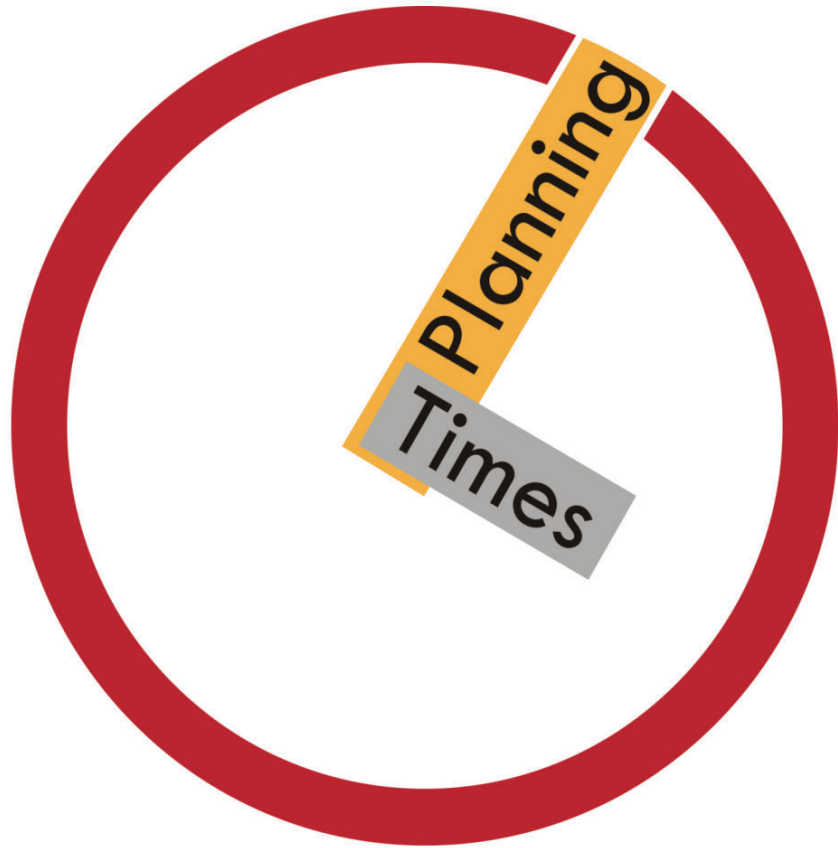


Manfred SCHRENK, Vasily V. POPOVICH, Peter ZEILE, Pietro ELISEI (Eds.)

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Table of Contents – Inhaltsverzeichnis:

PREFACE	5
Manfred Schrenk.....	5
A new Approach in the Visualization of Georeferenced Sensor Data in Spatial Planning	17
Frank Michel, Daniel Steffen, Benjamin S. Bergner, Jan-Philipp Exner, Peter Zeile	17
A Study on Thermal Comfortable following the Thermal Environment Migration in Detached Housing Area in Korea	25
Jiwon Ryu, Eung-Ho Jung, Dae-Wuk Kim, Akira Hoyano.....	25
Alpine Stadt-Landschaften. Beobachtungen zur Rolle von Freiräumen im Tiroler Inntal aus Sicht des Landscape Urbanism	37
Wolfgang Andexlinger.....	37
Alte Terre – Aree agricole di versante, nuovi modelli di sviluppo	47
Stefania Staniscia	47
An Environmental Resilience based on Approaching Planners Triangle for Integrated Catchment Management	57
Chin-Hsien Liao, Hsueh-Sheng Chang	57
An Experimental Study of Article-Finding Behaviors in a Shopping-Around Situation	67
Yoshinori Natsume, Sho Nakamura, Toshiyuki Kaneda	67
Application of Modeling Urban Growth with Cellular Automata in Spatial Planning	77
Marjan Javadian Namini, Hanieh Shamskooski, Mostafa Momeni	77
Approach to Spatial Data Infrastructure Development for Spatial Planning in Serbia	85
Ljiljana Živković.....	85
Assessing Impacts of Passive Defense Policies Interventions on Spatial Logic of Tehran Metropolitan Area (TMA)	95
Sahar Nedae Tousi, Ehsan Ghorbani Ghashghae Nejad	95
Augmented Reality Apps for Real Estate	109
Veronika Lang, Peter Sittler.....	109
Augmented Reality as a Communication Tool in Urban Design Processes	119
Daniel Broschart, Peter Zeile, Bernd Streich.....	119
BROWNTRANS – Focusing Brownfield Knowhow Transfer	127
Jiřina Bergatt Jackson, Zita Prostějovská, Barbara Vojvodíková, Karel Bařinka	127
Cadastral Feedback on Spatial Planning	133
Gerhard Navratil, Paolo Fogliaroni	133
Cellular Automata Approach for Medium Sized Cities	141
Caroline Bayr, Rose-Gerd Koboltschnig, Miriam Steurer.....	141
CG Mixed Reality Architectural Workspace	149
Andreas Behmel, Josef Gründler, Wolfgang Höhl, Thomas Kienzl, Heimo Sandtner	149
City Building and Urban Failure: Why Urban Development in Serbia Does Not Achieve Planned Results	159
Milena Vukmirovic, Mira Milakovic, Nikola Samardzic	159
City Works: A New Model for Management of Public Land	167
Lapo Cozzutto	167
Climate Data Analysis on IGIS	171
Filipp Galyano, Vasily Popovich, Manfred Schrenk, Natalia Zhukova.....	171
Collaboration in the Brownfield Regeneration Process – Legally Binding or Informal Approach?	181
Ana Perić, Danilo Furundžić	181
Conceptual Assessments on Epistemological Differences in Tactical and Strategic Spatial Planning	189
Aynaz Lotfata.....	189
Creating Collective Memories in Urban Spaces of Iran	195
Nasim Iranmanesh, Elham Amini	195
Creativity and Innovation in a Mid-Urban Size Learning Infrastructure – Designing Spaces for Thriving Innovation Communities	205
Markus F. Peschl, Thomas Fundneider	205
Crime Mapping for Urban Planning – a Useful Tool for New Planning Times?	213
Willi Wendt, Jan-Philipp Exner	213
Cross-Border Transport Modelling in the Region of Aache	223
Conny Louen, Julia Kammer.....	223
Data Analysis Methods for Urban Planning – Problem-Oriented Stakeholders Maps Building	233
Victor L. Kuriashkin, Natalia A. Zhukova	233

