

Struggle for Collective Space

a Cities Log initiated by Ana Dzokic and Marc Neelen (STEALTH.unlimited)

A scan of the issues concerning the current urban development of cities like Belgrade, Kotor, Novi Sad, Podgorica, Priština, Pula, Skopje, Tirana, or Zagreb, reads like something between a crime scene investigation and a comic story. While up until two decades ago these cities developed largely outside the mechanisms of the real estate market, today privatisation, clientalism, and the creative abuse of laws seem commonplace in a context impacted by 'wild' urbanisation and fast-moving capital investments set within the horizon of a neoliberal context.

At the same time, something else starts to become clear: the first, uneasy struggles for collective space start to take shape. Here and there inhabitants start organising themselves, civil organisations start turning their gaze to the city and journalists begin digging through the issues. As urgent as they may be for their own context, they also hint at a new engagement of the citizenry and the professionals emerging in many cities throughout the world. This points to the alternatives appearing out of the cracks of the highly individual and profit-driven development of contemporary cities – opening the horizon to different contributions to and involvements in what the future of our cities could be.

This journal represents a short time-travel along issues found in the span of a compressed year. It reveals a mix of newly emerged claims on urban space – and the newly emerging openings set within it.

Clientalism – the tight integration of political leadership with business partners while closely exchanging favours between each other.

Zagreb / 31 March, 2009

Activists of Right to the City and Green Action promote Mutna (Muddy Water) – the top Zagreb 'quality' product that stimulates corruption and favouritism. They hand out (mud-filled) bottles to the people entering the parliament complex. The Mutna website gathers news related to corruption in the city of Zagreb.

Belgrade / 13 April, 2009

Television B92 airs the first of the seven-part documentary Insider: Abuse of Office on the construction mafia and corruption.

Circumstances around the rise of the new Ušće shopping mall in New Belgrade Ušće are highlighted. Constructed right in front of the former CK (Communist Party Central Committee) building, now a privatised office tower.

The resulting public discussions on how the 5 ha of land was acquired by its developer – with no gain for either city and state – provokes the President of Serbia to launch a probe into the matter.

Privatisation – who benefits (and who suffers) from the transition from collectively-owned to privately-owned property?

Belgrade / Autumn, 2008

Architect Daniel Liebeskind prepares a master plan for the conversion of the privatised Port of Belgrade. Privatised under ambiguous conditions, the port is part of a dispute between the city and the new owners (local tycoons). In this battle over 220 ha of land, Liebeskind is an important PR tool for the developers.

Belgrade / 23 April 2009

While the Port dispute is in court, Djilas, the mayor of Belgrade, promotes the very same Liebeskind project at Belgrade's official stand at the real-estate fair in Cannes, France.

Pula / 8 July, 2008

The County of Istria rules that the former military area Muzil in Pula is to be merged with the Brijuni Riviera tourist development. After almost 200 years as a military zone, this area is now opened to the development of a 27-hole golf course – and will thus stay closed to most of the county's citizens.

Muzil comprises one-quarter of the city's total surface area – and no civilian inhabitant of Pula has ever been there.

Pula / 23 January, 2009

The Civil Initiative for Muzil is formed (to oppose the development of the exclusive golf course) and the first public session is held. The newspaper *Otvoreni Muzil* (Open Muzil) is published. A demand for permanent public access to the area is made.

Pula / 8 March, 2009

As a result of pressure from the initiative, the municipality and the County of Istria arrange a walk-through for the people of Pula. 11 buses bring people into the Muzil area. The initiative states: "The opening of Muzil has begun, and it cannot be stopped anymore".

Zagreb / 29 July, 2009

The first official meeting of Croatian President Mesić and the new Prime Minister Kosor centres on the future of real estate owned by the Ministry of Defence. Following the meeting, the Croatian press publishes sensational articles stating that "hectares of attractive state-owned land remain empty". Muzil is one of these sites.

Pula / 16 August, 2009

Organised by Pulska grupa, the conference Post-Capitalist City takes place on the former military grounds of Muzil, leading to the declaration of Komunal – land that is neither state- nor privately-owned.

Belgrade / 10 August, 2009

On the way to Pula we read about the cancellation of negotiations on the privatisation of the Belgrade Fair.

Noteworthy: Since 2002, 424 privatisation contracts out of 2504 in Serbia have been cancelled, mainly due to the failure by new owners to observe obligatory measures related to investment, social programs, production and integrity of property.

Real Estate – in many countries in the region, real estate represents one of the main sectors of the economy. Some say that until recently 80% of the Albanian economy was comprised of turning around the market-driven production of buildings.

Belgrade / October, 2008

After a 3-year struggle to prevent the conversion of a local park into a construction site, citizens around Peti park (Fifth Park) succeed in holding back the developer. Newly-elected mayor Djilas, in one of his first public appearances, visits Fifth Park and promises that the development site will move elsewhere.

