

The regeneration of military brownfields in Serbia: Moving towards deliberative planning practice?

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the regeneration process of military brownfields in Serbia through the lens of a deliberative planning approach. The topic is important for Serbia as a proto-democratic society where brownfield regeneration follows market rules, thus neglecting the interests of other actors. However, military brownfields are considered an exception in this regard as the starting point for their revitalisation is agreement between public institutions – the Ministry of Defence and municipalities. This, however, does not mean that the regeneration process runs smoothly. Considering this issue from the perspective of theory, the paper examines the starting assumptions of deliberative planning to highlight the role of the moderator in the public deliberation procedure. An empirical in-depth case study illustrates the regeneration of the Army Club in Vršac, Serbia, based on collaboration among various national bodies (ministries), local authorities, local entrepreneurs, and other agencies that facilitate the process. Using analysis of the institutional framework, findings of desk research, and interviews with key informants, the paper contributes to an understanding of the limits and potentials of deliberative practice for regeneration of military brownfields. More importantly, it outlines a theoretically informed and empirically tested mechanism to tackle the critical issues, elements, and steps discovered by an exploration of the process. The lessons prove valid not only for Serbia, but also for similar socio-spatial contexts.

1. Introduction

Social segregation, crime, land pollution, legal obstacles, economic deterioration, and many other conditions make the regeneration of brownfield sites extremely complex. On top of this, former industrial land, derelict housing areas, abandoned transport zones, and the like, requires coordinated effort among diverse parties with different and often conflicting interests: land owners, private developers and contractors expecting to build profitable residential or commercial projects; private lenders and investors looking for high yield opportunities; environmental activists using scientific evidence to identify and mitigate local ecological risk; public administrators and planners responsible for assuring project compliance with government rules and regulations; elected officials assessing the political attractiveness and viability of the project; the nearby citizens touched by the physical changes; and, the wider public whose tax revenue will help fund redevelopment. Collaborative planning seems to be the right approach to tackling these complex spatial problems.

The collaborative planning paradigm is based on the premise of

unhampered communication among various stakeholders (Habermas, 1984, 1987). This assumption is also considered the main instrument for consensus-building and conflict resolution (Innes, 1995; Healey, 1992, 1997). In practice, this approach uses exchange of information and both expert and experiential knowledge, and harmonises the various self-interests to reach what is termed common interest through social learning (Friedmann, 1987; Booher and Innes, 2002; Innes and Booher, 2010).

Despite some theoretical arguments being advanced against collaborative planning model, such as the alleged lack of argumentative justification of the model itself and its ambiguous theoretical base (Allmendinger, 2002), as well as its neglect of power (Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000), the main criticism relates to the vagueness and poor applicability of the model in planning practice. In short, the critique focuses on the lack of communicative rationality (Harris, 2002; Sandercock, 1998; Flyvbjerg, 1998; Flyvbjerg and Richardson, 2002) as seen in the following: exchange of knowledge among stakeholders is rather low; various parties differ greatly in their opinions of how to solve problems; some stakeholders are incapable of protecting their own

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interests; the transparency required for unhampered communication is poor, etc. In addition, collaborative debate reveals the stakeholders that hold real power (be this e.g. special expertise, a position of public authority, or financial resources), which then affects the understanding and definition of the various types of rationality.

Previous critiques emphasise the need for an intermediary in the planning process. In contemporary practice, professional planners usually act as mediators in charge of facilitating communication among the various stakeholders to balance their particular self-interests. To ensure this collaboration is effective, planners need to be competent negotiators capable of understanding the interests of social groups that take part in the planning process (Booher and Innes, 2002; Shmueli et al., 2008). Therefore, some scholars place an emphasis on deliberation (Forester, 1989, 1999, 2009; Sager, 2002; Laurian, 2007, 2009).

In its essence, deliberative planning is a response to both reflective and collaborative practice. To address the former, deliberation aims at creating an acceptable plan for the optimal organisation of participants' activities that, respectively, affect and modify participants' needs in order for their goals and interests to be reconciled (Forester, 1993). Such a 'scheme of behaving' (Rawls, 1999) in a deliberative process corresponds to a certain extent to the highly structured organisation of the planning process according to premises of the rational model (Dryzek, 1990; Fisher, 2002). Nevertheless, the instrumental rationality of experts does not prevail in the deliberative approach, as reflective practice complements deliberative practice: planners act in a certain context and not independently from other stakeholders, thus moving from a subject-centred approach towards situated, inter-subjective, and learning-oriented deliberative practices (De Leo and Forester, 2017).

Similar to collaborative planning, deliberative practice affects the selection of a course of action after careful consideration and dialogue among involved parties, supported by arguments (Goodin, 2008). Nevertheless, through deliberation, the participants are encouraged not only to overcome the idea of consensus-building, but also to face mutual problem-solving (Fisher, 2002; Fischer and Gottweis, 2012; Fishler, 2012). Furthermore, in contrast to collaborative planning, where all stakeholders are seen as equals, the deliberative approach emphasises the role of planners as mediators (Forester, 1999, 2011).

Deliberative scholarship further supports the idea of a neutral moderator as an advanced actor, compared to the planner as mediator. A moderator – be this an individual or an advisory board – has an unbiased position: a moderator is an objective participant in the planning process in charge of communicating various information to enrich the perspectives of other participants, yet with no influence on the outcomes of the planning process (Laurian, 2007; Dryzek, 2009). However, similarly to the unhampered communication in collaborative planning as discussed above, the elusiveness of perfect neutrality is considered an open question in deliberative practice (Spada and Vreeland, 2013; Fischer and Gottweis, 2012; Fishkin, 2009). This issue is considered important for both planning theory and practice, at the same time providing a prolific area for further research.