Decision Support Systems and Tools as Collaborative Web Platform for Sustainable Development of Landscapes	239
Thomas M. Klein, Ulrike Wissen Hayek, Enrico Celio, Adrienne Grêt-Regamey	239
Density Exercises in Projects of Oriol Bohigas. Density as a Tool for Suburbs Regeneration	249
Cecilia De Marinis	249
Deprived Neighbourhoods in Neo-Liberal Times – the Role of Public Funding in Education	257
Cecilia Scoppetta, Caterina Scoppetta	257
Drive Towards Circular Land Use Management	267
Uwe Ferber, Jirina Bergatt Jackson, Thomas Preuss, Maic Verbücheln, Anna Starzewska-Sikorska	267
Einkaufsstättenwahl, Einzelhandelscluster und räumliche Versorgungsdisparitäten – Modellierung von Marktgebieten im Einzelhandel unter Berücksichtigung von Agglomerationseffekten	275
Thomas Wieland	275
Endangerments on Schools	285
Sascha Henninger	285
Environmental Management in the Coastal Urban Area of Alimos	293
Agisilaos Economou, Roido Mitoula	293
Environmental Monitoring and Planning: Joining Forces for Facing Changes	303
Eliot Laniado, Mara Cossu, Silvia Vaghi	303
Evaluation of City Development Strategy as a New Planning Framework with Emphasis on Good Governance in Qazvin City	313
Mostafa Momeni, Marjan Javadian Namini, Hanieh Shamskooski	313
Flooding, Vulnerability and Livelihoods of Low Income Coastal Settlements in Lagos	321
Oluwafemi Olajide, Suzanne Speak, Taibat Lawanson	321
French Planning System Paradox	331
Jean-François Guet, Sylvain Petitot	331
From Plan to Augmented Reality – Workflow for Successful Implementation of AR Solutions in Planning and Participation Processes	339
Florian Reinwald, Christian Schober, Doris Damyanovic	339
Geographic Information System for Land Acquisition Process: A Social Need for Road Infrastructure Development in India	349
Bikram Kumar Dutta	349
Geomedia Skills – a Required Prerequisite for Public Participation in Urban Planning?	357
Sabine Hennig, Robert Vogler	357
Gestione delle risorse ambientali e pianificazione del territorio: le linee guida per la Valutazione ambientale strategica come strumento sistemico nei processi di pianificazione e programmazione	367
Federica Isola, Cheti Pira	367
Graffiti in Graz. Spatiotemporale Ansätze zur Analyse eines sozio-kulturellen Phänomens	377
Josef Gspurning	377
Historical Buildings Integration Into a Modern Industrial Urban Environment of Perm	387
Anastasia Kuznetsova, Yuliya Bushmakova	387
Hot Town, Summer in the City – Entwicklung von hitzerelevanten Anpassungsstrategien im Städtetourismus	393
Brigitte Allex, Christiane Brandenburg, Ursula Liebl, Thomas Gerersdorfer, Christina Czachs	393
Housing Quality and Lost (Public) Space in Croatia	399
Andelina Svirčić Gotovac, Jelena Zlatar	399
Human Sensory Assessment Methods in Urban Planning – a Case Study in Alexandria	407
Benjamin S. Bergner, Jan-Philipp Exner, Martin Memmel, Rania Raslan, Dina Taha, Manar Talal, Peter Zeile	407
Incremental Planning – Cooperative Scenario and/or Masterplan? Long- and Short-Term Planning Horizon of Urban Design Projects within the Existing Urban Fabric. Analysis of Projects in Vienna and Switzerland with Regard to the Factors Triggering Varying Planning Times	419
Silja Tillner	419
Information Around Us: Questions Connected to Information and Data Heterogeneities in Planning Activities	429
Otakar Cerba	429
Infrastructures of Smart Platforms – Mobile Tools to Control Intelligent Networks in Dynamic Urban Space	435
Benjamin Allbach, Julia Germann, Andreas Allbach	435
Interactive Simulation of Urban Environments over Time with Respect to Human Values	445
Hanieh Shamskooski, Mostafa Momeni, Marjan Javadian Namini	445
Interweaving the Digital and Analog Lives of Cities: Urban Sensing and User-Generated Cities	453
Salvatore Iaconesi, Oriana Persico	453

