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Aleksandra Đukić

New Belgrade: visions, plans and realizations 1950-2014

Introduction

The iconic modernist structures of New Belgrade have always been a symbol and a testimony of all ideological shifts in the Yugoslav and Serbian society. More than 60 years of its urban existence has brought numerous adjustment and changes in its economic, social and functional structure, but its rigid and over-scaled urban matrix has mostly remained untouched. Once flooded marshland, New Belgrade had been planned by numerous of Yugoslav architects who implemented their visions and beliefs into the new planned city. However, a process of a specific urban reconstruction has been started in the 1990s, tackling the sensitive issues of the modernist architectural legacy, challenging the purity of the original conception and introducing some new patterns of behavior and urban needs.

Since then, New Belgrade has been influenced by socio-economic turbulences on local and global levels and included in an inevitable transformation of urban tissue. Its identity has been redefined, tracing a new path for emerging models of urban life.¹ The urban pattern, as well as the spatial and functional concepts of the mega blocks have been questioned and exposed to professional criticism, while the upgrading and adjustment to the contemporary demands and standards have become an imperative of its further development.

The old framework has been tested and modified, many questions about current development have been raised, but the regeneration of the mega blocks still has to be synchronized in order to provide a flexible and satisfying urban setting. The increased speed of global flows certainly requires immediate solutions, but they should provide a long-term sustainability and not just another instant remedy with numerous contraindications.

The first urban plans for New Belgrade: the period from 1921 until 1945

The idea about the urbanization of this area was presented the first time at the competition for the General Urban Plan of Belgrade in 1921. The first Plan of Belgrade was done in 1923 by Djordje Kovaljevski and included the left bank of the river Sava (the New Belgrade site). One of the goals was the providing of an „organic“ connection between the town of Zemun and the historic Belgrade. The new urban matrix was composed of several smaller geometric ones. The critiques toward this plan came from the Czech architect Jan Dubovy, who pointed out the problem of finding solutions for the newly formed settlements in megaprojects. In his critiques he also promoted values of the contemporary European urbanism, especially of the „garden city“ idea.² However, just some roads, a railway and a bridge, the airport and Belgrade’s fair were built on the area because of the swampy and inhospitable land and the lack of investments.



Fig. 1
General Urban Plan of Belgrade from 1923 by Djordje Kovaljevski. (Archive Đukić)

A decade later, in 1932, in the Regulation Plan for Zemun by Djordje Kovaljevski, done in a Beaux Art style, the urban expansion was planned southwards, toward Belgrade and Sava River. The new settlement was divided into three zones, differentiated by the population density: one dense, one medium and one rare populated areas. The dense populated area was planned to be the administrative, business and cultural core of the settlement. A square was planned in the center of the zone, connected with the other parts of the settlement, as well as with Belgrade, Zemun and Bežanija. The center was pointed out by a square with a monument and surrounded by public buildings.



Fig. 2
Urban plan of reconstruction of Belgrade from 1940 by Milorad Pantović. (Archive Đukić)

Another vision for the ideal city of Belgrade is shown in the sketch of Milorad Pantović, done for the touristic exhibition in Belgrade in 1940, with the aim of promoting mass-tourism. The plan suggested a radical reconstruction of the historic Belgrade. Pantovic followed Le Corbusier’s ideas about the abolition of the urban blocks and streets and the construction of skyscrapers surrounded by green

areas. New Belgrade was seen in this sketch as a huge landscaped city garden. Another idea for a radical reconstruction of Belgrade was proposed in 1941, on the eve of WW II. The sketch was done by Dragiša Brašovan and included the area of New Belgrade, named “Sava New Settlement-City Belgrade” too. New Belgrade was planned for 500.000 inhabitants as a connection between Belgrade and Zemun in a radial urban matrix. Besides the residential area and a new railway station, a huge park with sport and recreation facilities surrounded by representative public buildings such as theaters, museums, churches were foreseen. Brašovan respected in the plan the Olympic stadium project, done by the architect Werner March in 1940.

