

# REUSE OF COMMON SPACE AS A TACTIC FOR MASS HOUSING REVITALIZATION

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## ABSTRACT.

Urban decay and obsolescence of post-war mass housing is a global phenomenon. Although the reasons for housing deterioration are different, the altered relationship between public and private spaces is essential for the mass housing. The research hypothesizes that strong polarisation of the urban landscape into private and public is firmly influencing urban decay and obsolescence of post-war mass housing neighbourhoods. Taking New Belgrade blocks as the case study, the research investigates this correlation, following the gradual transformation of the urban landscape of modernity in parallel with different factors. Moreover, the research sheds light on the specific Yugoslav housing policy and developed collective self-management of the urban commons from the time of construction. Although these strategies have been neglected over the time, they are valuable for contemporary, increasing discussions on community-driven approaches for comprehending and managing change in urban environment, specifically for residential neighbourhoods. Furthermore, the research is analysing different contemporary strategies and community practices that are reinventing the public-private relationship in the context of mass housing, contributing to the development of a methodology for mitigating obsolescence and causes of housing deterioration. The methodology is revitalizing the important value of common spaces and the role of community and is reusing the modernist idea of co-creation, contributing to inheritance of the modernist concepts. Moreover, if applied, it would increase liveability of urban space and well-being of its residents, contributing to transformation strategies for adaptation to current needs, and therefore ensuring vitality of mass housing as a core typology of the Modern Movement.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary discussions on community-driven approaches for comprehending and managing change in urban environment, and especially for revitalization of residential neighbourhoods, are being increasingly important. In context of privatisation and commercialization of public and common spaces in cities, increased individualisation and struggles for social justice, the concepts of *urban commons*, *common spaces* and process of *commoning* are re-emerging today, both in the scientific context and urban practices.

Stavros Stavrides, a researcher, teacher and activist, sees commons as an open system shaped by people who believe themselves to be equally responsible, both in maintaining and repeatedly questioning them. What is also important to stress, he clearly distinguishes common space from what we call public space, in that "common spaces are developed as a common ground, as areas of negotiation or of collective endeavors created out of necessity. In contrast, public space has always been connected to the governing body that authorizes its use." Common space, is created through participatory processes, and it can always be in the making; "emerging as people collectively develop their relations."<sup>1</sup> He is partly basing his presuppositions on the work of the anthropologist and geographer David Harvey, that is describ-

ing commons as a relation of people with the conditions they describe as essential for their existence, collectively.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the increasing discussions on the topic are being influenced by the economist and Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom, that is addressing the issue from the economics perspective, showing that natural resources (like forests) are highly effectively managed by "commons-like organisations that allow a self-managed community of users equal access, without private ownership or state control".<sup>3</sup> The self-management, as a very important aspect for urban commons, was present already in the post-war period in Yugoslavia, and it will be specifically addressed in the Chapter 3.1. This aspect, but also other ideas and concepts related to urban commons, common spaces and resources (that will be addressed in the Chapter 3.2.), are especially relevant for the management of mass housing. The neglected collective spaces of these neighbourhoods are crucial for their vitality. Namely, these neighbourhoods were planned in a different socio-political context, when the sense of community had an important role, and so the notion of common space was truly significant. Therefore, this paper investigates the potentials of common spaces to support the revitalisation process of mass housing, focusing on New Belgrade housing blocks as a specific part of the modernist post-war mass housing phenomenon.