Keeping the Public Sphere Anchored to Social Changes	465
Cecilia Scoppetta.....	465
Klimaverträglich mobil in Zeiten des demographischen Wandels – Wie wohnen Mobilität bestimmt	475
Mechtild Stiewe, Doris Bäumer	475
Kollektive Strategien für zukunftsfähige Stadtentwicklung – Erfahrungen aus einem partizipativen Szenarienprozess in Niederösterreich	485
Elisabeth Schuppenlehner-Kloyber, Marianne Penker, Michael Braito.....	485
Landscape as a Connection – Beyond Boundaries	497
Tamara Marić, Josip Zaninović, Bojana Bojanić Obad Šćitaroci	497
Le Politiche Temporalì Urbane tra Pianificazione e Inclusività Sociale: il Caso dei Piani Territoriali dei Tempi e degli Spazi della Regione Puglia in Italia	507
Tiziana Cardinale, Laura Pavia	507
London After the Spectacle Year, Who Claims Which Space and Who Gets it?	517
Judith Ryser.....	517
Longing for the Ordinary – the Meaning of Authentic Places in the North-American Metropolis	527
Jorick Beijer	527
L'altra faccia dell'economia: gli street vendors e l'uso dello spazio urbano nell'area metropolitana di Cagliari	535
Roberta Floris, Anania Mereu	535
Metrics of Assessing Affordable Living	545
Justyna Karakiewicz.....	545
Mobile Embedded Climate Sensing 2.0	551
Benjamin Allbach, Sascha Henninger	551
Modernity and Collage of City Non-Core Area: the Case of Suzhou River Area in Shanghai	561
Lingyan Yao, Ming Tong, Shuiqing Wu, Xin Chen.....	561
Morgenstadt: CityInsights. A Research Approach for Systems Research in Urban Development	571
Dominik Kalisch, Susanne Schatzinger, Steffen Braun, Alanus v. Radecki.....	571
Neighbourhoods' Future Created by Combined Stakeholder Engagement	579
Katharina Söpper.....	579
Neoliberal Challenges and Practices of Urban Regeneration Projects in Istanbul	587
A. Erdem Erbas, Tansel Erbil.....	587
Neue Instrumente der Partizipation: Vergleich von mobiler Augmented Reality und Perspektivskizzen im Rahmen des Shared-Space-Projektes Alleegasse in Hartberg	597
Martin Berger, Mario Platzer, Christoph Schwarz, Thomas Pilz	597
New Geographies of Self-Organisation	607
Cecilia Scoppetta.....	607
New Methods of Climate Monitoring	617
Benjamin Allbach, Sascha Henninger	617
New Public Open Spaces and Old Prejudices: Public Space Uses in the Centre of Medellín	627
Eva Schwab.....	627
New Quality of Public Spaces as a Stimulant for Socio-Economic Development – the Specificity of Medium-Sized Towns ...	639
Anna Goleździnowska	639
Nuove strategie sociali, economiche, urbane e architettoniche per il social housing	649
Flavio Mangione	649
Objektorientierte Landbedeckungsklassifikation von Graz (Österreich) unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der dritten Dimension	651
Wolfgang Sulzer, Marc Muick, Winfried Ganster	651
Open Space for Social Housing – between Social Benefit and Marketing Asset?	661
Lilli Lička, Philipp Rode, Doris Bistricky.....	661
Opportunities for the Development of the Latvian Property Tax Administration System through Improvements in the Property Registration System and the Implementation of European Union Requirements for Geospatial Information	671
Sarmite Barvika, Aldis Rausis, Inga Berzina	671
Optimizing Public Participation through ICT and Social Networks: Questions and Challenges	683
Chiara Garau	683
Planning in Fragile Sites in Turkey: in Case of Hasankeyf	691
Hale Mamunlu Kocabas	691
Planning Times of the City: an Overview on Urban Time Policies	701
Marco Mareggi.....	701

Polish Suburban Landscape Made of Entrepreneurial Tissue	711
Justyna Martyniuk-Peczek, Olga Martyniuk.....	711
Polycentric Structures and Mobility in Agglomerations – an Analysis of the Vorarlberg Rhine Valley in Austria	721
Oliver Roider, Roman Klementschtz.....	721
Pop-up Pest: An Educational Game for Active Participation of Children and Youth in Urban Planning	731
Eszter Tóth, Alenka Poplin.....	731
Public Space Issues in Bali Tourist Beaches	743
Anom Rajendra, Richard Nicholls.....	743
Quantifying Town Development in Space and Time using Land Use Data	751
Miriam Steurer, Caroline Bayr.....	751
Regional Land-Taking Processes in Italy: a Study Concerning Sardinia	757
Sabrina Lai, Corrado Zoppi.....	757
Regional Planning and Territorial Competitiveness: the Role of Identitary Heritage. The Case of the Sardinian Region	767
Anna Maria Colavitti, Sergio Serra, Alessia Usai.....	767
Research on China’s Urban Network Based on the Relations between Micro-Blog Users: a Case Study of Sina Micro-Blog	779
Feng Zhen, Bo Wang, Guangliang Xi, Yinxue Chen.....	779
Smart Community Participation for Revitalization of Urban Green Spaces Over Time: Case Study New Delhi	793
Sandeep Kumar Raut, Papiya Bandyopadhyay Raut.....	793
Social Housing in Serbia: Dual Approach	801
Uros Vesic, Tatjana Kotic, Aleksandra Krstic-Furundzic.....	801
Solid Waste Management, an Environmental Challenge in Millennium Cyber City in India, Gurgaon	811
Sanhita Bandyopadhyay.....	811
Spatial and Temporal Dynamics of Residential Areas Affected by the Industrial Function in a Post-Communist City – Case Study Bucharest.....	821
Diana Andreea Onose, Ioan Cristian Iojă, Gabriel Ovidiu Vânău, Mihai Răzvan Niță, Cristiana Maria Ciocănea, Delia Adriana Mirea.....	821
Spatial Resilience of Megacities based on Conceptual Model from Concept to Implementation. Case Study: Greater Cairo, Egypt	831
Ahmed Abdelhalim M Hassan.....	831
Strengthening Alexandria Urban Fabric by Planning Urbanism's Walkable Area.....	841
Shahira Sharaf El Din, Ghada Ragheb.....	841
Study on “Micro-Participation” of the City – Emergency Management in the Age of Micro-Blogging	851
Xi Guangliang, Zhen Feng.....	851
Supporting Spatial Planning with Qualitative Configuration Analysis	863
Paolo Fogliaroni, Gerhard Navratil.....	863
Synergies and Goal Conflicts for Climate Change Policy and Spatial Planning	871
Douglas Baker, Gregory Marston, Lachlan McClure.....	871
Temporality of Physical and Political Liminal Spaces in the Urban Transformations of the Greater Paris	879
Federica Gatta.....	879
The Beauty or the Beast? Can Illegal Housing Tackle the Problem of Social Integration and Social Housing?	889
Branislav Antonic, Biserka Mitrovic.....	889
The Challenge of Economic Regeneration in Small Urban Settlements of Greece	901
Despina Dimelli.....	901
The Elderly under Urban Heat Pressure – Strategies and Behaviours of Elderly Residents against Urban Heat.....	909
Brigitte Allex, Arne Arnberger, Anna Wanka, Renate Eder, Hans-Peter Hutter, Michael Kundi, Peter Wallner, Franz Kolland, Beate Blättner, Henny Annette Grewe.....	909
The Heart of the City from a Socio Cultural Perspective.....	917
Heba Safey Eldeen.....	917
The Identity of Place ... and Memory of Time ... Define Space-Time of Human Architecture.....	927
Mohammed Qasim Abdul Ghafoor Al Ani.....	927
The Multidimensionality of Contemporary Urban Spaces – Implications for Design	945
Cecilia Scopetta.....	945
The Planning of Peri-Urban Agricultural Areas: the Case of “L’Horta de València”	953
José Luis Miralles i Garcia.....	953
The Rural-Urban Fringe in the Netherlands: a Morphological Analysis of Recent Urban Developments	963
Kersten Nabelek, Pia Kronberger-Nabelek, David Hamers.....	963