The period from 1945 until 1960

After the end of WW II, Belgrade became the capital city of the new-formed Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia. New Belgrade was conceived as a new governmental centre, reflecting the ideological and technological aspirations of the recently established socialist society. Its unique position in the topology of Belgrade enabled its total modern design based on a grid which followed the modernist ideas of Le Corbusier, proclaimed by CIAM in 1928. The ideas implemented in the urban plan denied the aestheticism and academicism and proclaimed the functionalism, presented by open mega blocks, divided functions, flat roofs and transparent ground floors.

The first urban plan “Sketch for the Regulation of Belgrade on the Left Bank of the River Sava” was designed by Nikola Dobrović in 1946, who was famous Serbian architect and the head of the newly formed Town Planning Institute.³ According to this plan New Belgrade was considered as an administrative center with governmental buildings, a new railway station and a residential area for diplomats. The urban matrix was asymmetrically radial (the main streets were planned parallel to the river Sava) and formal, with mega blocks and large percentage of greenery. The new building of the 50 m high Parliament was located within the historic Kalemegdan castle on the top of the hill, flanked by two skyscrapers of 100 m height.

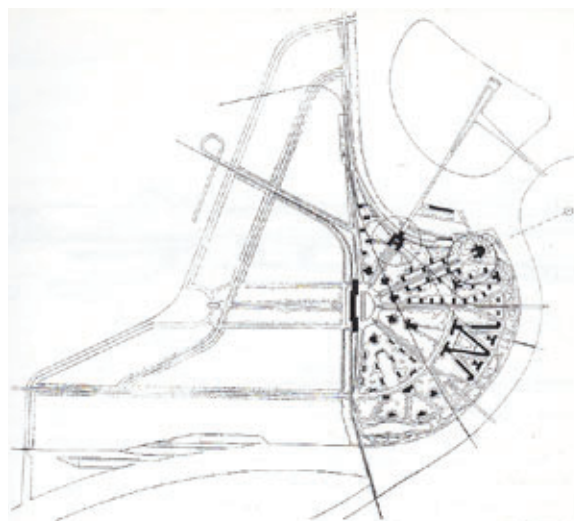


Fig. 3
Sketch for the regulation of Belgrade on the left bank
of the river Sava from 1946 by Nikola Dobrović.
(Archive Đukić)

The majority of the participants in the architectural competition in 1946 followed principally Dobrović’s concept, but neglected the radial urban matrix and suggested an orthogonal one. The member of the jury Josip Seissel divided in his report about the results of the competition the proposals into three groups, according to the size and the use of the space: maximalists, minimalists and the moderate solutions

(with middle measures/dimensions).⁴ The proposals for a new settlement for 200.000 inhabitants that covered 1300Ha (400 Ha for a public buildings zone) were opposed to solutions for a settlement for 70.000 inhabitants that cover 70 Ha for residential land use only. The most of the proposals belonged to the moderate solutions. However, it was clear after the competition that the idea of New Belgrade as a strictly administrative center was replaced by the more realistic one by the majority of the participants. There was a lack of housing after the war period and the number of citizens increased in Belgrade.⁵ Therefore the competition contributions proposed a large residential area in New Belgrade. At the same time an architectural competition for modern multi-family houses and apartments was launched.

The first version of the “Sketch for the General Regulation of the Communication System and the Land Use of New Belgrade”, done by Nikola Dobrović was finished in 1948 and it became the basement for the General Urban Plan (GUP) of Belgrade. The inputs for the plan were also a five years development program for the period 1947-1951, the analysis of the current situation and a program for the future development of Belgrade until 1966. The individual and creative method and the procedure in urban planning were replaced by the team decision-making. The Commission of Urbanism consisting of more than 30 experts in urban planning was part of a team, which created the GUP of Belgrade. The Action Plan, a financial framework plan for the implementation of the GUP Belgrade, which was mostly oriented toward the economic domain, was also considered as a part of the plan. The important zones of the city were preliminary studied through 3D models, urban design projects and sometimes even through preliminary construction plans. However the composition of the new city as well as the functional zones were defined. The plan proposed four units, each of them consisting of three mega blocks. The first unit, parallel to the riverbank was intended for the federal administration, while the others were planned for residential areas. The position of the Government Presidency Building, the Sava bridge and a luxury hotel were fixed in 1947 after a Design Competition. Some of the proposals were never accepted, such as the canal, connecting the rivers Sava and Danube and crossing New Belgrade or the artificial lake between the island of Veliko Ratno Ostrvo and the Danube riverbank. The GUP of Belgrade was adopted on October 20th 1950.

