

## **Rethinking Spontaneous Transformation: the case of Belgrade abandoned places**

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*Abstract:* - This paper contributes to current discussions of the abandoned spaces as being catalists of contemporary urbanity. The case study for this research is the city of Belgrade, the capital of Serbia. It is a potent city, on the edge of the European Union and in the intensive phase of political, economic and social transition, therefore overcrowded with abandoned spaces of various kinds. The aim is to rethink possible tactics of spontaneous transformation of abandoned spaces and to relate them to urban regeneration, providing insight into the continuous and multivalent nature of urban space and the relationship between spatial experience, practice, representation and identity. The paper analyses the diversity of possible actions and therefore provides an insight into the nature and possible articulation of spontaneous transformation of abandoned spaces. The aim is to rethink tactics of conquest as patterns of spontaneous transformation capable to provide multiple and dynamic contemporary urbanity will be searched for.

*Key-Words:* abandoned spaces, spontaneous transformation, Belgrade.

### **1 Introduction**

The space is seen as a complex system (Uprichard and Byrne, 2006), primarily through the lens of phenomenological sociology, through the lived world of everyday life (Schultz, 1970). It is seen as a product of interrelation, never fixed but continuous and always in production (Deleuze and Gutarri, 1988) emphasising multiple histories, stories and trajectories as basic aspects of which space and place are born and are developed from (Bergson, 2007). Time and space are merged where space is seen as an event open to multiple experiences and always in the process of becoming (Massey, 2005).

In accordance with these traces, addressing the need for a critical analysis of abandoned spaces and in meeting the main objectives of the paper to rething spontaneous transformations of the city, the main aim is to broden conceptualization of abandoned spaces from merely a problem to a space with potential. In doing this, the first aim is to look for values through mapping patterns of Belgrade indeterminate spaces and the relationship of power that emerges from them in contrast to the world of precifications, representations and abstractions associated with spatial hegemony under contemporary capitalism. The second is to search for tactics of conquest as patterns of spontaneous transformation capable to

provide multiple and dynamic contemporary urbanity against unidimensional logic of comodification, monofunctionality and control. We conclude that abandoned spaces can provide alternative socio-cultural opportunities and that they also illuminate the space-time condition of urban development in a more dynamic way. The overall question is how these new forms of urban transformations, based on lived experience can be given a proper place in urban planning agenda and in architecture as a discipline.

### **2 Belgrade is changing**

Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, is a potent city, on the edge of the European Union and in the intensive phase of political, economic and social transition. Consequences of territorial transformation of former Yugoslavia, internal wars, NATO bombing as well as privatization during the Transition period (end of the 20th century) left abandoned spaces with no clear guidelines and defined level of protection, with low level of maintenance and without any picture of their involvement in the process of future development (Hirt, 2008; 2009).

The process of development of Belgrade has happened through few parallel flows of change. The most powerful flows were: the process of deindustrialization, changes in state/economy (and

military) system and changes in social/community facilities (Stanilov, 2007). Post-socialist societies, in all, are simultaneously facing at least three types of transformation, causing complex structural changes, and in the case of Belgrade as follows:

- 1) SP: Socio-political transformation – from totalitarian to democratic society;
- 2) ET: Economic transformation – from planned to market based economy and/or from supply to demand driven economy;
- 3) PI: Transforming industrial to post-industrial society;
- 4) Ex-YU: Transformation from Yugoslavia to Serbia, with Belgrade being a capital of YU and becoming a capital of Serbia. The size of the actual country decreased, therefore buildings intended for governmental purposes became oversized and not functional.
- 5) B: Bombarding in 1999 actually have changed a picture of the central part of Belgrade, as military building which were the most attractive and glamorous were bombarded.

Changes are evident in the facilities of various purposes, including industrial, military, business, social, and cultural. Within the group of abandoned buildings the most numerous are those which came as a product of the process of socio-political changes. For instance, during the last 20 years, a large number of cinemas were closed (in 1967 Serbia had over 700 cinemas, which is an absolute record in the history of its cinema), slowly deteriorated until 1995 and then completely stopped working (Jovanovic, 2010) and were replaced by big multiplexes in shopping malls during 2000s. In the case of the culture centers, it is characteristic that they erected throughout the former Yugoslavia as places of social acquaintance. We can freely talk about the network of such facilities, which can be found even in the smallest villages of Serbia. Once a center of cultural events, over the last two decades they have lost their original function and moreover their meaning and social significance. Nowadays, all these buildings lost in time and place represent fragmented spaces of spontaneous development. Regardless to the actual process of planned transformation, where both post-socialist and postmodern urbanity relies on consumerism, fragmentation and diversity, many buildings are still left vague, offering further interpretations in dynamic city patterns of Belgrade.

