

Complex History as a Source of Planning Problems: Old Belgrade Fairground

Introduction

If we say that history of a city is one of its basic guidelines for its future development, especially in European urban practice, it is not a poetic statement, but the fact so obvious that we don't even mention it. Planners and architects are trying to preserve historical buildings and ambient, habits and values of inhabitants, everyday life, and concept of space and time use, in order to plan such urban structures that would be comfortable for citizens and attractive for visitors.

Even more, city's history is nowadays one of most exploited urban resources. Branding cities and searching for authenticity in globalized world, rely on history of the particular city, or even city area. In search for tourists and investments, city governments and urban professionals all over the world, especially in Europe, use history as a resource in competition with other cities. Every little difference, anything that makes a city "special" comparing to others, similar in size, economic and human potentials, is being used for better position in the world cities market.

Sociologist Sreten Vujovic says that "...studying a city requires paying attention on *tameness*, because history and time are contents of the city, and historical ambient arise from pure temporality". Yet, case of the Old Belgrade Fairground is quite opposite. Both city government and architectural and planning professionals are very indisposed to talk about history of the complex, and almost totally inhibited in taking any action about the area. Reason is very intensive history, during which the role of the Fairground has been changing in the most frustrating way. Changes were dramatic, and layers of past can hardly coexist in the same physical structures. But, they have to.

Today, the Old Fairground is completely isolated from the other parts of Belgrade. It is situated on the left bank of the Sava River between two bridges and downtown New Belgrade. This is in the center of Belgrade; on the other side of the river is the oldest city central zone. Bridges and river work as a kind of a boundary, not as connections with the rest of the city. Also, functionally this area is not integrated in the urban pattern. That is one of the most devastated city parts, populated by poor inhabitants, most of them from marginal groups, and burdened with tragic history.

In this paper, we are discussing whether it is possible to conciliate historical roles of the complex, and to realize its potentials in the modern world. First, facts of the complex's history are presented in the first part. In the second part, we analyze reasons and circumstances of keeping status quo in the Fairground since World War 2, and pressure to think about solution today. Finally, in the third part, there are presented new strategies and initiatives for future development.

History of the Old Belgrade Fairground *Period between two world wars*

After World War 1, started new phase in life of Belgrade, a capital of young Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, which lost more than million people during the War, and contributed in victory. Before that war, there were numerous problems in making good relations with some European countries, such as economical disagreements with Austro-Hungarian Emporia, and most of all, brutal murder of royal couple in 1903. So, this was a new opportunity to show democratic potentials and gain respect among other countries.

Rapid development of the city started: Belgrade has, after centuries under Turkish Ottoman rule possibility to grow across rivers Sava and Danube. It becomes an important river quay (landing-stage) and a railway crossroad. Also, it becomes administrative, cultural, trade and industrial center of Kingdom, with insufficient size and inadequate system of government.

In urban pattern, there were two different wholes: old core of the city, pretty oriental but nice and vivid, which was center of complete public and social life, and new parts "amorphous and chaotic agglomeration". Plans that were made before the War, were partial, created with no wider strategy for urban development. Strong migrations were going on and illegal settlements arise along main roads to the city, as a result of intensive industrial growth. But, it was not possible to take real action without strategy for whole city - there was needed a master plan.

In 1919, municipality of Belgrade decided to get new master plan, by public competition. Master plan was published in 1923, and it was a good basis for further development and reconstruction, and it included extension of city center on the left bank of Sava river.

Arrangements for realization of Belgrade Fairground started in 1936. Basic concept of the project was distribution of pavilions around one central building - tower, which had two functions: to be an exhibition pavilion, and to be an urban mark, visible from distant parts of the city. It was a monumental modern open plan.

Building was very rapid, and in 1938, there was a first exhibition held in seven big pavilions, and more than 20 small private pavilions.

