

## **INTEGRATING CITY OF MITROVICA**

### **CONTEXT**

Today, the city of Mitrovica has many problems. It outwards the overall complexity of situation that has dominated over the past six years in Kosovo. Actually the city of Mitrovica is divided by the Iber River into the Southern part, inhabited by mainly Kosovo Albanians and the Northern part, inhabited mainly by Kosovo Serbian population. The population on both parts of the city is living in very poor living conditions. Following the economic collapse after the decline of the industrial base of the city, without any significant public investment and new weak private sector, the economic base of the population depends heavily on the public subsidies and presence of the international community.

A new approach to urban planning has been identified as a response to the urbanizing world and a way to a more sustainable development. Planning should ensure acceptable quality of life, providing affordable land for housing and work, fed by urban infrastructure and services. This paper attempts to show how difficult it is for city planners to perform in difficult conditions, while struggling to plan for a new urban development in the city. At the time when the strategic planning is breaking through in Kosovo, the duty of planners is even more challenging.

### **The city and the people**

Mitrovica lies alongside a small lowland in the north of Kosovo valley between 42 ° 53 ' North, 25 ° 25 ' East, and is located 500-510 m above sea-level, exactly in the picturesque area of Iber river and beneath the volcanic cupola of Zvecan, bounded by the Shala hills extending from its east flank. Municipality of Mitrovica lies approximately 40 kilometers north of Prishtina – capital of Kosovo, covering an area of 350 square kilometers. It contains one town and 49 villages, bordered by Vushtrri and Skenderaj to the south, Zveçan and Zubin Potok to the west and Podujeva to the east.

The area's position at the confluence of the two rivers Ibar and Sitnica and in particular the mine resources of silver and lead, has continuously made this area attractive to inhabitants, since prehistory. Archaeological discoveries and many researches indicate that life in Mitrovica began in the Neolithic time, while the first inhabitants were found to be Dardans<sup>1</sup> Illyrian tribe. Mitrovica's mines were exploited since Roman times, Byzantine rule followed by Middle Ages up to the modern times.

Geographic position has made the city a natural regional crossroad providing a trading interface between north and south. A north – south railway line between Belgrade and Pristina runs through Mitrovica, on to Skopje and through Thessaloniki down to Mediterranean Sea. The highway runs west from the city, following the Iber and along Gazivode Lake to Montenegro and Adriatic Sea.

Due to these advantages, following the II World War, Mitrovica was developed to a very important trade, industrial and cultural center. Mitrovica was a one - company industrial city that at its height in 1988 employed almost 23,000 <sup>2</sup>people in its activities in the broader region. The Trepça complex, apart from mines and flotation had a battery factory, a lead smelter, zinc metallurgical works, chemical industry and other non – core activities.

During the Milosevic regime (1989-1999), Mitrovica faced a decline in all directions. The economic collapse that city faced with decline of Trepça, has resulted into a current unemployment rate of 70%, the highest in Kosovo. Decades of a heavy industry have left Mitrovica with a legacy of huge environmental damages. The cost of repair of these damages will be very high, while this is considered to be of a crucial importance for attracting investments for the future reactivation of the complex.



**Figure 1. Position of Kosova and Mitrovica in the region. Source: ESI**



**Figure 2. Position of Roma Mahalla in urban area of Mitrovica. Source: ESI**

## Introduction

During the war, in spring 1999 Serbian security forces expelled more than 1 million Kosovo Albanians from their century old motherland. Thousands were killed and injured and their houses were destroyed. Much of Mitrovica's Albanian population had the same fate. According to the assessment made from the Directorate for Planning, Urbanism and Reconstruction, nearly 40% of the housing stock was totally destroyed, nearly 36% was seriously damaged, nearly 14% suffered less destruction and only about 10% was spared. During the period 2000 – 2006, only 43,42% of the total number of houses from all categories<sup>3</sup> was reconstructed.

With the entry of NATO troops in summer 1999 Albanian population came back to Kosovo. At the same time Serbian population begun fleeing northwards, together with the withdrawing Serbian security forces. Together with them, ~ 6000<sup>4</sup> RAE that used to live in a Roma Mahalla (mahalla is Turkish for "neighborhood"), settlement on the Iber riverbank, in south part of the city, fled as well. This fact supported the largely Kosovo Albanians assumption that during the war RAE community took the side of the Milosevic regime. Until June 2004, a large number of RAE, 523 persons (91 households) were settled in the 3 camps in the northern part of Mitrovica and one in Leposavic: Kablare, Cesmin Lug and Zitkovc,<sup>5</sup> while the rest are displaced in Serbia, Montenegro and Western Europe. The camps were an ad hoc response to a flow of RAE refugees and were meant to be a temporary solution, while the destroyed houses of Roma Mahalla will be reconstructed.