Several design competitions for New Belgrade were announced between 1947 and 1950: the competition for the FPRY Government Presidency Building, for the building of the Central Committee of the Union of the Yugoslav Communists and for typological apartments in multi-family residential houses. In the course of the competition for the Government Presidency Building a few general requirements were set: the position of the Central Committee Building as a landmark, the railway route and the position of a new railway bridge as well as for two other bridges across the river Sava, the complex of government buildings around the Central Committee Building and the diplomatic quarter with 20 representative buildings were fixed. The key elements for evaluating



Fig. 4
The General Urban Plan of
Belgrade from 1950.
(Archive Đukić)

the competition works were: monumentality, functionality, harmonization of the synthesis of architecture and art, the constructive solution and the contribution to the urban design of the location. Dobrović's concept from 1948 was completely negated in the proposals. None of the winning projects followed the radial pattern of Dobrović's sketch, but the hierarchical structure of the city center was accepted. Finally, New Belgrade was seen as an integral part of Belgrade and not only as a location for newly designed monumental buildings.

The planning of New Belgrade was continued with the Regulation Plan of New Belgrade by Vido Vrbanić and was finished in 1950. He insisted on the natural conditions (topography, microclimate, geology, hydrology), the demographics and specific contents within the functional zones.⁶ He designed the urban composition of New Belgrade insisting on its artistic realization and considering architectural values.⁷ Instead of the radial matrix and the diagonal axes, he used a formal orthogonal grid, with strictly defined functions within the zones and mega blocks. The initially proposed landscaped design of the new settlement was denied, and the "free standing structures" were re-planned as mega blocks with an exactly defined typology of buildings and assemblies. The residential area was planned for 80.000 inhabitants. 80% of the land within the blocks stayed unbuilt, while 70% was covered with greenery.

A next urban study of New Belgrade with the aim of checking and actualising the GUP was done in 1954 by Stanko Mandić. The study rejected the proposals for the regulation of the rivers and the formation of an artificial lake as well as the filling in and leveling of the entire area. It insisted on the integral approach to planning and simultaneous solving of the problems. It suggested the concentrated construction of tall apartment buildings in 11 nodes instead of the residential four-storey buildings with higher density. In the further

consideration of the urban plan of New Belgrade, the concept of the leveling of the ground was accepted as well as the general idea about the construction of tall buildings instead of four-storey ones.

The Town Planning Institute was founded in 1955 and one of its tasks was to continue the work on the GUP of New Belgrade. The new plan covered an area of 2.000 Ha. One of the authors of the plan was Branko Petričić who changed the New Belgrade once again according to the concepts of the Athena's Charter and Le Corbusier's model of the "Ville Radieuse" with focus on the landscape design and the insulations of each building. He offered a catalogue of blocks, with buildings set in square blocks with the dimensions of 400m/400m. The draft version of the plan has undergone significant changes after the discussions with experts in professional organizations and was adopted in 1958.⁸ The projects for the residential mega blocks 1 and 2 with 3600 apartments were built according to this plan between 1960 and 1963. The residential area was

strictly separated from the administrative one and the public buildings for culture and arts were located in a park along the Sava riverbank. Block 1 was in its form basically a square of 400/400m and block 2 was trapezoid-shaped. The residential buildings were organized in two basic types: towers, which were designed as landmarks, and long two-tack buildings, conceived as connecting visual elements. The public space of the urban blocks 1 and 2 was not articulated enough, which caused its inappropriate and uncontrolled use. Since the first generation of inhabitants came mostly from rural areas, they 'cultivated' this space in their own way, creating a semi-rural ambiance of gardens and small orchards around the buildings. Simultaneously, the traditional places for social interaction – streets and squares – were substituted with over-sized communal spaces which stimulated the alienation of the potential users.