This paper aims at analysing the specific role, skills, and competences of a moderator, as well as the moderator's channels of communication with the various stakeholders. To elucidate the role of moderator in the public deliberation procedure, we use the example of Serbian military brownfields. Serbia, a post-socialist country, is an interesting case for two reasons: 1) whilst spatial planning practice was once underpinned by public participation as its main instrument, contemporary proto-democratic Serbian society is not perceived as a context particularly amenable to pursuing collaboration in planning; 2) recent transformations of the Serbian armed forces, including the elimination of obligatory national service, have produced thousands of hectares of vacant or largely unused military sites, now ready to be put to new uses and, in due course, shift from state/public to private ownership. Cast broadly, Serbian planning practice is stretched between various parties: private investors' demands greenlit by high-level politicians; planning professionals incapable of shifting their doctrine away

from technical expertise towards managing the needs of the open market; and a passive civil sector. Hence, the key question is: how to organise the planning process for regeneration of military brownfields in a society oriented towards democracy and neoliberalism, yet with an inherited system of rational planning that still strongly influences planning outcomes?

The paper is structured as follows. After introductory remarks, we examine the premises of the deliberative approach to decision-making, particularly highlighting the attributes normatively assigned to the neutral moderator. The empirical case covers the regeneration of the Vršac Army Club, placed in the context of contemporary planning practice in Serbia and regeneration of military brownfields. In the discussion section, we test to what extent the principles of deliberative decision-making defined previously were implemented in the practical case. The conclusion critically assesses the advantages and obstacles of applying a deliberative approach in contemporary Serbian planning practice.

2. The neutral moderator in public deliberation

Urban land planning as a state administrative activity makes plans for places. This creates a paradox in liberal democratic settings where many different legitimate interests compete and contest the future use of land. Deliberative planning seeks to include these institutions and actors within the plan making process. More precisely, deliberation recognises different viewpoints and takes into account the experiences of all stakeholders with the objective of identifying broader public consensus or a common base (Chambers, 2003; Cohen, 2006). Further, the deliberation process tends to broaden perspectives and foster tolerance and understanding within the decision-making group (Gastil et al., 2010). Finally, the deliberation process entails debate and discussion aimed at creating reasonable and rational opinions based on verified information, in which the participants are prepared to revise their views in the light of new information and claims advanced by other stakeholders. Deliberation need not have consensus as its ultimate goal; rather, the participants are expected to continue their interest in the topic discussed even after the deliberation process has ended (Chambers, 2003; Forester, 1999; Kaplan, 2002; Mansbridge et al., 2006).

From a theoretical perspective, the deliberative process should be based on the principles ingrained in the theory of deliberative democracy: freedom, reasoned thinking, equality, and rationally motivated consensus (Cohen, 2006).¹ According to Mansbridge (2009), these principles belong to early deliberative theory (or type I deliberation), as they highlight consensus-building based on rigid rational communication, search for common and/or public good and ideal deliberation (Habermas, 1962, 1987; Cohen, 2006). On the other hand, modern deliberative theory (or type II deliberation), wherein deliberation is focused on diversity analysis in problem-solving and on flexible communication, transforms the essence of deliberation aimed at consensus, concentrating it on a much more sensitive approach to pluralism, i.e. leading to plural agreement or deliberative disagreement

¹ Briefly, these principles entail the following (Cohen, 2006; Dryzek, 1990; Elster, 1998; List, 2007): **Freedom** exists if the parties: 1) are focused only on problem-solving and not guided by predetermined personal standards, values and requirements; and 2) consider the decision reached in the process of deliberation as a sufficient cause to comply with. **Reasoned thinking** is established if the participants in a discussion present arguments to support their own or criticise some other proposals, aimed at achieving agreement in accordance with better arguments and better reasons (Cohen, 2006). **Equality** 1) is achieved a formal sense when the rules for implementing deliberation do not exclude any individual; while 2) in substantive terms it implies that the existing distribution of power and resources cannot influence the process of public deliberation. **Rationally-motivated consensus** is understood as an implicit outcome of the deliberative process, as participants trigger each other to reconsider certain preferences and their potential modifications as well.

(Chambers, 2003; Bächtiger et al., 2009, 2010; Fisher, 2002; Fishkin, 2009; Gastil et al., 2010). According to Bächtiger et al. (2009), there are seven principles relevant for analysis of deliberative practices based on the synthesis between type I and type II deliberation:

- **Equality**, i.e. discussion on an equal footing, equality of vote, and formal equity; equal participation demands that no individual or group is able to dominate the deliberation process, even if participants in the deliberation are not strictly equal in terms of power and importance; standards of deliberation do not demand absolute equality in deliberation, but it is important for the participants to be equally able to take part in the decision-making process;
- **Justification rationality** is the key consideration for the quality of the deliberation process, as the way in which conclusions are made from the reasons presented determines whether a decision is legitimate or not;
- **Common good orientation** means advancing arguments based on interest, which may be personal or group interest or interest relative to a set of principles;
- **Respect** for the group is expressed at three junctures in the decision-making process: when deliberating, presenting demands, and making counterarguments;
- **Interactivity** means that the participants are mutually connected in the sense that each must take in, internalise, and respond to questions related to its opinions and arguments;
- **Constructivity** pertains to the requirement to reach consensus, and refers to the group's shared objective of achieving rational consensus;
- **Alternative communicative forms** (story-telling, personal experiences, or rhetoric) are deployed to: 1) elucidate relevant information that would otherwise be lost, 2) provide a forum for contributions from people who might otherwise be unjustly disadvantaged in communicating their needs, and 3) build deliberative capacity by engendering trust, inclusion, and respect.