Belgrade / 11 June, 2005

How did this civil resistance start? In the early morning, people around the Fifth Park area woke to trucks bearing “trees are the city’s lungs” slogans and the sound of chainsaws.

They know nothing about the plan to wipe out the Park in order to erect a 6000 m² building.

Offence and defence around the basketball court – with police presence. Local citizens put up a strong front against the heavy machinery and disrupted demolition proceedings, even establishing a 24-hour watch.

Making use of every event possible to promote and publicise the issue, people from the Fifth Park gain wide support and show up at the 2007 Belgrade Marathon.

In spring 2008 Serbian president Boris Tadić and Dragan Djilas, future mayor of Belgrade, visit the Fifth Park during their election campaign.

After the Park is 'saved', inhabitants are still left – until 2010 – with the victory over a totally demolished site.

Belgrade / April, 2009

Three months before the opening of the Universiade, and without proper warning, the City bulldozes 40 houses of the Roma settlement right next to the Belleville athletic village – a private residential area planned for future sale.

Public pressure halts the total erasure of the settlement.

Belgrade / June, 2009

Remains of the settlement are fenced and the electricity is cut. Universiade volunteers are instructed to say that this is a film set.

Noteworthy: During 2009 Serbia holds the Presidency of the Roma Decade, with housing as one of the event's priority issues.

Belgrade / 1 – 14 July, 2009

The 25th Universiade takes place. By the beginning of 2010 the majority of the apartments in the athletic village – built for the private market (price 1800 €/m²) – are not yet sold.

Legislation and legalisation – lawmaking as a powerful tool in the (re)distribution of resources.

Zagreb / 18 December, 2008

In an emergency procedure, a Law on Golf Courses is passed, declaring golf a service of national importance. Part of the future golf course can be used for real estate development and it becomes possible to expropriate up to 20% of the future area needed. This violates the Law on Private Property.

Belgrade / April, 2009

The Minister for Environment and Spatial Planning states that after the introduction of the 2003 Construction and Planning Law, unsuccessful legislation resulted in 50,000 new illegal buildings in Belgrade. The presence of construction credits since that time has only served to make illegal / extra-legal investments that much more solid.

Priština / 2009

It is very difficult to obtain building permits in Priština. Last year only some 60 permits were granted. At the same time, this condition only boosts illegal construction.

Priština / August 2009

NGO Archis Intervention Priština completes the MANUAL on the legalisation of structures built without construction permits.

Belgrade / 27 August, 2009

The Minister Environment and Spatial Planning encourages all illegally built buildings in Serbia to be finished before the new Law on Planning and Construction is passed by Parliament. Once the law is passed it will be far more difficult to legalise, but much faster getting building permits.

Building Identity – architecture as a tool in identity shaping.

Belgrade / August, 2008

The French film Banlieue 13: Ultimatum, produced by Luc Besson, is shot in the blocks of New Belgrade. New Belgrade depicts an apocalyptic Parisian' ghetto in 2013.

Podgorica / 19 December, 2008

The Moscow Bridge opens on Liberation Day in Podgorica. The pedestrian bridge is a gift in part from Moscow (60%) while 40% is paid by the city. The position of the bridge stands outside the flow of people in the city; but does serve the investor's ambition – a new, closer association with Russia.

Skopje / 2008

Construction begins on the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle and Museum for the Victims of Communism initiated and financed by the Ministry of Culture. In the architectural competition, the only neo-classical entry wins. Since the last national elections, a quasi 'antique'-style future is favoured in order to enforce Macedonia's newly emerging history.

Skopje / 30 January, 2009

Mother Theresa house opens in Skopje's pedestrian zone. The eclectic building, placed in the midst of the modernist city centre provokes intense reactions.

Skopje / 28 March, 2009

The First Archi Brigade – a few hundred architecture students and citizens unsatisfied with the Orthodox church to be built on the main square – which "defies any logic of urban planning" – organise the First Architectural Uprising.

Mobilised by a call from a popular TV show, a mob of 'believers' attacks them.

Skopje / 7 May, 2009

The focus of the debate on the future of Macedonia Square shifts from the planned Orthodox Church to the statue of Alexander the Great (22 m tall, at a cost of €4.5 million).

Infrastructure – one of the few domains in which serious public investment is made, but also an area that easily lends itself to the re-routing of large amounts of money.

Belgrade / 19 August, 2008

Dragan Djilas, Belgrade's newly appointed mayor states "If this administration lasts for four years, I see Belgrade with one bridge constructed, with resolved infrastructural problems, better traffic – as a light and clean city".

Belgrade / May, 2009

Negotiations begin between the Serbian and Chinese governments on a new bridge over the Danube between Zemun and Borča. The Chinese government will finance it through a loan from their Export Bank. It requires that Chinese companies must be commissioned for construction, even though Serbian companies have enough expertise. The bridge opens up the potential for a new city district – a Third Belgrade – to be developed on current agricultural land.

