

Livability and Social Integration vs. Economic Crisis and Trends of Transition: Case Study of Local Planning in Belgrade

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1 ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the negative influence of global economic forces and transition changes against the intention of local municipalities and local inhabitants to achieve better quality of life and better social integration in local environment.

Strong economic crisis affecting cities worldwide and transition trends in post-socialistic countries are the most significant drive force of the development/decline of Serbian cities. It reflects on changing the city structure, lessening the functional diversity and shrinking the public space as most vulnerable and least profitable areas in the city. Public interest and the public space in the current context of legislation, arbitrary treatment of singular locations by some institutions and professionals and pressures of the capital is increasingly losing its significance.

On the other hand, even in such conditions the awareness of local municipalities and local inhabitants about the quality of life as well as about the importance of involvement in participation process as a way to impact local livability has grown during the past decade. Such actions of local community rely upon the strong theoretical background focusing sustainable and integrative urban design approach and protection and enhancement of public space and public realm, as well as upon the principles of social integration and cohesion for the local community.

Following the approach of “learning from mistakes“, the paper presents an example of treatment of sports and recreational facilities within residential areas in Belgrade in the current local planning practice, discussing how this treatment can be considered in sustainable way, resisting the transition trends and economic crisis forces and making the local city space more resilient and livable. As a result, this approach also brings other benefits to the city as whole, making planning procedures more effective and sustainable and creating additional value to the city areas.

2 INTRODUCTION

This paper will present one of possible scopes to the current planning practice in Serbia, specially pointing out the investors' attitude about the public space and also the way how local communities try to balance public and private interest. The framework is defined by the socio- economic context and transitional changes in an ex-socialistic country towards market oriented economy.

Though the process of transition lasts for more than a decade, the direction of planning process and effective model for planning practice are not yet clearly defined. Some of the questions still waiting for answers are related to: sustainable framework which 'works' under condition of discontinuity and growth instead of development; experiences from other countries which are not quite transferable; balanced planning intervention in the market in favour of public realm; dilemmas about lessening the public sector, understood as a category inherited from socialism, etc.

We will try to offer some answers analyzing as a case study three sports and recreational areas in Belgrade, not having and ambition to give final answers but to provoke for further discussion. The approach is based equally on ecological, social, economic and institutional sustainability, thus creating conditions for a realistic community development based on the economic resource preservation.

3 PUBLIC INTEREST, PUBLIC LAND USE AND SUSTAINABILITY

The understanding of public interest relies on the premise that public interest has a different understanding, scope and importance in every socio - political environment. The concept of public interest is equally related to land construction land on which it exerts, land use (transportation, infrastructure or recreation areas) or activities of public interest, as is the case with activities related to the environmental protection or cultural

heritage protection. Public interest in Serbia in the situation of a flexible interpretation of the plans, the current legislative context, arbitrary treatment by some of institutions and the pressure of capital is losing its importance.

The basic understanding of the concept of public interest is tied to the notion of public good, which represents the area or activity whose use by individuals or groups does not diminish the possibility of use by another individual or group. By classical definition, private capital is (mostly) not interested for public good.¹

For socially balanced city, social consensus about definition and coverage of public interest is vitally important, as well as consistent implementation of decisions related to the protection and promotion of public interest within the given limits. Since the city of Belgrade has a legacy in this regard, there is a need for redefining the public interest in areas/purposes/activities that are or have been related to it.

On the other hand, the most important foundation of sustainable development rely upon economic, ecological and social cohesion. Sustainable cities follow an integrated and long-term development that does not question the development of future generations. Among the most important features of the development of sustainable cities are: effective economy, lower external and social costs, social progress and strengthening of the civil society,² which together form the basis for long-term qualitative development. At first seen as an approach that is primarily related to environmental issues, sustainable development of the city today is also based on: quality of life as the most important value, respect for human dimension, comprehensive and integrative approach to development and planning,³ preservation of natural, economic and social resources for future generations and social equity and cohesion,⁴ and many more.