Beside its economical and representative value, Old Belgrade Fairground was very important for history of Serbian urban planning for several reasons:

- Process of its planning, designing, building, as well as its financial aspect, was completely public. Many professionals, private investors and citizens were included in making decisions. This is a fact of great importance, both for the success of Fairground realization, as well as for strengthening the confidence of citizens for institutions.
- This spatial composition became a metaphor of an urban complex that was completely realized according to a plan. Every single detail was planned and designed by professionals, with no improvisations so often in previous period.
- In composition and in details, everything was modern. Old Belgrade Fairground is a symbol of modernity, or at least its aspiration for modernity of whole country, and specially its capital.
- Previous characteristics are underlined by the fact the complex is situated across the river, on the new territory that was not considered Belgrade before. "Taking possession" of this land was in manner of democracy, economical prosperity and modernity, which was almost a statement directed both to citizens and to European countries.

Constructing the public buildings and buildings for cultural purposes, consenting with the previously foreseen plan for giving shape to Belgrade area, was one of the important parts of the 1923 year's General plan.

Proclamation Belgrade for a tourist city in 1936, as well as the fact that Belgrade - Zemun road was already made, gave a special inspiration to the preparations for building the Belgrade Fairground on the left bank of the river Sava. It was the first move in taking possession of the left bank of the Sava, consenting the urban planning conception of the 1923 year's Master plan.



Figure 1: Complex on the eve of the WW2
Annual of the City of Belgrade (2004), Vol. LI



Figure 2: Complex and a view of Kalemegdan
Annual of the City of Belgrade (2004), Vol. LI

Although the rivers Danube and Sava are the most dominant values of Belgrade, the city was traditionally built and developed, not on the river banks, but on the crag. Anyhow, the river banks, together with the Belgrade Fortress are the impressive parts of the Belgrade Panorama. Zemun is partly oriented towards the Danube, so it is also the characteristic part of the city situated on the left banks of the rivers Danube and Sava. In that period, on the left bank of the Sava river a civil airport with hangars covered with concrete shells according to the project of Milutin Milankovic was being built, as well as “the Modern Area”, the project by architect Mihajlo Radovanovic, a triangular shaped residential area consisting of collective buildings and family houses with front gardens drew up in line, located on the exit of Zemun towards Belgrade. These two cultural and historical areas represented the initial steps towards realization of “The Old Belgrade Fairground”.

Therefore, the “Technical Bureau” organized by the “Society” (Association) made new plans for pavilions, and it enabled the beginning of preparatory works on the left bank of the Sava in August 1936. Architects Milivoje Trickovic, Djordje Lukic i Rajko Tatic, members of the Technical Board of the Belgrade Municipality were engaged to examine the existing plans of general disposition and pavilions on the fairground, and to submit their opinion in the form of official report.

At the time of the opening of “the Third Autumn Fair” this area was dominated by four big and two smaller pavilions of the Society for Organizing Fairs and Exhibitions, Central Tower, as well as the exhibition pavilions of the foreign countries: Germany, Italy, Romania, Turkey, Chech-Moravian Protectorate and Hungary, “Nikola Spasic Foundation” and more than 20 private pavilions.

Belgrade press was reporting about all the happenings concerning the building of the pavilions as well as the preparations and realizations of numerous exhibitions: international automobile fair, concerts, sport competitions, fashion shows etc.



Figure 3: The central tower of the Belgrade fair
Annual of the City of Belgrade (2004), Vol. LI



Figure 4: Complex after the opening
Annual of the City of Belgrade (2004), Vol. LI

From day to day Belgrade was becoming not only the meeting point of businessmen both from Yugoslavia and foreign countries, but also one of the leading fairs in the South Eastern Europe.

Breaking out of the war in September 1939, and the state of emergency in the North and the West of Europe affected the situation in Yugoslavia. However, in the period between 1939 and 1941. Technical Board published “the Statutes Draft for Realization of the Belgrade City Regulation Plan according to the regulation draft” and “the Plan of Belgrade and Zemun”. Belgrade was totally destroyed by the German air attack in April 1941.

World War 2 and communist period

World War 2 changes destiny of this complex in the most tragic way. Sava river becomes a border between Serbia and Independent State of Croatia (fascist state with numerous concentrate camps in which hundreds of thousands people were killed), and occupation forces transformed Belgrade Fairground complex into the concentrate camp. At first, it was for Jew people (Judenlager Semlin), most of who were brutally killed, and latter Serbs and other political prisoners were taken there.