The Slums Affect the Future of the Metropolis	977
Sonia Pintus.....	977
The Taming of the Shrew: Coping with Illegal Settlements in Belgrade, Serbia	985
Biserka Mitrovic, Branislav Antonic.....	985
Timeless Modernity, Shifting Ideologies: a Vibrant Street in a Distorted Reality?	995
Mira Milakovic, Aleksandra Stupar	995
Touristic Potentials of Open Space Heritage – 4 Case Studies in South East Europe	1001
Pixie Jacobs, Lilli Lička, Manfred Schwaba	1001
Transnational Planning Support by the European Geodata Infrastructure INSPIRE	1009
Joachim Benner, Karl-Heinz Häfele, Andreas Geiger.....	1009
Urban Coastal Environment and Management Policies in Attica	1019
Minas Angelidis, Agisilaos Economou	1019
Urban Health in India: a Challenge to Policy Making	1027
Indrani Gupta, Swadhin Mondal	1027
Urban Heat Islands – Strategy Plan Vienna	1037
Christina Czachs, Florian Reinwald, Doris Damyanovic, Christiane Brandenburg, Birgit Gantner, Brigitte Alex, Jürgen Preiss, Ursula Liebl.....	1037
Urban Infill as Strategy for Social Housing Stock	1045
Mariella Annese, Barbara Del Brocco.....	1045
Urban Planning Implications of Changing Land Use Structure of Metropolitan Lagos, Nigeria	1055
Leke Oduwaye	1055
Valuation Cycles Of Pre Industrial Townscape	1067
Jürgen Lafrenz.....	1067
Abandoned Churches in European Countries: a UK Perspective	1075
Peter Aiers.....	1075
Abandoned and Re-Used Churches in Germany	1079
Kerstin Gothe, Stefan Netsch	1079
About Historical Centers: Is the Trend towards Decor Really Irresistible?	1083
Olivier Lefebvre.....	1083
Are the Netherlands Shrinking or Just Changing?	1089
Stefan Netsch, Niels Kropman	1089
ARGUS: a Personalised Guidance System to Improve Autonomy of People with Visual Impairment in the City	1099
Oihana Otaegui, Estibaliz Loyo, Eduardo Carrasco, Claudia Fösleitner, John Spiller, Daniela Patti, Adela Marcoci, Rafael Olmedo, Markus Dubielzig.....	1099
Attract-SEE – Assessing Territorial Attractiveness in South East Europe. Establishing a Common Territorial Monitoring Framework	1105
Julia Neuschmid, Christian Eizinger, Blaž Barborič, Graziella Guaragno, Tomaž Miklavčič, Stefano Marani, Ljiljana Živković, Francesca Altomare, Đorđe Milić, Gianandrea Esposito, Alessandro Selva	1105
CentropESTATISTICS – Interactive Creation of Maps and Charts	1113
Clemens Beyer, Walter Pozarek, Manfred Schrenk	1113
Cities for All: All-Inclusive Collective Urban Spaces for the Public – a Case of a Successful Interactive Model	1117
Eric R. P. Farr, Poorang (Amir E.) Piroozfar	1117
Competitiveness Factors of Higher Education Institutions, with Particular Respect to Hungarian Cities	1125
László Tamándl, Dávid Nagy.....	1125
Construction of Spatial Memory Demolished Historic Architectural Context after 1972 Earthquake in Managua, Nicaragua	1131
Romer Altamirano Guerrero, Martín Alfredo Majewsky García.....	1131
CURe MODERN – Monitoring of Infrastructures in Cross-Border Regions	1135
Jan-Philipp Exner, Timo Wundsam, Christopher Jung, Martin Fabisch	1135
Data Representation Dynamic Model for Distributed Urban IGIS	1139
Andrey Pankin, Natalia Zhukova	1139
Development of the Border Territories within the Framework of National Development Plan for the Republic of Kazakhstan	1147
Turlybek Mussabayev, Karlygash Muldagaliyeva	1147
Disaster Prevention Planning and Disaster Preparedness for Earthquake	1153
Shabnam Farboud, Anahita Mahmoudi.....	1153