Another design competition was announced for the residential block 21 in the central part of New Belgrade in 1958 and 1959. The main task of the competition was the solving of the conflict of functions along the Boulevard Mihajlo Pupin - the residential area was planned along one side of the boulevard and the administrative one along the other side. One of the demands of the competition was the design of the urban plan for the central part of New Belgrade. The first prize was not given and it was decided that a team made up of the winning participants should deliver the

Fig. 5
Urban plan of New Belgrade from 1950 by Vido Vrbanić.
(Archive Đukić)



plan for New Belgrade's central zone. The zone was planned as the central axes of New Belgrade connecting the Government Presidency Building with the new railway station. Three main squares represented the cultural and entertainment life along it.

The construction of Novi Belgrade started in 1948 by mobilizing the Youth Work Brigades which counted more than 100.000 people.⁹ At the beginning of the 1960s the construction was halted due to the economic crisis and the blockade by the USSR. The construction of the Government Presidency Building had been stopped in 1949 and continued six years later. The building has become a major focus of the new city and a decisive factor for the future planning of its central zone. The building concept was based on the "H-form" organizational scheme with two concave curved side blocks connected with a linking tract. The tract was extended in the center by an annex orientated to the park and the Danube River. The side blocks and the linking tract defined a spacious square and the access to the ceremonial entrance and the lobby on the ground floor.¹⁰ Giving up the construction of the complex ministry around the Central Committee Building, there have been significant changes in the planning of New Belgrade. The planning paradigm has changed and the so called "management city" became a "residential city". The construction companies took over the business from youth brigades in 1956 and continued the construction works.



Fig. 6
General Urban Plan of New Belgrade from 1958 by
Branko Petričić. (Archive Đukić)

The architectural style was in the spirit of the "socialist realism" but the politicization of the architectural scene was quite different from the one in the other socialist countries. The serious break between the Yugoslavian and the USSR communist parties happened in 1948 and was followed by the economic blockade of Yugoslavia. The breaking up with the Soviet Union and the introduction of an own form of socialism, forced Yugoslavia to open to Western Europe, which brought a strong economic support of the capitalist countries in the following decades, a political independence and a privileged position in the communist part of Europe. During the cold war Yugoslavia was between two opposing systems and blocks - the capitalist and the socialist ones. Furthermore, it took a neutral position and was one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, according to which its foreign policy was oriented. During the 1950s, the economy was partly liberalized, the self-management public ownership in the production sphere replaced the communist concept of the state ownership, and

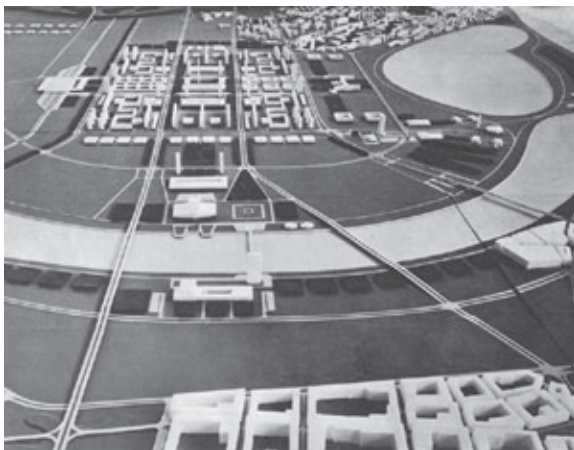
a decentralized political system was practically applied by transferring a large number of jurisdiction to the federated republics in the early 1960s.

