BALCAN CITIES, POLITICAL INFLUENCES AND ARCHITECTURE: 
THE CASE OF SERBIA

Abstract: Throughout history architecture has been controlled by reigning regimes to express political power in order to propagate socio-political ideologies. The fact is that political leaders and ideology possess the ability to regulate the building forms of architecture, to modify the urban development direction and influences on the urban morphology of cities. This paper explores the political dimension of architecture, reflections of certain political regimes and ideologies into the shaping of architecture and cities in the second half of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century in the Balkan region. Specifically, the paper gives an overview of the conditions and circumstances under which successive, socioeconomic and political systems, socialism and post-socialism were realized in Serbia and analyzes their impact on the physical and visual form of architecture and development of the urban centers.

Key words: political influence, architecture, socialism, transition.

1. Introduction

The pace and scope of constructing the physical structures of the city are determined by socio-economic conditions namely they depend on the economic strength of a society and ultimately they depend on the socio-political system in the country.

Although most European cities both in the 'East' and in the 'West' grew rapidly in the post-war decades, the important issues regarding the difference between urbanization under the two contradictory political regimes has been rarely deeply discussed and determined in the urban studies. Thus, the post-1989/1990 success and current renaissance of the notion of 'post-socialism' is significant.

The end of socialism is a part of the broader context of global restructuring [1]. The dominant processes have influenced South-Eastern Europe, too. Many of the processes in Western cities as the collapse of old industries, the reduced role of the public sector and the practice of aggressive privatization, also are factors of the post-socialist transition.

The situation in the Balkan region, and in Western Balkan especially, was more complicated and more difficult. The transitional period occurred after the conflicts following the late 1980s and the early 1990s in former Yugoslavian countries. However, the
Serbian cities are in the restructuring process since 2000 followed with democratic changes that came right after the NATO bombing in the 1998. The radical political and social changes made their impact on every aspect of life. But although delayed, transformations occur at a faster pace than in countries that never experienced socialism [2].

The reason to research the Balkan region and Serbia in this paper is based on the fact that the cities of South-Eastern Europe have not been studied as carefully as those of Central Europe. On the other hand, capitals of the states of South-Eastern Europe represent a more sudden post-socialist transition, because were under socialism and more protected from capitalist effect.

2. Balkan cities and historical context

The Balkan capitals have been political, economic and functional centres, even before the Ottoman times. Belgrade, the “white city”, was located at the border of larger empires. It was a stronghold for the Ottoman Empire, facing the Hapsburg town of Zemun at the opposite site of the river Sava. The military importance prevailed over economic or political functions in this time, but Belgrade was still the only urban centre in very rural surroundings. The Balkan cities became places with urban society later than the central or western European cities. It was not until the 19th century that they were shaped into modern cities following the examples of Vienna, Paris or London. Their reshaping is connected to the formation of the national states. The cities were thoroughly altered. Broad boulevards, modern parks and representative buildings were the result of the policy of ‘de-orientalization’ [3]. In the first half of the 20th century the western influences remained, yet there were bigger problems with the mitigation of damages inflicted by the two World Wars and with the massive population growth within the capital cities in that time.

2.1 The socialist period

The influence of the socialist regimes on the structure of the Balkan cities after World War II, was enormous. Until today, the inheritance of the socialist time dominates their appearance. However, the fact is that type of the political system distinguished highly between the South-East European cities. Yugoslavia developed a rather liberal form of socialism, and on the other hand the East European countries were closely orientated to Stalin’s Soviet Union. But the main characteristics of all socialist cities are the dependence of urban planning and construction to the political will.

Throughout the 1950s Stalinism was imported to Eastern Europe, and the policies implemented in all of the socialist satellite states followed rather strictly the Soviet model. Investments in heavy industries were given priority in all socialist countries at the expense of other sectors, including that of housing construction. After Stalin’s death, priorities were reconsidered, and investments aiming to raise the standard of living were acknowledged. It
was, however, not before the 1960s when the results could be seen on a large scale.

During the period from the 1960s onwards ‘separate roads to socialism’ were allowed and there emerged increasing political and economic differences between socialist countries, although within a similar framework. For example, Yugoslavia, implemented reforms which introduced some market elements to their housing systems, although under state regulation and without profit-oriented commercial institutions [4].

One of the characteristics of the socialist period was the construction of new cities. Until 1990, socialist authorities built many so-called planned socialist towns across the Eastern bloc, both in the USSR and in the satellite socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe. During this period, such towns served to showcase socialism: they represented the worker's towns within the worker's state. For decades, the towns’ role in the settlement system, the direction and expected rates of their development, had been determined centrally, while the local leaders held only minor decision-making powers [5].