Economy out of the Big Lights: the Issue of Mono-Cities in the Republic of Kazakhstan within the Framework of National Development Plan for the Republic of Kazakhstan	1159
Turlybek Mussabayev, Karlygash Muldagaliyeva	1159
Effective Usage of Short-Term Parking Zones by Offering Real-Time Information on the Utilisation of Parking Lots.....	1163
Tina Uhlmann, Reinhard Hössinger, Peter Widhalm.....	1163
Energia e paesaggio al tempo dei cambiamenti climatici.	1169
Marcello Magoni	1169
Energy Poverty: Considerations for Socially Sustainable Shifts Towards Renewable Energy Sources.....	1177
Tania Berger, Anna Faustmann, Andrea Hoeltl.....	1177
FIFA World Cup 2018 – the Planning Challenge for Russian Cities	1185
Alexander Antonov, Tatiana Badmaeva	1185
Globalization and Urban Land Use Planning: The Case of Lagos, Nigeria.....	1193
Leke Oduwaye.....	1193
Governance in the Metropolitan Region: The Vienna-Bratislava Case	1201
Daniela Patti	1201
Handlungsoptionen für Transformationsprozesse österreichischer Städte Richtung Smart City: Den demographischen Wandel beachten!	1207
Martin Berger, Martina Jauschneg, Sebastian Beiglböck, Tobias Panwinkler, Katharina Gugerell, Carina Diesenreiter.....	1207
Heute die Jugend, morgen die ganze Welt – nachhaltige Fortbewegung langfristig fördern.....	1213
Elisabeth Füssl, Manuel Oberlader, Odilo Seisser, Alexander Risser, Ralf Risser	1213
High-Resolution Global Monitoring of Urban Settlements.....	1219
Mattia Marconcini, Thomas Esch, Andreas Felbier, Wieke Heldens	1219
HLANDATA – Harmonisation of Land Use and Land Cover Data Across Europe: Project Results	1225
Julia Neuschmid, Manfred Schrenk, Wolfgang W. Wasserburger.....	1225
Hydro Urban Units – a Meso Scale Approach for Integrated Planning.....	1229
Bernd Eisenberg, Eva Nemcova, Rossana Poblet, Antje Stokman	1229
I-SCOPE: Smart Cities and Citizens	1239
Daniela Patti, Raffaele de Amicis, Federico Prandi, Ellie D’Hont, Heino Rudolf, Pietro Elisei, Irina Saghin	1239
Indicator-Based Assessment of Land Use Planning in Wrocław Region with CommunityViz	1247
Jan Kazak, Szymon Szewrański, Paweł Decewicz	1247
JPI Urban Europe – Urban Megatrends Study.....	1253
Johannes Riegler, Klaus Kubeczko, Wolfgang Loibl	1253
LIMES – From Beacons to Facebook	1257
Rainer Zementz.....	1257
LIMES – Older than the Way of St. James	1261
Franz Schafranski	1261
LIMES – Turning on the Light Switch	1267
Daniel Hamann, Katrin Wunderlich	1267
Linking Demographic and Spatial Data for a Successful Stakeholder Process in Climate Change Protection Projects – The Case Study of Leoben/AT	1273
Martina Jauschneg, Britta Fuchs, Mandy Schönemann	1273
Living Environment Information Services – Enhancing the Collaboration between Authorities and the Citizens	1279
Kaarina Vartiainen, Niina Nieminen, Tiia Tanskanen	1279
Meeting the Needs of Different User Groups in Mobility as Key to Ensure Social Inclusion.....	1285
Tina Uhlmann, Wiebke Unbehaun	1285
Meter-ON: Smart Metering for Europe's Smart(er) Households.....	1291
Giuseppe Mauri, Sara Raffaelli, Adela Marcoci, Wolfgang W. Wasserburger.....	1291
Motorways in Agglomerations – Changing Concepts for Changing Needs	1295
Thomas Steiner	1295
Opportunities for Sustainable Development of Suburban Rural Areas on Example of Karabiha Rural Settlement	1301
Anastasia Dubova	1301
Orijentir – Interactive City Guide for All.....	1305
Ljubica Gajević, Vidan Danković, Miloš Milovanović	1305
Prato: Organizzazione e Tecnologie per un nuovo Modello di Sviluppo urbano consapevole	1309
Davide Puccianti.....	1309
Regional Effects of Urban Planning – an Informal GIS Tool to Support Sustainable Strategic Planning	1313
Anja Brauckmann, Alexander Mayr	1313

Rete Ecologica Locale, aree verdi al limite tra città e campagna	1319
Giacomo Cozzolino, Alessandro Piazzì	1319
Reuse of Abandoned Churches in the Netherlands	1321
Albert Reinstra	1321
Risk Management and Spatial Planning – Understanding Rapid Urbanization in Climate Change.....	1327
Harry Storch, Nigel Downes	1327
Smart Cities and Urban Governance. The urbanAPI Project: Bologna Case Study.....	1335
David C. Ludlow, Maria Paola Mauri, Chiara Caranti	1335
Stadtentwicklungsfonds – ein innovatives europäisches Finanzierungsinstrument zur Entwicklung integrierter Immobilien.....	1341
Michael Nadler.....	1341
Stadtklimakomfortzonen – von übergeordneten Planungen zu lokalen Interventionen	1345
Bernd Eisenberg.....	1345
SUNSHINE – Smart Urban Services for Higher eEnergy Efficiency	1349
Linda Dörrzapf, Barbara Mušič, Manfred Schrenk, Wolfgang W. Wasserburger	1349
The 7+1 Graz Process – a Method for Promoting the Development of a Smart City	1353
Kersten Hofbauer, Ernst Rainer, Hans Schnitzer	1353
The Role of Community in Urban Regeneration: Mixed Use Areas Approach in USA.....	1361
Carmelina Bevilacqua, Jusy Calabrò, Carla Maione	1361
Underground Space – Lost Space Ready to be Reclaimed.....	1367
Han Admiraal, Antonia Cornaro	1367
Urban Agriculture: How to Create a Natural Connection between the Urban and Rural Environment in Almere Oosterwold (NL).....	1373
Jan Eelco Jansma, Esther J. Veen, Arjan G.J. Dekking, Andries J. Visser.....	1373
Urban Dimension of Territorial Cohesion: Perspective Facing the Crisis	1383
Maria Prezioso, Angela D’Orazio	1383
Urban Nexus – Structured Dialogue, Problem-Solving, and Strategic Partnerships	1391
David Ludlow, June Graham, Nuria Blanes	1391
Urban Risk Assessment using Intelligent Geoinformation System	1397
Oksana Smirnova	1397
Urban Space Patterns and Homelessness in Bucharest, Romania	1405
Mirela Paraschiv.....	1405
VIATOR – A Mobile Travel Companion for Disabled Persons	1411
Wolfgang Narzt, Wolfgang W. Wasserburger.....	1411
Was kosten Radverkehr, Fußverkehr, öffentlicher Personennahverkehr und Kfz-Verkehr eine Kommune? – Entwicklung und Anwendung einer Methode für den Vergleich verschiedener Verkehrsmittel anhand von kommunalen Haushalten ...	1417
Volker Schmitt, Björn Bauer, Carsten Sommer	1417
Discomfort of the Present, Relief of the Future	1427
Michel Sudarskis, Viviana Rubbo, Lola Davidson.....	1427
Sustainable Mobility in Urban and Touristic Areas.....	1433
Gianluca Fabbri, Fabio Massimo Frattale Mascioli, Maurizio Paschero, Marco Dessì	1433

Timeless Modernity, Shifting Ideologies: a Vibrant Street in a Distorted Reality?

