

Public interest as a basis for planning standards in urban development: state-socialist and post-socialist cases in Serbia

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Abstract

How public interest is constituted in planning practice varies according to the local context. Using state-socialist and post-socialist cases in Belgrade, Serbia, we explore the shift in the realization of public interest as a basis for planning standards regarding provision of public land use and services. The research looks at trends for planning standards on two case studies, and reveals the underlying norms of this local interpretation of public interest via interviews with planning professionals and residents. The results suggest the persistence of the top-down unitary approach to public interest in planning, but also a deterioration in prescribed standards.

Keywords: public interest, planning standards, planning practice, post-socialist, Serbia

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Introduction

There is a generally accepted idea of public interest as a relevant criterion in planning (Cassinelli 1958; Held 1970; Klosterman 1980; Tait 2016). For several decades following the Second World War, in the advanced democracies and capitalist economies the demonstration of public interest as related to general welfare was the responsibility of the state, which secured it primarily in the form of a unitary, top-down expression (Kamat 2004). In the last few decades of the 20th century, the intensified reliance on pluralist approaches in democratic, market-economy countries, led to increased scrutiny of the unitary role of the state in securing public interest in planning. As a constituent operational framework of planning, public interest has been examined in developed democratic societies in relation to fairness, trust, as well as knowledge creation (Tait 2011; Chettiparamb 2015; Mattila 2016; Lennon 2017). Less attention has been devoted to untangling variations of the notion of public interest in state socialist and post-socialist planning practice.

Alexander (2002) recognizes some of the key operational roles of public interest in planning practice: as a legitimizing notion for planning decisions, as a norm in planning practitioners' daily practice, and as a criterion for plan evaluation. At the same time, it is difficult to reach a universal public interest criterion as a set of standards to be applied in diverse societal and local practices (Puustinen 2017). Some mature democratic regimes, such as the United States, are organized with the expectation that the elected government will serve public interest and represent the "general population's values and desires" (Franklin 2001, 126). In planning practice in the US, public interest is realized through public participation as a mechanism of control for practitioners and administration by the public. It represents a professional norm that enables consultations with stakeholders in the plan preparation process in order to achieve economically, socially and environmentally fair and feasible outcomes (Franklin 2001). Additionally, public interest ranges from welfare, health and safety, as the legal basis of planning in the United States (Hack et al. 2009; Hoch et al. 2000), to the more specific provision of goods and services. Whether interpreted in line with communitarian ideals as a desirable planning objective or through the welfare economics perspective, public interest is often considered the provision of goods using nonmarket or modified market mechanisms, which are non-rival in consumption, nonexclusive, and free-to-use (Kaul et al. 2009; Murphy and Fox-Rogers 2015). These public or common goods are often in the form of infrastructural improvements (e.g., roads or utilities), but are also offered

as public or community services (e.g., parks, schools, health facilities, or local cultural / community centers) (Van Straalen et al. 2017).

Unlike the United States and some other mature democratic societies' planning frameworks that emphasize the pluralist and procedural notion of the concept, in Serbia public interest is manifested as a professional planning standard applied in local planning practice to protect and allocate (public) physical space for public land use and public services. This planning instrument emerged in the legal planning framework in the 1950s and continued in the post-socialist urban development practice as the top-down unitary, rather than pluralistic, domain of the planning profession. However, the circumstances in which this standard is operationalized have dramatically changed since the early socialist era. The research presented in this paper builds on the framework for the operationalization of public interest in planning offered by Alexander (2002) and focuses on the role of public interest as a norm for planning practitioners. The notion of norm is considered as translated to professional planning (or urban development) standards, an interpretation common in Europe across its varied planning systems and families (Nadin et al. 2018). We explore the question of how political and socio-economic changes from state socialism to a market economy and democracy affect the embodiment of public interest as a basis for professional planning standards in local urban planning practice. In the context of a renewed discussion of public interest in planning ethics and practice, the research pursues practical modifications of these planning standards in line with post-socialist transition in Serbia in two Belgrade neighborhoods.

In order to answer the main research question, the next section introduces discussions around the roles of public interest in general and as it relates to planning in Serbia. The paper then presents the research methodology and empirical results based on the case study research of two housing complexes in Belgrade, the country's capital. The final section discusses the findings and implications for a theoretical understanding of the notion of public interest and its application in transitional societies.

Conceptualizations of public interest in planning

Public interest is a complex, partial and contingent phenomenon that takes different roles in representative versus deliberative democracies, displays varying outcomes as understood by welfare economics (individual versus collective), and is dependent on

manifestations of power in society (Campbell and Marshall 2002). Early debates on public interest were mainly placed within socio-political and cultural stances associated with a top-down, unitary approach (Alexander 2002). In this form, the legitimizing role of the concept comes to the fore, since public interest is considered a “standard that sits atop the hierarchy and facilitates a rational ranking among the various competing social preferences, goals, values, or practices under consideration” (Yumatle 2014, 2). The role of legitimization is recognized across diverse international contexts in which public interest has long been considered an objective of political action used to justify the state’s urban and regional planning activities (Long 1959; Faludi 1973; Alexander 2002; Campbell and Marshall 2002; Tait 2016), which is emphasized even more in socialist planning doctrine (Kamat 2004; Hirt 2012). A shift that occurred through the proliferation of societal pluralism in some democratic societies in the 1970s brought forward an understanding of public interest as a descriptive and aggregate concept, providing equal support for people to achieve their individual interests (Held 1970; Klosterman 1980). Considered a constituent operational framework of planning, the pluralist notion of public interest is compatible with the communicative planning model that relies on public discourse and participatory practices (Campbell and Marshall 2002; Chettiparamb 2015; Mattila 2016).