In this light, this paper emphasizes the social component of sustainability through the vision of social balance and social cohesion in the city. City of social balance is equally good for all citizens within possibilities and constraints. The implementation of the concept is conditioned by harmonized needs and interests of all social groups. The concept focuses on the desirable or optimal development of social/public services that are covered by compulsory social care for local community and are mostly treated as non-profitable, such as: (public) education, health, social care, child daycare, culture and sports and recreation.⁵ Guaranteed elementary education, primary health care and preschool children care is the level of social concern defined by the international documents (eg. Agenda 21, Habitat Agenda, New Athens Charter, etc.) and by international organizations (UNEP, UN HABITAT, WHO, UNICEF, etc.).

The concept of social cohesion is based on creating the conditions for fulfilling the needs of different population groups, regardless of their political, economic or social power, therefore manifests concern for "non-productive" population groups, such as children, youth, elderly, people with special needs, etc. It can be argued that validation of the concept is based on the quantity of actors which would support it, instead on the power/dominance actors able to impose their model of development. Including a wider range of actors has a strategic importance because it goes beyond short-term effects in the urban space and activities that respond to the trends and uncontrolled privatization processes.⁶

The city of social balance tends to minimize the social inequities which manifest as spatial inequities and make the city territory more inconsistent. By balanced spatial development and social and spatial cohesion, several positive effects can be achieved: minimizing the difference between center and periphery, the development of secondary centers and the optimal equalization of quality of life in the city.⁷ The concept gives priority to the public space in the city and does not favor (economic) growth at any cost. Imperfections of market mechanisms, the effects of unlimited economic growth and points of spatial conflict, being the weak points of contemporary city, present the starting point of defining socially sustainable city.⁸

¹ Source: Mihaljević, G. (1992).

² Source: REC: [www.rec.org/REC/Programs/Sustainable cities](http://www.rec.org/REC/Programs/Sustainable%20cities).

³ Source: Centre for Sustainable Development <http://home.wmin.ac.uk/cfsd/research.htm>

⁴ Source: Stockholm Environment Institute <http://www.sei-international.org/>

⁵ Source: Zakon o javnim službama / Public Services Act/ (Sl.Glasnik RS, 42/91, 71/94.).

⁶ Source: Mitrović, B. (2006) „City of social balance“, in: Milić V., Djokić V. (eds.): “Belgrade The Capital“, Faculty of Architecture- University of Belgrade, Berlage Institute, Rotterdam, Fakultat für Architektur der RWTH Aachen.

⁷ Source: Kazepov, Y. (2005) (ed.): “Cities of Europe, changing contexts, local arrangements and the challenge to urban cohesion”, Blackwell Publishing.

⁸ Stiglitz, J. (2000) “Economics of the Public Sector”, W.W.Norton, New York.

Operationalization of the principles of socially sustainable city should be expressed through at least:

- Social sustainability and the application of the principle of equality by creating the spatial conditions to minimize social differences and favoring social and territorial cohesion.
- Sustainable urban planning - local planning strategy which take into consideration the welfare of the local economy and population;
- Sustainable land use;
- Institutional sustainability, which includes improvement of procedures and institutional arrangements and introduction of integrated approach.

4 TRANSITION AND THE CONSEQUENCES REFLECTING ON PUBLIC SPACE

The trends of privatization and the encouragement of the flow of capital in transition countries are shaping the understanding of public interest. Local political surrounding is usually strong support to such trends and it is by its nature oriented towards short-term effects and much less focused on long-term strategy of the city development.

Not having intention to elaborate many positive and negative effects of transition in Serbia, we shall review only the significant effects in the public sector. The ownership transformation and privatization of public enterprises and public services, private use of public urban construction land, legislative support for the private ownership of urban construction land and reduced financial support for the public sector are just some of the current changes and problems in the transition period.

In economic terms, the goal of transition should be a provision of conditions for the introduction of organized and systematic market relations, healthy competition and the supply and demand within the framework of welfare state. In the countries with long tradition of market relations, the rules arranging the relationship between private and public sector are defined and respected, as well as the level of state and local government intervention in the market, according to established criteria (although we cannot say that these relations are always fully defined and unambiguous). The fundamental problem arises in the absence of these criteria. Then the solution for the most conflict situations in urban environment between public and private interest is solved in the process of arbitrary and ad hoc decision making. The situation in Serbia, although the transition takes a long time, indicates the lack of criteria and standards and lack of clear policy and strategy development for the public sector and also the propositions under which it can be transformed in the process of transition.

