 2004, the three-year period of support started, provided by the association Art Today (the Swiss cultural program), as well as the National Heritage Fund in Bulgaria.

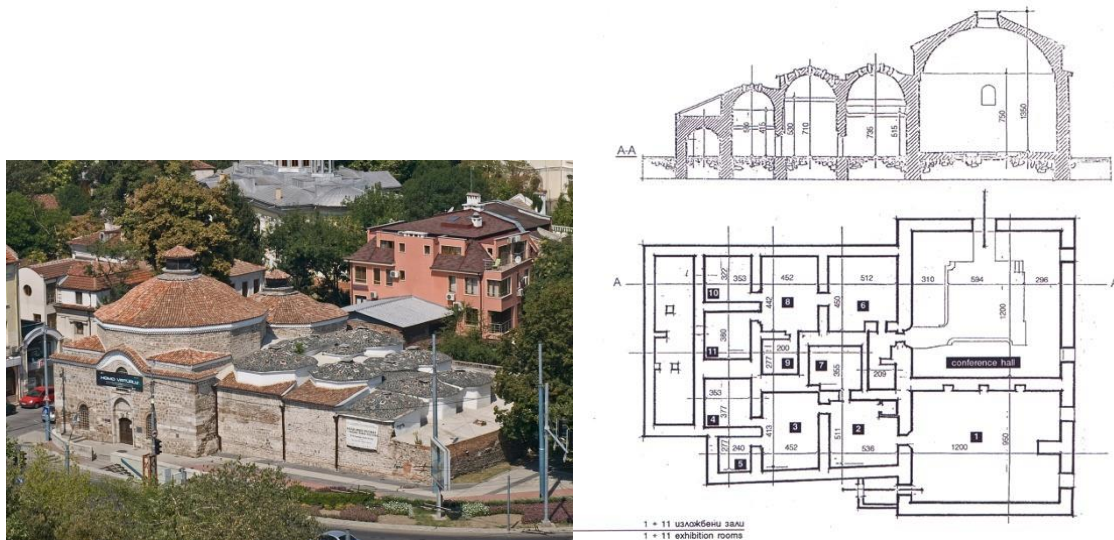


Figure 5. Contemporary Art Center in former Chifte Banya. Source: <https://www.artfactories.net/Center-for-contemporary-art-Plovdiv.html>

Notably, the nongovernmental organization “Art Today Association” is registered in public favour [15]. Their roots date back to late 1990s, and they have been active in presentation the art and culture affected by the transitory changes of social and economic life in Bulgaria. The idea of transformation of the public bath into contemporary art center generated both public and municipal interest, and the association signed free-lending contract with the municipality. The cultural activities take place in 500m² of previously abandoned space of the public bath (figure 6). The Center is not limited to artistic exhibition activities only, but includes multimedia laboratory and artist-in-residence program.

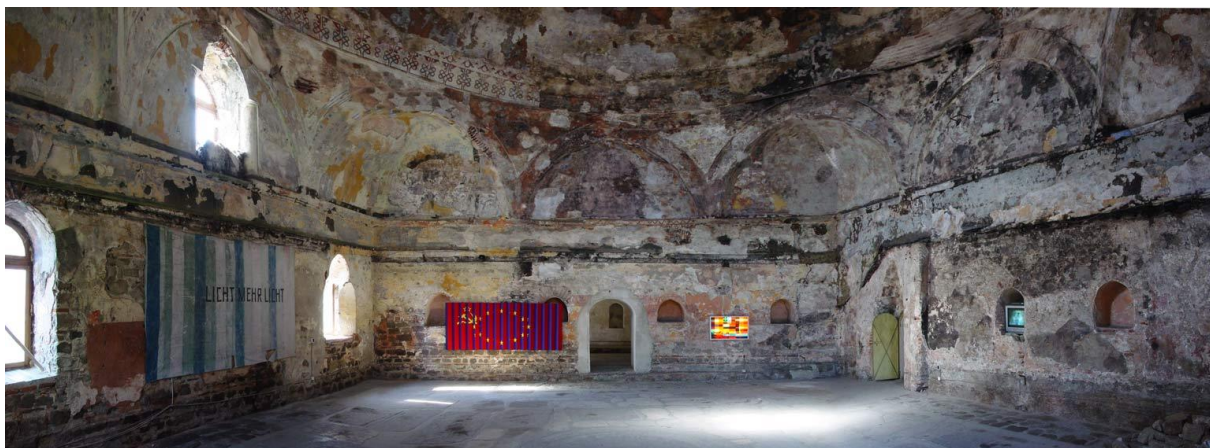


Figure 6. Contemporary Art Center interior exhibition space. Source: <http://www.visitplovdiv.com/en/node/826>

The high quality urban design principles are less observable in the process of the transformation of the Chifte Banya. The plot and the object position limit the area that could be improved with new quality design. However, the façade underwent a reconstruction. Unfortunately, the building interior did not have extensive renovation, and only several parts were made functional in order to serve Contemporary Art Center exhibition/technical needs.

Local cultural identity can be observed as an upgrade. The bath house was a legacy on its own, withstanding turbulence over the centuries. It had transformed from utilitarian to decaying symbol of the ancient history, and Ottoman dominance in the region. The current transformation reflects the identity of the public – as it incorporates the common vision of artists interpreting the effects of post-socialist transition - shared values of dialogue and universal culture that respects and preserves the past, and focuses on dialogue and democratic future.

The municipal decision to concede and reactivate the former public bath space to cultural activities and local activist organization demonstrates the openness for local ideas and visions. The indirect participation avoided exclusion, and focused on further improvements of activities related to culture and art.

4. Conclusion

The post-socialist transition remains the key issue of many countries in South-Eastern Europe. Each country struggles, to certain extent, to maintain the necessary sustainable principles in order to produce desired effects of urban transformations. The socialist legacy explored in Belgrade power plant “Power and Light” gives insight into different stages of neoliberal influence on regeneration. The remnants of former socialist system are highly visible in the early stages of the transformation process. The government-investor relation and the exclusion of public formed a gap between preferred vision and profit-led development. Therefore, the first plan parameters enabled maximized profit, and had no intention to upgrade local values and their implementation. The principles of sustainable regeneration were not present, nor considered. However, the conditions towards more sustainable regeneration have been created in 2013. The government declaration and the promotion of power plant as cultural monument limited the profit influence, slowly enabling shared values to get incorporated into the plan. The plan for linear park in 2019, although including many stakeholders and interested parties (civil sector in general), still was unable to deliver fully sustainable transformations to the power plant complex. Collective decision-making remained rather declarative, as the proposals for the linear park faced certain level of public disagreement. On the other hand, the transformation of Plovdiv’s bath house into Contemporary Art Center resulted in reactivation of unused and devastated cultural heritage, and was not facing multiple neoliberal constraints. Opposite to Belgrade example, the Art Center used post-socialist civic reaction to socialist models in order to create more democratic or transitional space. The local government was open for cooperation, and the bath house transformation was backed up by several funding options. The foreign capital was channelled to promote cultural activities and community empowerment, while in Belgrade case it promoted profit. Cultural activities were even further promoted in Plovdiv, as the city was the first Bulgarian city chosen to be European Capital of Culture in 2019. The neoliberal forces affecting urban transformations often result in propositions/solutions that are the opposite of community values, needs and expectations. However, profit lead development needs to meet local values and apply norms and principles defined by locally contextual specifics in order to achieve socially sustainable transformations, avoiding social polarization while creating new vision for urban regeneration.

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