

## **(Re)creating the Urban Identity: The Belgrade Metropolitan Region at the Crossroads of the European Integration Flows**

### **1. Introduction**

The ex-communist countries in the Central and South-Eastern Europe are still fighting with their 'iron curtain' heritage, which was, especially in the Balkan region, additionally complicated by civil wars and political overthrows generated from the new type of nationalist dictatorship. This background highly effected their isolated position at the European and global scene. At the same time, the tradition of a strong, centralized state power (which was dominant from the 2nd World War until the end of 1980s) directed their urbanization process, and effected urban and social structure, completely differently than those in capitalist countries.

Therefore, Belgrade, the capital of Serbia and Montenegro, is selected as an example of a confusing post-socialist urban environment where the consequences of the decade-long isolation are extremely visible. Its connectivity and position on the global scene were seriously threatened by specific political and economical conditions, but, after the democratic changes, the practical role of the city and its different actors have followed the logic of global perception and regional integration. Creating a new urban amalgam for the 3rd millennium, the city of Belgrade and its metropolitan area are shaping their future on several levels - transregional (European), regional and local, establishing new networks which could redefine its urban character, improve its attractiveness and, finally, prepare the necessary support for the global competition.

### **2. The regionalisation as a challenge**

After the fall of communist regime, new challenges have appeared and a new phase in economical and political development of Belgrade metropolitan area has started. At the same time, other cities in the Balkan region have faced similar problems as a result of an inherited local tradition, post-communist restructuring, globalising forces, evolving networks, post-war reconstruction and revitalization, and, inevitably, a multicultural and multiethnic urban fusion that, fortunately, simply cannot be erased by civil wars. Although placed at the margins of the newly established global networks, these cities have reacted to the process of regional cooperation and global competition, under the limited scope of transnational political integration. The modernization of building and planning regulations, new market conditions and different status of property have become a starting point for the creation of new urban districts and urban areas and diversification of economic structure. Simultaneously, re-organization and revitalization of city centers, fringe areas, devastated and degraded urban zones, development of existing transport and communication networks i.e. improvement of urban and regional connectivity, became a necessity that demonstrated the radical turn in a completely new direction.

The Belgrade metropolitan area, as well as other urban nodes in the evolving regional networks, has recognized the concept of regionalisation as a new chance for a balanced space development, as well as a preferred direction towards the new regional attractiveness and competitiveness. Consequently, the South-Eastern Europe, as one of the regions lagging behind, has tried to establish a cooperation between highly developed and undeveloped countries in order to support institutional, technological and market integration into the European community. Therefore, during the last few years, there have been a great

number of more or less successful initiatives focused on different aspects of regional and interregional integration. At the same time, strong efforts have been made in the field of civic networking - the process that has been going along with institutional restructuring.

The imperatives of these actions were transparency, efficiency and interdependence of economic and spatial development, decision-making process and management, supported by administration accessibility. The main actors are local, regional and national governments, the NGO sector, other decision-making bodies, different interest groups, and citizens as active participants of development and democratization of the society.

However, civic networking needs adequate technological support, whose development should also be one of the main objectives. Development of new information and communication technologies evidently produced a new opportunity for extensive promotion and integration of evolving civil societies and urban spaces, and it was necessary to apply these tools at every space level - as a link between:

- citizens and their representatives;
- municipalities;
- cities within regions;
- different regions.

Shaping the basic skeleton of future networks, these links should be included in planning policies whose purpose is to encourage polycentric development of regions. The spatial infrastructure development, improved knowledge base, strengthened cultural interactions, harmonized cross-border relations and contacts have, therefore, a twofold role - they are a strong impetus for future cooperation, and, at the same time, they are an important output of the strategic approach defined by all interested participants and institutions.