The situation changed after the conflict and the Stalinist ideas and models were thrown off in Yugoslavia. The local architecture orientated to the modernist Soviet architects of the 1920s who defined the functionalism as a principle that is applicable in the context of the social needs and to the programs of CIAM defining a progressivist approach to the functionalist city.¹¹ The architects in Yugoslavia tried to re-invent the architectural style and to find new models to express their commitment for the creation of a “new architecture”, the so called “contemporary socialist architecture”. It was proclaimed in Yugoslavia that the architecture should have a political, social, moral and artistic cohesion as well as to “serve the masses” not the group of individuals.¹² Furthermore, the art and the architecture of the pre-war period were neglected. The thesis that architecture should change its qualitative values and that in the contemporary architecture there is no place for historic elements was accepted as a new way of thinking.¹³

The period from 1960 until 1990

A new Regulation Plan of New Belgrade which covered 4.160 ha was adopted in 1962. The plan was a basis for the further development of the other parts of New Belgrade until 1984, when the residential block 24 was built instead of an administrative one. The whole settlement was divided into five functional zones: housing, recreation, industry, public sector and agriculture. The public buildings were also positioned in the area. An integral part of the plan was the project for the monumental central zone. The plan of the central zone covered an area of 1600/1600 m. The central axes of the zone was planned as the main pedestrian prospectus and 12 skyscrapers were positioned at the corners of the blocks, along it. The detailed urban plan for Block 30 was done in 1967, but only the residential buildings, the commercial center and the local community center were realised according to this plan.¹⁴

Fig. 7
Regulation plan for the center of New Belgrade from 1962.
(Archive Đukić)



The Central Committee Building was realized in 1965 according to a design competition launched in 1960. The building was the highest one in New Belgrade until the 1980s. With its strong form of simple, pure parallelepiped covered with an aluminum and glass facade, and its position, this building was the main symbol of New Belgrade during the socialist era and is even today.

There were several other urbanistic competitions during the 1960s: the competition with invited participants for the residential mega block 29 in 1967, the federal competition for the residential mega blocks 22 and 23 in 1968 and the internal Belgrade's competition for the residential mega blocks 61 and 62 in 1971. The subject of the competition for the residential mega block 29 was a local community of 4000 inhabitants in 7 residential buildings. The rewarded works were constructed according to the urbanistic conditions, with a minimum of corrections of the buildings length. Each building has got a ground floor and six upper ones as well as an attic. A prefabricated frame system was applied according to the request of the investors.

The GUP of Belgrade from 1972 reconfirmed the urban regulation of New Belgrade and the previously posted goals. A Study of the Central Zone of Belgrade from 1976, took into consideration both sides of the River Sava. The concept re-emphasized the role of the Sava riverbanks and the Sava Amphitheatre as important urban connectors between the old and the new parts of Belgrade. An activation of both riverbanks was proposed.

Several studies, controversies and books were written about the possible reconstruction and regeneration of New Belgrade during the 1980s. In the book "Experience of the Past"¹⁵ the urban matrix and urban pattern of New Belgrade were compared to the matrix and patterns of historic towns. The idea was to change the urban pattern of New Belgrade into a "more acceptable for users and especially for pedestrians" one and to introduce the concept of the mixed use development.

An international competition for the New Belgrade Urban Structure Improvement was launched in 1985. The participants offered a variety of

