

From Value Recognition and the MoMA Exhibition to Cultural Heritage and Future Sustainability: A Case Study of the Central Zone in New Belgrade

Marina Pavlović | pavlovic.marina@yahoo.com

Academy Of Arts – Novi Sad, University of Novi Sad

Saša Mihajlov | sasamihajlov@yahoo.com

The Cultural Heritage Preservation Institute of Belgrade

Jasna Cvetić | jasna.cvetic@gmail.com

The Cultural Heritage Preservation Institute of Belgrade

Abstract

Awareness of the necessity to protect architectural works and implemented urban planning solutions from the post-World War II period began to emerge within Serbian heritage institutions during the 1990s. By the early 2000s, these institutions had initiated more systematic research and launched legal protection procedures.

Among the first spatial entities recognized in this context was New Belgrade, a planned urban area located on the left bank of the Sava River, part of Belgrade, Serbia's capital, whose inception and development are closely linked to the immediate post-war years. Its central section – the Central Zone of New Belgrade – was initially designed to include nine residential blocks with related amenities, of which six were realized according to the original plan.

Although professionals and heritage institutions in Belgrade began identifying the enduring architectural and urban values of this area at a relatively early point in its existence, it took more than half a century for these values to be equally recognized and appreciated by residents and the wider community. This paper foregrounds the dual processes of international and local acknowledgment by examining the influence of a major international exhibition; *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980* (held at MoMA) and the procedural framework of designation as cultural heritage. The aim is to illuminate the complex trajectory from initial recognition to institutional and societal acceptance of these values as lasting cultural assets.

In addition, the paper investigates how the formal decision to designate the Central Zone as a cultural monument has introduced new challenges and raised critical questions. These include the need to define protection measures and maintenance strategies suited to Modernist heritage, which require innovative and adaptive approaches.

Keywords

New Belgrade, Modernist heritage, MoMA exhibition, Heritage listing, Sustainable heritage.

Protection of the built heritage of contemporary architecture created after the Second World War in Belgrade

The built heritage created after the Second World War in Serbia, and especially that created in its capital, Belgrade, only came into the focus of the professional and scientific public during the last two decades of the 20th century, with the recording, research and evaluation of the buildings themselves, but also of their wider environments, with such research intensifying in the first decade of this millennium¹. On the one hand, an increasing number of scientific works addressing this topic have appeared, while, on the other, services for the protection

of immovable cultural heritage also began work on providing legal protection, in order to establish a precedent for the preservation of modern urban and architectural heritage in the future. The legal regulations that govern the protection of immovable cultural heritage in Serbia do not specify precise cut-off years for designation of a cultural asset, nor prescribe an amount of time that must elapse between the creation of a work and it having such status bestowed upon it. Thus, certain buildings, such as the Museum of Contemporary Art (1962–65) and the National Library of Serbia (1966–72), were already afforded such protection just two decades after their construction. In 1987, they became the first examples of contemporary architecture in Serbia to receive legal protection. A systematic research program for the post-war architectural heritage fund of Belgrade was initiated within the Cultural Heritage Preservation Institute of Belgrade (hereinafter ‘the Institute’) in 2008, and since then a large number of extremely valuable works of contemporary architecture – as well as residential, spatial, cultural and historical units – have been identified. However, despite the acknowledged significance of such structures, it took a long time for the local community to accept them as part of their heritage, while the professional services were presented with a series of new challenges in terms of these buildings’ maintenance and future usage. One of the most striking examples is New Belgrade’s Central Zone, which represents one of the key models for the processes involved in the planning, design and execution of housing units and facilities in Yugoslavia after the Second World War.