Regional integration was also considered as an important step towards protection of the environment and sustainable development of urban and rural areas. The problems of environmental degradation were caused by numerous factors - highly polluting technologies, the lack of proper waste facilities, insufficient ecological monitoring and the consequences of war and conflicts. Therefore, regional monitoring and ecological management, as well as multilateral environmental strategies, could provide a solid foundation for the introduction of sustainable postulates: renewable energy, waste reduction, organic production and recycling.

Among the different projects initiated by various expert groups and international organizations, the initiative VISION PLANET and INTERREG IIIb could be recognized as being very comprehensive and promising for the whole region and the Belgrade metropolitan area, as one of the nodal points.

The Vision planet<sup>1</sup> as an idea, was presented in 1997 and the first Vision document appeared in 1998. The purpose of this initiative was to present a program of the transnational spatial planning cooperation whose participants would be countries from the Central, Adriatic, Danubian and South-East European region (CADSES). The CADSES area represents a very interesting mixture of advanced and less developed countries and regions, different in economic development and social structure. Furthermore, they have completely opposite political backgrounds that have influenced their spatial development and their starting position in the European integration process. Therefore, the intention of this document was to support regional integration, to present a problem background (knowledge base) and to offer guidelines and policy proposals.

The spatial development perspectives are created to be concerned with the principal objectives (competitiveness, balanced development, environmental and heritage protection,

integration, objectives interaction) and they are directed to spatial (urban and rural), economical, environmental and communication aspects. The VISION document also includes an implementation path, built in proposals for institutional networking and spatial integration.

INTERREG IIIb represents a part of the Community Initiative Interreg, and it is conducted from 2002 to 2008, as a program for transnational cooperation in Europe, especially focused on spatial integration between 'accession countries' and 'neighbouring countries'. The program was approved in December 2001, and part of this program is the project UTN (Urban Technology Network) which supports development of 30 cities from 13 countries<sup>2</sup>. The UTN is co-financed by the European Commission and the City of Vienna and its main objective is the networking of cities as a way of improving technological development of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

Evidently, there are numerous attempts for reintegration of South-Eastern Europe and, consequently, we can notice that working teams and expert groups are facing new challenges every day. These efforts have resulted in a new approach - the urban concept of the regionally integrated city - which could be highly applicable for future planning and designing in our urban environment.

### 3. The Belgrade metropolitan area between local and global forces

The city of Belgrade is the crossing-point of the European corridor VII and corridor X (branch X1 and two international high-roads E75 and E70) that could be used as a starting point for the future integration strategies. However, we have to be aware that an excellent geo-strategic position is not the key-factor for economic progress and (re)integration into the European and global flows. The era of regional and global integration has just started for the Belgrade metropolitan area which has to participate in the global competition in order to improve its position in the trans-urban hierarchy. Therefore, the networking of the Belgrade region has three basic levels - European, macro-regional and metropolitan.



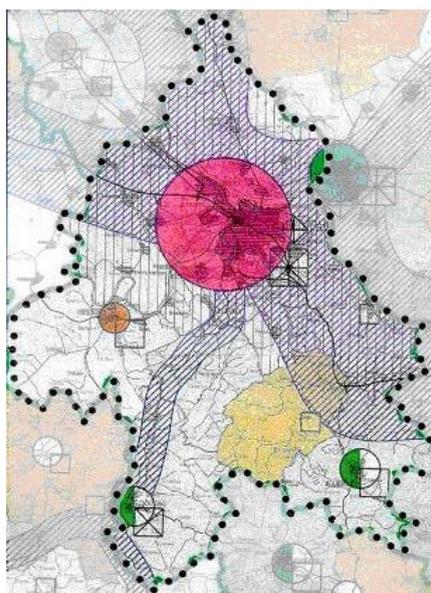
Figure 1. Connectivity of Belgrade - the main European corridors ([http://www.beograd.org.yu/documents/regplan/slika\\_1.jpg](http://www.beograd.org.yu/documents/regplan/slika_1.jpg))

The main directions of the European integration are the 'Danubian links' i.e. establishment of the "Danubian Belt City Hansa" constituted of urban nodes - Ulm (Germany), Vienna (Austria), Bratislava (Slovakia), Budapest (Hungary), Belgrade (S&M) and Braila (Romania). Their cooperation and functional synchronization could increase the economical, cultural and

ecological attractiveness of this area. At the same time, the links are established with Bucharest, Sofia and Thessaloniki, (re)creating a new foundation for advanced interactions.