Today the city is divided and the structure of the population on both sides has changed as a result of the unresolved situation, reproducing inter-ethnic tension. The displaced population on both parts was left pending without any solution. Currently, there are roughly 67,000

Albanians living in the Southern part, while around 14,000 Serbs have inhabited the Northern part (1/3 of this number are Serb IDP's from other parts of Kosovo). Today there are around 1500<sup>6</sup> other minorities (Bosniaks, Turks and RAE) living in the city.



**Picture 3. Roma Mahalla in 2005. Source: DRC**

In July 2004 WHO carried out an environmental health risk assessment for lead and heavy metal contamination in the Mitrovica region. It was found that the locations of the RAE camps in the north are heavily polluted by toxic waste from the extensive Trepca mines. This was in particular threatening the children, some of which already were suffering the impact of lead poisoning, while one of them died. An immediate evacuation of the children was required and relocation of camps. RAE community was skeptical to the proposal for relocation of the camps, and they insisted on a permanent solution – return to the Roma Mahalla. UNMIK, ORC decided to link this with the return process and started a long process of negotiations in order to achieve acceptable solution for all.

The return projects in all Kosovo, in their aim to be sustainable, are a complicated process that requires prior analysis and consultation with all relevant stakeholders. To provide sustainable conditions it is necessary to have a multi-sectoral approach to this issue. Since this kind of projects requires a lot of financial means that cannot be provided solely from the Kosovo budget, an input from the international donors was an imperative. Thus even though the Return to Roma Mahalla was addressed few times since 2000, only in April 2005 Municipality of Mitrovica and International Stakeholders Group agreed on implementation of a new Urban plan for this settlement.

## **ROMA MAHALLA – A SMALL STEP FOR THE INTEGRATION OF THE CITY OF MITROVICA**

### ***Urban conditions in Roma Mahalla***

Roma Mahalla lies in the western-southwestern side of the center of Mitrovica, precisely in the inner city area. In its length of 750 m and different widths between 80 – 200 m, it follows the riverbed of the Iber river that borders it at the north side. At east is bordered with residential area, at south with the agricultural loamy land while at west with a residential area of low density. The site is quite near to the city center, and very attractive due to the view on the river, and an easy access to the 2 football fields on its edges and several recreation activities.

There are no exact data about the time of the settlement of RAE in these areas, while according to census of 1948; out of 14237 inhabitants of Mitrovica, 95 of them or 0.8 %<sup>7</sup> were Roma.

The geographical zone determined as Roma Mahalla (Fig.4.) is about 21 ha and is divided into two ownership categories:

- 1 Privately owned property (4.1ha representing 351 plots with around 385 houses)
- 2 Municipally owned land (16.7 ha with around 219 houses)

Roma Mahalla was an informal settlement that expanded gradually, triggered by the population growth. Houses were built without any urban planning, no adequate infrastructure to support this growth and no access to the public services. The living conditions of the inhabitants were far below the appropriate living standard. Apart of small part along the main road, where a small number of houses were constructed properly, the rest of them were built of pore material regardless any building standards or technical regulations. Parts of the riverbank were covered in waste, creating a makeshift landfill for the building sites, where dwellings from iron sheets were initially made, aiming to claim stake on the land.

The overall infrastructure of the settlement was at a very poor level. Only the main road was asphalted while the secondary roads, due to the illegal occupation of the land were transformed into footpaths. Improper connections to the city electrical network and a high number of individual illegal connections have worsened the network that is nowadays completely destroyed. Water supply network and the sewage system were also in a poor condition. Due to this, hygienic conditions of the inhabitants were very bad, while a large part of the sewage line was open, representing a potential source of diseases.

One health and a veterinary centre were located in this area. RAE children attended the nearby school together with other communities. RAE population is quite young, but the illiteracy and low level of education is widespread. Most of the inhabitants of the Mahalla were working as daily laborers; garbage collection, shop keeping, and some of them were engaged in Trepca and other state – owned enterprises.

Environmental disaster of the area is evident. Continuous illegal construction on the riverbank has caused a serious damage of ecological fibre including both flora and fauna. The remaining of the destroyed houses is a threat for the safety of the pedestrians and air quality.



Figure 4. The geographical zone determined as Roma Mahalla – Source: DRC

## URBAN PROPOSALS FOR THE NEW ROMA MAHALLA

### 1. FIDANISHTE-SECTION A

Even before the endorsement of Standards for Kosovo, municipality of Mitrovica had drafted a regulatory plan called Fidanishte-section A on 31.02.2004. The Plan was aiming to provide shelter for the displaced RAE community and other social cases in the municipality.