From a practical point of view, if urban planning is considered a collective process oriented towards problem-solving, and one that also involves participants with fewer rhetorical abilities, the civil sector, and non-experts (Fischer and Gottweis, 2012), deliberation calls for the introduction of intermediaries – mediators and moderators – as entities that encourage negotiation among the various social groups, as opposed to their direct contact with various authorities (Baxamusa, 2008; Fishler, 2012; Grossman, 2009). In contrast to mediators, which can affect the decision-making process, the role of moderators is only to promote discussion and guarantee that all participants have an opportunity to speak. Hence, they are considered neutral interveners (Spada and Vreeland, 2013; Fischer and Gottweis, 2012; Fishkin, 2009; Dryzek and List, 2003; List, 2007; McLean et al., 2000).

The shift towards a more sensitive pluralism in the deliberative process, as noted above, clearly influences the positions of the various participants affected by the issue at hand. More precisely, participants who lack the rhetorical skills or self-confidence to voice their opinions must be given an equal opportunity to take part in the decision-making process, which is only possible with the involvement of a neutral moderator. Fig. 1 shows the position of the moderator vis-à-vis the other participants in the public deliberation process as an instrument for facilitating deliberative decision-making.

The role of the neutral moderator in the public deliberation process is reflected in information flow, which is considered the key contribution of the moderator (Laurian, 2007, 2009). A neutral moderator does not provide information, but rather ensures that none of the groups of participants is deprived of an idea, position, decision, or piece of data. The moderator is tasked with facilitating free exchange of information, making sure it takes place in a discussion rather than as a dispute, and controlling the quality of information so that a legitimate decision can be made. Free discussion and moderator's neutrality vis-à-vis all

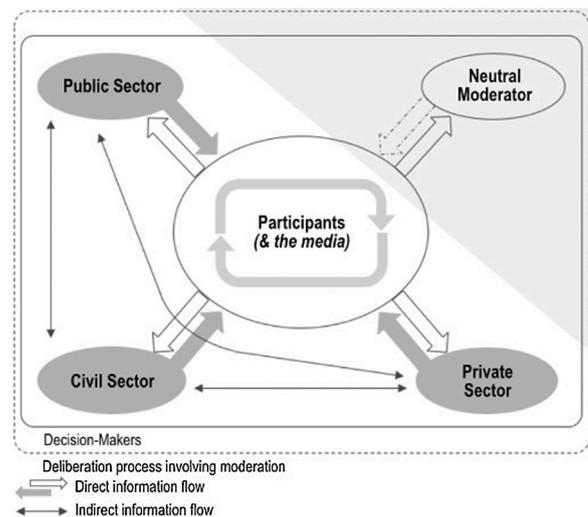


Fig. 1. Direct and indirect flow of information between participants in the public deliberation process.

Source: Authors.

participants in the deliberation process are the foundations of public deliberation (Zurita, 2006; Dryzek and List, 2003).

As such, the moderator's leadership skills are crucial, above all for ensuring that the deliberation can proceed spontaneously and preventing any participant from dominating the discussion. Therefore, the moderator, as a neutral entity, ought to watch, guide, and motivate participants to engage in discussion and dialogue, with the primary objective of understanding one another (Fishkin, 2009; Dryzek, 2009).

The moderator should also be aware of the situation in question and follow the deliberation processes and objectively assess their legitimacy. Moreover, the moderator should permit each participant to take an equal part in the presentation of arguments and draw attention to any opinions that may have been insufficiently or inadequately presented. In doing so, the moderator allays mistrust between the participants in a public deliberation, creates conditions for more open and efficient communication, and helps the participants stay focused on the issue at hand (Spada and Vreeland, 2013; McLean et al., 2000).

Finally, the moderator does not participate actively in the decision-making process. The moderator's task is to ensure effective participatory mechanisms are available throughout the planning process, as these promote more interaction between members of the public, interest groups, and government agencies than traditional mechanisms (such as surveys and debates) do. The neutral moderator's advisory role is important as it marks his or her essential contribution to the quality, transparency, and legitimacy of the planning process (Laurian, 2009; Spada and Vreeland, 2013; Fischer and Gottweis, 2012). Hence, the objective of the moderator to ensure that shared learning (i.e. exchange of knowledge through discussion) leads to a decision that all are ready to abide by and one that is acceptable to all, the so-called deliberative consensus.

In the practical sense, public deliberation can be conducted in the format of advisory committees or mini-groups (Goodin, 2003; Chambers, 2009), and its effects vary depending on the particular context, e.g. value system, history, demographics and/or ideological conditions. Following a brief description of Serbia's contemporary planning context, the next section focuses on the process of public deliberation in repurposing a military brownfield site.

3. Contemporary urban planning in Serbia

Serbia's first democratically elected government came to power only in late 2000, marking the foundation of a pluralist political culture and a decentralisation of power. In this context, the 2002 Local Government

Law (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 9/, 2002) gave local authorities legal and decision-making power for budgeting and spatial planning within their administrative boundaries. Nevertheless, the absence of appropriate measures, institutional capacity, and political reforms when embracing a market-driven economy have created a chaotic situation wherein no clear ideas were forthcoming on how to adapt to the new socio-economic reality (Lazarevic Bajec, 2009; Nedovic-Budic et al., 2012). As another pillar of a liberal society, democracy is also facing major challenges: as many as twenty years after the fall of the authoritarian political regime, Serbian society is still considered a 'proto-democracy' (Vujosevic, 2010). Consequently, spatial planning instruments are ineffective and citizen involvement is low (Zekovic et al., 2015; Maricic et al., 2018).