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1 ABSTRACT¹

The focus of the paper is on the relation between a traditional and a modern concept of street design and regulation, which have been overlapping and upgrading/degrading for decades.

The case of the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina in New Belgrade will be used as an interesting example of a street constructed during the 1960s. The original modernist idea, reflecting the socio-economic background of the socialist epoch, is still recognizable in impressive prefabricated housing blocks, shaped according to the ideas of the Athens charter and the Modernist movement. The street, originally planed as an important transit artery with surrounding housing and green areas, started to transform its landscape during the period of transition (1990s). The position, available empty space and already provided infrastructure have directed a new tide of changes, attracting attention of city authorities, investors and entrepreneurs. The intensity of activities has increased, new office/commercial/housing units were constructed, but all these transformations have not been supported by the planning concepts which would improve the overall condition and quality of life in this area. Driven by the logic of economic efficiency and profit, the transformation of the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina has also tackled the sensitive issues of spatial organization, social cohesion, redefined urban needs and questionable sustainability.

Therefore, the paper will discuss recent changes and trends which opened some new questions of urban durability, modernity, efficiency and environmental awareness, simultaneously emphasizing a need for an integral approach, adjusted to a new dynamic and multiplying demands of/for the future.

2 INTRODUCTION

New Belgrade, a unique urban entity designed and developed in the ex-Yugoslav capital after the WWII, has been a focus of attention of numerous professionals and researchers since its construction (Backovic, 2009; Blagojevic, 2007; Eric, 2009; Milakovic, Vukmirovic, 2011; Perovic, 1985; Waley, 2011; etc). Built between two historical cores – Belgrade and Zemun, the area was not spontaneously developed as an extension of the urban fabric. Instead, it was supposed to be an example of a total design and a radically different approach which reflected the power of the state and its new ideology. Conceived as a symbol and a spatial manifestation of a young, progressive and multicultural society, New Belgrade occupied the left bank of the river Sava, enabling the expansion of Belgrade on an empty terrain which was not burdened by any mental or physical heritage. The principles of continuous development of the (traditional) city were substituted by the ideas of the Modern movement, but the development and transformations of its structure have been influenced by a complexity and specificity of the general social, political and economic background, confirming the ambivalent character of the Yugoslav society and responding to changes and challenges generated by transition and globalization.

The case of the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina represents a good example of shifts and turbulences on all levels of Yugoslav/Serbian society, a testimony of planning ideas, efforts and failures, but also an expression of urban vibrancy, dynamism and uncontrolled forces which could be identified in a contemporary city.

3 SHAPING A MODERN(IST) FRAMEWORK

Designed under the strong influence of CIAM and the Modern movement, the original streetscape of New Belgrade followed the principles of the Athens Charter. Consequently, the traditional development of street space was 'strictly prohibited', continuously built facades of street corridors were avoided, and open mega-

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blocks with free-standing structures and a lot of 'sun, space and greenery' were promoted. This approach changed the basic, traditional morphology and the size/scale of urban blocks and streets, focusing on car-oriented transport. Pedestrian spaces were situated inside blocks, as separated public zones, enabling free movement and recreation of inhabitants.

However, the change of ideological circumstances has influenced significant transformations of the urban landscape of New Belgrade, implanting additional features into purified modernist pattern. Nowadays, we can identify four street forms defined by the level of dependence/correlation between blocks (buildings) and street regulation – (1) building structures perpendicular to a street creating a rhythm with deep penetration of vistas in the block, (2) structures parallel to a street, with large sidewalks and green pathways between buildings and streets, (3) individual, dominant structures built on the corners of blocks and (4) 'meander' structures in the central part of a block creating a dynamic secondary routes for pedestrian movement.

The example of the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina represents a specific area of New Belgrade which was designed according to the official plans. However, its development was shaped by conflicting social, political and economic interests. Since New Belgrade occupies the central position of Belgrade, the area around the Boulevard was initially planned as a mostly industrial area, only partially habitable (Урбанистички завод ИОНО града Београда, 1951). However, subsequent amendments from 1965 changed the original idea imposing completely residential development (Figure 1). The main artery – the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina, has become the backbone of the area, which consists of several types of open blocks.

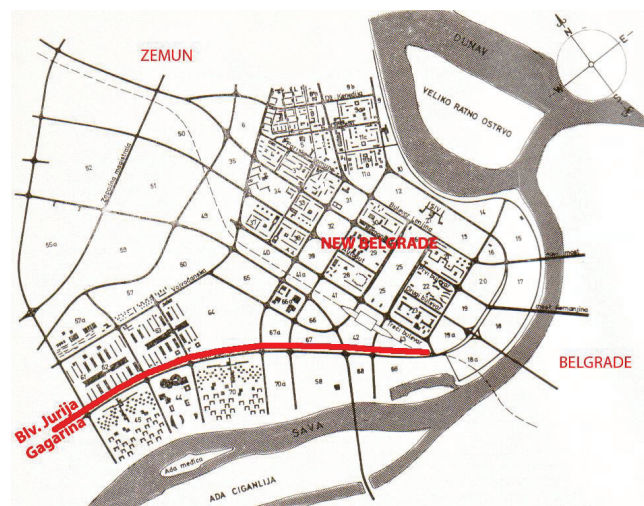


Fig. 1: The position of New Belgrade between two historical cores – Belgrade and Zemun. Red line marks the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina in a zone initially planned for industry, but transformed to a residential area.