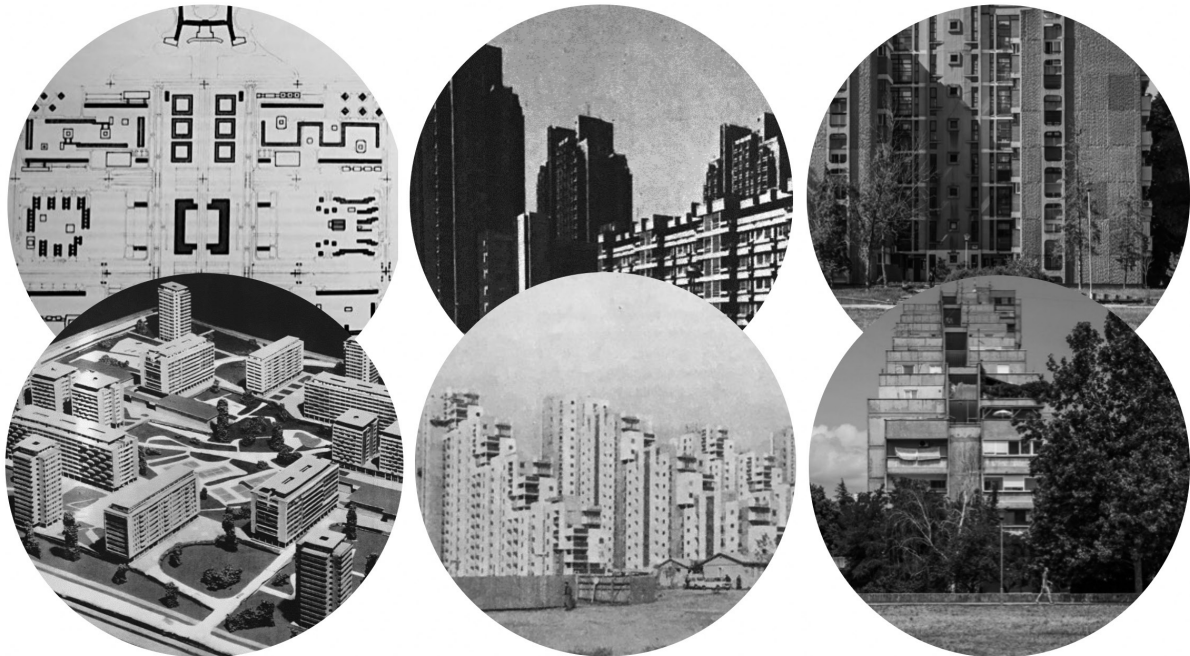


Fig. 1. New Belgrade: a) planned, b) built and c) lived space. © Illustration Anica Dragutinovic, November 2018, image credits: a) Group of Authors, *Novi Beograd 1961, The Direction for the construction of Novi Beograd, Belgrade, 1961*. b) Journal "Izgradnja", 1978. c) Photography Ogino Knauss, [www.calvetjournal.com/features/show/6695/suspended-city-roaming-streets-of-novi-beograd](http://www.calvetjournal.com/features/show/6695/suspended-city-roaming-streets-of-novi-beograd).

## 2. OBSOLESCENCE OF THE URBAN LANDSCAPES OF MODERNITY: THE CASE STUDY OF NEW BELGRADE BLOCKS

Today, mass housing areas are being characterised by urban decay and obsolescence on different levels. Privatisation and commercialization of public and common spaces on one hand, and individualisation and suppressed importance of community on the other, are strongly affecting the issues these neighbourhoods are facing. A very important case study for the phenomenon of interest is New Belgrade (Serbia, or at the time of construction Socialist Yugoslavia), one of the largest modernist post-war mass housing area, with around 250,000 inhabitants today. The importance of the case study is based on the notably present correlation between the transformation of the relationship between public and private spaces over the time and urban decay and obsolescence of the housing blocks. Although, historical narrative of New Belgrade itself is not the focus, the chapter aims to show this correlation, following the gradual transformation of the urban landscape of modernity (Fig. 1) in parallel with housing policy changes, ownership, process of privatisation and other factors.

