

Can new Developments and City Identity grow in Harmony? – The Quest for a successful Public Space design for New Belgrade

Introduction

Belgrade's turbulent history and its unique urban culture are an important part of the city's identity, and were a winning force in the previous years of sanctions, poverty, war and political battles. It is both a privilege and a burden for local leaders, and a challenge for planners and designers keen on making the city attractive for the global development market. At the same time there is also a goal for historic heritage protection institutions to save the "path" of urban development inherited from the previous period. The New Belgrade city core, the focus of this research, is a target for real estate developers, Serbia's pride in never abandoned social housing buildings, the living monument to Le Corbusier's city model, and the biggest construction site in modern Serbia.

The design of public space should help harmonize interests of various economic, social, religious, national groups, all parts of a diverse contemporary city population. For the cities in transition, such as Belgrade, good design of public space is one of the instruments for improving the image of the city, either for its disintegrated population that should take an active part in public life or for the developers who are expected to invest in such a stable and nice place. The challenge for planners and the city management is to preserve and improve the city's identity while making it attractive to developers. This goal is common to all contemporary cities around the world, since the global real estate market is making them all alike. A successful city management is the one that is able to stimulate growth in harmony with local city character. Governments in the previous socialism period financed most of the interventions, and since the transition in the economy has just begun, neither the knowledge nor skills by the authorities have been developed for such negotiations to be successful.

In the case of New Belgrade, a specific and lively city with high potentials, there is a need for wise, intelligent but also rational and economically sustainable solution for new development, and, on the other hand, for an equally important model of obtaining a well organized public space that can reconcile historic, social, functional and aesthetic character of the most important part of New Belgrade. Therefore the City government initiated a study and even more, a public architectural competition for the new design of the whole area.

New Belgrade's Identity & Attractions

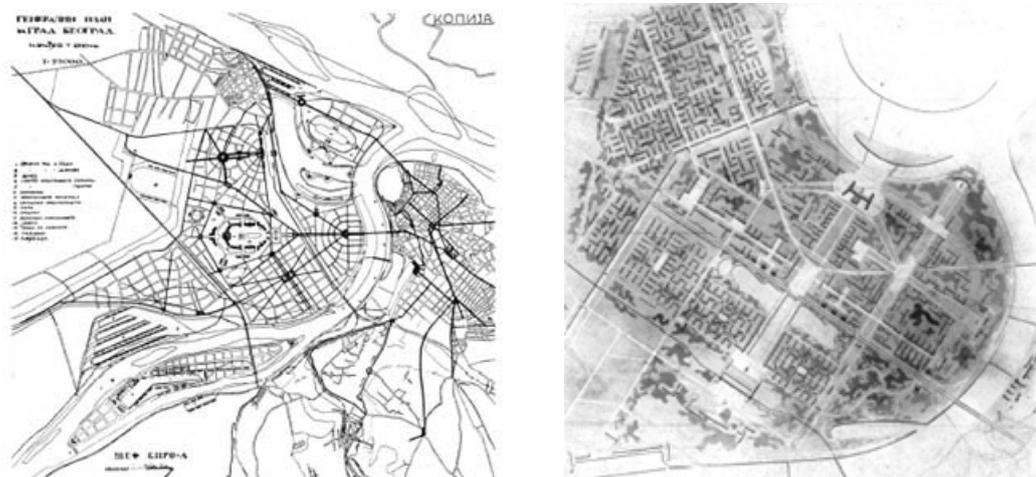
New Belgrade is one of the City of Belgrade's seventeen municipalities, and one of the biggest with a population of more than 220.000, and the majority of investments not only in Belgrade, but in whole Serbia. The first sketches of a new city first appeared in an architectural competition in 1922, but the actual city was built during reconstruction of the Yugoslav Capital after WW II. It was planned and built on the marshy land on the left riverbank, for and by a new, young working class enthusiastic about rebuilding not only the ruined city but a new socialist society as well. The plans for the new city were made between 1922 and 1962 in a modern movement manner, as a Le Corbusier type of the new city with multiple functions, from housing to green spaces and governmental complexes.¹ On the other hand, it was a typical new socialist capital city built for a growing working class. Even physically separated from the old Belgrade, the city was also a frame for the new political

power, new political order, with it's new urban concept: the Government Palace as an icon in a pole of the main green axis.²