Initially, blocks 45 and 70 were the only residential blocks in New Belgrade placed on the river bank, while Block 44, located between them, was built in the 1980's.² Both blocks have identical spatial organization, with two types of elements/buildings positioned (and copied) in a park setting. The part of the block toward the river consists of lower residential buildings (up to 4 storeys) in the shape of a horseshoe, while the other part, next to the Boulevard, is composed of orthogonal, freestanding solitaires (up to 15 storeys). The structures are grouped in four zones, with two main pedestrian passages in between – a promenade parallel to the river and the second one, perpendicular, with clustered services, education facilities (primary school and kindergarten) and a local community center. These additional activities and their structures create a central space, as a focus of social life and interaction. The size of each block is 800x800m, while car accessibility to buildings and parking spaces is provided by few internal streets/blind alleys (Figure 2).

² Competition for these blocks was announced in 1965. The award-winning work is from Slovenia, authors Ivan Tepes and Velimir Gradelj.

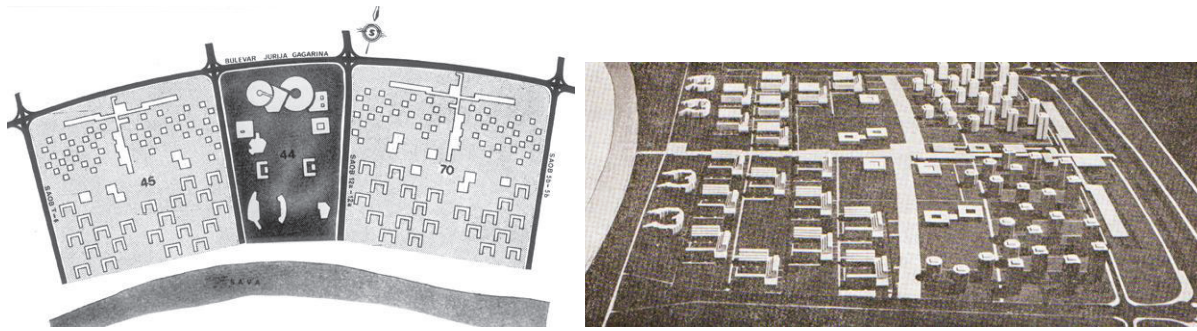


Fig. 2: Initially planned structures along the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina – (left) the model of block 45; (right) the plan of the south part of the street (blocks 45, 70 and 44).

Blocks 61, 62, 63 and 64 have a different composition, but they are all designed in the same manner.³ The basic urban concept represents a symmetrical macro-composition, consisting of two regular series of residential buildings, linked by the axis where the center is planned. The height of buildings decreases from the axis to the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina.

All four blocks have a strict segregation of vehicular and pedestrian traffic – the first one is planned on the ground level, while pedestrian movement is placed above, integrating public/free space with access to residential structures. The connection between the axial center and buildings via passages was also planned, creating micro-ambiances as public spaces for social interaction (Figure 3).

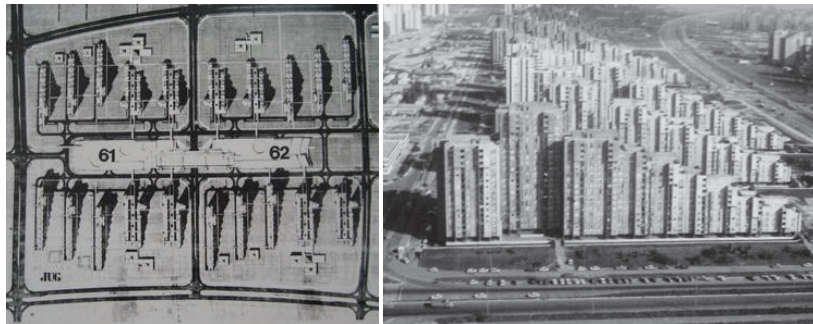


Fig. 3: The initially planned structures along the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina: (left) blocks 61 and 62 – plan, (right) typical block.

Since it was envisioned as a transit route, the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina is wide 60 metres, with 6 car-lanes, 2 tram-lanes and large green buffer zones between roadway and buildings (Figure 4). However, since this area remained on the outskirts of the city, with prevailing residential activities and without construction activities around/at the end of the street, it actually acts as a highly frequent access road to existing residential buildings.



Fig. 4: The Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina before the transformation.

³ The competition was announced in 1971. The winning proposal was designed by Darko Marusic, Milenija Marusic and Milan Miodragovic.

From the environmental point of view, the concept was made to fulfill main needs of comfort for the residents. By decreasing the building height towards the river, the majority of apartments are facing the south, and the basic laws of insulation and ventilation are met. From an economic aspect, the realization of this comprehensive project was possible only by industrial type of construction, i.e. prefabricated buildings. Within the socialist system, which existed before the 1980s, the state was the only and principal investor.

4 FACING THE TURBULENCES

The beginning of the 1980s was marked by the crisis of economy which also influenced the efficiency of the Yugoslav self-management socialism. Changed conditions and general instability of the system and society also triggered a number of other processes which finally led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991. Simultaneously, the economy started its shift to an open market, introducing privatization, decentralization and deregulation. Urban planning lost its centralized character causing a hyper production of detailed plans by different offices, without the influence of the Town Planning Institute of Belgrade. New architectural and planning paradigms were embraced by the professionals inclined to post-modern flows, while modernist models lost their importance in a changed socio-economic context (Vujošević, 2004).

Local authorities ignored previous models of development, refusing to define long-term strategies and visions. They mostly accepted and followed ad-hoc decisions enabling uncontrolled commercialization of urban space. The architectural and planning profession lost its significance affecting a degradation of urban environment with increased social and spatial segregation (Petrović, 2009). Consequently, during the last decade of the 20th century, the process of transition was visible in urban planning as a unique paradox – decisions were actually centralized, but their implementation (and legitimacy) was achieved by a number of decentralized decisions from various actors/participants in a planning process. This situation created a fertile ground for different malversations and uncontrolled private accumulation while the importance of public good was neglected (Vujošević, 2004). Therefore, urban planning represented an uncoordinated set of fragmented interventions, ‘justified’ by the lack of funds, regulations, tools for implementation and, above all, well-defined, comprehensive development concepts. The contradictions of the new system were reflected in architecture as well, shaping a new landscape for transitional flows.