All these aspects of transformation have affected cities, including Belgrade, which in themselves are spatial projections of society (Lefebvre, 1996). Because of turbulent economic and social changes, as well as dynamic changes in urban governance, spatial transformations in Belgrade are even more visible.

### 3 Editing Belgrade

In order to show various ways in which spontaneous occupation of abandoned places exist, this article considers abandoned buildings and areas which are currently in the process of transformation in Belgrade. For these reasons this study observes the *collage* of well-known transformations that have so far been held in Belgrade. We have considered different typologies regardless to their size, position (place) or quality of the abandoned structure. This approach was chosen because the aim of the study is to provide guidance, potential patterns of transformation, not a typology of abandoned places, nor possibilities of their affirmation.

All mapped examples are in a zone of the city core with a radius of 4km from the central square.



Fig. 1. BIGZ

*Used to be:* state printing house; built in 1937; 9000m<sup>2</sup>; It is protected as an architectural legacy;  
*Time / Reason for abandonment:* beginning of 1990s / ex-YU and ET;  
*Value:* economic; architectural; alternative culture;  
*Is now:* rent-a-space for diverse purposes as offices, music studios, art studios, design studio, craft workshops, theatre, night club, recreation club;  
*Rhythm analysis:* used to be in daily rhythm; now is in a week rhythm; uncertain duration (yearly cycle); assume permanency;  
*Character / Identity:* limbo between temporary and permanent use; indeterminacy and vagueness; no link between legacy and abandonment; materiality and memory hidden; production of cultural and social life heightened;  
*Space / Content:* reactivation; content is more important than spatiality.



Fig. 2. Former Military Academy / now Museum of the City by The Belgrade City

*Used to be:* military academy; built in 1899; 3600m<sup>2</sup>;  
*Time / Reason for abandonment:* partially during 1990s / bombed in 1999; 1990 demilitarisation 1999 bombarding;

*Value:* cultural;

*Is now:* since 2006 museum of city, gallery space, education space;

*Rhythm analysis:* used to be in daily rhythm, now is in yearly interval rhythm, October Salon, BINA, periodic lecture and debate;

*Character / Identity:* transgression, indeterminacy, strong link with abandonment, materiality and memory revealed, production of culture;

*Space / Content:* redesign, content is in a strong relation to the spatiality.



Fig. 3. Beton hall

*Used to be:* warehouse of Belgrade's port; built in 1937; 6000m<sup>2</sup>; protected industrial structure together with the only one remaining warehouse crane;

*Time / Reason for abandonment:* deteriorate slowly over the time / 1945 post-industrial, 1990 economic;

*Value:* economic, social;

*Is now:* rent-a-space, leisure purposes, 2006-2008 partial adaptation, since 2008 BGD municipality;

*Rhythm analysis:* used to be without a rhythm,

now daily rhythm, permanent;

*Character / Identity:* permanent, no link with abandonment; materiality highlighted, no memory preserved; production of middle class, social life;

*Space / Content:* reactivation, redesign; content follows the pace and rhythm of space.



Fig. 4. Port of Belgrade on the river Danube

*Used to be:* cargo port on danube river; established in 1961, 300 000m<sup>2</sup> + 650 000m<sup>2</sup> open; protected industrial silos structure;

*Time / Reason for abandonment:* partially 1980s; closed down in 2004 / 1980 post-industrial 2000s property;

*Value:* economic;

*Is now:* abandoned;

*Rhythm analysis:* used to be in daily rhythm; now no rhythm; occasionally 2009-2011 Mikser festival;

*Character / Identity:* indeterminacy, vagueness;

*Space / Content:* awareness; content – space relation is unrecognisable.