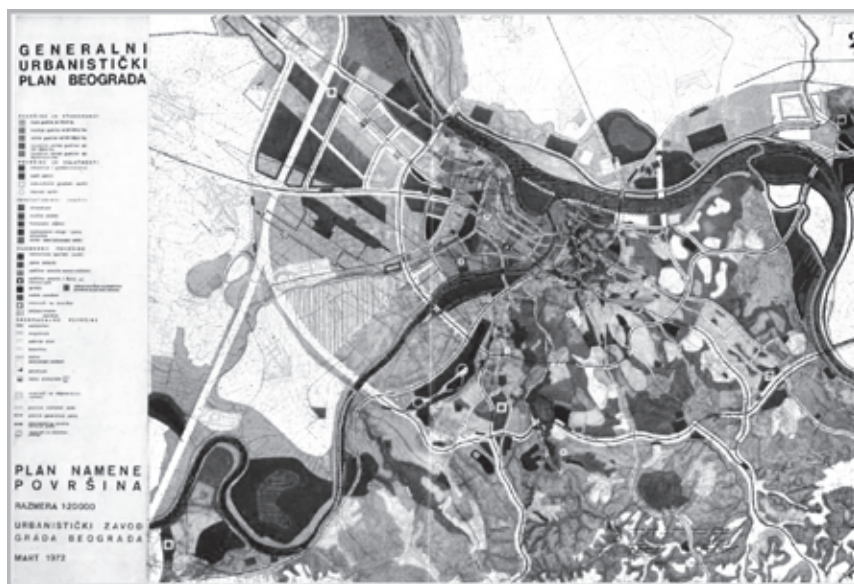


Fig. 8
General Urban Plan of Belgrade
from 1972. (Archive Đukić)

design proposals for the improvement of the urban structures of the central zone of New Belgrade and the Sava Amphitheater and were focused on filling in “the gaps” inside the mega-blocks. The implementation of small “villages” with little houses between the skyscrapers was seen as an idea for the regeneration of the blocks.

Facing the changes: the period from 1990 until 2015

The strongest efforts for changing the character of New Belgrade belonged to the period of the post-socialist transition which started in the 1990s. “Even at sites such as the central axis, where the question of forming an urban centre takes clear precedence over any other, the agenda for a new architecture and an urban representation has been narrated under an ideological veil of the market democracy, identified with economic viability in general and a principle of laissez-faire’s primacy over other regulatory instruments.”¹⁶ The 21st century brought significant changes in the physical and functional structure of New Belgrade. The density has increased, new commercial activities have been introduced and it has become one of the major construction sites in Belgrade. The original typology of the mega-blocks was modified with new buildings positioned along the existing boulevards changing the previous character of public spaces. The open modernist mono-functional assemblies were upgraded into a mixed-use development but some green spaces disappeared under hundreds of thousands of new square meters built up area. Considering the number of about 300.000 inhabitants and their new social structure, a new profile of space users/consumers and their contemporary needs, it was necessary to focus attention to the quality of the open and public spaces.¹⁷ Therefore, during the last decade, a process of revitalization and rehabilitation has started, (re)shaping the existing urban environment and inserting some new facilities.

The project and competition “Third Millennium” organized by the Serbian Academy of Science and Art in 1991, once again raised the discussion among the professionals about the connection between the two Sava riverbanks and the developing of the areas alongside. The main idea was the establishing of a cultural center. The organizers of the project invited seven teams and suggested seven topics on major development issues, one for each team: the City on Water and the ecological approach, the futuristic vision New Ada, the Sava boulevard, the Urban Matrix, the Sava City, the Border Zones and the Initial Places.

The end of the 1990s was marked by another proposal for the Amphitheatre - the study for a City on Water, made by the Town Planning Institute. The study re-lunched the idea of a closer connectedness between the urban tissue and the waterfronts, focusing on the both sides of Sava, as an integral functional and architectural entity. However, the special importance was given to the space of the river banks. The proposal included networks of canals and artificial islands which were supposed to link New Belgrade and the historic urban part,



while housing, commercial and business activities, services and tourism were integrated into compact urban blocks.

Fig. 9
City on Water.
(Town Planning Institute, 1990)

Another architectural design competition was launched in 2003 for a program and a design of New Belgrade's Block 16 (palace Ušće - ex Central Committee Building). The task was the redesign and re-modelation of the building with new business and commercial functions and with an urban design of the surrounding area. The adoption of the new architectural and urbanistic values as a positivist principle, such as the continuity and preservation, oppose to the demolition and contempt of all the previous attainments, was finally accepted. The whole process has shown the formation of a new awareness of New Belgrade, of its cultural and historical values.