New Belgrade emerged in the first post-war years from marshy land on the left bank of the Sava River, opposite to the historical Belgrade. It was conceived as a city to symbolize a new beginning of the socialist state with a nation-building agenda. Although planned as a centre of administration,

culture and economy, the housing shortage came to the forefront, and the city was eventually built in the 1960s and 1970s as a city of housing.<sup>4</sup>

Affordable housing was a focus in whole post-war Europe. However, in the East-European countries it had specific consequences in terms of ownership and housing policy. The whole New Belgrade was planned and built as a socially owned city. Consequently, housing was a common good, and flats were socially owned, just as streets or parks.<sup>5</sup> The housing policies in Yugoslavia, such as the "Right to Residence",<sup>6</sup> as well as the ownership situation, were very important for realisation of the mass housing project. One of the key elements in the design of New Belgrade housing blocks was the dialogue between private and public. This was achieved, firstly, through the ownership situation. Namely, the status of being socially owned has blurred the line between public and private spaces within the blocks. The flats were indeed the most private zones, but even the flats were not privately owned. The fine gradient towards the public was further supported by common spaces within the blocks, for example local community centres and urban common spaces. The collective ownership, and therefore design of the blocks as a whole (from private to public spaces, or individual to collective spaces), was supposed to enable communal and participatory use of the facilities. However, before even being completed, the modernist project already began its socio-spatial transformation. The so called post-socialist transformation, caused a set of changes: housing policy change, privatisa-

tion of the housing and eventual urban landscape transformation. By the end of 1993, 95% of socially owned housing was privatized in Belgrade. New Belgrade flats were practically shared among the sitting tenants and political elite for extremely low prices, and it served as a “shock absorber” in the post-socialist transition.<sup>7</sup> The privatisation prevented the social obsolescence — the issue that is very often present in case of mass housing in Europe and is claimed to be one of the main reasons for their demolition today.<sup>8</sup> However, technical and functional obsolescence emerged due to the failure of the state to create legally clear housing policies and better maintenance regulations.<sup>9</sup>

This set of socio-political and economical changes marked the emergence of the post-socialist urban reality and contestation of the modernist landscape, while questions about the opportunities of collective and cooperative appropriation of space remain largely unresolved.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the usurpation of public spaces intended for the community, their privatisation and transformation into large retail and business facilities has been occurring until today. The commercialisation of these spaces did change the role of urban planning “turning its back on participatory, integrated planning”.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the modernist residential buildings are being excluded from the process of formal transformation and left to decay. The polarisation of the urban landscape into public and private is strongly affecting their condition, and therefore is recognised as the core issue. In order to overcome it, revitalisation of the concepts of common spaces and collective management of housing and urban spaces is seen as crucial for the issue. In further chapters, potentials of these concepts and community-driven approaches for co-creation of the change will be analysed.

### **3. COMMUNITY-DRIVEN APPROACHES FOR MASS HOUSING REVITALIZATION AND CO-CREATION OF THE CHANGE**

The focus of the chapter is on the contemporary community-driven approaches for comprehending and managing change in urban environment, specifically for residential neighbourhoods. Before analysing contemporary practices that are reinventing the public-private relationship in the context of housing (3.2), the paper sheds light on the specific Yugoslav housing policy and collective self-management of the urban commons from the post-war period (3.1). Although neglected over the time, it is valuable intangible heritage that can contribute to the development of a methodology for mitigating obsolescence and causes of housing deterioration.

#### **3.1. Yugoslav Collective Self-management of the Commons**

The financialization of the mass housing in Yugoslavia, and namely New Belgrade housing, was consequently directing the ownership situation, policies and management of the housing. The housing was financed by a social hous-

ing fund, which later decentralized: further transferred to the state authorities and socially owned enterprises that became the formal investors. The socially owned enterprises were organized according to the workers self-management system, and after construction of a building or a neighbourhood, an enterprise (workers) was responsible for the distribution of flats. As a result, flats were not state owned, but socially owned.<sup>12</sup>

Societal ownership of New Belgrade blocks in general was “based on the ideological premise of the right to a residence as a universal right for the common public good”.<sup>13</sup> Lefebvre theory, that Blagojevic refers to, and especially the point where he reasserted his concept of the right to the city in direct relation to self-management, is of great importance. The right to the city “comes as a complement, not so much to the rights of man ... but to the right of the citizen” and “leads to active participation of the citizen-citadin in the control of the territory, and in its management ... also to the participation of the citizen-citadin in the social life linked to the urban”.<sup>14</sup>

The influence of these social factors on spatial practices and management of the housing was present. The collective ownership was supposed to enable communal and participatory use and management. However, with the change of ownership status within the post-socialist, neoliberal reforms at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the use value, based on the premise that a place of residence is not a commodity, is replaced by the rising property value within the real estate market.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, usurpation of urban spaces of the blocks, intended for the community, is neglecting the importance of citizen-citadin participation in co-creation of the urban reality.