Notwithstanding the differences in planning models, much of planning theory takes it as a given that planning is or should be an activity intended to secure public interest in the context of urban development (Alexander 2002; Sandercock and Dovey 2002; Tait 2016). While the institutional setting of some developed democracies recognizes the state’s support in realizing essential community interests, the emphasis in planning processes is on encouraging development and the exercise of individual human, civil, and political rights (Perry and Wise 1990; Bengs 2005b; EU Commission 2011; HABITAT III 2015). Diverging from these experiences and building on the ideology and principles established during state socialism, some of the post-socialist countries in transition to market-based economies have continued to consider individual rights as secondary, whereas the political and socio-economic rhetoric of these societies supports the unitary notion of societal rights and public interest as a common value (Dimitrijević and Paunović 1997; Hirt 2015). For example, former Yugoslav workers’ socialism labelled each development decision of the state as “the public interest,” thus validating the outcomes and rationalizing the adopted means and procedures made by the political elite (Nedović-Budić and Cavrić 2006). Despite the

officially required and considered “right and duty” (*pravo i obaveza*) for public engagement in urban planning processes from the 1970s (Čolić 2014), the involvement of various societal actors, citizens in particular, had limited influence on plans with a public interest label even after the transition to political decentralization and economic liberalization in the 2000s (Čolić and Dželebdžić 2018; Dabović et al. 2019; Perić 2020; Zeković and Maričić 2020).

Public interest as a basis for planning standards

As a basis for standards in urban development practice, public interest can be emanated through planners’ commitments within a system informed by societal values and environments (Alexander 2002; Stead et al. 2015; Lennon 2017). Planning practitioners and related stakeholders rely on planning standards to endorse their decisions and practices, in particular those related to the form and function of physical space (Tait 2011; Hirt 2012). For some practitioners, planning standards may also serve as a line of defense against market forces that could threaten the social or ecological welfare (Howe 1992). These standards are associated with public interest in the context of public service policy in the fields of education, healthcare, social care, and transport (Hodgkinson et al. 2017). While planning standards have been used and persist in urban design practice across socio-political and economic regimes (APA et al. 2012), this portrayal most accurately fits the general profile of socialist planning professionals. According to Tsenkova (2014), they were educated mainly in the fields of architecture and engineering and deliberately spared from providing economic justification for planning proposals. Socialist planners used technical knowledge to determine the level and type of urban development at all scales – from neighborhood to regional (Klosterman 1980). However, planning standards as a set of rules were not just technical tools in socialist planning practices – they reflected socially constructed standards, and thus influenced the organization of human environments (Hirt 2012).

Public interest was first introduced in former Yugoslav planning practice in the early 1950s in the form of a planning standard to regulate the use of vacant public urban land, and to protect and allocate physical space for public land use, infrastructure and public services. The regulatory planning framework still recognizes public interest in this form in several

laws (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, nos. 82/2005, 72/2009 and 106/2016)³. As one of the main instruments of city design and regulation, this planning standard requires the implementation of physical (spatial) capacities for land uses or facilities, expressed through the number of square meters per person that are based on social assessments of personal needs (Petovar 2003).

Planning standards for urban developments with a public interest label in former Yugoslavia were profoundly influenced by international ideas, such as the Athens Charter (Le Corbusier 1933) in the 1950s and early 1960s. The Charter contained regulations and standards for the development of a functionalist city that were followed by many urban practices and implemented in major cities of that era, e.g., Glasgow, Brasilia, Tokyo, Torino, Tel Aviv, and New Belgrade (Perović 2008). The development of public land uses, including infrastructure, public housing and public services and facilities in the form of societal/public ownership, had to comply with standards promoted in the Athens Charter, along with those set in the national planning acts.

This partially functional post-WWII planning system in former Yugoslavia was disrupted in the early 1990s by the uncertainties of political and economic transition, whereas complex socio-economic circumstances resulted in a dearth of comprehensive land policy and the privatization of almost all public housing (Nedović-Budić et al. 2012). At the same time, inadequate building permits and construction inspection, as well as inconsistent law enforcement, contributed to the continued and accelerated unregulated (illegal) construction on green and open public space and agricultural areas on the periphery of cities on societally/publicly owned land (Petovar 2003). According to Petovar (2003) it has been estimated that almost 50 percent of all housing erected from 1990-2000 was illegally built,

³ 2016 Compulsory Land Purchase Act, according to which the government may proclaim public interest as the reason for expropriating land for the provision of land uses and services in the field of education, health, social protection, culture, water management, sports, traffic, energy and communal infrastructure, administration facilities, as well as for housing for the socially deprived; 2005 Public Services Act, according to which services in the fields of education, science, culture, physical education, healthcare, social care, child care, social security, and veterinary science ensure the realization of societal rights and public interest; and, 2009 Planning and Construction Act, which regulates the implementation of planning standards in land use plans.

i.e., without planning permission and compliance with planning standards, thus jeopardizing existing public land use and land allocated for future public services. After the 2000s, vacant urban public land persisted as the primary target of private developers. In parallel, the state contributed to urban disorganization by rationing or abolishing public services in small urban settlements (Džebebdžić and Jokić 2014). The results of such actions are still visible through reduced planning standards for some basic public land services, and poor access to public housing, basic infrastructure and open public space (Sustainable Urban Development Strategy of Serbia until 2030 2019).