More than ten thousand Jews, and thirteen thousand Serbs and people of other nationalities were killed in this camp, but precise number and names of victims is impossible to know. Also, a number of victims was never buried properly, in a tomb, and their bodies could be anywhere in the complex. These facts strongly determine future use of this area.

During the Allies bombardment in spring 1944, all the buildings of the “Old Belgrade Fairground” were destroyed except the Central Tower and “Spasić Pavilion”, used as the camp hospital. More than ten thousand Jews and thirteen thousand Serbs were executed in this camp.



Figure 5: Main gate, latter the gate of camp
Annual of the City of Belgrade (2004), Vol. LI



Figure 6: First exhibition, than execution pavilions
Annual of the City of Belgrade (2004), Vol. LI

In sixth decade of XX century pavilions that were not ruined during the war, were adopted and given to the artists to use them as ateliers. Today, they are still there surrounded by storages, garages, car repair services, workshops, etc.

Paradox of too much identity: stop the watches

This historical review shows how difficult is to plan future of this important area in Belgrade. Problem is complex and has many aspects: social, economical, even political, but crucial point is cultural. While urban communities in the modern world are struggling to create clear and strong urban identity, the Old Belgrade Fairground has too much of it.

In short, first phase of complex's life, as well as an idea of its realization, was inducted by strong will of state and the city to modernize way of life. It was about economical and cultural growth, and about adopting values of western, democratic world. This statement illustrates modernizing impulse well: The Old Belgrade Fairground complex is situated on the left bank of the Sava river, between two great steel bridges, which connect western Europe

with Balkan and East, developers have gathered, not only from Belgrade and other Yugoslav cities, but from many European and Balkan countries...

This phase was interrupted by the War. Brutal policy that was taken at that time, left unchangeable consequences: Jewish community has never completely recovered after this. Number of Jews in Belgrade today is considerably smaller comparing to period before the War. Tragic destiny of thousands people tortured, humiliating and murdered must not be ignored.

Structures which survived war became a shelter for poor people. Homelessness as known in western countries was extremely rare in socialist Yugoslavia, but this kind of housing - illegal use of different kind of buildings for home, could be compared with it. Complex buildings were not appropriate for living in, without adequate infrastructure. Among others, artists, painters, sculptors, lived here. Some of these artists later became very famous, but they still continue to work in these ateliers. This was not an insult for victims, but, whole situation insulted these new inhabitants and their right to decent house.

Absence of any planning activities was, and still is, result of deep frustration about identity of this place. What is to be identified as basic point in area's history? Identity, according to Encyclopedia Britannica, is (a) sameness of essential or generic character in different instances, and (b) sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing. The question is: what is essential, constitutive character of this place? Character is based on the concept of use, idea and values that were transposed on this city area, but how to conciliate components in character which are not only incompatible, but totally opposite. How to integrate memory on tragic period for city and its citizens into the urban pattern? And finally, is there any possibility to keep some hope for alive and respect for the dead, and materialize both in the same structure?

Not an easy task for planners and government to do, but something has to be decided. For many decades, this area was an ignored space, planning-free zone; city government was pretending that problem does not exist.

Strategy of city government in the socialist era

When war was finished, priorities for reconstruction of destroyed city were infrastructure and houses. Roads, railway, bridges, water supply, industry, public administrative and cultural capacities, and most of housing were completely ruined. Total renewal had to be done, and human resources were seriously damaged: thousands of killed people, refugees and orphans, people without homes and families burdened with war traumas. It was obvious that problem of monumental complex wasn't first on the list. There was a lot of work to do before: build infrastructure, start industry, rebuild economy. But, how is it possible not to intervene for decades? And why?

During the World War 2, Kingdom of Yugoslavia was transformed into republic, as a result of socialist revolution which took part in that period. New communist government, except rebuilding the country, had more jobs to do - to create new institutions, system of governing, to make the attitude towards "capitalist" history and previous regime, and to take a position in polarized world. So, action in the Old Belgrade Fairground could reflect some of those.