The market-oriented economic approach finds fertile ground for growth in the form of wild neoliberalism. For example, the 2004 Privatisation Law (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 45/, 2005) made it possible for private consortia to purchase state-owned (socially-owned) enterprises, allowing them to buy these firms' buildings but not the land on which they stood. Nevertheless, the 2009 Planning and Construction Law (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 72/2009) permitted this leasehold to be converted to freehold. Serbian and foreign oligarchs became wealthy at the expense of ordinary citizens. The fact that only some groups have had their interests met has distorted spatial development (Peric and Maruna, 2012; Peric and Miljus, 2017).

Rooted in the comprehensive planning model, the majority of professionals show respect neither for the demands of the free market in the domain of spatial development (Vujosevic and Nedovic-Budic, 2006; Nedovic-Budic and Cavric, 2006), nor for the need for collaborative planning, introduced through informal strategic planning with the involvement of large (foreign) funds such as UN-Habitat and the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ) (Lazarevic Bajec, 2009; Peric, 2016a). This situation has been gradually changing as future planning professionals are gaining new knowledge and skills through the recently established academic programmes and growing participation in the international projects, thus being capable of expanding their perspectives beyond the traditional planning approach based on the technical rationality (Maruna, 2015). However, even when equipped with relevant knowledge to tackle complex spatial problems, planners, and, in particular, those within local authority planning departments are left incapable of coping with the decisions imposed from the national bodies (Peric, 2020b). Hence, the system hierarchy clearly endangers planners' functional responsibility needed for collaboration.

Following a gradual renaissance in public initiatives, mainly through the emerging creative cluster, and supported by the amended planning law (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 145/, 2014) that introduced the instrument of 'early public inspection', members of the public are now allowed to voice their opinions about certain urban issues. However, participation by the civil sector in planning is still weak (Peric, 2020b). The lack of knowledge among planning professionals on how to implement new participatory mechanisms based on the collaborative planning paradigm, as well as their disinterest, mistrust, and fear of communicating with the public (Maricic et al., 2018), means that civic engagement remains rather unstructured and spontaneous: public voices are not sufficiently heard, members of the public are mainly passive recipients of information, and the civil sector is usually omitted from the urban decision-making process (Cvetinovic et al., 2017). Only grassroots movements appear to act as advocates of the public interest (Grubbauer and Camprag, 2019).

3.1. Military brownfield sites in Serbia

It is clear from the outline of Serbian socio-spatial context presented above that brownfield regeneration initiatives have much potential for manipulation that involves public land, public interest, and taxpayer money. Though these practices are common to most post-socialist countries faced with the private sector in a position of power,

opportunism in governmental structures, and lack of professional expertise (Cook, 2010; Keresztély and Scott, 2012; Cope, 2015; Osman et al., 2015; Djurasovic, 2016; Peric, 2016b; Zdunic, 2017), resulting in the neglect of public interest in favour of profit for foreign and domestic developers, the Serbian case reveals nation-state politics unambiguously supporting the private sector at the expense of the citizens. Such authoritarian entrepreneurialism is particularly seen in the Belgrade Waterfront project (Grubbauer and Camprag, 2019; Peric, 2020a; Cukic and Peric, 2019; Zekovic et al., 2018; Pope, 2020).

However, the redevelopment of a military brownfield site follows a different pattern. The crucial difference lies in the fact that the land and/or facility involved are not immediately open to the market, i.e. they are not subject to a tendering procedure in which a variety of public and private sector institutions, organisations, and individuals can compete. More precisely, the asset disposal process, where the leasehold or freehold title is transferred from the seller (in this case the government, as the land is state-owned) to the buyer is strictly regulated by the Public Property Law (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 108/, 2016). According to this law, repurposing military brownfields requires collaboration between three key types of stakeholders: national agencies (the Serbian Government), the Ministry of Defence (MoD), and local authorities. Local governments have pre-emptive rights, meaning the former military sites must be offered for sale to them first.² This process prevents the uncontrolled influence of the private sector and requires direct coordination between the national and sub-national level throughout the regeneration process.

There are, however, a number of issues that hinder the redevelopment of military brownfields (Tadic, 2012; Rancic, 2008; Kopanja et al., 2015). Mainly, as military brownfields are usually located outside central urban areas, it is not easy to find local authorities ready to take on the risk of their redevelopment due to the low tax revenue they stand to earn once the sites are revitalised. A second group of problems are administrative in nature. Firstly, selling the land is a complicated process that involves a variety of public agencies, yet no clear set of responsibilities is assigned to any of them; and, coordination between national agencies and municipalities is inefficient, and, more importantly, lacks a clear leadership role. The process is further slowed by unclear property titles and many sites not being registered in property records. Solving these issues requires more time and technical and financial support from local authorities.