#### **3.2. Contemporary Strategies and Community Practices for Revitalization of Residential Neighbourhoods**

The concepts of collective management of housing and urban spaces are being revisited within the contemporary discussions on community-driven approaches and practices for revitalization of residential neighbourhoods. The four projects (Fig. 2) that are unfolding full potential of the contemporary concepts of *urban commons*, *common spaces* and process of *commoning* will be analysed in this sub-chapter.

The right to housing and the right to the city through commoning processes has been addressed in the Spreefeld cohousing project in Berlin (BARarchitekten, Carpaneto Schoeningh Architekten, FATkoehl Architekten, 2013). The project presents an alternative to the privatization of land, acting in the interests of the common good — in that the waterfront remains accessible to the public. The ground floor feature “option spaces”: shared spaces, “intentionally left unfinished by the architects, to be completed by the community according to their needs and desires”. One has become a multi-functional event space with shared kitchen (Fig. 2: Spreefeld), the other a wood workshop, and the third

Kalkbreite



Dragon Court Village



Threshold space between the private upper floor and the communal area on the ground floor

## R-URBAN Building neighborhood resilience by promoting local production and consumption cycles



Fig. 2. (a) Kalkbreite, Mueller Sigrist Architekten, 2014, (b) R-urban, AAA, 2008, (c) Dragon Court Village, Eureka, 2013, (d) Spreefeld, BARarchitekten, Carpaneto Schoeningh Architekten, FATkoehl Architekten, 2013.

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a space for art and culture. The common spaces of Spreefeld cohousing can be used also by non-residents, offering meeting places for the broader neighbourhood community. “The project unfolds its full potential as a materialized manifesto for an alternative, bottom-up approach to urban renewal”.<sup>16</sup>

The Kalkbreite cooperative (Mueller Sigrist Architekten, 2014) is an example that is striving for an economic, cultural, and ethnic diversity. The residents live in a community household, where 20 mini apartments share a common dining space and a kitchen. Some residents live in so-called cluster flats. There are also “joker rooms”, which residents can rent when hosting extended family. “The variety of innovative apartment typologies in this project transgresses conventional notion of private and public space, reflecting the broad array of social configurations and living constellations in which we live today”.<sup>17</sup>

An alternative for the modernist separation of functions comes from the Japanese Dragon Court Village project (Eureka, 2013), that is combining living and working, as a “(re) productive space that facilitates a community-oriented form of cohabitation”.<sup>18</sup> The borders between public, common and private space are dissolved through spatial porosity and mix of uses.

The paradigm of community has been present in projects on different scale as well. R-urban is a network of resident-run facilities: an urban community farm, a recycling lab, a unit for communal living, organized as “civic hubs in a circular neighbourhood metabolism”. Several leftover sites in France have been transformed into urban community gardens (Atelier d’Architecture Autogeree, 2008), together with neighbourhood communities. The participatory prac-

tice aimed to co-produce ecological, social and cultural resilience — a system that is adaptable to changing circumstances. *AgroCite* is “a testing field for establishing principles of circular economy”, empowering citizens to become active “prosumers” (producers and consumers at the same time). Residents are involved in the change through collaborative spatial practices. The project shows the social relations are “integral to the production of space that will ultimately make commons sustainable and resilient”.<sup>19</sup>

The four projects are questioning the notion of community as well, focusing on the user, not only as a *resident*, but rather a *citadin*. As Stavros Stavrides argues, common spaces should “spill beyond the boundaries of any existing community; outsiders, foreigners, and newcomers should be invited into them, constantly”.<sup>20</sup>