New Belgrade’s ‘Central Zone’

The end of the Second World War also brought with it the end of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia². The implementation of a new social order, with a new ideology, was manifested in the reconstruction and development of war-ravaged Belgrade, primarily in the form of a new city on the left bank of the Sava River – New Belgrade – on a previously marshy, sandy and empty area³. The new part of the city was envisaged as a new administrative, economic and cultural centre of FNR Yugoslavia. A clear break with the preceding period and state organization was embodied through the new architecture as a city of sun, space and greenery, in the sense of the ideology espoused by the *Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne* and Le Corbusier’s *Athens Charter* from 1943. The Central Zone of New Belgrade, conceived as the first planned urban unit of the ‘new’ Yugoslavia, was the largest state project of its time. The General Urban Plan of Belgrade (1950) envisaged the establishment of a central (or metropolitan) core zone, conceived in the very centre of the new city, passing between the (planned) New Belgrade railway station and the Presidency building (SIV), all the way to the banks of the Sava⁴. Three squares – ceremonial (Block 26), central (Block 25) and station (Block 24) – were to be formed as part of that core zone, lined by landmark buildings of national significance, including ministries, courts, theatres, cinemas and other cultural facilities. However, the post-war housing crisis, unstable economic situation, and international political circumstances⁵ brought to the fore the need for rapid construction and rational construction solutions. The original concept of building an administrative hub for the capital was abandoned, and priority was given to developing a district predominantly given over to housing, i.e. the formation of a city of large boulevards, residential buildings and skyscrapers, with accompanying facilities for the social life of the local population⁶. The new idea was for the Central Zone of New Belgrade to be one of three ‘equal’ centres of the city, alongside the old cores of Belgrade and Zemun⁷.



Fig. 1 New Belgrade, Block 23 (photo by S. Negovanović, (DZZSKGB) 2020- 2021).

The plan for the Central Zone was only partially implemented: residential blocks were built on the perimeter, while the central area designated for public and communal functions remained unrealized. The square plan includes nine symmetrically arranged blocks⁸: Blocks 21, 22, 23, 28, 29 and 30 were built in 1961–79⁹, and Blocks 24, 25 and 26 during the 1980s and 1990s. With the construction of the highway and of Block 24 and the sports hall in Block 25, instead of the planned central facilities and the city square, the concept of the Central Zone was irreparably violated¹⁰. The urban planning solution provided for a symmetrical arrangement of blocks on both sides of the avenue, where a distinction was made between the accentuated corner blocks (21, 23, 28 & 30) and subdued central blocks (22, 24, 25, 26 & 29), with three typologies of International Style being employed in their formulation: the tower, horizontal ‘bar’ and meander. The corner blocks were to have from four to six landmark towers on the outside and one on the inside, while along the peripheral boundaries of the block there would be longitudinal buildings – two ‘bars’ of eleven floors each – and a meandering structure of five floors in the centre; a solution intended to be mirrored on all four corner blocks. The central blocks (22 and 29) were intended as a series of elongated high-rise structures on the outside, with a quadrate at the centre and two reference towers on the block’s interior, i.e. the side closest to the central axis¹¹. Almost all of the aforementioned structures were to be realized through industrialized construction systems, which required large and organized construction sites¹². In spite of being a typified construction with prefabricated components, the buildings that were constructed in these blocks were not replicated elsewhere; however, largely due to the use of specific open prefabrication systems, they exhibit certain prototypical characteristics. The general outline is dominated by geometric and repetitive shapes, linearity, and cuboidal concrete compositions of buildings integrated alongside the elongated residential buildings, surrounded by roads and parking areas. Special attention was paid to the finishing

of the façades, taking into account the location of the Central Zone. The basic characteristics and criteria of the architectural composition of the façades were the quality of the processing of materials, and the simplicity and elegance of the elements and linearities¹³. In terms of the apartments themselves, an extremely utilitarian design philosophy was applied, which, thanks to the high level of production output that Belgrade had at the time, contributed to the creation of the Department of Housing within the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade¹⁴.