Fig.1 - View from the historic Belgrade fortress of New Belgrade on the other side of river Sava and its business, housing and culture icons: “Ušće” Palace, housing blocks and the Museum of Contemporary Art. Fig.2 – SIV, Governmental Palace and the core of New Belgrade

The first ideas for the new city back to the early 1920's in a spirit of a “garden city” model. , The more serious design was incorporated in the next Master plan for the city of Belgrade (Kovaljevski) and it was related to Belgrade City Center. The most important Yugoslav architects such as Dobrovic and Ravnikar did design proposals in orthogonal matrix and city blocks 300 by 300 m long. The main city green axis, between Danube and Sava rivers, was designed to support the location of the new governmental building and to show the political power behind it. The most important buildings and functions were along the axis and on their poles, and they are representing city landmarks even today. The core of the city was formed by residential “nine blocks”, designed and built in 1950's around the main axe. This shape, the architectural form and the way of maintenance of public space, buildings, even wide roads and boulevards, all show the attitude of the city authority but also the will of the republican government to manage properly the newest and the most important part of the country's capital. The state built, owned and maintained the space for public use and the governmental buildings, but also all the residential, rare commercial buildings, culture and sport complexes, as well as the student campus in New Belgrade. This system contributed to New Belgrade's specific and unique identity.



Figs.3, 4 – Drawings from The Belgrade Master Plan 1922 (Kovaljevski), and the New Belgrade Urban Design Competition (Dobrovic, 1948)

The social structure of New Belgrade's population was also interesting, as it was representative of representing the population structure of entire Yugoslavia. The majority of people came from all over the country, mainly engaged in the huge city and state administration and public services. The so-called "middle class" lived in residential "Blocks", fairly educated and of various ethnic, religious and social backgrounds. The working class lived in "Pavilions", older structures on the edge of Zemun and generally on the fringes of the new city. The former urban elite, although officially not recognized, as well as a part of the establishment, highly politically positioned, remained living in the old part of Belgrade, classic city and classic urban matrix. The structure of New Belgrade's population was diverse, but strong and stable. Over time New Belgrade has become a progressive, young, open-minded society and the cradle of the most progressive urban culture movements. During eighties, even "New wave" music movement, following European trends, evolved in New Belgrade for some reason. People from New Belgrade were proud of their wide, clean, transparent and green city and claimed they would never move to the noisy and crowded old city center. New Belgrade became a distinctive site and urban and cultural entity within the city of Belgrade and in Yugoslavia in general.

Post-socialist transformation in Belgrade has turned out to be much slower than in other Central European societies and cities. Social system transition has been accompanied by marginalization of the local economy in European context, and impoverishment of population and community as a whole. Poverty gravely affected urban population and middle class, so that, at the turn of the century 40% of the inhabitants are poor, another 40% at the verge of poverty, only 15% belonging to middle classes, and 5% rich. Spatial consequences of such social trends were numerous and multiply negative: from illegal additions to existing buildings, enlargements, to massive mounting of stands in public space, city streets, to illegal building of the residential and other constructions, including the entirely new city blocks and sometimes settlements without any plan.

Prospects of future social development are closely connected with creation of an entirely new socio-economic system convenient and different economic ambience, through all the different aspects of social activities – economic, environmental, political, educational, cultural, sport, humanitarian etc. Various conflicts between the owners of the land and developers, local and national economy, between producers and city dwellers, among different social groups, owners and renters etc., must be wisely and efficiently overcome or minimized in common interest.

Process of privatization of residential and business space and commercialization of historical entities are influencing urban transformation. To quote the General Plan of Belgrade 2021, "New identity of Belgrade ought to be multilevel, including national, regional and local. Regional Belgrade identity is founded on its re-established importance as an international, Central-European and Balkan center. Belgrade significant identity is to be kept by general social integration, in cooperation with various ...cities owning symbolic or historical characteristics of metropolis."

