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INDICE

1	Il fiume come progetto urbano	Alberto Clementi
APPRENDERE DALLA STORIA		
5	Il Tevere, infrastruttura storica di Roma	Anna Laura Palazzo
15	Lungotevere Boulevard	Rosario Pavia
26	Come il fiume nella città	Mosè Ricci
33	Envisioning the Planetary	Jose Alfredo Ramirez
ESPERIENZE PARALLELE		
45	Città e rischio idraulico. Progetti resilienti per Dhaka e L'Avana	Romeo Farinella
61	Berlino Swim City? Riflessioni in cammino lungo la Sprea	Antonella Radicchi
70	Waterfront regeneration in post-socialist Belgrade	J. Zivkovich, Z. Djukanovic
81	Lubiana, la città e il fiume	Domenico Potenza
87	La trasformazione del lungofiume danubiano a Bratislava	M. Manicone, M. Scacchi
103	La città e il suo fiume: Francoforte sul Meno	Raffaele Mennella
116	L'identità di Lione disegnata dall'acqua	Claudia Mattogno
125	Lungo le linee delle acque della Mosa a Liegi	Rita Occhiuto
135	Allontanarse del fiume!	Carlos Llop Torné
145	Le vie d'acqua nella Spagna moderna	M.G. Cianci, F.P. Mondelli, M. Rabazo Martin
158	"Giocare di sponda": Torino e i suoi fiumi	Paola Gregory
169	Il fiume Pescara, una risorsa (latente) della città	Ester Zazzerò
Call for paper:		
FIUME COME PROGETTO URBANO		
195	Tre fiumi adriatico-balcanici e tre città	Lorenzo Pignatti
202	Convivere con l'acqua	Luca Velo
211	Rijeka Riconversione creativa e trasformazioni urbane lungo il fiume Rječina	Stefania Grusso

>>



>> FIUME COME PAESAGGIO

- 219** Paesaggi evolutivi | Claudia Di Girolamo
226 Il fiume come paesaggio. L'esperienza di Rouen lungo la Senna | Tiziana Casaburi

CONDIZIONI PER L'INTERVENTO

- 234** Il Tevere nel sistema Roma. Un patto tra fiume e città | P. Cannavò, M. Zupi
245 Verso un progetto co-evolutivo di riverfront | Filippo Angelucci

ESPERIENZE DIDATTICHE

- 262** Il riverfront di Pescara | D. Potenza, A. Damiani,
G. Girasante
268 Tre tesi per il fiume Pescara | Ester Zazzero

LA CITTÀ ARTISTICA

- 287** Perlustrare una Città artistica | Luca Porqueddu
289 Roma, Tevere | Monica Manicone
294 Il fiume in una collezione di sguardi | Pietro Zampetti
297 Flumen | Matteo Benedetti

LETTURE

- 311** Liberiamo i fiumi. Rapporto WWF 2019
recensione a cura di Ester Zazzero

Waterfront regeneration in post-socialist Belgrade: benefits and risks

Jelena Zivkovic, Zoran Djukanovic

Key words: waterfront regeneration, post-socialist city, grassroots projects, megaprojects, Belgrade

Abstract

Cities all over the world are (re)discovering their waterfronts as places for public enjoyment, and as opportunities for new economic development. Although waterfront regeneration has been well studied in developed countries, only recently have researchers begun to explore it in post-socialist context. We contribute to this line of the research by examining the process of waterfront regeneration in Belgrade, Serbia. The paper presents three phases in redevelopment of Belgrade's central waterfront, and analyses their benefits, risks and links. These phases were realized through different approaches to urban regeneration: a) as grassroots events by *Public art & Public space* programme, b) as bottom-up formation of Savamala creative district, and c) through top-down megaproject "Belgrade Waterfront".

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century urban waterfronts are dynamic places where nature, people, and economy meet. Waterfront cities around the world are rediscovering the potentials of these areas for public use and new development. They are regenerating and developing their formerly industrial waterfronts into mixture of land uses that reflect a post-industrial vision of a better urban future (Yocom et al. 2016). The main purpose of these actions is to reverse the decline of waterfront areas by improving their physical structure, life and the economy with a goal to make cities attractive places to work, live and visit (Wesley Scott & Kühn, 2012; Zivkovic, 2006).