New Belgrade, as a valuable and well-positioned urban resource, became one of the targets which attracted attention of numerous investors. Offering empty (unused) spaces and well-developed infrastructure it gradually reshaped its socialist image and generated a new identity. The urban tissue was invaded by new activities and structures which were not in accordance with the original concept, but in spite of its inconsistent, hybrid style, this part of Belgrade increased its significance and value (Petovar, 1989). The morphology of New Belgrade was changed, the inherited modernist legacy was negated but the current situation confirms the transformation potential of the space, as well as its flexibility for the future economic, social and spatial challenges.

Streets of New Belgrade changed their physiognomy too. The Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina was no longer considered a transit street, but as a social arena, which needed a formal and functional continuity. The construction of new buildings started during 1980s, when first small-scale shopping malls appeared along the street, in the former green areas. However, the significant transformation started after 2000, when foreign investments were intensified and a number of European and global corporations arrived to Serbian market. New Belgrade was recognized as a perfect site for business, services, exclusive residential buildings and – new shopping malls.

Introduction of a postmodern paradigm launched a different design concept which promoted a traditional model of street. However, a gap between planning profession and economy produced a specific scenery which followed the original plan from 1965 but adjusted to new regulations and indicators generated from contemporary trends and economic turbulences. Therefore, the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina was gradually transformed into a compact urban tissue, with high density and decreased green areas/open spaces. These changes do not represent the outcome of planning visions, strategies and procedures which should improve a general environmental quality (Bajic Brkovic, 2009). Instead, they are a consequence of different investments which used the flexibility (i.e. insufficient determination) of the uncompleted modernist framework.

5 OVERLAPPING THE PATTERNS

The present constellation of power, interests and needs in the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina mirrors ‘the crisis of non-concept’. The new development is clearly visible along the street and the open spaces of housing blocks are occupied by the commercial drive of private capital, expanding its boundaries into the public areas (Figure 5). Demarcation lines are set between physical structures that represent two epochs creating a distorted image of this area. It is nowadays full of contradictions, which coexist and overlap, creating a surreal environment (Stupar, 2006).

The streetscape of the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina has changed its density, function and overall narrative which had been visible for almost half a century. In search for a new continuity, its empty land has been filled with buildings which created a scenery for a traditional urban streets, but without any pattern or organized scheme it is hard to achieve a unity of architectural expression (Milakovic and Vukmirovic, 2011). Furthermore, there are several problems which could be identified in the main aspects of urban life – (1) physical – referring to spatial and functional organization; (2) social – implying a different use of space and the attitude of users toward change, and (3) economic – related to the validity of new structures and a balanced development.



Fig. 5: The Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina after the transformation.

In terms of physical environment, the construction of new buildings mainly threatened both the public space along the Boulevard and the space inside blocks. The current and planned construction activities are already beyond originally proposed capacities, while the new high rise buildings do not respect original rules of positioning, orientation, vertical regulation and environmentally responsible morphing. The level of comfort and the ecological quality of urban life is decreased. Meanwhile, the higher density of inhabitants and users caused a significant increase of the number of cars which made the existing parking capacities insufficient. Consequently, the open public spaces and pedestrian areas have been used as informal parking spaces which – to a certain extent – have even been legalized.

From a social perspective, the main problem is related to the altered use of open public spaces where we can identify a clash of two opposing concepts – the modernist model, which promotes the internal space of a block as a gathering place suitable for contacts, relaxation and recreation, and the post-modern model, which underlines the importance of a street for public life. The opinions of users are also divided – for some of them the usurpation of public space and a conflict between old and new structures only degrades physical, social and environmental quality of the space, while other users support introduction of new structures and activities which would complement already existing residential character of the area. In spite of this ambivalent perception of the space, the general opinion is positive because both groups appreciate a new daily dynamic which enables a simultaneous functioning of both spatial elements – blocks and streets.

The sustainability of the Boulevard and its surrounding area is also questionable. The intensification of activities has increased employment possibilities and enabled higher dynamic of economy and market, but the introduced activities are not evenly distributed and they still do not provide a satisfactory balance and a variety of services. Consequently, some office and commercial spaces remain without tenants which only confirms the lack of spatial and economic strategies which would stabilise supply and demand.

Finally, the factors of environmental quality and energy efficiency are mostly neglected which represents a serious warning and a problem for all users and space-consumers. Obviously, the ad-hoc shaping of a space does not consider problems generated by climate changes, which is also a result of low environmental consciousness. Therefore, the imperative of the future development of the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina

should be adjustment to current climate conditions and global environmental trends, which is – again – a mission achievable only via comprehensive strategic plans and actions. In the meantime, ad-hoc approach could be used for environmental vibrancy as well, especially for the application of various biophilic elements which increase a general environmental quality and create new competitive advantages for this area.

6 CONCLUSION

The transformation of the Boulevard of Jurija Gagarina has been the metaphor of discontinuity and a materialization of all turmoils which ex-Yugoslav and Serbian society have faced since the 1990s. The overlapping concepts, unsynchronised actions and conflicting interest have shaped the morphology of this space, creating a confusing urbanscape and a distorted image of anticipated modernity. Disregarding original ideas and urban regulation, but benefiting from their generous spatial formations and available empty space, the latest phase of aggressive and often uncontrolled urban intensification has also brought an unexpected vibrancy to previously dormant residential area. However, the newly created urbo-economic system is not a stable one and it needs a proper tuning to contextual changes which should guarantee its long-term sustainability.

During the last two decades, the flexibility of the ‘modernist’ space has been brutally tested and – confirmed, but the accumulated problems and actual local and global challenges demand immediate, resolute and forward looking strategies and actions. Therefore, the future of New Belgrade, its mega-blocks and boulevards, should be defined in a well-balanced framework able to provide enough environmental and social benefits for different categories of residents and users, while remaining a hot-spot for all contemporary, innovative and creative impulses able to ensure its further ‘modernity’.

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