Development gap & new attractions

All the new states established from former Yugoslavia are nowadays in one or another phase of transition, and Serbia was the last to enter. The previous period, 1990's, was marked by economic and cultural sanctions and ended in the collapse of the national economy. During that time Serbian urban heritage, including specific city identity, was either ruined or neglected and its historic, cultural or architectural values were vanishing together with its physical attributes. There were several reasons for this situation, not to mention general poverty and the collapse of national and city economy. The first important reason was the lack of local authorities' strength to preserve, maintain and improve public property and save it from being devastated by illegal or temporary construction. Neither rich nor poor or

underdeveloped societies, as Serbian was for almost two decades, can on their own create public goods or gain enough benefits from (rare) new developments. If so, there must be at least an agreement between the city government and the public on the use and design of public space. These conditions should especially be met in the environment with historic and symbolic values, such as the spaces in the core of New Belgrade.

The second possible reason for the most attractive locations in New Belgrade to remain non-developed was the strict and inappropriate planning and legal system, by that time long outdated, which did not follow the changes in other segments of the society. The planning law either ignored the needs of the growing real estate market and stick tight to previously designed structures for unknown investors. On the other hand, plans and laws established, through the Detail planning, such a set of rules that no investor or authority was able to follow. These plans were, although made after public architectural and urban design competitions, outdated, and therefore inapplicable to various wishes and plans of contemporary investors.

The third and probably the most important reason for the vacant space in attractive parts of New Belgrade might be the state/social ownership of all the land, designed to be developed in old, socialist-like model. Although attractive and defined in urban plans, the most interesting locations in New Belgrade remained empty in spite of the convenient street and infrastructure systems built in socialist period, well organized public transportation system, and plenty of open and parking space. The site analyzed in this study is one of such.

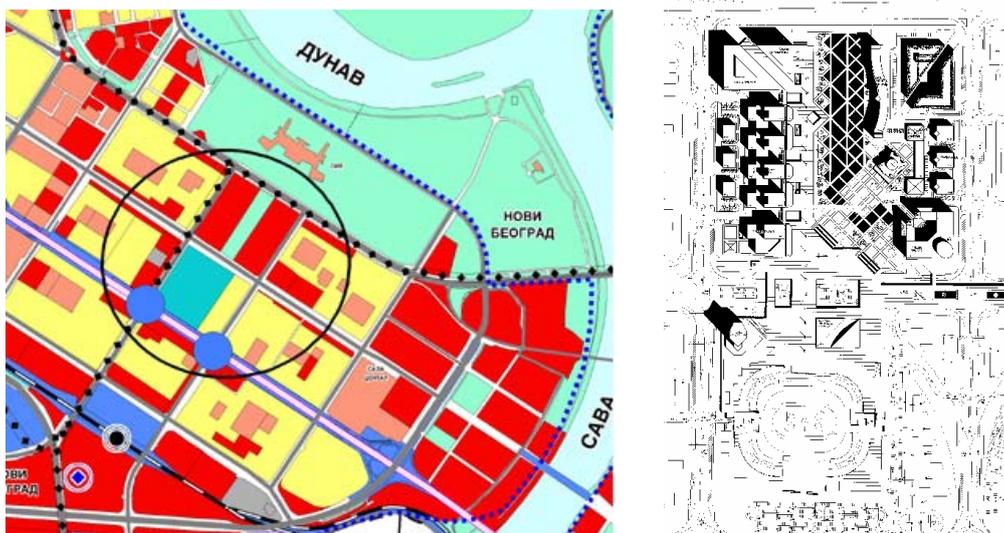
After the political change in 2000, and a new state and city strategy to open towards the new developments and attract foreign investors, the authorities put all the efforts in organizing systems and simplifying procedures for developers. In 2003, after the new planning law adoption, the City remained the owner/user of the land only in New Belgrade, while locations in the old Belgrade are mainly in private use. The law prescribed that only owners or long-term users of the building land in city boundaries are allowed to build. Therefore "Agency for building land and Construction of Belgrade", the public enterprise representing city of Belgrade ownership, was left to make and organize developments only in New Belgrade. Of the total of Belgrade's building land allocated for long-term lease (250.000m²), only 31% was in New Belgrade in 2003. After the law changed, 84,57% of total 207.000m² was leased in New Belgrade in 2004, 79.73% of 139.305m² in 2005, and in the current year almost only New Belgrade sites are offered on tenders for developers. Therefore the City of Belgrade is very interested in rezoning parts of New Belgrade and offering a higher-density development concept. Nowadays New Belgrade has become one of the biggest building sites in Europe³



Figs.5, 6 –Aerial photo of the New (left) and old Belgrade (right) cores (2001) on the river Sava and construction site in block 26 ("Napred", February 2006)

The challenge of New Belgrade's new development

The results of the opening to developers are visible and the whole city is active and in constant change. The old and the new plans are in the process of implementation, and developers are running in tenders to gain as much locations and as more capacity as possible for constructions. The new shopping malls, commercial and business parks, hotels and, of course, housing are growing in various parts of the city. The design of the Olympic village for the Universiade Belgrade 2009 is in progress at one end of the main axis and the demands for the high-rise recently have come from foreign investors as well. The most attractive site for such a "business-city" seems to be the core of New Belgrade, one of the vacant "nine blocks", Block 26.