Today, a variety of approaches to waterfront regeneration exist, and span from small scale, grassroots, bottom up approaches, to large-scale, top-down approaches, known as megaprojects. Both approaches are widely discussed in literature, but mostly in relation to developed capitalist countries. Only recently the phenomena of waterfront regeneration has been analysed in relation to specific context of post-socialist development (Grubbauer and Camprag, 2019; Cvetinovic et al., 2016; Zekovic et al. 2019, Radosavljevic, 2008; Lalovic et al., 2015; Zivkovic and Djukanovic, 2010; Djukanovic and Zivkovic, 2015).

This paper attempts to contribute to this body of research and examines the process of waterfront regeneration in Belgrade, the capital city of former socialist Yugoslavia and of the Republic of Serbia today. After setting the context of post-socialist urban development in Serbia, it provides an overview of historical rise and decline of the Belgrade's central waterfront area, and further focus on the three phases of its contemporary redevelopment. These three phases represent different approaches to urban regeneration: a) as grassroots annual events initiated and delivered by *Public art & Public space* educational programme, b) as bottom-up formation of Savamala creative

district, and c) through top-down waterfront megaproject “Belgrade Waterfront”. We discuss their benefits, risks and links in order to conclude on how post-socialist transition context helped shape waterfront regeneration in post-socialist Belgrade.

Development Context: Belgrade as Post-Socialist Capital City

Belgrade is the capital and the largest city in Serbia, with a population of about 1.6 million. The city is located on the Balkan Peninsula in south-eastern Europe, at the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers. Today, Belgrade is a political, economic and cultural centre of Serbia, and one of the main tourist destinations in this part of Europe.

Contemporary urban development of Belgrade has been shaped by the specific social, political and economic changes that took place in Serbia and other ex-Yugoslavia countries in the last three decades. Serbia is a post-socialist country in a multilevel transition: from socialism to capitalism, from collectivism to individualism, from autocracy to democracy (and back!), and in that sense, Belgrade should be understood as a “post-socialist city”. This term refers to South and Eastern European cities that experienced economic, institutional and social transformation after the collapse of the socialist system. In these cities, some material and ideational socialist and post-socialist legacies remain present, and are entangled with contemporary global processes. In this way they influence the socio-spatial changes and shape the actions of citizens, economic and political actors (Hirt et al., 2017).

Although Serbian cities had the better starting position compared to other post socialist cities, policies adopted since 1987, and the events that followed (Balkan wars, economic sanctions and the breakup of the state) devastated the cities of Serbia during the last decade of 20th century (Petrovic and Backovic, 2019). During this period, urban development was characterised by slowness to transform the economy, establish public order and democratic institutions, as well as by the significant presence of illegal construction and a barter economy. This has led to the emergence of the unregulated capitalist city, similar to developing world cities (Petrovic, 2005).

At the beginning of the new millennium (after the demise of the Milosevic regime), the country started to experience some political and economic stabilisation and a growth of foreign investment. Unfortunately, legal and institutional transformation was only partially accomplished, as it required the dissolution of informal links between political and economic actors (Vujovic & Petrovic, 2006). In such circumstances, the economic actors had a great power to shape the urban environment, supported by politicians who were in position to craft the institutional framework and to make choices which projects to back up. Being stuck in this situation, planning experts didn't have sufficient professional autonomy (Petrovic and Backovic, 2019). Additional problem was a low level of civic engagement in the planning process and in public life in general, as one of the socialistic legacies. All of this defined the context for waterfront regeneration in Belgrade that started at the beginning of 21st century.