The transition to markets and democracy in post-socialist states has been accompanied by the proliferation and more explicit expression of private individual and group interests and the overall development of political culture (Hirt 2015). These circumstances require the use of planning standards where public interest is shaped by the democratic political system and processes, a renewed sense of citizenship, and transparent and open governance (Hodgkinson et al. 2017). However, in the context of post-socialist transition, the promotion of public interest has often diverged from the general expectation and model practiced in advanced democracies. In some cases, this was motivated by questionable ethics, since the end of state socialism did not necessarily lead to either the democratization of public affairs, or a substantial departure from a technocratic approach to planning (Lazarević-Bajec 2009; Nedović-Budić et al. 2011; Hirt 2015). Serbian planners today deal with a variety of urban development forces, stakeholders and issues, which include immature institutions, lack of legal security, inadequate building permits and construction inspection, as well as the simultaneous advent of neoliberalism. In circumstances where their work involved various individual and partial interests, some practitioners continued their professional engagements and the implementation of planning standards under the aura of public interest (Tsenkova 2014). In this research, we explore how this particular (local) approach to public interest has been interpreted and applied in the planning of two housing complexes built in Belgrade during different socio-economic and political circumstances. The next section introduces the local context and the case study methodology.

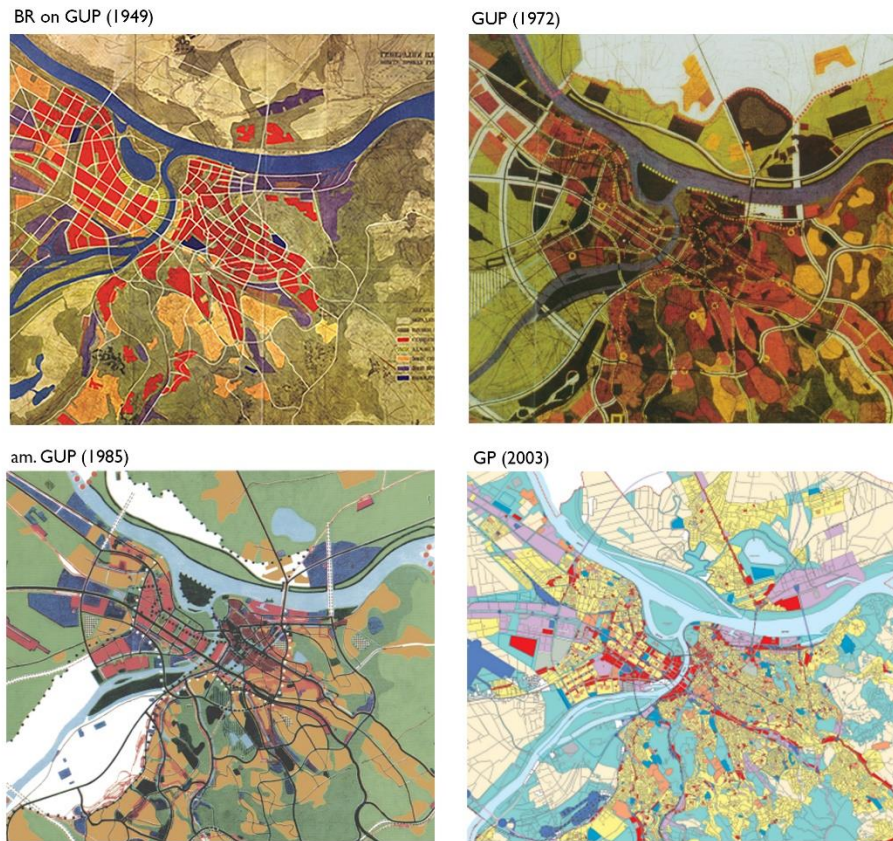
Methodology

The research question of how political and socio-economic changes from state socialism to a market economy and democracy have affected the embodiment of public interest as a basis for professional planning standards in local urban planning practice was empirically addressed through a case study approach (Bryman 2016). The presented research was conducted within the PhD studies of the author (native) who had previously worked in planning practice in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, and at a university in the UK. Belgrade was chosen as a place of innovative and often prototypical planning practices that were later applied on a smaller scale around Serbia (Petovar 2003). The case choice was aimed at a more general understanding of changes in the implementation of planning standards that correspond to public interest, as well as related challenges in adjusting the planning system to post-socialist circumstances. This research is exploratory (Flyvbjerg et al. 2012). It tracks changes in planning standards via a descriptive analysis of the local plans of one socialist and one post-socialist neighborhood, and contextualizes these findings in relation to the city-wide plans that drove their implementation. Additionally, open-ended interviews with planning professionals who worked in Belgrade, as well as residents of the two neighborhoods were conducted to reveal the underlying norms attached to the local interpretation of public interest as a basis for socialist and post-socialist planning standards. This is a snapshot of one specific aspect of the realization of public interest in practice, while there might be several other proxies too in relation to different local contexts of empirical investigation.

Planning standards are expressed in square meters (m²) per person and are set out in urban plans to provide the basis for the design, development, and use of space, representing soft instruments that are complementary to building and land use regulations and construction intensity requirements (i.e., land use balance, occupancy index of the lot, construction index of the lot, and the maximum height of the buildings). To obtain a more general overview of trends ranging from the state socialist era to contemporary practice on a city-wide scale, four versions of the General Urban Plan of Belgrade were examined via descriptive analysis –

Basic Resolution on GUP (1949⁴), GUP (1972⁵), amendment of 1972 GUP (1985⁶), and GP (2003⁷) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Land use in four versions of the city-wide General Urban Plan (GUP) for Belgrade



Sources: Basic Resolution on the General Urban Plan of Belgrade (Official Gazette of the FNRJ, no. 78/49) – up left; General Urban Plan of Belgrade (Official Gazette of the City of Belgrade, no. 17/72) – up right; General Urban Plan of Belgrade (Official Gazette of the City of Belgrade, no. 17/72, amend. 1985) – down left; General Plan of Belgrade (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 27/03) – down right, www.urbel.com

From the city-wide level, research tracked the implementation of planning standards for two housing complexes legally proclaimed as developments in the public interest

⁴ Basic Resolution on the General Urban Plan of Belgrade, Official Gazette of the FNRJ, no. 78/49

⁵ General Urban Plan of Belgrade, Official Gazette of the City of Belgrade, no. 17/72

⁶ General Urban Plan of Belgrade, Official Gazette of the City of Belgrade, no. 17/72, amend. 1985

⁷ General Plan of Belgrade, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 27/03

(*projekti od javnog značaja*) – Block 23 from the early socialist era, and Stepa Stepanović housing complex from post-socialist planning practice (Figure 2). Planning standards in both detailed plans for the housing complexes were examined via descriptive analysis. This included the analysis of planning standards for: 1) housing characterized as affordable, non-profit and of public interest at the time of its development; and 2) public land use and services, including schools, child care facilities, culture, healthcare, social protection, green and open spaces, and playgrounds.