Recognition of value

The perception of the architecture of New Belgrade – both in the eyes of citizens and of the professional public – has fluctuated from the time of its construction right up to the present day. After the first construction boom, New Belgrade became oft-perceived as little more than a dormitory without facilities. The most pronounced criticism came in the 1980s, when the idea of a core zone was abandoned following the construction of Block 24, and when various studies of the reconstruction of New Belgrade were initiated¹⁵. The disintegration of the urban fabric continued in the decades to come, fuelled by societal transition. Over the past twenty years, interventions within the blocks have served to completely nullify its basic urban concept. Support for the evaluation of the architecture of the Central Zone, which was carried out by the professional protection services, came in the form of Dr. Ljiljana Blagojević's seminal book, *Novi Beograd: Osporeni modernizam* (New Belgrade: Contested Modernism) (2007)¹⁶. However, society's unresolved relationship with the Socialist period continues to elicit conflicting views of the architecture of New Belgrade, especially the residential blocks. The international exhibition *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980*, hosted by MoMA in New York in 2018–19, had a major impact on the perception of the architecture of New Belgrade, with the Central Zone also being presented within the exhibition. Its valorization at an international level opened discussions about the treatment of post-war architecture, with this area, which shapes the daily life of New Belgrade, having not been widely recognized as a significant contribution to architectural practice until the exhibition in New York. The reactions of the public and the interest generated by the exhibition contributed to the affirmation of contemporary architecture and the understanding of the process of establishing the Central Zone of New Belgrade as a cultural asset. However, the legal framework in place¹⁷ for the formulation of the *Decision on Designation of the Central Zone of New Belgrade as a Spatial Cultural-Historical Unit* did not provide for a sufficiently comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach to the perception of space and objects in the context of contemporary architecture, primarily when pertaining to the protection of the urban concept; the most endangered aspect in this instance. The law states that it is necessary to determine the boundary of the whole and the boundary of the protected environment within which all elements are to be evaluated individually. However, the area in question was not fully realized according to the original concept, and does not represent the entirety of the original urban solution. The legislation does not allow for the exclusion of individual components – i.e. the blocks formed through subsequent construction that disrupt the basic urban matrix and lack recognizable (relevant) architectural values – within the boundaries of the protected area, and, consequently, all blocks (and their constituent elements) are equally protected by the law. The Central Zone was, in spite of these limitations, declared a cultural asset in 2021, with the conservation service making such a decision to limit construction within the blocks and protect their authentic urban features from further degradation.

Preservation and maintenance of the cultural heritage of contemporary architecture

As much as, on the one hand, the valorization and appreciation of contemporary architecture has influenced its wider acceptance, on the other the Decision has itself generated a series of new challenges and issues that neither conservators and experts from nearby areas, nor users of buildings and areas under protection, had to date encountered; it is therefore necessary to find novel solutions for these. In foremost place, this refers to the definition of protection measures and the method(s) of preserving and maintaining immovable cultural heritage, whose characteristics, construction techniques, materials and aesthetics significantly differ to those of traditional ones. The restoration of prefabricated systems requires a highly complex approach that must be developed systematically for all objects; however, there is currently no adequate financial or technological support for this. The Institute has made attempts to organize multi-year projects with scientific institutions aimed at examining the current situation and creating maintenance protocols, but these have thus far failed to yield the desired results. The maintenance of *béton brut* façades, or those coated with specific materials, such as porcelain mosaic tiles, requires exceptional investments that the tenants of these blocks are unable to finance. In parallel to this, tenants or other potential investors (the City of Belgrade or the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) view the restoration of façades in terms of achieving greater energy efficiency, oftentimes by coating them with thermal insulation materials, which is counterintuitive from the perspective of preserving this type of architecture. In addition to the above-mentioned challenges, an additional problem is that of parking, which is gradually encroaching on the open green areas and requires significant investments from the City to resolve. At the same time, unauthorized modifications, such as the walling-up and sub-division of open ground floors, as well as the enclosing of terraces, carried out during previous decades and in most cases retrospectively legalized, further damage the integrity of the space.

Conclusion

Insufficient understanding of the users of a space as to what the activities of the protection service entail, as well as what the conservation and restoration of contemporary architecture actually involves, leads to unrealistic expectations, conflicts and dissatisfaction. Such problems are exacerbated by the fact that the protection service, in addition to being limited by an inadequate legal framework and insufficient financial resources, also has at its disposal underdeveloped techniques and technologies for the restoration of modern architecture and materials, which are still in their nascent stages on an international level. The experiences gained from the inscription of the Central Zone of New Belgrade as a spatial, cultural and historical entity, as well as the broader social consensus achieved in the wake of the exhibition held at New York's MoMA, show that a similar form of concord will be necessary for its actual, physical preservation. Only the broad social support for protection services can create preconditions for more intensive interventions and investments, without which the architecturally valuable achievements of the Central Zone will not receive adequate protection that is sustainable in the long term.