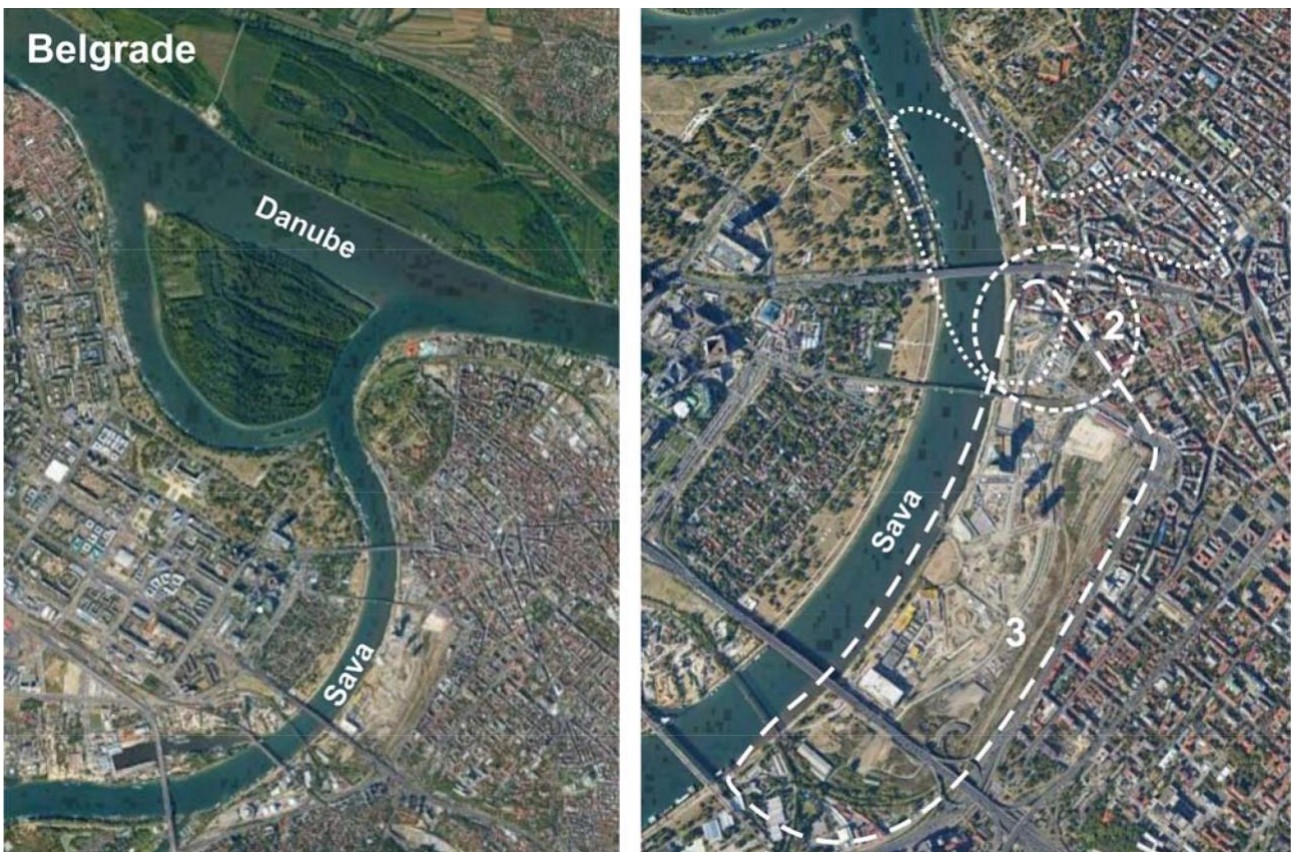
Urban Regeneration of Sava Waterfront in Belgrade

Sava waterfront in Belgrade – a historical overview

The city of Belgrade has a unique position at the confluence of two international rivers – the Sava and the Danube. These two rivers divide the urban area into three units while, at the same time, integrate it around centrally located Great War Island. As such, the city was predestined to develop in relation to its rivers (fig.1 and fig.2). Throughout the history, being located at the East–West “fluvial border“, the city suffered from numerous attacks from its rivers, but also became an important merchant city (Zivkovic and Djukanovic, 2010).



(Fig. 1) Sava waterfront in Belgrade, Photo: Jelena Zivkovic



(Fig. 2) Three phases of central Belgrade's waterfront regeneration: 1 - Public art& Public space events, 2- Savamala creative district, 3- "Belgrade Waterfront project"; Maps by authors based on Map data: Google Earth, Maxar

Technologies

During the 19th century, the business and commercial urban core was in Savamala, waterfront area on the Sava River. At the beginning of 20th century, Belgrade's centre moved to the top of the hill.

Industrialisation introduced new activities on the Sava waterfront, such as industrial and port complexes, railroad and central railway station (Radosavljevic, 2008). Those industrial structures made the city turn its back to the rivers. In 1961 the new Belgrade Port was established on the Danube riverbank, leaving the existing industrial facilities obsolete on the Sava riverbank. In the following decades, many planners, architects, artists and city officials dreamed of Belgrade descending to its rivers. A variety of waterfront redevelopment visions were created, but never delivered. Being vulnerable to political and economic fluctuations, they ended up as seductive visions of the better future. It was at the beginning of the 21st century, when the first small steps towards river revitalisation were taken that led to more significant changes on the Sava waterfront. Three phases of Belgrade's waterfront regeneration will be further presented in detail (fig.2).