Socialist housing complex Block 23 was built in 1967 and contained societal, non-profit flats, before the housing stock was privatized in the 1990s. The nomenclature of “block” was typical for socialist planning doctrine, and it referred to a housing complex on a neighborhood scale that contained residential housing, all necessary infrastructure, and administrative and public services, sufficient for it to function independently. Planning standards for public land use and services in Block 23 were outlined in the local plan Detailed Urban Plan (DUP) for Block 23 (1967, amend. 1987)⁸. The more recent housing complex Stepa Stepanović, completed in 2013, was initiated, financed, and built by the Serbian state as an affordable housing project. Its public interest status was proclaimed through the adoption of a new legal framework *Lex Specialis*, to enhance the construction industry at a time of crisis (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 45/2010). The new legal framework provided the basis for transforming former military quarters into housing, commercial, and public land use. Planning standards for public land use and services in this complex were outlined in the local plan Urban Project (UP) “Stepa Stepanović – Transformation of Military Barracks into a Housing-Commercial Complex” (2010).

⁸ Detailed Urban Plan for the Local Community in Block 23 on the territory of New Belgrade, Official Gazette of the City of Belgrade, nos. 26/67, 18/87

Figure 2. Block 23 and Stepa Stepanović housing complex

Block 23 floor plan scatch and image of public space within the housing complex



Stepa Stepanović floor plan scatch and image of public space within the housing complex



Legend:

- Primary school
- Child care facility
- Local community center (*centar mesne zajednice*)
- Undeveloped part of the block designated for general city functions (*opšte gradske delatnosti*)

Sources: Detailed Urban Plan for the Local Community in Block 23 on the territory of New Belgrade, Official Gazette of the City of Belgrade, nos. 26/67, 18/87 – up left; Urban Project (UP) “Stepa Stepanović – Transformation of Military Barracks into a Housing-Commercial Complex” (2010) – down left; Images of open public space in Block 23 (2015) and Stepa Stepanović (2020) – authors.

To provide contextual understanding of the numeric findings derived from analyzing the urban plans, this research included in-depth open-ended interviews with planning professionals and residents from the two housing complexes in Belgrade. Open-ended interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed by one of the authors in 2015 with: 1) thirty-two planning professionals from public, private, and international consultancy sectors to learn about the planners’ perceptions of public interest in daily practice; and 2) eight

residents from the two housing complexes (four residents from each), aiming to understand the planning outcomes from the users' perspective. Authors applied a purposive sampling strategy (Bryman 2016), starting with the public and government institutions in charge of drafting and implementing urban plans⁹ and expanding toward other sectors based on a snowball sampling strategy (i.e., recommendations from colleagues in the designated area of work). The sample selection criteria were based on a phronetic approach (Flyvbjerg et al. 2012), where the research subjects had to possess practical wisdom and intimate knowledge of the local context in which public interest is shaped and articulated. Planning professionals had more than fifteen years of work experience and some had worked in planning agencies during the period of state socialism; all residents had lived in their neighborhoods for more than five years.

Each interview lasted between fifty minutes and one and a half hour. Interview questions for planning practitioners were organized around the following domains: their understanding of the role of public interest in planners' daily practice; the use of professional planning standards in drafting urban plans; the role of public participation as a means of achieving public interest; professional and ethical considerations in working on projects with the formal label of public interest. The cases of housing complexes Block 23 and Stepa Stepanović were singled out by planning professionals as critical cases that could enhance the external reliability and transferability of findings due to their sensitivity to the local context (Bryman 2016) and provide "knowledge that the people being studied can themselves use to address better the problems they are experiencing" (Schram 2012, 16). Residents of these complexes were asked to talk about the outcomes of these plans in terms of built environment. Practitioners' practical knowledge in preparing and implementing plans under the label of public interest, and residents' knowledge about living in the housing complexes derived from these plans, were thus central to the qualitative inquiry of this research.

Narratives, as a fundamental form of empirical information, provided the opportunity for different levels of systematic analysis – linear, relational, emotional and analytical (Landman 2012, 30-31). At the linear level of analysis, the coding of the narratives employed

⁹ Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure of Serbia, Republic Agency for Spatial Planning of Serbia, Secretariat for Urban Planning and Construction of Belgrade, Development Directorate of Serbia, Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade

a thematic approach (Bauer 1996) where the domains of planning practitioners' work were scrutinized through the identified roles of public interest in planning (Alexander 2002). This level of analysis indicated that public interest represents an important professional norm and a basis for planning standards in the daily practice of the interviewed practitioners. Based on this input, the second, relational level of analysis strived for a deeper understanding of the different procedural aspects of implementing planning standards in the identified projects under the label of public interest. The third, emotional level of analysis aimed to provide a subjective understanding of such planning processes, as well as their outcomes in terms of built environment, from the viewpoint of practitioners and residents. At the analytical level, narratives were contextualized in relation to the results obtained from the descriptive analysis of professional planning standards in the designated urban plans. Due to the fairly large sample and the interviewees' enthusiasm for the research subject, the fieldwork stage provided a considerable amount of data. It is important to mention that all the interviewed planners declared themselves to be protectors of public interest mainly through the notion of the consistent implementation of professional planning standards in the respective plans, especially under the pressure to increase the planning standards of for-profit land use and reduce those of public land use. For the purposes of this paper, we illustrate herein the attitudes and perceptions of planners and residents of the two housing complexes about the effectiveness of the implemented professional planning standards and their experiences under the changing systems and circumstances.