In Central-Eastern Europe the goal of constructing New Towns was to create new economic bases for the newly-built social order. The primary purpose during the construction of New Towns was to provide enough dwelling units for the workers to ensure industrial productivity. They were created during an over-politicized period, when professional issues were secondary in almost every aspect - in terms of their creation, location, size, and even their urban structure and design. These circumstances determined not only the creation, but also the long-term functioning of these towns [5].

2.2. Post-socialist processes

After the fall down of socialism, the first measures of political transformation were implemented in early 1990s and included establishment of multiparty system, organization of democratic elections and government decentralization.

On the other hand, in an open-market the economy of socialist cities with industry as its most important part, felt the consequences of technological backwardness, inefficiency and redundancy. All this had an effect on the overall economic situation and quickly led to a significant decrease in volume of production and an increase in inflation and unemployment rate.

Restitution of confiscated property and privatization of state and socially owned assets, including housing, presented two crucial segments of institutional transformation and became the main drivers of upcoming urban restructuring [6]. The process of restitution had a crucial impact on the development of real estate market, since most of the property was centrally located and reached very high prices. Housing privatization presented the most radical and the
most efficient systemic measures of institutional transformation, which had generated preconditions for the later transformations as a coming of foreign investments, internationalization of markets and economic restructuring with a lower industrialization and strengthening the tertiary sector.

The urban economy accepted contemporary global trends through modernizing production and adjusting it to contemporary market conditions. Capitals relatively quickly revised priorities, rearranged their economies and entered the period of gradual and steady economic growth, but cities with heavy industry tradition met with high unemployment and urban poverty.

2.3. Transition processes in Serbia

The conflicts following the late 1980s and the early 1990s directed Serbia towards rather dark development opportunities. The comparative advantages of Serbia have worsened by which the country’s competitiveness lost a large part of their potential. Serbia has remained beyond the periphery of Europe. Now, the country has found itself in the position of an economic, ecological and financial depending on few influential international political, economic and financial actors, also reflecting the ideological model of post-socialist transition reforms chosen [7].

In socio-political terms, after almost two decades of reforms, the post-socialist transition in Serbia has been described as a process of transition with ups and downs, and as a process that results a great numbers of people who are the objective losers due to an application of contemporary models. Serbia’s own industrial production was nearly destroyed and its citizens unemployed. The main economic consequence of this period is an unequal redistribution of social wealth, accompanied by a total destruction of the former economic system and the creation of new interest groups. Since 2000 there have been attempts to improve the effects of that economic distribution by measures like a tax on extra profit, but they were unsuccessful due to the absence of other measures of political transition: the reform of the tribunal, prosecution, restitution and denationalization.

It has been shown that results are impossible to achieve in a fast and easy way, which points again to the difficulties and complexity of the social, political and economic social conditions. A significant contribution to the problem is the fact that the government in Serbia from the end of the 1980s until today, and especially after 2000, applied formerly known dogmas in conceptualizing the social transformation, instead of using new and creative approaches. Especially problematic was the selection of the privatization model. From 1990 till 2009, Serbia lost 601,000 industry workers [7]. Now, Serbia is a country with the largest deindustrialization among all former socialist/communist countries which creates huge numbers
of economic and social problems. Serbia is a country of robbed economy, a society full of anomalies, with needy citizens and very small number of wealthy people.

3. Architecture and politics in the Balkan region and Serbia

The Balkan region was an area with a variety of ideologies and with complicated history of an especially heterogeneous territory in terms of ethnicity, culture and civilization. Therefore former Yugoslavia was the state that during the 20th century experienced all great turning points in the world (World War I, World War II, the collapse of the Cold War division, the crisis of neo-liberal capitalism) through its own disturbing internal transformation.

Socialist Yugoslavia’s position between east and west had significant influence on its architecture and urbanism. The country used its specific geopolitical position for the considerable advances in its technical capacities and culture.

The architecture of the cities was a reflection of the political aspirations and it was the result of political decisions. The cities were created on special principles. During the socialist period housing zones were built at the cities’ edges and usually on a big scale. Quarters like these are well known from many socialist cities as the predominantly monotonous architectural design. Increasing levels of investment combined with the modernisation and industrialisation of building methods, including the use of pre-fabricated elements in construction, thus characterised socialist city building throughout these decades. The most recent architectural analyses contribute to the general assumption that the most important common feature of these towns is use of the so-called socialist-realist style, which makes the time of construction and political context of these towns easily recognisable. Thus, socialist buildings had a certain impact on panorama of urban city core. The “socialist city” represents an unique urban form with specific characteristics as are: compactness, high-density housing districts, grand scale of civic spaces, lack of the spaces for retailing and other services and an aesthetic monotony which defines almost the entire urban environment.