Kosovo–Durrës / 25 June, 2009

Just days before citizens go to the polls, the Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha heads into Sunday's election with another milestone to his government's credit – a newly completed section of the highway linking Durres with Kosovo, dubbed the Patriotic Highway. Critics however, raise questions about the timing and financing.

Belgrade/Kaludjerica, August 2009

As part of the Flux Beneath Us art project, Nebojsa Milikic et al. / Cultural Center Rex, map a potential sewer system to be collectively made in Kaludjerica, the largest 'illegally' built neighbourhood in Belgrade.

The Role of Architects – architects are an important but relatively powerless actor in this harsh economy of real-estate development. At the same time the current re-definition of the profession comes from its margins.

Skopje / June, 2008.

High competition awards in Macedonia keep architects busy. The magazine Kapital reveals who profits: the single-day fee for a jury member is the equivalent of two-month's salary at the Faculty of Architecture.

Zagreb / 3 October, 2008

In the defunct cinema Mosor, Platforma 9.81 – Institute for Research in Architecture initiates a temporary social centre for cultural and community events in this area of Zagreb.

Belgrade / end 2008.

Following months of reconsideration the national election results are announced, while the economic crisis proceeds, complaints are made that planners are “not producing locations” for new developments.

Zagreb / 4 – 7 December, 2008

In the former Mosor cinema, the conference *The Neoliberal Frontline: Urban Struggles in Post-Socialist Societies* questions spatial and social changes in the contemporary city.

Priština / 2009

The law does not regulate the architecture professional. Since the early 90s no individual licensing for architects exists, but firms (like supermarkets) can be licensed as architecture firms. At the same time four different ministries have their own construction departments.

Tirana / 22 July, 2009

After three academic years, the Polis University – International School of Architecture and Urban Development in Tirana receives full university accreditation.

Tirana / 1997

This University has been initiated by Co-PLAN, founded in 1995. Co-PLAN is a non-profit organisation developing civil society and empowering community participation in urban development. Their first projects focused on opening roads and enabling basic infrastructure in the informally built neighbourhoods of Tirana.

With 20 full-time employees, and still an NGO, Co-PLAN works today closely with local and central government institutions as well as civil society groups, with a strong focus on influencing policy making.

The Role of Citizens, slowly but surely starts to profile itself, usually as a counter force to pressures on particular urban spaces.

Zagreb / 12 August, 2009

Demolition of buildings on Cvijetni Trg Square in the city center begins, despite almost 3 years of struggle by the civil community and public actions intended to reveal corruption and irregularities. The only positive outcome: urban issues now have become a public matter.

This local civic action started here in February, 2007, when Pravo na grad (Right to the City) organised a petition against the devastation of Cvjetni Trg, with over 54.000 signatures.

Zagreb / 04 July, 2007

In the Defending square action 54,000 petition cards with signatures are presented.

Zagreb / 18 January, 2008

The action Varšavska street marks the space in the main pedestrian street that will be used for the parking garage entrance ramp.

Zagreb / 26 January, 2008

Action Odustanite (Give Up) – a public call to the developer to quit the project.

Zagreb / 10 May, 2009

Construction work on the entrance to the underground garage is simulated – to show the amount of the pedestrian area to be lost to traffic once completed.

Zagreb / 29 April, 2009

Right to the City and Green Action organise the round table What kind of city do we want? and present the publication Zagreb as we wish it, put together by the Urbanistic Council of Green Action as a contribution toward the development strategy for the future Zagreb.

This document, where only a very limited overview of the urban issues in the cities is mentioned, makes it obvious that the question To whom belongs the city? becomes more and more relevant, when the ground in this intense and highly conflicted field we call the city is drawn up and divided between various market forces, private interests, siding local governments and opposition forces.

And as urgent as this resistance may be for the specific (local) cases brought forward here, they also hint to transformations currently in process in many other cities throughout the world.

About:

This illustrated journal is based on the Cities Log – a chronology of spatial issues compiled by STEALTH.unlimited (Ana Dzokic and Marc Neelen) on the occasion of the 4th T.I.C.A.B – Tirana International Contemporary Art Biannual (September / October 2009), through conversations with and contributions by professionals in the fields of architecture and urban issues: Besnik Aliaj,

Gjergj Bakallbashi, Aleksandar Bede, Branko Belacevic, Jelena Stefanovic, Dafne Berc, Teodor Celakoski, Sotir Dhamo, Ulrike Franzel, Valon Germizaj, Zakilina Gligorijevic, Adelina Greca, Astrit Hajrullahu, Florina Jerliu, Aleksandra Kapetanovic, Ivan Kucina, Marko Miletic, Ilir Murseli, Oliver Musovic, Divna Pencic, Dubravka Sekulic, Petrit Selimi, Pulska grupa, Aneta Spaseska, Borislav Vukicevic and more. The Cities Log traces a period of one year, from summer-to-summer 2008/2009. This project is part of the first case study of the project Individual Utopias, supported by the Swiss Cultural Program (SCP) in the Western Balkans.

Image credits [as far as we could find]:

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