Findings: Professional planning standards in land use plans

City-wide scale

The layout of the city of Belgrade has drastically changed since 1949, both in terms of spatial extent and land use. As the jurisdiction of the General Urban Plan (GUP) expanded through the second half of the 20th century, the city had to meet the needs of a growing number of residents by providing housing and services. An overview of the changing planning standards for public land use and services on a city-wide scale from 1949 to 2003 is shown in Table 1. The 1949 Basic Resolution on GUP and GUP 1972 had numerical values for standards solely for housing and green and open space, while the suggested spatial distribution and development standards for other public land use took the form of descriptions and were quantified in later versions of the plan.

Table 1. Standards for housing and public land use and services in GUPs for Belgrade

Housing and public land use	1949 (m² per person)	1972 (m² per person)	1985 (m² per person)	2003 (m² per person)
Housing	18	21	21	22
Green and open areas (related with housing)	8	-	6.16	1
Health facilities	-	-	0.003-0.11	0.003-0.09
Playgrounds	-	-	9-18*	1
Child care facilities	-	-	6.5-7.5**	6.5-7.5**
Primary schools	-	-	6-10**	6.5-7.5**
Higher education	-	-	10-12**	10-12**
Social protection	-	-	3***; 20-40****	3***; 20-25****
Culture	-	-	4.6	4.6-5
Recreation	-	-	3	4

Source: General Urban Plan of Belgrade (Official Gazette of the City of Belgrade, no. 17/72, am. 1985); General Plan of Belgrade (Official Gazette of RS, no. 27/03)

Note: *18 m² per inhabitant in new housing zones, ** m² of an object per person (child / pupil / student), ***Short-term stay facilities, **** Long-term stay facilities.

During the post-WWII period studied, housing standards seem to have remained stable, and even slightly improved. Standards for recreational land use, educational facilities, and culture displayed a similar trend, with minor reductions in social protection and healthcare, based on am. GUP 1985 and GP 2003. However, standards for playgrounds and green and open space decreased substantially, the latter as much as sixfold from 1985 and eightfold from 1949. The notable decrease in standards for specific public land use can be partially explained by the changing needs of a transitional society resulting from the shifting socio-economic and political circumstances, as well as planning doctrine. In parallel, the abolishment of societal ownership in the Constitution, the move to a market economy and the private ownership of land, buildings, and residential units was coupled with the mass privatization of public housing and some public services, which led to the reduction, or even abolition of standards for some public land use. For example, specialized central urban areas (*specijalizovani gradski centri*) that existed as public land use in plans from 1949, 1972, and 1985 with almost a four percent share of the overall territory of Belgrade, transformed as land use in GP 2003. These centers usually contained a combination of services, including educational facilities and community areas for meetings and other activities by local residents. After the fall of state socialism, many of the existing facilities located in urban centers changed ownership from public (societal) to private, and switched to commercial uses (e.g., business establishments, supermarkets).

The drastic reduction in standards for green and open space could be related to the political decisions made to alleviate the humanitarian crisis following the civil war during 1990s and large-scale influx of Serbs driven out of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to Serbia, Belgrade in particular. In addition to designated urban centers and public facilities, planned as well as existing open and green space suffered with the dismantling of state powers in controlling urban development. During the 1990s almost fifty percent of residential buildings were erected on green and open space or agricultural land, without building permits (Petovar 2003). Subsequently, to deal with these developments, the Serbian government introduced a set of policies for the mass legalization of illegally constructed housing (Planning and Construction Act, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 47/2003). In turn, in line with the new legal status for buildings erected on green and agricultural space, these land use designations in city-wide planning documents had to be converted to construction or developable land use types.

Neighborhood scale

To complement the city-wide data with more detailed findings, we followed the change of standards for the development of public land use and services in two housing complexes and their related plans. In terms of urban typology, an *open block* was the formal nomenclature for both Block 23 and the Stepa Stepanović housing complex. Open blocks contain one or more multi-family high-rise buildings retracted from the regulatory line of the plot (GP 2003). These blocks were usually developed on a single, large lot, and were typical of the state socialist era. Many of them were erected in the socialist city of New Belgrade, but, obviously, the practice continued into the post-socialist period in Serbia and across the territory of former Yugoslavia. Undeveloped areas between buildings had green areas, playgrounds, sports and leisure facilities, schools, centers of the local commune, and other public land use and services. No further development was allowed on designated public space within the blocks.

The Block 23 housing complex occupies around 20 ha, while the Stepa Stepanović complex is twice as large at close to 42 ha. Although both the socialist Block 23 and the post-socialist Stepa Stepanović are open blocks, it is evident that the percentage of green and open public spaces and housing diverged between the two (Table 2). While Block 23 reserved 43% of the whole plot for green and open spaces (excluding public spaces within school and child

care facility yards), Stepa Stepanović allowed only 3% for such land use. The difference was devoted to housing, which occupied about half of the area of the Stepa Stepanović complex and only about 1/9th of Block 23. In addition, the Stepa Stepanović complex had no space allocated for land use such as the center of the local commune (*centar mesne zajednice*) or for general city functions (*opšte gradske delatnosti*). This used to be complementary public land use in most housing complexes developed during state socialism and provided a space for the inhabitants to gather and organize cultural and leisure activities.