In sum, the inefficient asset disposal procedure reduces opportunities for redevelopment. The procedure ends once the local authority has purchased the asset (i.e. after the first instalment of the purchase price has been paid). Therefore, if the municipality lacks a clear strategy on how to redevelop a military brownfield site in its administrative area, the influence of other actors becomes immense (with the private sector a key interested party, given how sidelined it is in the asset sale procedure). The initial idea of redeveloping the land in the public interest is thus highly likely to become distorted, even though this is the aim of agreements between national and local bodies as envisaged in the Public Property Law. Clearly, the need for the inclusion of and negotiation between relevant stakeholders, as well as for efficient coordination between interested parties, enabling all to take part in defining a feasible strategy, requires better moderation of the entire process (Miljus, 2018). The example presented below shows the strengths and weaknesses of the process once a moderator is engaged.

² Of the total of 478 sites registered as military brownfields (barracks, army clubs, depots, airfields, shooting ranges, training areas, shelters, army-owned farms, etc.), 121 have been repurposed to date (June 2020). Two-thirds of the sites have been purchased by local governments.

4. Case study: revitalisation of the Vršac Army Club

4.1. Methodological strategy

Before describing the regeneration process (the rest of Section 4) and analysis of the mediated deliberation in such a process (Section 5) as applied in the selected case, the methodological approach to conduct such an analysis is briefly explained. An in-depth qualitative case study was developed to permit an understanding of the complex nature of planning for the redevelopment of the chosen military brownfield. We differ several steps in such a case study.

Firstly, by reviewing the secondary sources on the topic of military brownfields regeneration in Serbia, we were able to select relevant data sources for our case. Accordingly, we started with identifying the institutions (both public authorities at the national and local level), and organisations involved in the revitalisation process, to further collect the topic-related legal and strategic documents at the national and local scale, and, finally, identify the key informants.

We proceeded with collecting the data from the sources mentioned, using the following methods: 1) institutional analysis of the roles, responsibilities, and tasks in the disposal of former military facilities of the national institutions – MoD and National Property Directorate, local municipality of Vršac, and NGO National Alliance for Local Economic Development (NALED); 2) document analysis of primary national sources – Public Property Law ([Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 108/, 2016](#)) and other national plans, policies, and reports, primary local sources – Detailed Zoning Plan ([Official Gazette of the Municipality of Vršac No. 17/, 2013](#)) and the local authority's public reports, and the documents prepared by NALED in collaboration with the City of Vršac ([NALED, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c](#)); and 3) semi-structured interviews with the representatives of the above mentioned bodies in order to define their positions, purpose, and expertise in the given process.

Finally, using the methods of content analysis of documents and transcription of interviews, and backed by the seven principles gleaned from the theoretical analysis, we assessed the extent of mediated deliberation by elucidating the following aspects in the process:

- 1) equal standing of the parties in the deliberations,
- 2) reasoning as a base for effective deliberation,
- 3) common interest and/or principles,
- 4) respect for others' arguments, rebuttals, and demands,
- 5) empathy for interests and situation of others,
- 6) commitment to consensus, and
- 7) robust and inclusive rhetoric.

This section elucidates brownfield regeneration process as exemplified by the Vršac Army Club and is described through two phases: initial planning to repurpose the facility (2014–2015) and additional redevelopment (2015–2016). In Section 5, we assess to what extent the modified theoretical principles have been implemented in the empirical case.

4.2. Vršac Army Club

Situated in the central urban core, the Vršac Army Club was declared surplus to the Serbian Army's requirements in 2006. Given its location and architectural heritage, the Italianate building dating from the 1890s has been the subject of various studies and plans on multiple occasions.³

³ In 2003, the Pančevo Cultural Heritage Agency developed its Study and Conservation Plan for block 60 of the Vršac city centre, which includes the Army Club. The Block 60 Detailed Zoning Plan regulates the development of this area, also known as the 'Vršac Promenade'. The zoning plan was commissioned in 2009 by the Vršac local authority from the Institute of Architecture and Urban & Spatial Planning of Serbia.

Exercising its pre-emptive rights, in November 2012 the Vršac local authority bought the Army Club (a building with a floor area of 1,314 sqm on a lot of 13.73 ares) for 56.8 million dinars (approximately 500,000 euros). The Club was finally put to use only in 2014 after the city won financial and technical assistance in a competition held under the Brownfield Revitalisation Project call,⁴ operated by the National Alliance for Local Economic Development (NALED), a Serbian NGO, with support from the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The revitalised space is today known as the Army Club – Creative Generator.

4.2.1. Initial redevelopment of the Vršac Army Club: phase 1

After a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between NALED and the City of Vršac, both parties agreed on what was needed to implement the 'Army Club – Creative Generator' proposal which won support from the assistance programme. In summary, NALED's support included: training for those involved in redevelopment planning; preparation of a business plan; and, support for the actual redevelopment works. [Table 1](#) below shows a detailed description of activities undertaken from the signing of the MoU (October 2014) to the formal opening of one part of the former armed forces facility (June 2015).

4.2.2. Additional redevelopment of the Vršac Army Club: phase 2

After the Army Club – Creative Generator was formally opened, the local authority received support from NALED to commission a final business plan from experts at University of Belgrade Faculty of Economics. The business plan focuses on guidelines for continuing development of the site, which involves refurbishing the remainder of the building and finding ways to attract long-term commercial tenants, which would make the redevelopment viable in the long run. [Table 2](#) below shows a detailed description of activities undertaken from the time the initial tenants moved in (June 2015) to NALED's final presentation that marked the end of regeneration supported by this NGO (January 2016).