Regeneration phase 1 – “Public art & Public space” events (2003-2004)

Public spaces in Serbian cities were experiencing significant physical and social neglect and decay in the last socialist and first post-socialist decades. This was related to the range of political and economic problems, as well as to the change in value system during social transition, in which individualistic values replaced collective ones.

In order to help change this situation, the *Public Art & Public Space* project (*PaPs*) was established in 2003. Founded as a grassroots project, that brought together the university professors, assistants and students as well as professionals in design, art, social and humanities disciplines, *PaPs* evolved into the official programme at the University of Belgrade Faculty of Architecture (see more at: <http://www.publicart-publicspace.org>). The aim of the programme is to integrate public art into urban design education, and to use it for enhancing meaning, use, and value of central and marginal urban public spaces. Having placemaking as a theoretical and normative framework, the programme affirms collaboration between design disciplines, local communities and authorities when working on projects in the civic realm (Djukanovic & Zivkovic, 2015).

The first two *PaPs* annual events were focused on the idea of bringing citizens of Belgrade back to their rivers. The area around the old Sava Port was chosen for planning, designing and delivering spatial interventions, activities and events that were supposed to revive interest for the Sava River and the riverfront.

a) Project “Step towards the River” - The first *PaPs* project aimed to re-establish connection and to lead people from the city centre to the Sava River. The strategically important area of intervention was chosen (between main pedestrian Knez Mijailova street, Kalemegdan fortress, Savamala district and the river) in order to make projects' activities more visible. The spatial strategy was to sprinkle the paths to the river with the “magnetic dust” of new attractions that will lure people between the public spaces in the area. The aim was not to speed up the walk, but to make it more enjoyable. The *PaPs* annual project "Step towards the River" encompassed 13 workshops conducted by interdisciplinary students' teams that worked with the team of mentors, local community and officials. The total of 3 academic institutions, 7 national public institutions, 15 local public institutions, 2 institutions of the civic sector, and 22 private sector participants were involved in creating or supporting the project. The one-day event "Step towards the River" took place on the 12th of July 2003 and was opened by the Mayor of Belgrade, and more than 2,500 people attended the event (Zivkovic and Djukanovic, 2010). Joyful events and the intensity of urban experience created a new meaning of the Sava riverfront - the old Sava port became a *public gathering place*, at least for a day! (fig. 3)



(Fig. 3) Step towards the River by Public Art & Public Space, Photo: © PaPs archive



(Fig. 4) Belgrade Boat Carnival by Public Art & Public Space, Photo: © PaPs archive

b) Project “Belgrade Boat Carnival” - Building on “Step towards river” success, the aim of the second *PaPs* project was to organise a big event that will celebrate Belgrade’s rivers and showcase its riverbanks as lovable public spaces. This is how the idea of the “Belgrade Boat Carnival” was born. The one day event took place on 24th of July 2004. in the former Sava port area and included: events on the riverside (student design exhibition, children’s theatre and workshops, boat models exhibition, fish soup cooking competition), daily events on the river (water jumps, sailing boats, rowboats and jet ski parade) and final event - 250 boats in a carnival parade (fig. 4). More than 100,000 people attended this event. Next year, “Belgrade Boat Carnival” became an official Belgrade’s special event.

The results of *Public Art & Public Space* annual events show that well planned, temporary, public-oriented projects can work not only as creative exercises in urban design education, but also as generators of change with significant spatial and social effects (Djukanovic and Zivkovic, 2015). By constantly attracting people, they created familiarity with waterfront public spaces and raised awareness of their importance for city life. As a consequence, the investments and cultural activities increased in the Sava Port structure “Beton hala”, as well as in nearby Savamala area. All of this led to the reconceptualization of the Sava riverfront in urban planning documents and to institutionalisation of “Belgrade Boat Carnival” as one of major city events. The main social effects refer to the fact that *PaPs* experimental educational projects educated not only students, but also citizens, local and national governments, and helped establishing links between different sectors in the process of placemaking.

Regeneration Phase 2 – Savamala creative district (2008 -2012)

The second waterfront regeneration phase started in 2007, and reached its peak during 2012–2014, through the formation of Savamala creative district. The Savamala quarter is located in Belgrade's central Savski venac and Stari grad municipalities, and stretches along the right bank of the Sava River and Karadjovdjeva Street. Due to development of Sava Port in the mid 19th century, it became the vibrant economic and cultural centre of Belgrade. After relocation of the Port facilities to the Danube River, and with formation of the new urban centre on the top of the hill, Savamala area was neglected for decades. But its rich cultural and architectural heritage, combined with traffic bottleneck and vivid street life, created specific atmosphere that constantly attracted tourists and artist (Cvetinovic et al., 2016; Vanista et al., 2016).