Figs.7, 8 – Belgrade General Plan 2021 for the central axis of New Belgrade and the winning design from the architectural competition (Licina)

The idea about forming the "city" somewhere in New Belgrade is as old as the city itself, but the decision about the size, location and the shape should be made with caution. The demanding real estate market, because not yet being liberal and not any more planned, is already changing unique New Belgrade matrix. The city government decided to initiate an urban development study for the two most interesting blocks between the SIV, now already historic Governmental building and the "Limes", new representative sport arena.

What makes such a study complex is the conflict of various interests on the site, which has raised several strategic questions. The main axis historically was kept in plans as a representative green prospect along the blocks. The purpose of such a prospect has become questionable since there are no more important governmental buildings around it, and on the other side, the question arises as to the responsible for use, building and maintenance of such an expensive public space. In the same time, the geometry of the axis was disturbed by construction of the "Limes" arena and the coherence that might have given sense too the axis was lost. Therefore planners had to define the real spatial frame to conceptualize the "main square on the axis".

The City government presently put an emphasis on high-density development in the site, and local community demands their well organized and designed public space. The reason for such a demand is the fact that both old and New Belgrade gravitates towards common space in Knez Mihajlova Street and Republic square in historic part of Belgrade. The municipality of New Belgrade participated in the study with the team of young architects and students of architecture to create their own proposal for the site. The design challenge is to meet both demands in the same space.

Another interesting dilemma was about architectural design of the place: whether to resume broken modern movement urban development path and character, established in 1940's to

1960's or to bypass the confusing change and turn towards market-led development and try to anticipate a "city" with high-rises instead? Or both? As for the question of land use, can mixed-use, the Western urban planners' and sociologists' recipe for inner cities' sustainability, deep rooted and implemented in Belgrade's and Serbian urban heritage, be a way to satisfy requirements of the City government, municipality, real estate market, planners and NGOs? And is there a rule to prescribe business high-rises near to residential buildings?

Is then mix-use, the Western urban planners' and sociologists' recipe for the inner cities sustainability, inherited and implemented in Belgrade urban system since always, be a way to satisfy requirements of the city government, municipality, real estate market, planners and NGO's? And where and how to prescribe high-rises near to or with housing side by side?