5. Discussion: towards deliberative regeneration of military brownfields?

The overview presented above shows the timeline with the most important steps, decisions, and outputs in the regeneration of the Vršac Army Club. It is clear that NALED played a key role by moderating collaboration with other relevant stakeholders (local authority, local companies) and constantly providing various types of support, including technical knowledge, legal and economic advice, and financial assistance. Here we look closer at the nature of such cooperative brownfield regeneration backed by the principles of deliberative practice as defined by [Bächtiger et al. \(2009\)](#) and described in Section 2. More precisely, we conduct the empirical analysis through measuring to what extent the modified deliberative principles were implemented in the concrete case of the Vršac Army Club regeneration.

Equal standing of the parties in the deliberations. The equality of participants regardless of their social or economic positions was made possible through NALED who involved local entrepreneurs (winery, music school, tourism organisation, insurance company, and a project office) as key actors in addition to the Vršac local government. Nevertheless, somewhat diminished transparency was noticed twice at the very beginning of the process: by inviting only Gabriel Raul Peña to develop the preliminary business plan, and by favouring particular local stakeholders by the local authority, hence eschewing an open call to the

⁴ The Brownfield Revitalisation Project call was opened to all the local governments in Serbia, while 33 submitted the proposal for the development of a brownfield site within their administrative area. Seven proposals were short-listed, and the finalists were the local authorities from Vršac, Smederevo and Mladenovac.

Table 1

Vršac Army Club redevelopment: phase 1.

22.10.2014	MoU signed between NALED and City of Vršac
Nov.2014	Decision taken to involve local stakeholders
<i>Participants</i>	NALED, Vršac local authority
<i>Activity</i>	NALED recognised the following stakeholders as likely tenants of the future redevelopment: Vršac Vineyards, the large local winery; Music School; Vršac Tourism Organisation; DDOR Novi Sad insurance company; and a local firm with experience in drafting EU project applications.
Nov.2014	Decision taken to organise study tour
<i>Participants</i>	NALED, Vršac Local Authority, Embassy of the Netherlands, selected local stakeholders, Serbian Ministry of Economy (promotion of systemic approach to brownfield regeneration), and representatives of second- and third-ranked applications in the Brownfield Revitalisation Project competition (to promote interest in brownfield regeneration from other local authorities).
<i>Activity</i>	NALED and the Embassy of the Netherlands organised: 1) orientation training for the participants (14.11.2014); 2) a study tour guided by the Dutch architect Gabriel Raul Peña (16-21.11.2014) to allow the stakeholders to better understand the brownfield regeneration process and its impact on local economic development; and 3) discussion to exchange experiences from the study tour (Nov.-Dec.2014).
27-28.01.2015	Workshop for local stakeholders
<i>Participants</i>	Gabriel Raul Peña, NALED, selected local stakeholders (15 participants)
<i>Activity</i>	The workshop included two expert lectures: 1) marketing, financing, and involvement of various stakeholders in the creative process of brownfield redevelopment; and 2) best practices.
Mar.2015	Decision taken to appoint interim Army Club Board of Directors
<i>Participants</i>	Vršac local authority, Vršac Public Utility Corporation, Vršac Cultural Centre, 2 October Public Utility Corporation
<i>Activity</i>	With the Army Club now owned by the city, responsibility for operating the facility was given to the Vršac Public Utility Corporation, which manages all real estate held by the local government.
Apr.2015	NALED develops study entitled 'Redevelopment of Brownfield Sites in Serbia: analysis of the legal framework, best practices, and recommendations for improvement'
<i>Participants</i>	NALED
<i>Activity</i>	NALED developed an analysis of options for and experiences with revitalising brownfield sites in Serbia, with a list of all applicable national legislation and local ordinances, to facilitate the creation of a business plan.
Apr.2015	Preliminary Business Plan prepared
<i>Participants</i>	Peña Architecture, Vršac local authority, NALED
<i>Activity</i>	The Business Plan promotes the use of the space for a variety of activities (concerts, exhibitions, and workshops). The business plan also envisages the creation of a marketing approach and a community mobilisation strategy to optimise the use of the facility and ensure its positioning during the first stage of its operation.
Apr.2015	Army Club Redevelopment Project prepared
<i>Participants</i>	Peña Architecture, Vršac local authority, NALED
<i>Activity</i>	An integral part of the Business Plan, the Redevelopment Project re-brands the former Army Club as the 'Creative Generator'.
Apr.2015	Preliminary Business Plan and Redevelopment Project presented
<i>Participants</i>	Local stakeholders, local residents, NALED
<i>Activity</i>	The preliminary Business Plan and opportunities and proposed uses for the space were presented, with local authority officials, business leaders, potential tenants, and investors given a tour of the building.
May 2015	Phase 1 redevelopment works begin
<i>Participants</i>	Vršac local authority, interim Army Club Board of Directors, NALED
<i>Activity</i>	Commencement of the first phase of redevelopment works, involving the ground floor and courtyard. The construction works are jointly funded by Vršac and NALED.
12.06.2015	Formal opening of the Army Club – Creative Generator
<i>Participants</i>	Mayor of Vršac, NALED Executive Director, interim Army Club Board of Directors, US Ambassador to Serbia, Gabriel Raul Peña, media outlets
<i>Activity</i>	After the works were completed, the refurbished spaces were leased out to tenants for the summer.

Table 2

Vršac Army Club redevelopment: phase 2.