The new Regional spatial plan of Belgrade administrative area (2004) emphasizes the importance of these webs as the crucial condition for the activation of the main potentials - the geographical position of the Belgrade region, its geo/bio-diversity, transport connectivity, demographic structure, energy resources and cultural/tourist/information potentials. Unfortunately, there are many obstacles as well, such as the inherited inadequate social and technological infrastructure and highly centralized system of settlements within the metropolitan region. However, in order to support its further development and enhance its starting position, the plan offers main operative tasks which should:

- influence the unity of urban region;
- intensify multi-modal transportation networking;
- prevent further degradation of the river banks along the river Danube;
- ensure economical and social development of the rural areas and satellite towns;
- promote renewal and development of old urban areas which could attract foreign investors (with the assistance of the Urban Restructuring Experience Pool);
- accelerate decentralisation and facilitate role and function of the multi-modal node (Belgrade-Smederevo-Pancevo);
- initiate/continue mutual cultural projects.



**Figure 2. The administrative area of the Belgrade agglomeration /The spatial plan of the Republic of Serbia, 1996/**  
([http://www.beograd.org.yu/documents/regplan/slika\\_3.jpg](http://www.beograd.org.yu/documents/regplan/slika_3.jpg))

The Belgrade metropolitan region, as the major (inter)national urban node of Serbia, also represents one of the key-elements of the main development axis which connects macro-regional centers (Novi Sad and Kragujevac) as well as numerous regional and sub-regional centers. Therefore, it has been necessary to insure political and economical stability in order to begin comprehensive restructuring of the metropolitan region and to achieve the NUTS 2 level defined by EUROSTAT criteria. The new Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (in procedure) should approve the regional status for the administrative area of the city of Belgrade, consisted of seven urban districts (Belgrade, Zemun, Obrenovac, Lazarevac, Mladenovac, Grocka and Borca)<sup>3</sup>. This polycentric formation, as administrative-territorial unit, could be able to take part in the inter-regional competition and to coordinate its functioning on the local, regional and national level.

Considering this decentralized model of the future development (by the year 2011), The Regional spatial plan of Belgrade defines necessary guidelines for the management of the region based upon horizontal and vertical coordination, advanced informational technologies and active participation of citizens and NGOs. Therefore, the efficient and rational management should be innovated through four basic aspects - institutional, technical, administrative and political, and its mechanisms have to be adjusted to the local conditions.

Bearing in mind the complicated property status of the building land<sup>4</sup>, current revenue system and the land information base which is not yet completed, corrected and modernized, the management of the Belgrade agglomeration is focused on new tools and instruments. The ICT concept represents the basic skeleton for its modernization and the first steps have already been made. The new technologies have become the strong support of planning institutions and urban government, as well as the important mode of communication between various interest groups - local communities, NGOs, investors and the public sector. However, the e-management still has to be developed in order to fulfill its new social role and the basic education, accessibility, legal regulation and experimental implementation should be one of the most important objectives.

The plan is also oriented towards the activation of new urban nodes which have to restructure old industrial and agricultural areas, develop service and leisure activities (Mladenovac, Lazarevac, Obrenovac), establish new tourist landmarks/zones and diversify recourses of energy. The connections with surrounding municipalities beyond administrative borders should also shape the metropolitan character of this region and ensure the inter-city public transportation, mutual ecological survey and protection, coordination of production, consumption and infrastructure systems, introduction of new urban activities and, finally, to create a new, recognizable urban identity. Consequently, the Regional spatial plan of Belgrade administrative area distinguishes three basic zones - the central business zone, the zone around the river Danube (corridor VII) and the zone around the rivers Sava and Kolubara.