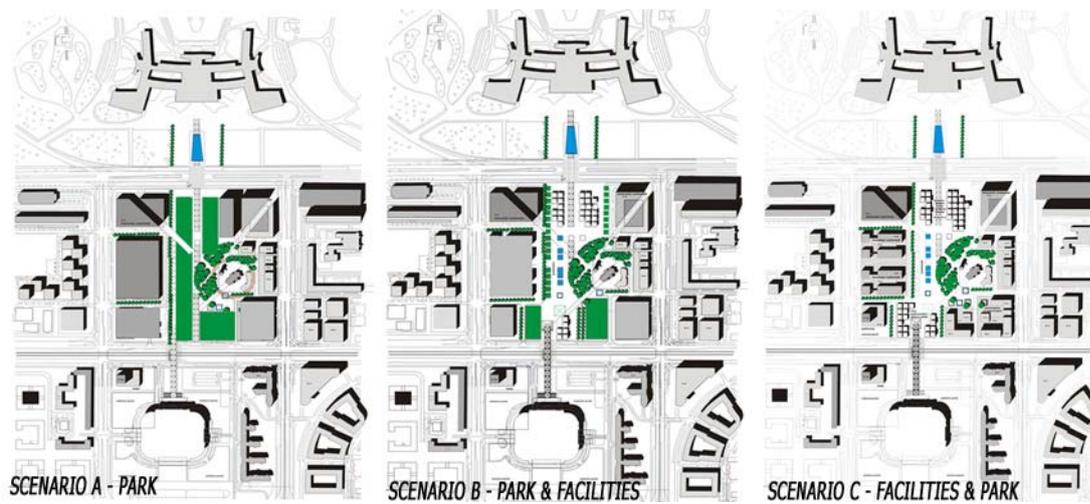
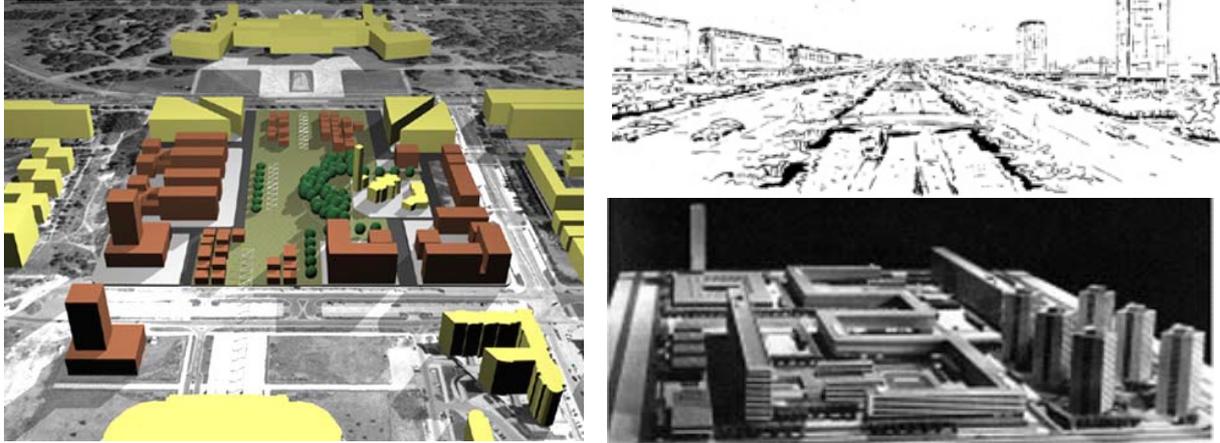


Fig.9 – Part of the author's study as a basis for design competition; design scenarios
A – If the City Government would be strong enough to build a central park along the axe;
B – Big enough public space with lots of green spaces and some commercial space in
partnership with private sector; C – Pragmatic option: public space with amenities built in PPD
with private sector, or small public space with commercials in public use

The new chapter of this list of questions starts with the responsibilities for public space creation and maintenance, which should be in the focus of the new city development planning. There is a small church in construction on the edge of a previously planned public park, and near the commercial site in Block 26. How is that related to design and functioning of the space? How can the public space (or square) be representative and monumental if the back of a small church is facing it? Is social equality respected if the church is on the main square of the city, and is it going to be equally open to the whole society interested in enjoying public space in different ways? How is commercial or business development related to small church in the neighborhood? Neither The City of Belgrade, nor New Belgrade municipality or Agency for building land and construction of Belgrade showed readiness and economic power to invest, or at least participate in some kind of construction and maintenance of this very important and the only remaining vacant space for public use. The reasons are different, from a question of ownership and maintenance as well as a lack of a clear strategy and efficient model of partnerships with yet unknown future developers. The last but not least, it is not clear if the city government should first find investors and design the space according to their needs, or should it predefine the space, locations and design and then offer them to investors?

So many unknown premises for a good and successful design!



Figs.10,11 – One of the designs for the site (2006) and part of the “nine blocks” implemented project from the 1950’s

Feasible solution: Public – Private Development PPD in the U.S.

Is there a solution or experience in developed societies for the public sector to reach well-designed and organized public space? May be the Public-Private Development one feasible solution?

One of the ways to explore possibilities and understand the advantages of PPDs in transitional European countries, such as Serbia, is to know the history and context of U.S. PPDs. The reasons for this kind of partnership were the same or similar over time and all over the world, only the U.S. seems to have been a better ground for them to appear and evolve in so many forms. This was the result of basic American society characteristics: the clear importance of private property, fast new development, and decentralized governments that enabled openness to specific forms of planning and development, through negotiation.

“Public sector”, in this research, is the term that represents the government: national, state, regional or local, with all its professional and additional services. When the term “private sector” is used, it represents private profit organizations, private developers, not-for-profits, NGOs, community development corporations (CDC), and other organizations and firms that are not governmental, as well as “end-users”, tenants, renters, etc.