In this context, sustainable planning and market demands in the current urban planning practice in Serbia are generally seen as conflicting concepts that mostly exclude each other. It is very common situation in the urban planning practice that sustainable solutions are usually not interesting to the market and investors, while on the other hand investors' interests in many cases cannot be understood as sustainable. Furthermore, local government generally neglects some aspects of sustainability, such as institutional or economic.

5 TREATMENT OF SOME SPORTS AND RECREATIONAL AREAS IN BELGRADE IN THE CONTEXT OF TRANSITION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Trends of the transformation of public urban construction land and public buildings in Belgrade in recent years illustrate the above standpoint. This is particularly visible when it comes to sports and recreational areas which used to be public during the socialistic period. As a case study for this paper three examples of planning treatment for sports and recreational areas in Belgrade will be presented, following the approach of learning from mistakes.

In Belgrade, over more than a decade, we are witnessing an ownership transformation of many health, education, sports, recreation and similar facilities. Privatization of public land and buildings is happening ad-hoc and decisions are made individually and utterly arbitrary. In this way the market behavior in relation to public spaces and facilities, enters "back door", without having analyzed the concept of development or strategic orientation.

We have to emphasize the unjustly neglected fact that we are discussing a very important resource – public facilities infrastructure/network, legacy from different sociopolitical environment. This infrastructure/network are often overwhelmed by problems related to the maintenance, lack of financial resources and

qualified working staff, nevertheless it is still a relatively diversified and balanced network. Let us mention the fact that many developing countries, with different or similar sociopolitical and economic history does not have such capital (as is the case with many Asian countries).

Of particular concern is the general social approval and support to these models of behavior in space. Public facilities have been transformed for other purposes, privatized and new, commercial facilities have been introduced. Sometimes, they even are not brought to a new purpose. As an argument and justification for such actions, greater efficiency after the ownership transformation, the need for rationalization of some services, high maintenance costs and hiring qualified work force are brought up. This way, the standard of living, which is tightly bond to the quality and spatial distribution of public services, and which has already been getting worse for other reasons, is imperiled. Hereby, the essential connections between the public facilities network development and the concept of social cohesion and social sustainability has been left out of sight.

Belgrade has several sports facilities and complexes of national and international importance which are designed for professional sport and big sports events,⁹ also more than 25 sports facilities and complexes, dispersed in urban districts and secondary urban centres. Nearly each of the 16 Belgrade municipalities has at least one sports facility. In addition, there are hundreds of sports and children's playgrounds in the city, relatively evenly dispersed. All these facilities were situated on the public urban construction land. Such ownership implied the obligation for the custody and tending by the city government institutions, particularly Belgrade Land Development Public Agency as the main holder. The ownership also obliged for further financial commitments to build, equip and maintain through the Belgrade Land Development Public Agency (using the City budget financial resources), as well as for the City Secretariat for Youth and Sports and Ministry of Education and Sport (Directorate of Sports). (using the State budget financial resources).

On the other hand, Belgrade Land Development Public Agency financed most of Belgrade detailed regulatory plans. These plans should have been defined in accordance with the sports and recreation development policy, the State and local regulations and the ownership status (Since according to The Planning and building Act (2003, Republic of Serbia) all urban plans, including Belgrade General Plan had a power to define public and private ownership over the urban construction land).



Under the conditions of the lack of funds, the City has encouraged private initiative and the ad-hoc solutions. However, to facilitate the financing of sports facilities and complexes by private individuals and firms, the status of the land had to be changed. So the land of complexes with high potential, such as stadiums of Partisan and Red Star sports clubs, received the status of private urban construction land. City Budget and Administration has certainly made a significant benefit by such transformation, understanding it as a short-term action and considering it as an "exemplary market adjustment," but what about the City and its citizens? Belgrade has irretrievably lost a significant part of urban resources – urban construction land, and citizens, to say the least, the ability to influence this process.