There were several architectural schools in the region. In spite of their broad similarities, the schools developed distinct aesthetic and conceptual profiles. Such heterogeneity had several sources. Through most of the socialist period, all schools subscribed to a modernist ideology, but at the same time each drew on the greatly differing local traditions of urban cultures and vernacular forms. Leading creative personalities also greatly affected their profiles. All of Yugoslavia's architectural scenes were well informed of and interested in current international goings-on.

Development of the city of Belgrade was relatively focused to one task which is a construction of Novi Beograd, especially in years that followed World War II. Left bank of the
Sava River, which had not been used for permanent urban growth and spreading, after 1948 rapidly started to utilize and to prosper. Primarily, it was begun with the construction of the certain administrative buildings. Residential construction was conditioned by increasing the number of inhabitants. Year 1960 was a crucial for Novi Beograd. This was a time when it had been decided to ensure dwelling space approximately for 250,000 humans. Prominent quality of the project, stable economic situation and internationally recognized Yugoslav architec
ts induced an unusual example of socialist housing: The architectural quality and variety were enormous and the supporting social and commercial infrastructure had a very high standard [8].

After socialism across the region, new actors in the real-estate business have transformed the built environment. At first, it was the local capital created during the controversial privatization in the 1990s, as well as the pettier private initiative that exploited the planning deregulation.

According to Hirt (2006), the key aspects of the urban landscape which distinguish the socialist from the capitalist city are overall spatial articulation, spatial scale, spatial organization, land-use balance, and aesthetic ambiance, and they exhibit the most visible recent shifts in the character of urban forms. She argues that there are five processes of post-socialist change: in spatial articulation - suburban growth and blurring of the urban edge; in spatial scale - decreased development marked by diminished spatial and building scale; in spatial organization - privatization of space; in land-use balance - commercialization; and in aesthetic character - pluralization of styles [9].

The characteristics of the urban forms in the “informational,” “post-industrial” city have changed due to the growth of the retail, consumer services; entertainment; and tourism [10] which leads to the commercialization of the city fabric, especially in downtowns. The power of private capital to shape space has suddenly increased and the role of the public sector has declined. This shift has increased inequities and led to the growing privatization of urban spaces [11].

The political normalization brought the inflow of international capital, which had an effect on the building boom trend up to the recent financial crisis. Under such circumstances, both the physical remains and the lessons of previous uncompleted modernisations seem superior to the current situation, both in terms of concrete concepts of urban development, as well as the dominant politics of space that are ever more narrowing the realm of the public good.
Spatial changes have also been followed by changes in culture and with appearance “postmodern” aesthetics. New spatial formats connected with the free market and Western capitalism are often hastily implemented to supersede buildings connected with the old system.

The occasional outstanding achievements in contemporary design show the continuity of architectural culture, while research into the built environment is turning to analyses of phenomena such as informal building and the active involvement of citizens in decision making about city development. There has been a kind of about turn in the understanding of the role of urbanisation as against the ideology of the socialist period: pure pragmatism is the only motive for urban development, and any critical counter proposals take on a utopian character [12].

4. Conclusion

Architecture is experiencing transition processes in parallel with the society. The reason behind the post-socialist transition is the aim to leave communist ideology, this change is: political, economic, institutional and change of actors - various interest groups [8]. Namely, the post-socialist transition and implementation of socio-political and economic reforms had an enormous impact on urban development and architecture. But, transformation of urban form takes considerable amount of time, while its short-term results are difficult to evaluate [13].

After the fall down of socialism the appearance of the cities in South-Eastern Europe has changed substantially in many aspects. Following idea of post-socialism as a “double transition,” Hirt (2006) identifies: local or post-socialist processes (marked by decreased development and diminished spatial scale - unique to post-socialist cities), and global or capitalist process (suburban growth, spatial privatization, and stylistic pluralism - which are similar to processes in capitalist cities).

In the Balkan region, the life and management of settlements changed drastically. The mechanisms for the production of spatial forms are now based on the market allocation of resources and operate within the globalizing world economy. Much of that can be considered as typical developments of post-socialist cities. But their historical subtexts and their economic and political situation during the last years had specific effects on the Balkan cities. To some degree, this separates them from other post-socialist cities in Eastern and Central Europe.

Many rudiments of today's architectural and planning thinking have been planted in the socialist period. Historically, modernism and socialism developed hand in hand. Yet the roots of “post-socialist post-modernism”, to take one example, can be traced back to 1980s, if not earlier. This raises the questions about the relation between the architectural dissent under
socialism and post-socialist architecture mainstream. In some instances, the value of buildings and urban plans from socialist period is being rediscovered today.

References