In general, the goal of governments working with the private sector in PPD is to achieve public benefits (or amenities). Both of them are providing resources for projects, and those resources are, for example: land, labor, investments, construction, management, etc. In cases when the public sector is able to provide all mentioned resources, including financing, for acquisition or rehabilitation of old buildings, or construction of new ones for public use, there is no need for the private sector to get involved.⁴ On the other hand, when the private sector is capable of making any development with its own resources, it doesn't need to search for a partner in the public sector.

There are several simple rationales for the public sector to be involved in PPD, presented by Professor Jerold Kayden.⁵ First, the private sector does not build and develop cities the way that is socially, functionally, or aesthetically the best way according to public criteria. Second, the private market is sometimes inefficient from a market point of view. Third, the private sector cannot do it alone in some locations because of legal restrictions. Fourth, society or its representatives are not always satisfied with the results of private development, as in the case of privately owned public spaces in Manhattan.⁶ On the other hand, the public sector was not always successful in renewal projects that were governmentally owned or financed.

The worst examples are urban renewal projects in American downtowns, which caused more damage than benefits to the society but were efficient and profitable for private owners.⁷

There are three possible scenarios for public-private arrangements in development projects. The first is when both of them are providing some resources for the project. The most usual and often recognized as PPD is the public subsidy provided either as direct or indirect cash (like rent subsidies, loans, tax credits, or tax deductions, etc.). The second scenario is a partnership where some of the resources are converted from one to another partner involved in a project, by the instruments of law, such as public provision of land or infrastructure. And the third possible scenario is the development totally constructed or provided by the private developer, based on so-called incentives. Those incentives are the possible benefits for developers, either in increasing the built square footage or tax deductions, in return for provision of public benefits. Those incentives are legally offered through specific set of rules such as incentive zoning, Business Improvement Districts (BID), tax deductions etc.

Although this short overview will not directly solve the public space financing problem in New Belgrade, it can help in making the strategic move towards possible solutions and these type of partnerships in the attempt to reach any and hopefully better public spaces in Serbia. The New Belgrade development potential is just the best start for such or similar models of partnership developments in Belgrade.

Conclusions (or just a suggestion from an experienced urban planner)

There is a hope that investors and organizations willing to build on this site are also willing to negotiate with governments and authorities on city rehabilitation issues and contribute not only to their own profit and welfare. Since most of the rehabilitation and all public projects in the previous period were financed by governments, and the transition in the economy has just begun, neither the knowledge nor skills had been developed by the authorities for such successful negotiations. Different models and strategies for revitalization may be used, but only the efficient and feasible ones will be accepted both by the developers and the authorities. One of such is a partnership between the authorities and the other profit or non-profit organizations. This can be a legal, convenient and efficient model for all: the owner, heritage protection institutions, developers and most importantly, for host cities' communities and their recognized but neglected identity and heritage.



Figs.12,13 – Successful PPDs in Public Space: Covent Garden, London, GB, Oregon, US.



Figs.14,15 – The Partnerships in Park making and Melbourne Federation Square, the huge and successful city regeneration project, built and developed in partnership of public and private sectors⁸

¹ Vale, Lawrence J. (1992) *The locus of political power - Capitol and Capital, Architecture, Power, and National Identity*. New Haven: Yale University Press;

² Costonis, John, J. (1989) *Icons and Aliens, Law, Aesthetics and Environmental Change*, Urbana, Chicago, University of Illinois Press;

³ The official facts and figures are not yet available for this year, but these are unofficial from the Marketing Sector of the Agency for building land and construction, that is responsible for offering development sites for the city of Belgrade.

⁴ Buildings for public use are schools, administrative governmental buildings, housing for low-income groups, public spaces, parks, etc.

⁵ Class notes, Professor Jerold Kayden, Graduate School of design, Spring course 04: Public-Private Development;

⁶ Kayden, S. Jerold with The New York City Department of City Planning & the Municipal Art Society of New York, (2000) *Privately Owned Public Space: The New York City Experience*, New York, John Wiley & Sons;

⁷ Just one example is the Urban Renewal Project of the West End in Boston, where new development appeared through total gentrification of an old and charming city neighborhood.