The development of the first zone is based upon natural recourses which have to be protected and included into the future strategies. Therefore, the main activities - tourism, leisure, agriculture and industry have to follow European ecological guidelines and standards, while the network of urban and rural settlements should be modernized in order to raise quality of life and environment. At the same time, local government(s) have to become an important link between citizens and regional authorities. The second zone, with important industrial and mining area, agricultural production and leisure activities has directed its future towards the sustainable development, re-cultivation of devastated areas in municipalities Obrenovac and Lazarevac, protection and activation of river banks and improvement of urban centers and their local government.

#### **4. Shaping the new urban image**

The Belgrade metropolitan region, with its 1,6 million residents (15.8% of Serbian population) is also trying to (re)discover its multiple identities which are the result of complex global-local tensions. Therefore, its genuine, polyvalent nature and its new character(s) should synthesize the imperatives of contemporary (globalized) urban images that define the city of the 21st century as:

- informational city (Castells, 1989)
- telematics city (Hepworth, 1990)
- network city (Batten, 1995)
- dual city (Castells, 1989; Mollenkopf, Castells, 1991)
- intelligent city (Graham, Marvin 1996; Hepworth, 1990)

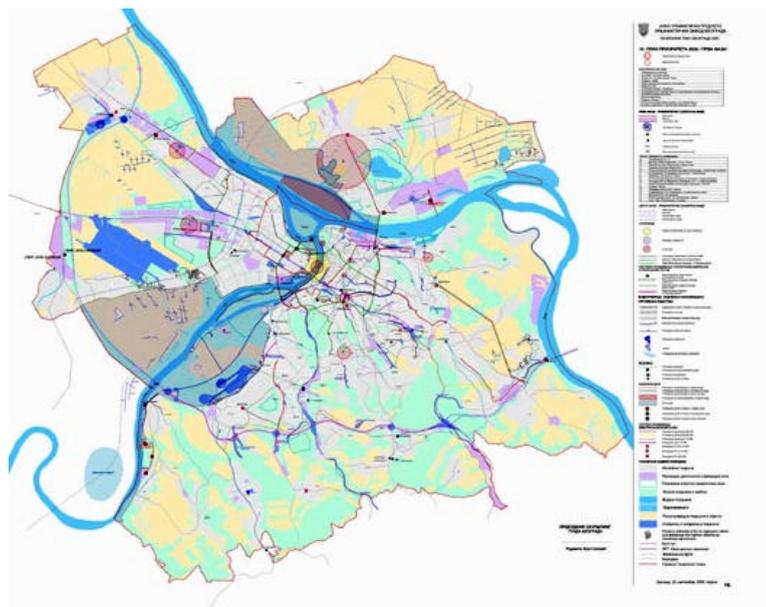
- divided city (Fainstein at al. 1992)
- city of collective memory (Boyer, 1995)
- city of spectacle (Short, Kim, 1999)
- entrepreneurial city (Short, Kim, 1999)
- diffuse/compact city ... etc.

Although it has just started its global race, the Belgrade region is continuously excited by internal and external economical, cultural, political, historical, social and ethnical stimulations and its evolving networks. Additionally, the importance of communication and movement becomes clearly visible because it allows completely new approach towards enhanced connectivity, integration and permeability.