There were several reasons why decision about future of the area was so difficult. First of all, this government was both antifascist and communist at the same time. They had great respect for all war victims, no matter their nationality - communist regime was strictly against any kind of nationalism, but also they had strong reserve about anything that was about ex-regime. Royal family was exiled out of country, and everyone they believed was supporting them was considered as potential danger for society.

In other words, problem, as well as potential solution, was frustrating for government, because it was not possible to separate memories on tragic past from structure in which it happened. Most of concentrate camps all over the Europe were reconstructed exactly as they were during war, with intention to remember these terrible moments of mankind history,

or as Edwin Heathcote says "not to allow people to forget". This meant reconstruction of bourgeois complex, and maybe support to bourgeois habits of citizens.

Second, new regime wanted to monopolize modernization of country. Any previous effort about modernization was minimized, if not completely denied. Industrialization and urbanization were imperatives, and a kind of continuously repeated mantra of communist regime. As whole industry was ruined during the war, there was a simulation like everything was starting from the very beginning. Also, pre war urbanism was taken as something conservative and anachronous, even if falsification of historical facts was necessary. Such an attitude led to ignoring Master plan from 1923, and few realized complexes in the territory known as New Belgrade (old airport designed by famous physician, astronomer and civilian engineer Milutin Milankovic, for example), including Old Belgrade Fairground.

On the other side, destroying structure relicts and reuse was out of question. In the end, nothing has been done about the Fairground for many years. New Belgrade arises around it, planned and designed in manner of modernism. New Fairground was built on the other bank of river, opposite to the old one, so Old Belgrade Fairground lost the function and became just a toponym.

In communist/ socialist period, two master plans for Belgrade were made. First one in 1950. in which the concept of Belgrade extension on the left bank of Sava was determinate. It was supposed to be in modernistic manner: wide, straight streets - axes, opened plan due to Charte d'Athenes.

Several characteristics of communist society enabled this total conservation of the area, and preservation of status quo for decades, but we might say all of them are derived from the elementary fact that there was no free market:

- Every aspect of economy was planed and centralized. In market economy, there are many actors in city development, and it would be hardly possible to keep the area in the central part of the city without any concept. If it wasn't protected as public good, it would be object of trade. Centralized economy may tolerate such "black holes" in urban fabric. On the other side, there were no private investors as known in the West, because there were no rich people. Everything was nationalized in
- Land in cities was in ownership of state, law did not allow private ownership of city lots. So, legally this area belonged to the city, and city government managed it.
- Urban planning was also centralized, with city government, or more precisely Communist Party as single actor in planning process. All decisions were made in the Comity of Party, and professionals just should have implemented them.

Transitional pressure

It's hard to say precise moment when socialist era ended, and transitional period started. In other socialist counties of eastern block it's easy to define the breaking point, but in former Yugoslavia, this process was parallel with brutal decay of country, wars and nationalism. But, for Old Belgrade Fairground radical change has happened in 1987. when the complex was pronounced for cultural good of Belgrade. This meant new regime for the area, which included protection and conservation. Decision was rather formal, as there was no particular action, but it was of enormous importance because it protected the area of illegal building, or other kind of intervention by private investors.

Though we can not specify exact time when transitional period begun, we can recognize that liberalization of market could hardly devastate complex. In circumstances of free market, some investors got pretty rich, and they needed space for their job. For this paper, it is irrelevant how they got their money: legally, illegally, or, perhaps, war profiteers, but they were, and still are, looking for space. Market of land did not develop as fast as it was necessary, and law was not suitable.

Land in cities, regarding to Constitution, is still ownership of state, but demand for it is very intensive. Position of Old Belgrade Fairground is very good: on the bank of the river, in the central zone, and infrastructural corridors passing nearby the complex area.

Another very important aspect of possible misuse of Old Belgrade Fairground considered public good. Public goods are, at the same time connected to laws, economy and mentality. In western countries, which did not have system discontinuity, mechanisms for protection and reproduction of public good have been established before, and they have been continuously improved. Legislative about this topic is precise and balanced, developers are considering it, and citizens are aware of it's importance. In Serbia, non of these exists: laws about public good protection are not precisely written, instruments for their implementation insufficient, and state is too week to realize even these laws. Developers, on the other side, are aggressive in making profit. Yet, prior problem is absence of citizen's conciseness and emancipation on this topic. People are not aware of their own responsibility for preservation of public good.