The current GUP of Belgrade 2021, adopted in 2003, is a basic strategic urban plan document for the territory of the whole city and the only one covering the entire space of New Belgrade. It proposes the increasing of the intensity and a variety of activities and physical structures on both sides of the Sava riverbanks. The critical analysis of this plan shows that the issues of the New Belgrade development and transformation as a unique and specific urban architectural entity have not been recognized and that a basement for a future development is still missing.¹⁸ At the same time, New Belgrade is considered as an important urban part which should be activated as a new business and commercial center. The main problem of its current and probably future development is the process of filling in the undeveloped parts of the blocks under the pressure of the new commercial facilities which basically changes the character of the planned

urban matrix of New Belgrade's mega-blocks. Despite a declarative attitude that the ambiance of New Belgrade as a modern city should be preserved, open spaces are recommended for intensive development following the logic that more free spaces enable a greater scope of a new development.

The competition for a program and an urban and architectural design of the blocks 25 and 26 in New Belgrade in 2007 showed that the initial idea for the axis between the Governmental Presidency Building and the train station is definitely abandoned. One of the early examples of this process has been the Stadium Hall¹⁹, which construction started soon after the architectural competition in 1991 but was realized in 2007. This generic, introverted volume, further separated from the rest of the plan by a massive access-exit infrastructure, was not placed in an appropriate peripheral location, but was slightly moved to the axes. It was the first realized building in the previously planned center of New Belgrade, which undermined the symmetry and annulled the role of the axis. By changing the urban composition the central part of New Belgrade finally lost its symbolic elements and meanings.



Fig. 10
Palace Ušće after the reconstruction. (Đukić)

In the Block 67 modern housing was accomplished for the Universiade Student Games in Belgrade in 2009. Made up of six plots and spread over 14 hectares, the complex also included 35,000 square meters of commercial and retail space.²⁰

Conclusion

The urban planning of New Belgrade has shown continuity since the beginning of the 20th century until nowadays, although there were periods of stagnation caused by the political and/or economic crises. The characteristics of the period from 1921 until WW II and from 1945 until 1960 is the adoption of plans based on totally different concepts. Although there were several architectural-urbanistic competitions and a dozen of urban plans adopted between 1960 and 1990, there were no planned changes or differences in the planning concept during that period. However, it is important to emphasize that until the 1980s New Belgrade was planned as an integral entity based on the Regulation Plan adopted in 1962.

A series of non-economic factors, as the political, social, military and technological once which purpose was to demonstrate the superiority of the socialism over the capitalism or the state commitment to the society and the achieving of social equality were of great importance for the urban