A characteristic of this plan was the proposed implementation in two phases. The first phase would be construction of apartment block in lamellas<sup>8</sup>(entrances) that would provide shelter to the residents without proven ownership of property. The second phase would be construction of the individual houses for the residents who have proven ownership of the land plots. The proposed implementation on phases was the main advantage of this plan. It would enable the accommodation of the RAE community currently living in the heavily polluted camps. Despite the good intention of the municipal planners, this plan carried a lot of weaknesses. The missing elements of health and social infrastructure, public spaces, recreation areas, greenery and parking space made this plan incomplete. Furthermore, the 5 story and 6 story apartment buildings foreseen, were not appropriate for the RAE way of living, so finally the plan was rejected, partially driven by the prejudice of the community towards the local government.

In the meantime, the Standards for Kosovo announced on December 2003 were approved. Standard 6, addressing legalization and regularization of informal settlements reflected also two main principles deriving from the international standards on human rights. The first principle was the right to return to the place of origin for all displaced persons in Kosovo<sup>9</sup>. The second principle derives from the section of the property rights in the Kosovo<sup>10</sup> Standards Implementation Plan, which refers to the legalization of informal settlements. According to the third principle, which is related to the legalization of settlements, each person has right to be member of community. Every citizen shall enjoy the equal rights as regards to the life standards and access towards services.



Figure 5. MA Mitrovica – Axonometric view of Regulatory Plan Fidanishte/Plantation-section “A”

## **2. DRC / DRAFT- PLAN FOR SUSTAINABLE RETURN**

The second initiative for drafting of the urban plan for Roma Mahalla was carried out by DRC through program GAR, as a part of return/reconstruction project for sustainable return of Roma.

The allocation of 21 ha, according to DRC- was determined according to general guidelines on urban planning:

Habitation zone	51%	or	10.8 ha
Transport	29%	or	6.11 ha
Greenery	14%	or	2.88 ha
Commercial zone	5%	or	1.03 ha
Social Infrastructure	2%	or	0.48 ha

Proper zoning of the Roma Mahalla was seen as an important step for the future development of Mitrovica and the integration of the returned community. The main objectives of the zoning process were: efficient distribution of public facilities; preservation of natural resources; reduction of the environmental pollution; and the cultivation of the high quality of life by creating a distinctive urban layout of the settlement.

The transport network is divided into primary, secondary and tertiary roads. The greenery was planned mainly along side the Iber River as a 25m buffer zone along the riverbank, and along every primary road. The proposed greenery zones alongside the Iber River, would affect 54 buildings, while by the proposal for the transport network, 99 private parcels (28 %) would be affected.

Because of the great number of Roma youth returnees, a social infrastructure should be planned, in order to fulfil the educational needs of population. One kindergarten would be built in the Roma Mahalla, near to the school and community centre. One primary and secondary school located in one building were foreseen too. One centrally located health centre is considered to be adequate, in providing the access to medical care to the residents of the area.



**Figure 6. Draft urban proposal - Return to Roma Mahalla. Source: DRC**

The community centre would be located on the main street, providing RAE community with youth centre and library, as well as other premises that may be used for the different meetings of Roma community. There were also parking places foreseen and children and youngsters playgrounds located within the planned green areas for a new neighborhood.

The religious sites (sacred tomb), would not be displaced in any case, in order to preserve the religious traditions of local population.

Roma Mahalla would have two areas designated for social infrastructure, one in the centre, while the other in the west of the mahalla. At this planning stage, specific location of any particular part of social infrastructure was not decided. A detailed layout of the structures would be determined at the later phase of the urban development plan of the Roma Mahalla.

Despite the fact that professional team of DRC set up an office in the Municipal building, the cooperation with urban planners was very limited, minor and consisted mainly in assistance during the data collection and technical consultation for categorization of road infrastructure. Moreover they were not actively engaged in the planning process.

The drafted proposal appeared to have a lot of disputable elements for the Municipality such as an irrational use of the municipal property. Out of the 21.0 ha of land that was foreseen in planning of the Roma Mahalla, only 4.1 ha had proven property ownership, while 16.9 ha was municipal property. For the municipality this was a very valuable area, that would provide many opportunities, important for the development of the city center, having in mind that this area is located in an inner – city zone, in a very attractive area near the river.

Another weak point of the draft was lack of addressing of citizens with proven ownership of properties. All residents were treated equally regardless their property status.

From the urban planning point of view, the main objection of the city planners was that the proposed solution leaves a lot of space for the segregation of the RAE community that could lead to a social instability in future undermining the long – term sustainability and reintegration. .