Table 2. Land occupancy in detailed plans for Block 23 (1967, 1987) and Stepa Stepanović housing complexes (2010)

Land use	Block 23 (%)	Stepa Stepanović (%)
Roads, transport infrastructure and parking	11	27
Green and open areas (related with housing)	43	3
Housing	9	52
Primary school and child care facility*	10	11
Commercial and other land-use	15	5
Local community center (<i>centar mesne zajednice</i>)	5	-
Undeveloped part of the block designated for general city functions (<i>opšte gradske delatnosti</i>)	7	-
Subject of another plan	-	2
Total	100	100

Source: Detailed Urban Plan for the Local Community in Block 23 on the territory of New Belgrade, Official Gazette of the City of Belgrade, no. 18/87; Urban Project (UP) “Stepa Stepanović – Transformation of Military Barracks into a Housing-Commercial Complex” (2010)

Note: *Including green and open areas within yards.

In the plans that guided the development of the two housing complexes, planning standards for public land use and services decreased for the Stepa Stepanović project relative to Block 23 (Table 3). With regard to housing, Block 23 showed the standard of 23 m² per person, which was slightly more generous than the required standard in Stepa Stepanović. However, the difference between the two housing complexes in terms of green and open space was substantial, where standards suggested in UP (2010) for the Stepa Stepanović project left only 1 m² per person for this land use. Complementing the standards with information on the housing complex typology showed that although Block 23 allowed for taller buildings than Stepa Stepanović, it produced considerably more green and open space between the buildings.

Both housing complexes contain a primary school and a child care facility. According to the amendment of DUP (1987), with 16.5 m² per pupil, the existing primary school in Block 23 could not accommodate all the children in the housing complex and, therefore, proposed to allocate additional land and facilities for this purpose. On the other hand, UP (2010) for Stepa Stepanović offered a higher standard for the primary school of 20-25 m² per pupil, and thus increased the space both for the school building and the open and green spaces within the schoolyard. Interestingly, per person standard for a child care facility and related open and green space standards were lower for the Stepa Stepanović complex.

Table 3. Standards for public land use and services in detailed plans for Block 23 and Stepa Stepanović housing complexes

Land use	Block 23 m²/ person	Stepa Stepanović m²/ person
Housing	23	22
Green and open areas (related with housing)	11	1
School (whole plot)	16.95	20-25
Green and open areas within the school yard	13	17.5
Child care facility (entire plot)	20	15-18
Green and open areas within the yard of the child-care facility	13.2	6.5-7.5

Source: Detailed Urban Plan for the Local Community in Block 23 on the territory of New Belgrade, Official Gazette of the City of Belgrade, nos. 26/67, 18/87; Urban Project (UP) "Stepa Stepanović – Transformation of Military Barracks into a Housing-Commercial Complex" (2010)

Another important category of public land use recognized in the 1967 DUP and its 1987 amendment for Block 23 was the center of the local commune. This land use usually contained various functions such as a meeting room, library, and a small retail and craft workshop. It was kept within the public domain during state socialism, but was privatized together with the housing stock in the 1990s and now has commercial uses. The center of the local commune was an obligatory public land use within most of New Belgrade's state socialist housing blocks, in addition to child care facilities and schools. Additionally, the detailed urban plan for Block 23 contained an undeveloped part of the block intended for the development of general city functions (marked blue on Figure 2) as part of the above-mentioned specialized central area land use that existed in all city-wide scale GUPs except for the one adopted in 2003. This area was kept undeveloped, but after the amendment of the

DUP (1987) it was replaced with commercial land use and an office building took up 7.7% of the plot.

Insights from planners and residents

Socialist case

The interviewed planners and residents spoke about socialist and post-socialist housing complexes and urban development in Belgrade. Block 23 was built along with many other housing blocks as part of the New Belgrade municipality through commitment to the Athens Charter, almost exclusive reliance on the expertise of professionals, and state support in provision of public housing for a growing population of Belgrade after the WWII.

New Belgrade was developed as a public and non-profit land use with comfortable planning standards, and the land and housing stock remained in the public/societal ownership until the privatisation in 1990s.

(International consultant, interview no. 6)

Some of the interviewees recognized the legitimizing role of public interest in the former Yugoslav government's decision for planning standards for socialist developments (especially residential housing blocks) to conform to the Athens Charter. On the other hand, the majority of the interviewed planners, regardless of the sector in which they worked, spoke about the positive outcomes of the rather deterministic, top-down socialist planning practice, and were confident that professional planning standards corresponding to public interest were implemented appropriately. Some of them suggested Block 23 was a "textbook example" of such practice:

New Belgrade blocks were a result of planning in the public interest through an unusual combination of state intervention and a scholarly functionalist approach. Such an approach allowed the implementation of generous standards for public land use and services from the 1949 GUP... the fact was that most central blocks [including Block 23 or 28] were developed in line with standards from the plan, which is rarely the case nowadays.

(Public sector planner, interview no. 19)

A couple of interviewee residents spoke about the direct effect of socialist development on their quality of life:

To be honest, New Belgrade was never on my list of possibilities, but my wife suggested we have a look at several apartments. So, we visited a couple of the blocks and searched for a child care facility, school, and how close they were to our potential apartment. We did not want our children to cross any major roads on the way to school. And that was how we came to Block 23. My son's school and my other son's child care facility have linked schoolyards that are 10 meters away from each other. It was perfect. The public health facility is a ten-minute walk from my apartment.

(Resident, interview no. 2)

I am very content with the quality of the building and our apartment, which is 88 m² and the terrace 11 m². I can't imagine that this used to be called social housing! My wife grows cherry tomatoes on the terrace and my son loves to pick them fresh and eat them.