A similar trend is established in relation to local/district sports and recreational centers and the need to transform the ownership and the status of urban construction land again occurred. Such was the case with the Sports and recreation complex Olimp, in Belgrade municipality Zvezdara territory. However, given the lower level of attractiveness of these sites and land, no significant interest was manifested in its privatization.

⁹ Mentioned categories are defined by the Sports and Recreation Facilities Act (Sl. Glasnik RS 17/96.).

From the long-term point of view, the consequences of the approach “less interest – less action” by the City government is more convenient for the development of the city than it is the case with short term actions and decisions. The problem is, however, that the solutions resulted from the daily political decisions, non-compliant initiatives and in the absence of defined and clear attitude and criteria of city authorities and central government institutions. Inconsistency and lack of communication between different levels of institutions makes their acting quite "unsustainable", creating a gap that will emerge "planning" decisions of very questionable quality.

On the other hand, the citizens and the Administration of the local community of Zvezdara have showed a great interest to keep the Olimp complex as a public facility. During the long and controversial process of designing and adopting the local regulatory plan of the Sports and recreation complex Olimp and the surrounding housing blocks, the citizens have taken the solid and consistent standpoint about the preservation of the local green, sports and recreational areas. Even though the Planning and Building Act (2003, Republic of Serbia) have given the citizens the chance to participate in the planning process only at the moment the draft plan version was almost finalised (that is, during the public review procedure) citizens of the local community of Zvezdara have made a significant pressure to the local and city administration bodies to get involved more often, thus making a great impact on the planned solution. The City municipality Zvezdara supported and confirmed the citizens' standpoint by municipal assembly decisions.



After a couple of years of negotiation with the City administration and urban planning bodies, The local municipality administratives of Zvezdara have managed to keep the local sports and recreation complex olimp for its citizens. The status and the ownership over the urban construction land assigned to the sports complex have remained public.

Though the case study of sport complex of Olimp in Belgrade shows that the city administrative bodies lacked the understanding of the citizens' interest and also had a little respect to the sustainable idea ‘think globally – act locally’, it also tells a lot about the awareness of citizens about their own quality of life and livability. It is specially important having in mind the citizens of Serbia are not yet fully informed or/and educated about the planning process participation and that they are still not involved in great number, although it is an established practice in many countries. The described situation should not be an unusual and extraordinary process, given that the detailed regulatory plan, as the most detailed planning document is the most understandable planning document to ordinary citizen.

The described examples clearly suggest the need for policy development in the field of public service, with careful, systematic and balanced harmonization of private and public sector and also the need for stronger legal and institutional support for participation in the planning process.

6 CONCLUSION

Summarizing, we have recognised the potentials, problems and limitations in the current state of the public sector and public services in Serbia and we point out some directions for solutions.

Potentials are as follows:

- Public services network consisting of many subsystems is in great need of transformation, reorganization and modernization.

- Sports and recreation facilities infrastructure makes it one of the vital segments of future urban development in Belgrade.
- Some of the most important problems and constraints in this field are:
- Public sector and public urban construction land and facilities are exposed to the serious consequences of uncontrolled or poorly controlled development.
- Different and often conflicting aspirations and actions of institutions, as well as different groups of actors.
- Absence of policy development and regulatory fragmentation.
- Arbitrariness in decision-making regarding the development and transformation of public services.
- Future solutions must certainly be based on goals and objectives relating to:
- Development of public services in order to create favorable social environment.
- Availability of public services for all citizens.
- Encouragement of the development of public services since they support the communication.
- Spatial distribution of public services as a way of meeting the needs of population equally.
- Balancing the quality of public services.
- Protection of public spaces and promotion of public interest.
- Minimizing the spatial differences in the development of the city arising from social differences and differences related to the development of public services, thus achieving consistent and balanced development of urban territory.
- Application of the principles of sustainable urban renewal, including social regeneration.
- Overcoming institutional separation of management, planning, funding and implementation in the field of public services.
- The integral part of the solution should be the criteria for qualitative and ownership transformation of public services.

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