Jun.2015- Dec.2015	Mentoring of local stakeholders by NALED
<i>Participants</i>	NALED, Gabriel Raul Peña
<i>Activity</i>	Over the first six months following initial refurbishment, the designer, business planners, and NALED trained the Board of Directors, local officials, and tenants.
Jul.2015	Agreement on development of new (final) Business Plan
<i>Participants</i>	Vršac local authority, NALED, Vršac Public Utility Corporation
<i>Activity</i>	With the interim Business Plan not allowing the facility to operate sustainably in the long run, the final plan should propose a combined approach: part of the building should be given to non-commercial tenants that fit the intended use of the space (local cultural institutions), whilst the remainder is to be offered for commercial lease in a competitive process, with the ultimate aim being transition to a public-private partnership model.
Jul.2015 -Oct.2015	Development of (final) Business Plan
<i>Participants</i>	University of Belgrade Faculty of Economics, Vršac local authority, NALED
<i>Activity</i>	The final Business Plan includes five documents required for managing the facility: 1 Decision to appoint Board of Directors of the Army Club – Creative Generator; 2 Decision to advertise commercial leases for parts of the facility; 3 Non-commercial lease agreements; 4 Lease agreements; 5 Decision to incorporate Vršac Creative Generator as an LLC once a public-private partnership model is established
14.10.2015	Adoption of final Business Plan
<i>Participants</i>	Vršac City Council, Vršac Public Utility Corporation, Vršac Cultural Centre
Nov.2015	Decision adopted to appoint Board of Directors of the Army Club – Creative Generator
<i>Participants</i>	Vršac local authority, NALED, Vršac City Councillor, Director of Vršac Public Utility Corporation, representative of Vršac Cultural Centre
<i>Activity</i>	The local authority appointed a permanent Board of Directors, which comprises a City Councillor who heads the Board, the Director of the Vršac Public Utility Corporation, and a representative of the Vršac Cultural Centre. The Board's objective is to continue the transformation of the former Army Club from the current low-cost cost management approach (minimal operational costs, investment cycles lacking clear tenant programming, etc.) to a market- and programme-oriented management approach.
13.11.2015	Advertisement of long-term commercial leases
<i>Participants</i>	Board of Directors, Vršac local authority
30.11-01.12.2015	Training for Board of Directors and tenants
<i>Participants</i>	NALED, USAID, Army Club – Creative Generator, tenants (Josif Marinković Music School, Vršac Literary Society, Vršac Tourism Organisation, Vršac Cultural Centre, Hemofarm Foundation), local authority, Bee Premium Group, Impact Hub, and Multikultivator.
<i>Activity</i>	Twelve representatives of the selected tenants attended two-day training organised by NALED. The event defined future steps in the regeneration of the former Army Club and developed a programme of activities and requirements that tenants would have to meet to continue using the space.
28.01.2016	Final presentation of Army Club redevelopment
<i>Participants</i>	NALED, MoD, Serbian National Public Policy Secretariat, Science and Technology Park, Privatisation Agency, Ministry of Economy, Pančevo and Novi Sad local authorities
<i>Activity</i>	NALED presented the results of the Army Club redevelopment and spoke more broadly about Serbia's brownfield sites, focusing especially on conclusions and recommendations for planning the regeneration of other brownfield areas.

broader public. However, the equality principle was applied in the final phase of the process, i.e. with the two-stage open call for long-term commercial tenants of the Creative Generator.

Reasoning as a base for effective deliberation. To secure legitimate decisions in the process, all documents (business plans and Peña's

urban plan and architectural design) were put up for public consultation. This allowed the civil sector, which did not actively participate in the initial phases of documents preparation, to use these consultations to express its own views and thoughts. Again, NALED was crucial in allowing public voices to be heard through organising several debates: the first in April 2015 to discuss the preliminary business plan and redevelopment proposal, the second in October 2015 to debate on the improved (final) business plan, and the final presentation of the Army Club redevelopment in January 2016.

Common interest and/or principles. To identify and recognise common interest out of self-interests was an important step in the process instead of considering the taken-for-granted public interest. In the case of Vršac, it was possible as various stakeholders believed in the work and mission of NALED, and, consequently, felt encouraged to articulate their individual interests whilst also being focused on mechanisms needed to achieve public interest as embodied in the revitalisation of the former army club. The meetings involving the local authority officials, business leaders, potential tenants, investors, and the general public became a regular practice – they were held three times in the crucial phases of the project development (April 2015, October 2015 and January 2016).

Respect for others' arguments, rebuttals, and demands. In practical terms, the level of respect among the stakeholders at the various phases of the planning process is conditioned by the general democratic attitudes in society. The Vršac case shows that, despite the length and complexity of the process and the variety of interests, respect was secured through systematic organisation of the planning process. NALED's readiness to train the Army Club Board of Directors, local officials, and tenants over the first six months following initial refurbishment proves as particularly valid in nurturing the culture of democratic dialogue, which is not the usual approach in Serbian planning practice.

Empathy for interests and situation of others. Similarly, the ability of the stakeholders to express their arguments, sometimes in agreement with other actors and at other times in opposition to them, is attributable to the intermediary being in charge of bringing the relevant parties together and enabling open discussion.

Commitment to consensus. This aspect presumes the attainment of a rationally motivated consensus even as compromise ensues. In Vršac, this was achieved by setting the stage for a long-term public-private partnership (PPP) between the municipality authorities and the long-term commercial tenants of a revitalised facility – Creative Generator. This is seen as a clear step towards a rational goal based on the attuned needs and interests of the various stakeholders. The role of NALED was in clarifying the need to involve not only the non-commercial tenants (i.e. culture-related organisations, as proposed by the preliminary business plan), but to advertise the mixture of commercial and non-commercial tenants, as suggested by the final business plan, and was, finally, implemented.