The plan was drafted upon incomplete data, lack of information, and statistics on anecdotic basis. The approach to planning in this case was more from a Human Rights Conventions perspective, rather than principles for sustainable development.

### 3. URBAN COMPROMISE

Finally, on 18 April 2005 Municipality of Mitrovica and an International stakeholders Group agreed on the implementation of a new urban plan for Roma Mahalla drafted jointly by municipal planers, NCA, DRC and in cooperation with other involved stakeholders and participation of the RAE community.<sup>11</sup>

The new plan defines the borders of the future mahalla in an overall area of 13 ha encompassed in its all length with a greenery buffer. The plan was a result of a long and difficult process of negotiation among the Municipality, International stakeholders Group and RAE community.



Figure 7. MA Mitrovica (2005) – Urban project for the sustainable return in the Roma Mahalla

However, after the initial four weeks of negotiations, RAE community has authorized the international officials to negotiate on their behalf. Whatever were the reasons for this decision (some have justified this with a limited capability of RAE to discuss technical issues, while the selection of the RAE representatives was also disputable), city planners were disappointed with this way of communication. It was very similar to the well-known method of „shuttle diplomacy“ - so common in the recent history of Kosovo. However in this fragile stage of reconciliation of inter – ethnic relations, they felt powerless to change this situation.

City planners were very committed in working out the solution despite daily challenges towards the urban chaos in the city. Enormous demand for housing in a post-conflict period when Kosovo institutions were not reestablished yet, lack of legislative framework (Kosovo Law on Spatial Planning was approved in 2003), outdated and ineffective existing plans resulted in a huge number of illegal constructions. They were followed by a damage of the city infrastructure, destruction of the green areas and agricultural land and abuse of the public space. A collapsed economy and the division of the city creating a framework in which nothing could function properly enforced all these problems.

The last existing urban plan of the city was drafted in 1974 and there was a revision of the existing General Urban Plan of 1962. Both plans had designated the Roma Mahalla a recreational green area and sport facilities. Positioned near the river and close to the city center, this location seemed to be perfect for this purpose. This part of the plan was never



implemented due to the limited municipal funds and high cost of implementation – typical for the conventional, top-down planning approach. As a consequence, RAE occupied the municipal land, and the area grew in a large informal settlement.

Even though the process of drafting of Municipal Plan of Mitrovica has not started yet, it has been the municipal planners vision to develop this area from an urban chaos into a tourist attraction. Both Ibër riverbanks would be enlarged and transformed into beaches combined with sport and recreational facilities, within the green buffer spaces up to the main bridge, which is currently the symbol of the division of the city. The area would serve both parts of the city, and all its communities, while the bridge would become a symbol of peace and reconciliation. By giving a new dimension to this area, the city would offer new opportunities for all.

Nevertheless, the agreement between Municipality and International Stakeholder Group concludes on basic requirements towards the design of the spatial plan of the area. It was decided that the privately owned land plots within this area would not be substantially changed. In cases that they will be affected on the benefit of the better infrastructure, the owners would be compensated with the municipal land within this area. As for the residents with no proven property ownership, in case of their return, they would be provided with apartments build on the municipal land, with the leasehold for 99 years, while the settlement would be legalized. The municipality would provide all the needed documentation for this purpose.

Municipal planners drafted the regulatory plan including the design of the apartment blocks. The characteristic of this plan was that the apartment blocks are designed as a 3-story and 4-story buildings, with 4 flats on each floor. The ground floors of these buildings would be used for the shops or services. The low residential density on these buildings was aiming to respect the specific way of living of RAE in current circumstances. The road infrastructure consists of primary and secondary roads. The main road was planned in the existing axes of the former road „Fabrika“, 6m wide, which goes through the mahalla along the Iber river.

The water supply network, sewage system and rainwater network is planed along the primary and secondary roads. The sidewalks were foreseen for the movement of pedestrians in both sides of the primary roads.

The existing structures of the health center and former agricultural school were incorporated in this solution. The greenery buffer encompasses Mahalla in almost of its perimeter. Contrary to the previous proposals, this time was also calculated the implementation cost of the project at the amount of 11.482.538, 50 €.

The agreed solution was in a way result of the compromise of all parties.

Municipality will be left with a challenge of dealing with the status of other informal settlements in the city, and problem of the many displaced persons without any financial support from external donors.

For the RAE community this agreement will defeat the hopes that they will gain ownership upon the occupied municipal land.

City planners had to give up their vision for the green oasis in the heart of the city.