(Resident, interview no. 1, emphasis added)

In describing particular housing complexes in New Belgrade, planning professionals across different employment sectors spoke about the consistent implementation of planning standards, while the interviewed residents complimented different aspects of the built environment such as the provision of public services and open public space within the blocks (e.g., accessible and free leisure and sports courts, greenery), the use of durable materials, and reliable housing maintenance.

Post-socialist case

The case of the Stepa Stepanović housing complex was described by several interviewees as an entrepreneurial endeavor by the government that obtained a public interest label in order to ensure public legitimacy. The term “entrepreneurial urbanism” is a synonym for maximizing the location's economic potential (and rent) regardless of adverse social or environmental effects. One planner interviewee explained how the project's value increased hand in hand with the increased planning standards for housing and commercial land use beyond the criteria of an open block:

Initially, it was exciting to witness the state-financed affordable housing project coming to life. However, plan preparation did not take the desired course... building regulation requirements and planning standards were over-dimensioned... That is

why Stepa appears as an open block, but in fact is not. The number of floors was too high and it jeopardizes public space. Moreover, the project did not include some of the basic public services.

(Public sector planner, interview no. 17)

Compared to the deterministic planning practice of state socialism, the interviewees mostly criticized current practice as being responsible for reducing or abolishing standards for public land use and services in the name of profit. They singled out the Stepa Stepanović project for its poor implementation of planning standards for public land use and services prescribed in the plan:

Sometimes it happens that the entire planning solution gets deviated during the implementation phase, which is to some extent visible in the example of Stepa Stepanović [What is a private gas station doing on public land instead of public healthcare?]. However, that is something that is out of our jurisdiction as planners...

(Public sector planner, interview no. 7)

It should be noted that the residents of Stepa Stepanović organized a successful public protest to obtain the essential public services that were envisaged in the plan but were not delivered in the implementation phase. Interviewees spoke about what led to protest:

Stepa Stepanović development was urgent, so the decision was to prepare the urban project [“Stepa Stepanović – Transformation of Military Barracks into a Housing-Commercial Complex”] rather than go for the detailed urban plan that would take considerably more time. That decision affected the length of public hearing as well... it lasted only 7 days, including 2 days of weekend [in the middle of summer holidays]. Residents found out about some of the implemented land uses [and reduced planning standards] only after the planning processes was completed.

(Public sector planner, interview no. 20)

Today buying an apartment developed by a private investor is risky due to the cheap materials they use in order to maximize profit... but after my experience with the Stepa Stepanović housing complex, I lost trust in state development as well. It was only after we held a public protest that we got a school and a child care facility.

(Resident, interview no. 5)

...we feel tricked and hoodwinked, because we bought apartments based on past experience with the state's development of public housing complexes during socialism.

(Resident, interview no. 8).

Interviewed planning professionals from both the public and private sector frequently spoke about implementation issues in contemporary planning practice and associated them with insufficient regulatory mechanisms and legal uncertainty. The fragility of planning standards as an instrument to protect public interest in plans came to the forefront in some planners' statements:

The technical knowledge of planners [through knowing, being familiar with planning standards] is not applicable anymore [as a form of knowledge]. Why? We can talk about the standards for public land use such as green space, traffic networks, schools, hospitals, etc. But when you take that from a city-level plan and put it into a detailed plan or urban project, all of that gets lost in the housing and commercial square meters.

(Public sector planner, interview no. 2)

In the uncertain and changed circumstances of a market economy with the breakdown of the public sector, pressure from international institutions [political and economic], domestic and international economic capital, and the privatization of construction land – planning practice lost its position and significance... The transformation from a socialist to a market economy is slow and requires new types of knowledge and an understanding of the changes, where traditional models of planning barely survive. The planner's assumption that technical knowledge alone is sufficient to function in those new circumstances – is naïve.

(Private sector planner, interview no. 1, emphasis added)

Most interviewees recognized that public land use and services were subordinate to economic interests and their adverse effects. This fundamental conflict between public and economic interests surfaced in the interviews and could have been the reason for favoring the outcomes of socialist planning and development over post-socialist for-profit projects and their [sparse] delivery of public services, even when officially labeled as public interest. Planning practitioners' narratives also provided insight into the difficulties in daily practice regarding the underlying notion of “an elephant in the room”, or the non-transparent planning system,

tokenistic participation processes, and poor institutional capacities to implement planning standards that legally and formally correspond to public interest.

Discussion and conclusion

To answer the research question, we conducted an empirical analysis of local urban plans and narratives elicited in interviews with planners and residents. The research objective was to observe the changes in interpretation and implementation of public interest as a basis for planning standards in socialist and post-socialist cases located in Belgrade, Serbia (former Yugoslavia). The findings confirmed and deepened the understanding that public interest, in Serbia's urban planning sphere, has been translated to professional and technical planning standards in service of ethical practice and quality urban development. Both the public interest and the standards were also used to legitimize and rationalize top-down decisions concerning projects of national interest. The former Yugoslav regulatory framework and planning system that was inherited by Serbia after the fall of communism and civil war in the 1990s, followed a top-down, unitary notion of public interest. This particular notion was embedded in both socialist and post-socialist planning practice and translated via professional norms into a set of de facto planning standards. During the state socialism that was established after WWII, the label of public interest was used to promote public policy based on the socialist welfare state doctrine, a modernist and functionalist approach to urbanization, and a self-management economic model aimed at an equitable distribution of resources in line with growing societal needs. In socialist planning, public interest was used to legitimize and justify investments in large-scale affordable public housing and public services. New Belgrade was a prime example of this urbanization practice. During this period, planning was in the service of the state's societal objectives, focused on the arrangement of physical space through a set of planning standards applied in planning land use and services.