(Fig. 5) Savamala creative district;Photo: Jelena Zivkovic



(Fig. 6) Savamala – Mixer festival, Photo: Jelena Zivkovic

Public art & Public space (PaPs) events showcased the potential of the Savamala's riverbanks, thus helping the Municipality of Savski Venac (whose officials took part in *PaPs* events) confirm their vision of regenerating Savamala based on culture and creativity. This vision was first presented at the Architectural Biennale in Venice in 2006 (Jocic et al., 2017), and then came into being in 2007, by opening of the first cultural centre in the area (Kc Magacin). In the years that followed, supported by Savski venac municipality and international cultural institutions (Goethe Institute), a lot of local and international organisations and cultural entrepreneurs focused their actions on Savamala (KC Grad, Mixer house, Nova Iskra design incubator,...) aiming to reactivate abandoned places through participatory, cultural, artistic and educational activities (Cvetinovic et al., 2016) (fig. 5). In addition, from 2012-2016 Mixer festival of creativity took place in the area, contributing to creation of synergies between cultural and economic actors, city officials and local communities. At the same time, many cafes, restaurants and shops were opened in the area, supporting the creation of Savamala as a new hot tourist spot in Belgrade (Vanista Lazarevic et al., 2016) (fig. 6).

Gradually, a variety of bottom-up spatial interventions and small-scale cultural projects transformed the space, helped create a new identity of Savamala as a creative and cultural district, and have grown into a kind of informal platform for exploring the alternative futures for Savamala. Savamala culture-led revitalisation became an emblematic example in western Balkans of how local government, cultural collectives, local entrepreneurs and citizens can work together (Cvetinovic et al., 2016).

The weak side of these regeneration efforts was that local citizens were not the main actors in these interventions, although some efforts to include them in activities existed. Their inclusion into regeneration process is very important because a new trendy image could lead to gentrification (Vanista Lazarevic et al., 2016) and commercialization of urban space (Jocic et al., 2017). Another key problem was that Savamala bottom-up efforts failed to integrate with official planning instruments and depended too much on external financial support. As Cvetinovic et al. point out (2016:23) *“The lack of strategic development goals, public funding and institutionalised approaches for cultural institutions and agendas certainly makes these bottom-up activities seem ephemeral and sporadic. Consequently, they could be wiped away by any whim of more powerful interests and political influences focused on Savamala spatial capital.”* This is actually what happened in 2014 when the state-led “Belgrade Waterfront” project came into being: the BWF company settled in Savamala and imposed new values that made a clear contrast with established cultural patterns.

Regeneration Phase 3 – “Belgrade Waterfront” megaproject (2011 -...)

The third phase of the waterfront regeneration refers to the initiation and delivery of “Belgrade Waterfront” (BGWF) megaproject. This urban project is part of national collaboration between Arab Emirati and Serbia, headed by the Government of Serbia, and aimed at improving Belgrade’s cityscape and economy by revitalizing Sava amphitheatre. It is a unique example of state-led, top-down waterfront regeneration in this part of the world, as a joint venture between the Republic of Serbia and Abu Dhabi-based investor Eagle Hills.

The location of this mega-project is the area of wider Savamala that includes Sava amphitheatre. Sava amphitheatre is an important city location that has been a subject of many studies and visionary projects. The Master Plan of Belgrade 2021 treats the location as one of the most valuable in Belgrade, while recognizing large projects as instruments for the Plan implementation (Radosavljevic, 2008). Therefore, how this area will develop and how public interest will be achieved, is an important task in waterfront regeneration process (Lalovic et al., 2015) (fig. 7).



(Fig. 7) Location of the Belgrade Waterfront project, Photo: © Aleksandar Kujucev

The idea of the “Belgrade Waterfront” (BGWF) megaproject has been announced to the public in 2012 as a part of Progressive party election campaign, and came into being after adopting the Agreement and Law on Cooperation between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of United Arab Emirates in 2013. BGWF was verified as a national priority, and the main legal precondition for its realization was the adoption of a *lex specialis* - a Law on establishing the public interest and the special procedures of expropriation and issuance of construction permits for the BGWF (Lalovic et al., 2015). During 2014, Serbian government founded the Belgrade Waterfront Company in order to mobilize public funds for the BGWF implementation. Besides that, BGWF has been integrated ex-post into the Master plan of Belgrade in 2014, and in 2015 Belgrade Waterfront Spatial Plan has been adopted (Zekovic et al., 2018).