## 4. REUSE OF COMMON SPACES OF NEW BELGRADE BLOCKS

This chapter presents a study on the identification of the potentials of urban common spaces of New Belgrade blocks, intended for community but neglected and underused over the time. The method of explorative mapping of impulses of modernism in everyday life and their reading and interpretation was applied, leading to proposals for their improvement. The focus was on re-articulation of the dialogue between public and private, and adaptive reuse of the neglected common spaces and elements of architecture, that would emerge as materialized added value for the housing. The research framework was a student workshop organized by the author (as part of her ongoing PhD re-

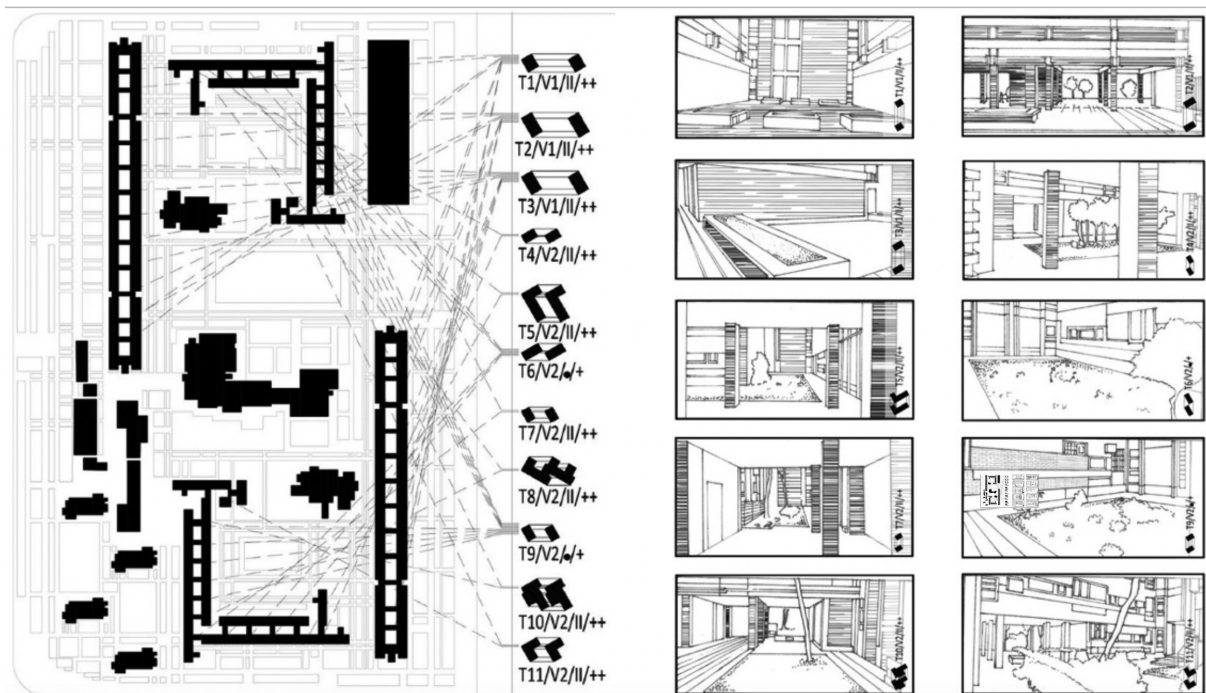


Fig. 3. Identification of the atrium typology in the Block 23 and visual interpretation of the atrium ambiances. © Illustration Research team C3: T. Ciric, M. Ristic, J. Ristic, J. Korolja, December 2018.

search) at the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade in the Fall Semester 2018/19. In the workshop participated 55 students of Bachelor and Master Studies of Architecture.

The first part of the investigation was applying a systematic observation and photo-documentation mapping specific socio-spatial phenomena. For example, research team C3, investigating on the block 23, mapped atriums of the linear buildings within the block 23 as an example of urban common spaces, spaces between public and private. After observation and photo-documentation, the group analysed the atriums and classified different types (Fig. 3). The atriums were observed and understood as public interiors of the blocks. Therefore, reuse of these spaces would improve the current tension between public — private, individual — collective, compact — fragmented, durable — ephemeral.