Robust and inclusive rhetoric. By definition, inclusive communication demands intervention from intermediaries, as they are intended to be used by weaker parties not capable of defining and articulating their own values, visions, and goals. In the practical case of Vršac, communication was mainly facilitated in the relationship between local private companies and the local administration, as the ultimate goal of NALED was also to promote local economic development by assisting the regeneration of the Army Club. However, as not all the tenants are market-oriented (such as the music school and the cultural centre), the needs of the general public, though expressed only in public consultations, were indirectly met.

Finally, if NALED set out to be a neutral moderator in the deliberative process of regeneration of the Army Club, we may conclude that it succeeded in its role to a great extent. If we strictly address the attributes assigned to the deliberative moderator:

1) NALED had the necessary leadership skills to organise the deliberative process and limit the dominance of some stakeholders. Clearly,

as NALED was determined to achieve PPP, the main role was to balance the needs and interests of the Vršac local authority, on the one hand, and local entrepreneurs, on the other;

- 2) NALED was considered an objective moderator aimed at keeping the stakeholders focused on problem-solving. The NGO was able to do so through activities that preceded this particular regeneration (e.g. organisation of the Brownfield Revitalisation Project call for applications), as well as by providing the local authority not only with training and intangible technical, but also with financial assistance throughout the process (by means of the study visit, involvement of foreign experts, etc.);
- 3) NALED ensured communication between the relevant stakeholders ran smoothly, yet stopped short of making decisions (all Directors were local officials). This clearly reflects the role of moderator as an enabler and promoter of open communication without affecting decision-making.

In one aspect, NALED even surpassed the nature of a neutral moderator: it not only disseminated information, but also brought new inputs and knowledge to the debate (though its internal business, legal, and technical departments). However, in the case of Vršac, this is considered an advantage as NALED initiated the call for applications in the Brownfield Revitalisation Project and was so able to look at the broader picture of brownfield issues. The NGO also possessed sufficient human and organisational capacities to moderate the regeneration of the former Army Club over the two years it took. Finally, NALED secured the funding for the process (from USAID), which was highly appreciated as Vršac is a relatively poor municipality that lacks finance for strategic and sustainable urban development.

6. Concluding remarks

The regeneration of the Vršac Army Club is a successful example of deliberative practice in contemporary Serbian urban planning. In addition to all the skills and competences detailed above that NALED was equipped with as the mediator in the process, the success of the venture was also contributed to by two conditions on the ground. Firstly, the Vršac local authority and local public enterprises showed a great deal of trust in NALED's leadership of the technical aspect of the process – the business plan and the revitalisation project. Although it was local experts who developed the winning bid for the Brownfield Revitalisation Project call, proving that the city did not lack either the knowledge or ideas for its development, the local authority was open to new experiences throughout the mediation process, and did not emphasise locals as the sole enablers and promoters of local identity. This does not mean that local knowledge was excluded from the process outright, as the local authority took an active part in discussing the final business plan.

Secondly, local entrepreneurs acted as partners to the local authority. Both groups of stakeholders were focused on the economic revitalisation of the city's central district, yet without the dominance of the private sector which usually aims at achieving financial benefits at the expense of the public interest (Miljus, 2018). Also, the involvement of non-commercial tenants underlined the basic need for enhancing the quality of life for the broader public through the regeneration process. This synergy between public and private sectors certainly contributed to NALED's successful moderation. In addition, none of the parties had a privileged position vis-à-vis NALED as an external organisation.

The limited involvement of the civil sector was the weakest element in the entire process. However, as general public become truly active in brownfield regeneration only when they face direct usurpation of public interest (Peric, 2020a), the case of Vršac clearly reveals an organised deliberative practice led by an objective and skilled moderator and directed towards mutual respect and common interest.

Duplication of this example at other military brownfield sites in Serbia may be met with two main issues. On the one hand, the vision of the private sector usually strongly conflicts with that of the local

authorities, or, alternatively, both parties agree to ignore the public interest together. In such cases, when faced with the dominance of one particular interest over others, it is very difficult for a moderator to seek fair, open, and respectful deliberation. On the other hand, NALED successfully fulfilled all the functions of an objective, skilled and competent mediator. This was possible due to NALED's organisational structure, which includes various departments (business, legal, technical), and its main role as supporter of municipalities in promoting local development. However, NALED had a much greater impact on the regeneration of the Vršac Army Club: 1) NALED initiated the Brownfield Regeneration Project call to make an informed choice of the best locations for future renewal; and 2) this competition was financially supported by USAID. It is highly unlikely that such a systemic approach to brownfield regeneration with an independent mediator will be found in planning practice. Usually, internal intermediaries (e.g. those that are part of public authorities, either local or national) eventually work in favour of the public sector only, neglecting the needs and interests of other stakeholders and, more importantly, diminishing the possibility of finding a joint solution to a spatial problem. In sum, a moderator like NALED is an exemption rather than the rule.

There are a number of mechanisms that can be introduced as intermediate steps towards the full application of deliberative procedures in contemporary Serbian planning practice. These mechanisms should be structured so as to: encourage stakeholders from various sectors to take part in decision-making; provide information about the issue at hand to every stakeholder throughout the urban planning process; motivate the participants to explain their views rationally and exchange information honestly; permit flexibility in planning procedures applicable to the issue at hand; and encourage local public services to use their own initiatives to adjust planning procedures to the issue at hand and the types of stakeholders involved in the decision-making. Such mechanisms certainly can make planning a purposeful deliberation instrument that may anticipate and avoid the social and economic damage to urban developments. However, to take them as a rule rather than exception requires a host of social, political and economic changes that extend well beyond what urban planning can do.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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