The BGWF Plan envisages the construction of two million m² on 177.27 ha in three phases (8–30 years), with expected total investment of about €3.5 billion EUR to be invested by the Serbian government and Emirati partners. The project includes office and luxury apartment buildings (6128 flats), Belgrade Park, Sava Promenade, five-star hotels, Belgrade Mall and Belgrade Tower. Policy-makers promoted the BWP by emphasizing its role in creating new employment (for 200 000 people), in providing high-quality services, in enhancing tourism, etc. Project realisation started in 2014. with reconstruction of Belgrade Cooperative building in Savamala. Phase I included building of riverside residential development - BW Residences, whose construction started in 2015. In spite of expected positive effects, there are several challenges and risks that BGWF project brings. In spatial terms, it will for sure change the identity of Belgrade, but the question remains – for better or for worse. It has been already recognised in literature that generic architecture of BGWF reflects the global concept of neo-liberal “Dubaification” (Koelemajj, 2020) (fig. 8).



(Fig. 8) Model of Belgrade Waterfront project, Photo: CC BY-SA 4.0, Leeturtle - Own work, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=48994040>



(Fig. 9) Belgrade Waterfront project in 2016 and 2020, Photo: Jelena Zivkovic

Besides that, the recent research on legislative mechanisms, contractual strategies and modes of governance involved in the BGWF project's delivery (Grubbauer and Camprag, 2019; Zekovic et al. 2018; Lalovic et al., 2015) points out that BGWF can be considered "as an extreme example of state-led regulatory intervention, characterised by lack of transparency and haste in decision-making processes, all of which serve to prioritise private investors' interests in project delivery above the principles of representative democracy" (Grubbauer and Camprag, 2019:649). In addition, there was a low level of public informing, the citizens were mostly excluded from the decision-making process and the protests of citizens and NGOs, initiated due to all above mentioned problems, clearly reflect insufficient transparency and democracy in the planning of BGWF (Zekovic et al., 2018)(fig. 9).

Conclusions

The overview of the proces of waterfront regeneration in Belgrade showed that both bottom-up and top down approaches are possible in post-socialist city development, and that both approaches bring certain social and spatial benefits and carry risks. Besides that, we can also acknowledge that post-socialist context helped shape waterfront regeneration in central Belgrade in both positive and negative ways.

Public art Public space events and development of Savamala creative quarter confirm that grassroots, bottom-up activities have a potential to point out to alternative urban futures of waterfront areas. They show that a need to change socialistic urban reality brought about a positive impulse to make interventions in urban public spaces, and that in the context of underdeveloped civic sector - academia and artists can work as carriers of these kind of changes. These two development phases show the *continuity* in approach and values that stand behind regeneration activities: *PaPs* grassroots annual events revealed the potential for development, and also, by informing and educating the local municipality officials, it paved the way for their support on development of Savamala creative district. Working in synergies, they enabled certain physical and functional transformation, and helped creation of the new positive identity of the area.

But, the post-socialist legacy of underdeveloped democratic institutions, lack of strategic planning instruments and inability to link grassroots interventions with official planning and strategies, made all these positive changes only temporary and sensitive to political changes and economic interests. The change of national and municipal government brought changes in values, actors and their (power) relations in delivering urban development. Third phase of waterfront redevelopment through BGWF megaproject, clearly presents a *break* in the way that Belgrade's central waterfront developed further on. This top-down approach imposed new values and prioritized global economical and national political elites. In that sense, it opened the question of public interest, addressing *who gets what from waterfront regeneration*.

What will future bring to Belgrade's waterfront is difficult to say. Although BGWF project enabled creation of new jobs and boost of some economic activities, development through megaprojects is vulnerable even in developed countries. Expected post-corona economic crises can make the realisation of the project even more difficult... Good thing is that whatever happens, due to bottom-up activities, some parts of Belgrade's waterfront became and will continue to be active, beautiful places for public enjoyment and use. The question remains of how much we are able to take advantage from this newly re-established connection with the Sava river to make Belgrade a better place for *all citizens*.

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