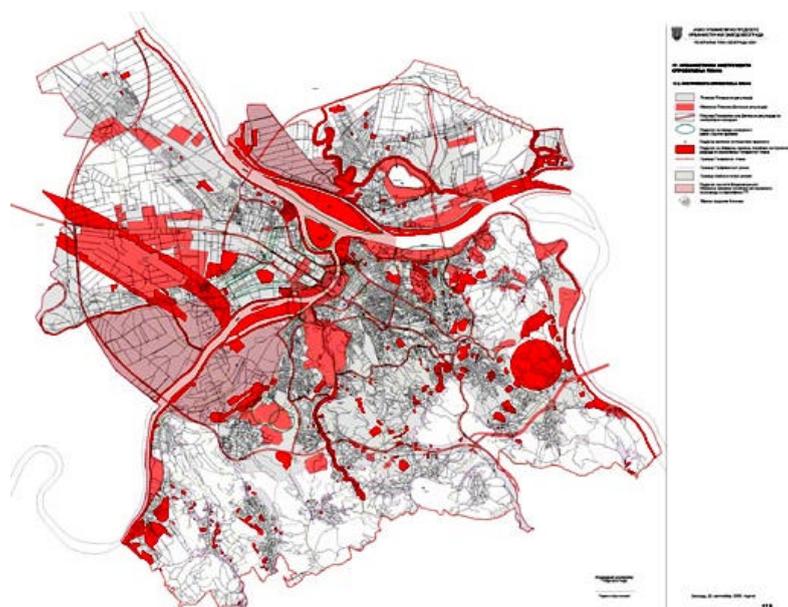
However, our starting position was not very promising, considering the fact that the specific post-socialist transformation of our society has influenced the degradation of urban structure. Since the beginning of the 1990s the population of Serbia has become rapidly pauperized and socially polarized and Belgrade urban region has been transformed into a confusing pattern of planned and unplanned areas, illegal and unhygienic settlements and, as a contrast, exclusive parts of the city with extremely rich population. Therefore, a new city government (elected in 2000) has faced the numerous problems but it has also succeeded, during the last four years, to avoid further decay of urban environment. Initiating the completely new phase of urban management its priority was to attract foreign capital emphasizing the existing urban potential, comparative advantages and new political and economical aspirations towards the European integration. Consequently, the new Master plan of Belgrade (2003) has proposed development strategies that support shaping of urban identities on city level, as well as on national and inter-regional level, until 2021.

According to this plan the urban structure should reinvent and renew some forgotten and neglected segments (ex-industrial areas, traffic nodes, riverfronts, suburban and rural neighborhoods) as generators of future transformations and mutations. At the same time, national and inter-regional importance has to be achieved through global social-cultural-economical integration, inter-urban cooperation and creation of recognizable Belgrade image - as an international, central-European and/or Balkan urban focus. The urban changes have to be directed towards privatization of housing and business spaces, adequate commercialization of urban historical core, completion of residential areas, decreasing of residential/commercial sub-urbanization and socio-spatial segregation. In order to finalize organization of settlements in the metropolitan region, it will be necessary to stop further illegal building and growth of unplanned urban areas.

Therefore, the main idea of the new Master plan is to improve the urban environment which will be able to maintain its new economical, ecological and social sustainability. At the same time, two main phases are defined - until 2006 and 2021, representing the basic horizons for the implementation and realization of crucial 'grand projects'. The urban infrastructure, as an inseparable part of the Belgrade urban system, has to be adjusted to the modified urban needs and to the technological demands representing the *fundus* of the future multi-modal connectivity and accessibility. Simultaneously, one of the interesting ideas implanted into the main planning concept is a long-term integration of natural recourses and built environment, and orientation towards renewable energy. However, these tasks require a completely different perception and organization of planning and advanced implementation processes which have to accept new dynamic, flexibility and openness to reality.



**Figure 3. The master plan of Belgrade (2003). The priorities until 2006 (the first phase) - zones, main transportation routes, preparation of selected critical areas, main internal transportation belt, new railway branches and metro system, systems of urban infrastructure**  
([http://www.beoland.co.yu/ostalo/genplan/10\\_plan\\_prioritet2006.jpg](http://www.beoland.co.yu/ostalo/genplan/10_plan_prioritet2006.jpg))



**Figure 4. The master plan of Belgrade (2003). The main instruments of implementation - plans of general and detail regulation, the areas intended for competitions and public professional revision and verification**  
([http://www.beoland.co.yu/ostalo/genplan/17\\_2\\_sprovodjenje.jpg](http://www.beoland.co.yu/ostalo/genplan/17_2_sprovodjenje.jpg))

Following the basic guidelines and strategies given by its Master plan, Belgrade metropolitan area and its local government intend to stimulate future urban development, which have to reveal new perspectives for our society, to revive its cosmopolitan spirit and to create an urban environment attractive for the new techno-elite.