The further mapped phenomena were obsolete facades, open public spaces dominated by cars, but also modernist composition of the blocks leaving underdefined surrounding landscape in which the buildings are floating in. The analysis of the surrounding landscape was especially addressing the relation between built and unbuilt. These groups were investigating on the potential of *programming the landscape* as a tactic to define the space, but still leave it open and porous. The tactic is mediating between the scales of the blocks — starting from micro points in the landscape, multiplying the identified ambiances, and reactivating the whole block eventually (Fig. 4).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The paper shows the importance of commons, and both social and spatial relations, for (re)production of sustainable and resilient neighbourhoods. The research on the contemporary practices, but also policies and management from the socialist period, can contribute to the further development of the methodology for mass housing revitalization through reuse of common spaces. The research focuses on New Belgrade blocks, and eventually presents the study on potentials for *spatial* interventions within them. In the next step, the *social* process of production and management of these spaces will be further investigated. Moreover, the concept aims to be generative, and therefore its applicability to similar case studies in Europe, but also Non-European countries in Africa, Asia or Latin America is to be investigated further.

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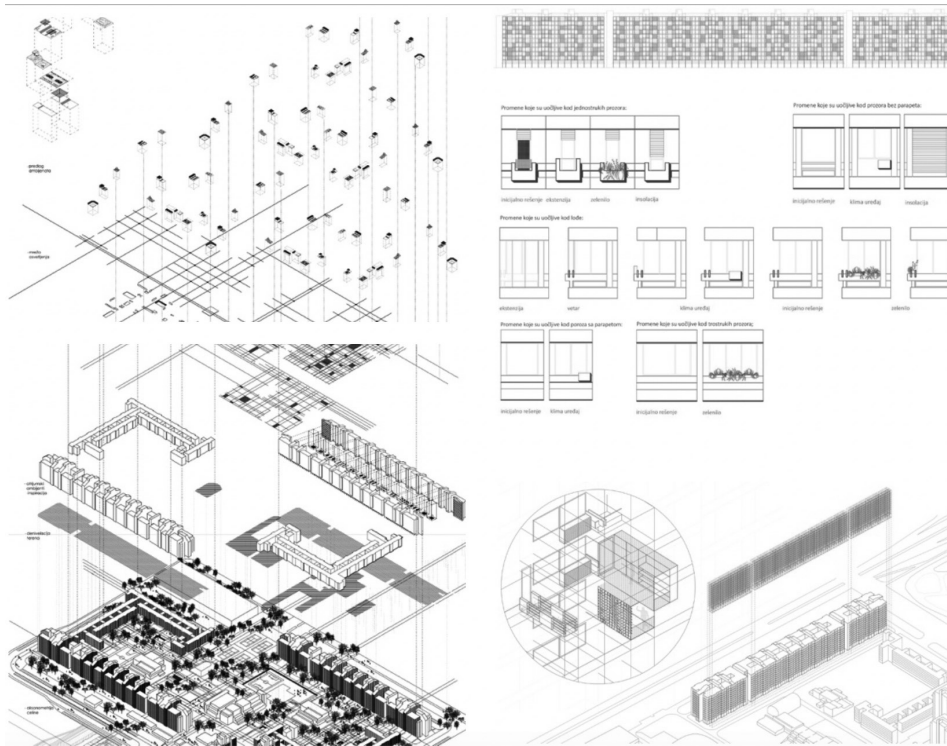


Fig. 4. Transformation concepts for the Block 23 (a) Landscape programming, (b) Facade re-design. © Illustration (a) Research team C1: A. Maksimovic, N. Djuric, K. Dimitrijevic, M. Bozovic, (b) Research team C2: Z. Stanojevic, A. Stojanovic, N. Lalic, O. Miskovic, December 2018.

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#### NOTES

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