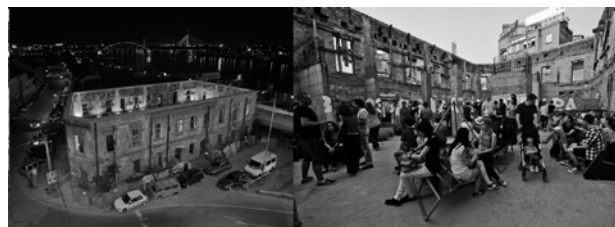


Fig. 5. "Spanish House"

*Used to be:* palace on the bank of Sava river; built in 1881; 300m<sup>2</sup>; customhouse till 1945, museum of shipping; 1950-1990;

*Time / Reason for abandonment:* deteriorated over time; cleared out in mid 1990s / 1945 socio-political; 1980 economic; 2000s property;

*Value:* bad state almost a ruin;

*Is now:* abandoned;

*Rhythm analysis:* used to be in daily rhythm; now no rhythm; occasionally; artistic performances;

*Character / Identity:* indeterminacy, vagueness, transgression, strong link with abandonment, materiality revealed, no memory at all;

*Space / Content:* awareness; content – space relation is unrecognisable.



Fig. 6. Ada Huja

*Used to be:* island on the right Danube bank, 4km long / 1.5km wide; became peninsula due to filling it with garbage 1945-1975;

*Time / Reason for abandonment:* cleared out in 1970s and regenerated in mid 1980s / post-industrial;

*Value:* ecology, recreation;

*Is now:* spontaneous occupation, recreation, sporting facilities;

*Rhythm analysis:* occasionally;

2011-2012 Supernatural Fest;

*Character / Identity:* empty, unprotected, vast;

identity of dump is present, avoided as a no-go zone; indeterminacy; vagueness;

*Space / Content:* reactivation; no content.



Fig. 7. Savamala district

*Used to be:* central district, between fortress and Sava river; begun in 1830s, 4km long / 2km wide; ambient protection was the first new settlement outside Kalemegdan fortress;

*Time / Reason for abandonment:* neglected after 1945, deteriorated slowly until 1980s / 1945 socio-political, 1980 post-industrial, 1990 economic;

*Value:* architectural, alter.culture community;

*Is now:* rent-a-space, from warehouse to the houses of culture; cafe, clubs, education facilities, Galleries, craft workshop;

*Rhythm analysis:* 2000-2005 occasional, underground club, alternative culture; 2007-2012 interval, Mikser festival, October salon; since 2010, assume permanency, Mikser house, cultural district;

*Character / Identity:* temporary spirit;

transgression; anticipated link between legacy and abandonment; materiality and memory revealed; production of culture and social life, community protection highlighted

*Space / Content:* awareness; reactivation, redesign; space is permanent and content is temporary.



Fig. 8. Former cinema advertising space

*Used to be:* pedestrian passage between Nikola Pasic Square and Nusiceve street in the centre of Belgrade; around 1950s, 500m<sup>2</sup> open;

*Time / Reason for abandonment:* neglected after 1990s when cinemas industry collapsed / economic ex-YU;

*Value:* social, cultural;

*Is now:* spontaneously in 2008; since 2010 MicroArt ass. sustainable street gallery settings for 3 years, with the possibility of extension;

*Rhythm analysis:* used to be without a rhythm, now interval rhythm; MicroArt ass. gallery;

*Character / Identity:* permanent; transgression; production of socio-cultural vibrancy of city;

*Space / Content:* reactivation; no spatial coherence; content based space.



Fig. 9. Cinema „Zvezda“

*Used to be:* the first cinema in Belgrade;  
*Time / Reason for abandonment:* neglected after 1990s when cinema industry collapsed / economic ex-YU;  
*Value:* social, cultural;  
*Is now:* spontaneously “occupied” 2015  
*Rhythm analysis:* used to be without a rhythm, used last summer for open air cinema;  
*Character / Identity:* permanent; transgression;  
 production of socio-cultural vibrancy of city;  
*Space / Content:* reactivation; no spatial coherence; content based space.



Fig. 10. Inex Film

*Used to be:* headquarters of the ex-YU state filming, cinema industry; late 1950s; 1000m<sup>2</sup>;  
*Time / Reason for abandonment:* neglected after 1990s, when cinema industry collapsed / 1990s economic, ex-YU, 2000s property;  
*Value:* social, cultural, community;  
*Is now:* since 2009, MicroArt ass; local community space and free occupation;  
*Rhythm analysis:* used to have a daily rhythm; now moment rhythm; uncertain duration;  
*Character / Identity:* temporary; indeterminacy; transgression;  
*Space / Content:* awareness; no connection between content and space.