¹ *Posleratna arhitektura Beograda sistematsko istraživanje* (2010), program leader Biljana Mišić; associates Ivana Vesković, Saša Mihajlov, Slađana Milojević, documentation of the Cultural Heritage Preservation Institute of Belgrade (DZZSKGB), I-76; BILJANA MIŠIĆ, *O vrednovanju i zaštiti posleratne arhitekture Beograda*, «Nasleđe», XI, 2010, pp. 193–206.

² The end of the war in Yugoslavia also brought about a change in the state system; from monarchy to republic.

³ There were only two complexes on the territory of the future city: The Belgrade Fair from 1937 on the bank of the Sava, and the airport built in 1927–31.

⁴ Today, these are current reference points in the topography of New Belgrade, with the only difference being that the Presidency Building (SIV) is now called *Palata „Srbija“*.

⁵ The so-called ‘Tito-Stalin Split’ of 1948.

⁶ IVANA VESKOVIĆ, JELICA JOVANOVIĆ, *Izgradnja blokova 21, 22, 23 Centralne zone Novog Beograda i njihov značaj u okviru kulturnog nasleđa Beograda*, «Nasleđe», XIX, 2018, pp. 35–51, p. 39.

⁷ ALEKSANDAR ĐORĐEVIĆ, *Urbanističko rešenje centralnog dela Novog Beograda*, «Arhitektura Urbanizam» II, 1960, pp. 3–13, p. 9.

⁸ The architectural and urban solution of these nine blocks was elaborated by a team of architects: Milutin Glavički, Uroš Martinović, Leonid Lenarčić, Milisav Mitić, Dušan Milenković, Aleksandar Stjepanović, Božidar Janković, Branislav Karadžić, Ilija Arnautović, and several others.

⁹ Of the planned nine blocks, Block 21 (1962–66) was the first to be realized, becoming a model for the further construction of the Central Zone. Block 21 was built in 1962–66, Blocks 22 and 23 were completed in 1976, Block 28 in 1971, Block 29 in 1969–73, and Block 30 from 1967 to 1979.

¹⁰ The highway through Belgrade was completed at the end of the 1960s, Block 24 in 1984–86, the construction of Block 25 began in 1991, while construction of Block 26 is still ongoing.

¹¹ *Odluka o utvrđivanju centralne zone Novog Beograda za prostorno kulturno-istorijsku celinu (blokovi 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29 i 30)*, (DZZSKGB), PKIC 15; I. VESKOVIĆ, J. JOVANOVIĆ, *Izgradnja blokova 21, 22*, op. cit., p. 40.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Architectural solutions for the buildings were sought through open Yugoslav tenders for Blocks 21, 22, 23 and 28, as well as through narrower (i.e. invitational) tenders, such as those for Blocks 29 and 30. Their authors include significant representatives of the Yugoslav architectural scene at that time, while a whole generation of younger authors gained recognition largely through their participation in the tenders for New Belgrade: *Posleratna arhitektura Beograda...* op. cit.; LJILJANA BLAGOJEVIĆ, *Novi Beograd: Osporeni modernizam*, Beograd, 2007, («Zavod za udžbenike», «Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture grada Beograda», «Arhitektonski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu») pp. 144–161.

¹⁴ The spatial features of the apartments and the philosophy underlying their functionality were later highlighted as the main characteristic of the so-called ‘Belgrade School of Housing’, i.e. the ‘Belgrade apartment’, which is essentially the result of housing policy and investments from the military, the City of Belgrade, and republic- and federal-level authorities.

¹⁵ LJ. BLAGOJEVIĆ, *Novi Beograd:*, op. cit., p. 206

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ At that time the Law on Cultural Property; the new Law on Cultural Heritage was passed in December 2021, entering into force a year later.