The political and socio-economic transition that started in the early 1990s, expanded the role of public interest that went from a desirable planning objective in the sense of common socialist ideals and values to balancing different interests and urban development forces in market-economy settings. Interestingly and fundamentally, unitarism remained the predominant approach to actions of the Serbian government that continued to rely on planning standards as tools for planning and development guidance. Even though society moved nominally toward political pluralism, the minor role of public participation and

dialogue and the scarcity of more explicit and broader stakeholder involvement left planning to official administrative processes. The pluralist notion of public interest has yet to develop, although transition has seen some initial signs of its rudimentary conceptualization and emergence. Meanwhile, the balance of forces has been tilting in a neo-liberal direction as for-profit interests materialized in several recent development projects sponsored by the state and were labelled as being in the public interest (i.e., through a special law *Lex Specialis*).

Data collected from general urban plans for the City of Belgrade, detailed plans and designs for Block 23 and the Stepa Stepanović housing complexes, and interviews with professional planners and local residents revealed that a mixed quasi-state and quasi-market practice seemed to be inferior to state socialist planning in implementing planning standards and achieving outcomes in the form of public land use and services. According to the majority of the interviewees, this was primarily due to decreased concern for social welfare, controlled public participation processes, and increased pressure to generate profit that ensued with post-socialism. In several categories of public land use and services, the standards were lowered, while the intensity and density of space utilization increased, primarily owing to reduced or lost green and open public space and community facilities. As a response to these lowering standards and financial pressures, there were demands for safeguarding (Stepa Stepanović) or preserving (Block 23) public land use and services. The pattern of green and community space being the first victim of post-socialist urbanism was noticed in other countries (Hirt 2007; Csomós et al. 2020). Similarly, some studies (e.g., the case of Bulgaria) indicated that new housing developments provided a lower quality of life (Slaev et al. 2018). In line with these findings, it made sense that the Serbian professionals we interviewed considered public interest to be an important planning criterion and suggested it corresponded to the application of professional judgment in the technical aspects of physical planning. It would be important to note here that the aesthetics and maintenance of premises of housing estates was not the strength of socialist urbanization. The observations and commentary offered in this paper, therefore, applied strictly to technical standards and provisions of public land use and services.

Beyond the local issues and context, this research offers general insights into planning theory and practice. Most critiques of public interest in planning literature discuss the impossibility of reaching a universal public interest criterion as well as a set of unified standards to be applied in diverse societal and local circumstances. Unlike the renewed

discourse on public interest in some mature democratic societies that emphasizes the importance of the procedural exercise of human, civil, and political rights in planning processes, the minimal generalizable interest in transitional societies similar to Serbia concerns the implementation of standards as rationality-based instruments aimed at improving the quality of residents' lives in designated planning areas.

By examining modifications and detecting evidence that suggests the deterioration of public interest as a base for standards for professional practice in a post-socialist country, we affirm that in this particular context the traditional unitary notion does not adequately respond to the emerging requirements of pluralism, deregulation, markets, and overall societal transition away from state socialism. This issue has to some extent been tackled in other post-socialist countries in the region, where the role of public engagement is strengthened in traditionally top-down processes concerning projects with a public interest label.¹⁰ In Serbia, which is still under transitional circumstances with challenges compounded by a lack of institutional capacity as well as institutional inertia, there is a concern as to whether the overall planning framework will be able to embrace a pluralist concept of public interest that requires new practices, skills, and ethics. Hence, some of the questions at the forefront of the debate about the role of public interest as an impetus for in planning practice deal with: firstly, the responsiveness of the formal planning framework toward the pluralism of interests when considering public interest;¹¹ secondly, the ability and willingness of planning professionals in transitional societies to apply the kind of planning approach that would reconcile the requirements for rationality and pluralism with the real needs of the city and its residents, and; thirdly, the motivation of the general public to participate in new state-led as well as privately sponsored projects and raise their voice.

The main issue that emerges from the findings is thus concerned with the modality of reframing the traditional unitary concept of public interest into an approach that enhances the

¹⁰ E.g., In the post-socialist Croatian legal framework, public interest refers to public ownership over land use and services (Staničić 2018). Croatia's Spatial Development Act (2013) introduced the legal obligation to balance private for-profit interests and "the public interest".

¹¹ Despite the formalization of an additional level of public participation in the Planning and Construction Act (132/2014), methods to evaluate planning practice are still insufficiently substantiated, especially in relation to participation (Čolić and Dželebdžić 2018).

preservation of physical space in line with the pluralism of interests and democratic principles. However, we discover that the reframing process itself is complex. Obstacles are found in both institutional inertia (Kunzmann 2013) and path dependency (Hirt 2015). Transitioning from one socio-economic and political regime to another means that the notion of public interest will not switch but will itself go through a transformation stage as well. Consequently, new expressions of public interest are likely to be hybrid rather than typical modalities, as demonstrated in our case that has a persisting predominantly unitary notion of public interest operating in a market economy and democracy.

Here, we would like to bring up the association between the notions of public interest – unitary and pluralistic, the respective planning models – rational and collaborative, and achieved outcomes in urban form. Our research casts doubt on the simplistic and dichotomous approach to understanding the delivery of public goods and services and securing adequate and affordable housing in a post-socialist country planning context. Achieving the right and desirable outcomes is likely dependent on many other factors in addition to a planning process that provides opportunities for the representation of and argumentation for a multiplicity of interests. These factors may include the country's or local state of economic and human development, resources, power balances, income disparities, participation capacities, and overall societal values and principles. While it is crucial to ensure stakeholder involvement in the planning and urban development processes, the technical knowledge, expertise, and skills of professional planners and the standards their practice adheres to could play just as important a role. In fact, the standards and their proper implementation are significant tools for ensuring that public interest is embedded in planning and urban development outcomes. We encourage planning scholars and practitioners to further explore how processes and outcomes can be balanced, along with the determinants of their optima within different societal contexts and project settings.

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