Fig. 11. Turkish bath

*Used to be:* complex built around “Amam”; built 1901; Turkish bath; 1901-1935; From 1952 historical monument;  
*Time / Reason for abandonment:* 1995 / 1995 neglected, 2005s property;  
*Value:* cultural, historic;  
*Is now:* closed museum;  
*Rhythm analysis:* occasional; perform. space; 2012 October Salon; 2010 Dance Festival;  
*Character / Identity:* materiality, memory revealed;  
*Space / Content:* reactivation; strong link between content and space.



Fig. 12. Geozavod

*Used to be:* stock exchange in Savamala district; built 1898, 2000m<sup>2</sup>; 1898-1935, 1945-1985 geological institute; protected as a hist. monument;  
*Time / Reason for abandonment:* 1985 deteriorated, 1995 abandoned / 1945 socio-political, 1985 economic, 1995 ex-YU, 2000s property;  
*Value:* cultural, historic, community;  
*Is now:* 2010 Mikser fest, 2012 October salon; 2014 reconstruction;  
*Rhythm analysis:* promotion for new investments  
*Character / Identity:* reactivated / no spatial coherence  
*Space / Content:* reconstructed / marketing



Fig. 13. Steamship “Župa”

*Used to be:* produced in Budapest as a part of a crew for the attack on Belgrade in 1915; 1948 part of river museum on the Sava river; protected as hist. monument;

*Time / Reason for abandonment:* Neglected after 1970s, and deteriorated slowly until 1980s; sank in fire 1919, renovated in 1920 sold to Romanians, Soviet troops seized it in 1944, sank again in 1945, and found 200km from Belgrade, renovated in 1946 / 1985 economic, 2000s property;

*Value:* historic, cultural, community;

*Is now:* spontaneously occupied;

*Rhythm analysis:* interval rhythm; festival floor and underground club; Goethe filmstreet fest;

*Character / Identity:* indeterminacy; transgression;

*Space / Content:* reactivation.

Taking into account the time parameter and having Lefebvre's rhythm-analysis of the city (Lefebvre, 2007) as a premise, we classified cases into those that have duration of a moment, those that repeat rhythmically in interval, and those which are, in a way, permanent in their temporality. Bishop and Williams (2012) argues that temporary use cannot be “based on the nature of the use, but rather on the intention of the user, developer or planner that the use should be temporary in nature”. Temporary use implies a time-limited use, not the one that substitute for the preferred permanent option (Nemeth, Langhorst, 2014). That is why we use the term permanent as it implies change in content.

1) *moment:* those interventions that occurred only once. Mostly represent a kind of “offenses” in relation to the usual way of using. Like to use transgressive places, where both, legacy and abandonment are revealed and where memory is present;

2) *interval:* those interventions that occur periodically, at certain time intervals. Like to use indeterminate and above all vague places, where legacy is memorable and faze of abandonment is obvious but not materialized;

3) *permanent:* those that assume future permanency, are in a faze of uncertain duration, depending on the circumstances in which they have occurred in and

have survived. Those are the places strong in their materiality, economically viable and transgressive.

In the book *Temporary Urban Spaces: Concepts for the Use of City Spaces* Haydn and Temel describe the relationship between the “temporary use” and “permanent use”, where the temporary prepares site for something that will come later and last longer (Haydn and Temel, 2006), and the question of the potential of this kind of temporary use as a platform for possible further transformation of the area is set. Therefore, what characterizes the short term using of long-lasting, but abandoned buildings, is their temporary (re)activation, which does not necessarily have to be oriented towards the further development of these places, but can represent a platform in which the potential for further transformation can be explored, which may be in the range from momentary events to permanent (re)development (Lehtovuori, 2000).

Taking into account the character of transformation, as well as the aspect of relationship between content and space we classified cases into those that predominantly alert and raise awareness, those that reactivate and those that redesign.

1) *awareness / alert:* individual interventions of specified duration, which aim is, mostly, to demonstrate the potential of a given area - the action of the Goethe Institute, the actions of the October Salon, individual actions within the Mikser and SuperNatural Festival. Those interventions prefer indeterminate and vague places where structure serves as a border, a décor, a scene for the activity which carries the primacy.

2) *(re) activation / try:* interventions that give purpose to certain areas that are now abandoned or forgotten, with the emphasis more on the content and less on spatial interventions - specific intervention during the festivals. Those interventions prefer spatiality and strong presence of abandonment.

3) *(re) design / create:* interventions based on spatial transformations and their potential lasting effects, which tend to re-produce the image of a certain area - Inex Film, Cinema “Zvezda”, Street Gallery, Beton hala. Those interventions prefer transgressive character that has a strong legacy and just a memory of abandonment.