Three groups were established for monitoring of the implementation of this project: steering board, Technical Issue Group and Property Issue Group. The groups are multi-sectoral and they meet on weekly basis.

The Groundbreaking ceremony of the construction works in the two apartment buildings that are initially foreseen to be constructed was inaugurated on 3.05.2006. Construction is ongoing.



**Figure 8. Current situation in Roma Mahalla – Source: author 05.07.2006**

Drafting of the MDP as required by the Law on Spatial Planning put planners in front of the a very difficult task. The divided city with a complicated system of administration and uncertain economic future requires a systematic way in managing the situation and creativity in planning the best possible future. Focusing on the issues that are affecting living conditions in whole city (water supply, traffic, public transport, environmental issues etc) will be a way to a future normal functioning of the city. In this context, the integration of the Roma Mahalla into the MDP requires a strategic approach. The unused area of the agricultural land that borders Mahalla and existing sport facilities as focus for the inner city development can be an element for incorporation of this area in overall structure of the city. This could be reached by planning of the green and recreational areas along the riverbed, development of the new traffic and public transport scheme, new housing area, development of the small businesses etc.

## **CONCLUSION**

The non-implementation of the two initial plans for the Roma Mahalla: Fidanishte-section A and draft project – proposal for sustainable return by DRC, confirm the already proved ascertainment that overlooking of the key stakeholders in the planning process leads to a conventional approach. In the first case it was the RAE community that was not engaged in the process, while in the second case, the urban planners were the ones to be neglected.

The agreed plan, so called -“Shuttle” urban compromise is multi-sectorial in its approach, and contains an element of consensus, which is necessary in the process of strategic planning. However, in this case this does not guarantee a successful implementation because the RAE did not participate directly that makes the process insufficiently transparent.

City planners have recognized and embraced the principles of inclusive, sustainable strategic planning as promoted and trained by international organizations as UN – HABITAT.

They have tried to implement those nice theories and principles by rebuilding the destroyed Roma Mahalla in a more sustainable way and by avoiding ghettoization. In this case, the implementation of the Standards for Kosovo proved to be incompatible with their aim of a sustainable development. Planners have been put in-between their professional principles and the imposed solutions by politics and different international organizations. This has frustrated them.

In countries in transition where democratization of society has not yet been reached fully, concept of strategic planning, despite the level of participation, is affected by powerful political influences. Although it seems at first sight that they can help in driving the process forward, in the long-term they may become an obstacle to the more rational and better urban solutions.

Planning in these societies attempts to be transitory - between conventional and strategic. In these conditions is difficult to follow strictly the principles and steps of the strategic planning. Different international organizations that promote new planning methodologies should focus more in finding modalities of how to put them in practice on the local context. How to make planning work?!

Kosovo Spatial Plan put forward the vision that will help the city to bring back its lost identity. By using and developing the existing assets and advantages, the city can regain its regional character. Therefore integration of the city of Mitrovica is not only political but also socio-economic and urban necessity. The vision of urban planners for drafting of "one plan for one city" reflects their aim in developing of a joint, tolerant, multi-ethnic future. Effort to reintegrate Roma Mahalla is the first step towards this vision. They will need the support of public opinion, the stakeholders and the international community to develop this vision and planning framework.

#### ENDNOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> Mitrovica and surrounding 1979 summary - group of authors

<sup>2</sup> Mitrovica agenda for local economic development.2004

<sup>3</sup> MA Mitrovica (2006). Information from the field regarding the status of reconstruction of burned houses

<sup>4</sup> Municipal representative of UNMIK estimated an number of 6-7000 inhabitants in September 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Davanzo, V. & Stefani, B. & Surdulli, B. (2004). Return in Roma Mahalla /Mitrovica, Draft urban proposal. . Danish Refugee Council.

<sup>6</sup> ESI, European Stability Initiative, 2003

<sup>7</sup> Federal institution of statistics-census 1948

<sup>8</sup> MA Mitrovicë. (2003). Regulatory plan Fidanishtja-Section "A"

<sup>9</sup> UNSC. (1999): Decision 1244, introduction, section 9 c, 11 k, 13 and annexes.

<sup>10</sup> Kosovo Standards Implementation Plan, 31 March 2004, Section V, property rights (pages 98, 99)

<sup>11</sup> MA Mitrovica (2005). urban project for the sustainable return in the Roma Mahalla

#### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

RAE	Roma, Ashkali, Egyptians
UNMIK	United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo
WHO	World Health Organization
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
GAR	Government Assistance to Returns
NCA	Norwegian church aid
MA	Municipal assembly
IDP	Internally Displaced People
MDP	Municipal Development Plan
ORC	UNMIK Office for returnees