The major international sport, cultural and commercial events and manifestations, whose role for the promotion of urban nodes is very important, as well as the development of 'inter' and 'intra' transportation systems and communication networks are recognized as a significant

regional/global impetus for the future development. Finally, the restructuring of production and the introduction of services are emphasized as an important task conditioned by liberalization of economy that should accept new rules imposed by the global flows of capital.

## **5. Urban management in transition - visions, experiments, initiatives**

Considering the burden of unpleasant recent history, the city of Belgrade, its city government, municipalities and Agency for Building Land and Construction are using different methods to improve the public face of our urban environment, launching the numerous formal and informal programs, projects and initiatives. Their main purpose is to create completely new comprehension of duties and responsibilities among its diversified population, as well as to establish fruitful communication and interaction between all interest parties. Therefore, beside its usual management activities that should facilitate the urban life and its numerous functions, these institutions are trying to set in motion various ideas that could support the building of a new, easily recognizable city-image.

Consequently, during the last four years, activities of the city government and its institutions are oriented towards three main directions:

- reconstruction and transformation of built environment;
- introduction of new, technologically advanced and efficient modes of urban government/management;
- new ideas.

The intensive process of urban renewal and regeneration, whose main aim is to transform Belgrade urbanscape into the vision of a modern urban center, is focused on the improvement and extension of primary infrastructure, street and road networks. At the same time, the numerous public buildings have been renovated (schools, hospitals, theatres, sport amenities), while there is also an attempt to develop new affordable housing, as well as new commercial and office districts. The public space (streets, squares, parks), together with the protected examples of historically valuable buildings, are recognized as powerful elements of the urban identity which Belgrade wants to express today.

The new technologically advanced approach enables an easier urban management and creates new patterns of social, economical, political and symbolical communication. However, it is noticeable that this mode of interaction attracts mostly younger, educated people whose enthusiasm represents the main generator of this citizen-government interaction. Nevertheless, it is very important that this option exists - as a window towards the global perspectives, and as a new phase of our democratic (r)evolution. The main city institutions and different levels of government are now more accessible than ever, and all necessary data about their structure, activities, results and projects are open to public. The official web-sites are a reliable source of information and completely new tool for public presentation, advertising, urban marketing, different announcements and, finally, important data base of available building land sites, useful for future investors and urban development.

However, the most interesting part of management activities represents a unique set of different projects whose purpose is to shape a vivid and unique response to the public needs and global challenges. Beside numerous architectural competitions dealing with interesting zones of Belgrade area<sup>5</sup>, the city government, in cooperation with Agency for Building Land and Construction, professional associations, foreign embassies and international and national companies, undertakes actions that should revive the forgotten urban spirit and enable active participation of creative individuals and groups. For example, under the program "Belgrade for children", the children playgrounds and school have been completely renewed by joint-efforts of Belgrade city government, Agency for Building Land

and Construction and sponsors - such as the Norwegian embassy, city of Vienna, companies Ferrero and Nestle etc.

Simultaneously, great attention has been directed towards ecological problems as a part of the project entitled "Ecological evaluation of the Master plan area of Belgrade - the ecological chart" which has begun in 1998. The main idea was to integrate available data about urban and natural environment of Belgrade that could be helpful in the future planning actions. Consequently, the second phase of this project - "The ecological atlas of Belgrade" started in 2002 under the supervision of The city institute for health protection of Belgrade, gathering experts from different scientific fields and institutions.