## 4 Tactics of conquest

Looking in the terms of the military terminology all these interventions can be divided into tactical rather than strategic. Strategy is characterized by known start and objectives, and clearly planned path from the beginning to an end, while all of these interventions, such as tactical procedures, allow

places themselves to change during the process of transformation, or the process of development between what they were and could become.

As the editing of Belgrade shows, underneath the precisely directed urban milieu and outside the dominant architectural discourse, city exists full of unwritten history, overlooked communities, unseen possibilities, a pattern of different orders. Rather than to follow how the legible system of power oppresses marginalized spaces and communities, we will try to show patterns in which these marginalized spaces transgress spatial constraints, loosen or soften social, economic and cultural barriers and produce a diverse community.

All presented examples show a variety of spatial, temporal and usage patterns, but they all embrace uncertainty as the potential for radical openness which nourishes the vision of a more experimental culture (Sandercock, 1998). While the level of organisation was very different ranging from a temporary occupation, to a more durable collective activity and legal organisation, they all show a unity in open accessibility and versatility of social groups using them. The longer the activity takes, a broader spectar of actors is incorporated. Based on different motives like marginal lifestyles, informal economies, artistic experimentation, once abandoned a deliberately open and public space allows equal access and representation, and becomes a platform for spontaneous uncensored development of the city. It's a real mix of energy, structures and contents capable to permanently look for a better position in mutual existence. It is the coalition between formal and informal that lead these places to a better future, when informal actors become players in the public debate.

Lefebvre said that differential space can be traced in almost every example "it is a space created and dominated by its users from the basis of its given conditions" (Lefebvre, 1996). A kind of urbanity is produced in which the contradictions that constitute urban lifestyle is nurtured as well as their deliberate juxtaposition. While open spaces remain largely unspecified, building their typology tend to be more precise but never the less integrate a high level of diversity and stayes permanently open for a change. There is an urge for a non/controlable, socially and politicaly sustainable place - a claim for a free zone. Mapping Belgrade clearly shows that there are three ways of occupying abandoned spaces, that can exist simultaneously or individually, depending on the case. The first refers to the temporary occupation of an abandoned space that gives the identity of waiting, the second refers to the transgression, or change of the purpose and character of the area and the third is

transformation from the informal into the formal framework through cooperation between the private and public sectors, through local communities and other interested parties. The following text deals with each of these patterns separately, by placing them in the context of the contemporary development of the city.

## 5 Conclusion: reconstruction of urbanity

Presented study shows possible ways of more or less informal transformation. We have seen that transformation can happen in different ways, from occasional use, through the gradual conquest to the institutional changes, so we should have in mind the importance of this kind of practice in the areas of active transformation, such as Belgrade.

What is a common feature of the presented models of transformation is that they were not planed as durable, but their common feature is that these are examples of short-term use of long-lasting buildings. These modes of transformation of objects offer the ability for the (re)construction of the city image and should therefore bear in mind the importance of the temporary use as a catalyst for the future change. Abolishing these places by re-planning and redevelopment will not delete the system that produced them but will simply erase the evidence of their existence. They are the constituents of the same economic, social and political system that created them at the beginning.

Almost any urban location can have potential for some kind of temporary use (Lehtovuori and Ruoppila, 2012). This research intended to show a variety of possible ways of using abandoned spaces in the contemporary dynamic society, with economic, social and cultural trends, where short-term usage is seen as a possible method for examination and a wide range experiment laboratory for future development of cities.

It is essential that space is not conceived as absolute but relational and inter-subjective, prone to various personal interpretation, that it is not understood as static and fixed but open, interconnected at all scales, and that urban planning practice has a courage to leave things unfinished, to let time pass and spatial and social relationships form. The presence of these places challenges the conception of what architecture and urban planning are and what they might be. It seems as in words of De Sola-Morales "strangers in our own land, strangers in our city, we inhabitants of the metropolis feel the spaces not dominated by architecture are

reflections of our own insecurity, of our vague wonderings through limitless spaces that, in our position external to the urban system, to power, to activity, constitute both a physical expression of our fear and insecurity and our expectation of the other, the alternative, the utopian, the future”, one finds the answer that urban reality does not exist it happens through everyday life and therefore architecture becomes transgressive in saying that it cannot be drawn and played like a game.

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