Tradition of personal and engagement of community disappeared during socialist regime. Centralized governing and decision making on Communist Party level, resulted with total excluding of citizens in matters about city's future. Hierarchy was extremely rigid and inflexible, and non-institutional effort couldn't give any result. Partly, it was caused by ideological motto that Party already knows what people need, but crucial reason was procedural.

Also, many people in Serbia and other countries of ex Yugoslavia, identify antifascism and communism. Hundreds of thousands Serbian citizens lost their lives as victims of fascism, and most of them weren't communists. Historians, sociologists and other scientists already are studying this phenomenon, and it is far too complex to be explained in this paper, but its reflections are recognizable in people's behavior and treatment of historical monuments from period of World War 2.

City parliament verified Detailed urban plan for monumental complex Old Belgrade Fairground in 1992. Reason for this was "to enable reconstruction of monumental complex and building a memorial object. This is to be done in order to reconstruct complex as it was at the time of transformation into the concentrate camp..."

The Way out

First impulse for preservation and reconstruction of the Old Belgrade Fairground was strictly individual. Art historians, planners, architects and journalists progressively realized imperative of personal engagement in struggle for such objectives. Previous regime did not leave any space for individual action or initiative, so there was needed some time for people to take new role – role of active and conscientious citizens.

Institutions were too rigid and indolent, regarding bureaucratic inertia which is immanent to every system: ideological or democratic. Gradually, idea of historical and urban importance of the Fairground was developed through separate activity of intellectuals and enthusiasts. Then, their practice was articulated in series of public discussions, panels, exhibitions. Finally, this became a wide action which mobilized not only professionals interested in this topic, but citizens who want to keep the memory and different layers of urban identity.

Basic indicator of possible planning solution was, ironically, half life of the complex in postwar period. Art is the only human effort that does not insult the dead and is a stimulus for alive. And, historically, ateliers and artists' activities are referred to this space. On this basis, Belgrade Master plan 2021 aligned Old Belgrade Fairground as an area for general reconstruction. Actually, it means that the Fairground is considered for cultural good to be protected as a whole, ambience treated integrally, due to previous structure, use and memories. This is implemented into the Plan, and it is a matter of time when Detailed plan for the area is going to be made.

Conclusion

After all, it is pretty obvious there are two complex historic stories about the Old Belgrade Fairground. First one is the history of the Fairground itself, from grandiose and modernistic idea, to ruined structure which is source of planning problems. Another one is story of politicians' and planners' trouble to decide what to do with it. Result of both is The Fairground as it is today: devastated, inhabited with poor, but urban population, excluded from city's life, but with potential to be reconstructed and renewed. Possibility to keep memory of every important phase of the Fairground is its most precious item. At the same time, that is the only one implication of planning process that lasted for decades. Ironically, it is not negligible.

Case of Old Belgrade Fairground proves that in some situations, is preferable not to make a decision, than to make a wrong one. Political and other social circumstances did not allow treating Fairground in manner that could incorporate all layers of its complex history into solution, but they made possible keeping status quo.

Also, there is another verdict that ensues after analyzing case of the Old Belgrade Fairground. It concerns eternal question about "ideal planning circumstances". Planning of Fairground's reconstruction took many years, and in that period totally opposite systems was on. Nature of socialism is complete centralization of political, legislative, financial power and still it was not ambience that allowed creation and implementation of good and lasting arbitrage. Limitation factor was ideology: power was there, but channels of its usage were directed by ideology.

Total and wild liberalization of market is prior characteristic of period that came after. The best possible action was to protect the complex of eventual usurpation of private financial capital. Slowly, as legislative was consequently constituted and social awareness grew, procedures for creating worthy solution were established.

Inheritance and history can't be treated appropriately in extreme social and economical conditions. Ideological socialist government was almighty, but selective in order to keep own supremacy, and main actors in free market have their priorities. Only socially aware and emancipated society, through democratic procedure, is capable to recognize and protect historical and other values and public good. And, we will have an opportunity to test this statement on the case of Old Belgrade Fairground and its future.

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