The city government also organizes or supports various sport and cultural manifestations (for ex. Belgrade marathon, BITEF - Belgrade International Theatre Festival established in 1967, FEST - Belgrade International Film Festival founded in 1971, JOY OF EUROPE - International Meeting of the Children of Europe etc.) which are the best promoters of Belgrade and its citizens, as well as generators of international networks and transmitters of complex and sensitive symbiosis of local and global values. At the same time, it is noticeable that Belgrade still needs some authentic symbols of its uniqueness. Therefore, the city authorities are trying to provoke a public opinion about some proposed interventions - such as a new bridge across Ada Ciganlija and the new Belgrade cableway - which could become, according to general projects, not just a tourist attraction, but an important potential for urban transport i.e. urban efficiency and internal connectivity.

Finally, one of the most interesting initiatives is "Project Belgrade - graduate on you future", established in 2003, as an initiative addressed to graduate students of Belgrade University. The main idea of this project is to invite young scholars of different profiles to create multidisciplinary teams in order to modify existing urban structure and to offer a new development concept for Belgrade. At the same time, these ideas should emphasize the importance of new functional organization, re-concentration of urban activities and activation of neglected and (un)discovered urban recourses. Thus, the meeting with our future looks more promising then ever and these student visions are the best testimony of our changed perception that should re-conceal local and global scale of our contemporary world.

## 6. Conclusion

On our way to the regionally integrated city it is sometimes difficult to imagine how planned strategies and policies can be directly applied and what would be their effect on the urban environment. The transformations of the urban structure could be used as a 'decoder' of political ideas and competitiveness, and its development, regeneration, preservation and networking could become the backbone of the regional cooperation. Our cities should be true representatives of the new perception of the society and their physical structure, technological support and global integration should serve this cause.

The Belgrade, capital of Serbia and Montenegro, lost its position in the global hierarchy during the last decade of the 20th century, but the beginning of the new millenium has offered a second chance for development. The importance of a flexible, innovative and creative urban management was well recognized by the new city authorities and their actions, plans and initiatives have become *spiritus movens* of Belgrade urban renewal which should enable its comeback into the community of European capitals and its presence in the regional and global networks.

The global, regional and local scales of Belgrade metropolitan region gradually adjust themselves to the global imperatives, but the new urban image, as an expression of our time, is not clearly visible yet. The (re)creation of its polyvalent identity is, therefore, just one of the

tasks that should be fulfilled, but the continuous interaction between citizens and urban government, tradition and modernity, history and technology, global flows and local limitations has to be a foundation for every future action.

The images from the recent past are the warning for tomorrow - are we ready to respect them?

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**Links:**

<http://www.beograd.co.yu> (<http://www.beograd.org.yu>) - the official web-site of the city of Belgrade

<http://www.beograd.org.yu/documents/regplan/> - Regional spatial plan of Belgrade administrative area

<http://www.beoland.co.yu> - Agency for Building Land and Construction of Belgrade

<http://www.beoland.co.yu/ostalo/generalniplan.html> - Master plan of Belgrade

<http://www.projekatbeograd.com/> - "Project Belgrade - graduate on you future"

<http://www.uniserver.cz/visionplanet/>

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<sup>1</sup> documents about Vision Planet project : <http://www.uniserver.cz/visionplanet/>

<sup>2</sup> including Belgrade and Smederevo from Serbia and Montenegro

<sup>3</sup> there is also a great interest for additional integration with several surrounding municipalities - Pancevo, Smederevo, Smederevska Palanka, Ub/Pecinci, Ruma, Stara Pazova that could receive the status of urban districts with their own urban centers

<sup>4</sup> in Belgrade, the building land is still owned by the state, but flats became a private property at the beginning of the 1990s. At the same time, the rent from the state owned enterprises and real estates is not feasible.

<sup>5</sup> for example, the Belgrade marina, multifunctional business center "Usce"(New Belgrade), the historical core of Zemun, spot complex Tasmajdan, numerous central squares, pedestrian streets, new office blocks, affordable housing etc.