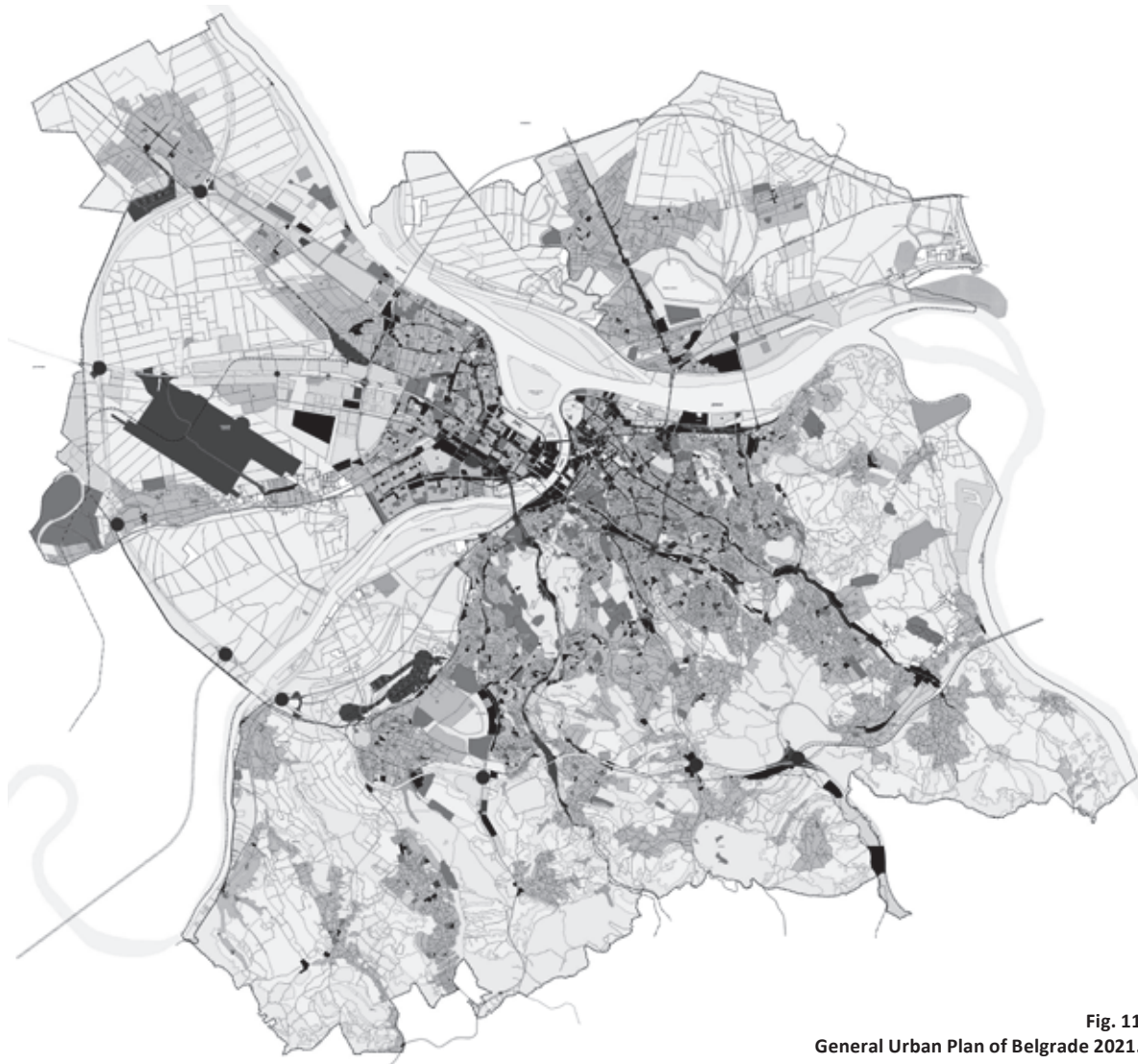


Fig. 11
General Urban Plan of Belgrade 2021.
(Reproduction)

development in this period. New Belgrade was as a realized mega project the symbol of a new formed socialist country in the political and social ways. The social organization of the state was represented through this realization. In opposite to the current social policy, the government was obliged to care for the employment and to shelter all the residents. Very often the social goals were given priority in contrast to the logic of profit making. Therefore the socialist city offered, in comparison with the capitalist one, a different and higher level of social security, with a lower degree of residential segregation and marginalization.

The construction of the residential buildings in Block 24 carried out in the period 1984-1989, represented the first deviation from the Regulation Plan, as well as from the Central Zone Plan. Furthermore, the deviation from the



Fig. 12
New structures in Block 21 built during the last decade.
(Đukić)

original plans and concepts, the monumental grid and the axes continued with the construction of the Blocks 26 and 25 and Belgrade's Arena. Primarily developed as an antithesis of capitalism, which has essentially determined the concept and strategy of its development, New Belgrade today represents an illustrative example of how the market law defines the space organisation of the capital. The current urban transformations are colored by the specificities of the post-socialist development in which an unbalanced role of the actors involved dominated. Various current planning documents, from the Master Plan of Belgrade 2021 to the district regulation plans and municipality programs, provide certainly a good foundation for the future development of New Belgrade.

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