

SPATIAL AND FUNCTIONAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE CITY CENTER STRUCTURE IN THE PROCESS OF TRANSITION

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Abstract. *Goal of this paper is to point to the ambivalent influence of transition process on the urban environments. The phenomenon of "transition" is defined as complex, multilayered process followed by new market and social principles. By observing the chronological order of changes which occurred in the city morphology, it gives recommendations for overcoming the city center identity crisis as the most significant public city space. Through definition and reconsideration of spatial and functional structure of the city center in the context of modern influences of the transition process, this paper emphasizes the elements which could be input in a direct or indirect way into the future strategies and plans. Accordingly, it proposes a set of measures for possible redefinition of the existing concept of the city centers and its adaptation to the demands of the time ahead.*

Key words: *city center, transition, transformation, restructuring, urban planning.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The circumstances in which the states of our region developed in the process of post-communistic transformation represent a large challenge for those who endeavor to comprehend the essence of these models. A prominent diversity of heritage and great variation of context in which the states developed in the course of this period are a basis for their further development. This task is even made more difficult if the analysis is carried out at the level of the cities of these states, as there emerges a yet wider spectrum of various modalities of changes. In global perspective, international, national and local policies in the last decade of 20th century, and dependency on the communistic past, exerted an extremely big influence on the post-communistic urban development. Such circumstances lead to an extremely high rate of reforms in many areas: privatization of social housing, restitution of property, commercialization of city centers, decentralization of housing and retail outlets according to new market conditions, as well as in public infrastructural in-

vestments. The treatment of cities as main initiators of economic growth during the communistic period, their importance as catalysts of political and economic reforms during the transitional period as well as the role they played in the modern development of their regions in the recent history is irrefutable [4]. For this reason, it is not surprising, that the challenges faced by the countries in transition in the transformation process are most clearly articulated within the area of the city and its traditional fabric.

The countries which were closer to the prospering European Union in spatial and traditional terms had benefited from their neighbors not only in the post-communistic period, but throughout whole modern history. The ties realized with them for centuries, via commercial and cultural exchange, got reinforced after 1989. The exposure of the transition countries to the forces of the global market, from the start of 1990's aggravated the international discrepancies in the region, giving a strong forward impetus to the leaders of the post-communistic reforms, while those countries which were slower to implement reforms, had only a humble benefit from this global market. The level of foreign investments obtained by post-communistic countries from the beginning of the transitional process, further widened the gap between them [2]. The transitional experience demonstrated that the most prominent progress occurred in those countries whose state institutions directly took part in planning and coordination of development of global competition and in attracting new foreign investments.

The crisis of the 90's of the last century, plummeting living standard and grave economic situation were the causes of neglecting of many activities in life, in order to satisfy bare necessities. In our country, as well as in surrounding countries, the transition process is accompanied by collapse of social identity. This collapse is prevalently manifested as problems in survival of a devastated and impoverished society. However, its origin is not of material but rather of spiritual nature. Frequent changes of ideological principles resulted in severe consequences, thus the transition period is marked by omnipresent vacuum in value system of the society. This comprehensive erosion of human consciousness and interests for many aspects of life, certainly reflects in habits, usage and perception of space. The problem mainly occurs in the context of urban-cultural identity. All these circumstances lead to impacts of extensive proportions on the entire urban space, and especially on the city centers. In such spatial strategy, everything is possible and everything is desirable. The consequence is (in)ability of city centers to establish a visual harmony with the surrounding. The non-existing dwelling culture and the culture of space using contributed to the loss of identity and formation of new value systems. Disrespect of the law, basic architectonic and designing principles, and negligence of public space both by the local authorities and professionals gave rise to a hasty group of interested individuals inspired only by a potential for a quick profit.

2. SPATIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CITY AND ITS CENTER IN THE COUNTRIES WITH COMMUNIST AND SOCIALIST SYSTEMS

In order to understand the processes occurring inside the urban space during restructuring and in the region during the transition period, it is necessary to primarily consider the overall spatial characteristics of a communist city. One of the most prominent differences of a communist and a capitalist city is that in the former case, when assigning the

land for the development and infrastructural investments, no heed was paid to market principles. Such concept, in combination with the principles of centralized planning applied by an authoritarian regime, created common urban spatial structures characterized by the following spatial forms and functions [1]:

- The city center which dominates over the high-density urban fabric, and where the retail, offices and governmental functions are concentrated.
- The core of older housing districts of high densities which are surrounding the city center is radially intersected by commercial facilities along the main arteries all the way to periphery.
- The core of the residential zones was surrounded large mono-functional belt composed of housing, industrial complexes and large peripheral parks.

It must be emphasized that articulation of rigid spatial structure took almost half a century, while transformation as a process occurring in transition, (particularly in the most dynamically reformed countries in the region), took considerably less time to realize its principles.

The beginning of the initial phase of transition is characterized by: introduction of market principles when choosing the real estate investment location (which brought about important changes in the future land use) and relocation of population in the urban city fabric. Urban restructuring becomes a natural response on the action of new economic, technological and social forces. These processes of spatial transformation were marked by [6]:

- disintegration of mono-oriented model of communist/socialist city as a result of decentralization of commercial and office activities. This process brought about diversification of an earlier mono-functional concept of city development and the emergence of secondary centers outside the main city core;
- transition from smaller poly-functional segments of spatial concept of the center to larger forms of mono-functional zones outside traditional city fabric;
- intensification of commercial and, to lesser extent, housing gentrification of a city center, as a consequence of a notable increase of land of office space rent in these central locations. This increase caused migration of the population with lower incomes towards the periphery where the low-budget districts are situated.

These significant changes exerted an irrefutable influence in formation of a new structure in the city center systems which are becoming an image of living habits and activities of the new age of transition.

2.1. Spatial characteristics and changes that have shaped the development of the cities in the former Yugoslavia

In comparison to other post-socialist cities, our cities had the best starting position, as the former SFRJ had some elements of market economy. Also, infrastructure in the cities was better. However, the politics since 1987 and the consequential ensuing wars brought the cities of Serbia to the level of the cities of Romania, Bulgaria and Albania. All these countries have in common the slow tempo of post-communistic restructuring, slow establishment of new types of public control and the development element characteristic to the Third World countries, primarily the significant presence of illegal building and bazaar economy [9]. In order to view the position of the contemporary Serbian cities, it is neces-

sary to point out the specifics of transformation process of our society. The blocked transformation of Yugoslav society is characterized by the introduction of political pluralism, which was followed by centralization of government, and not by decentralization and very limited introduction of market elements [10]. SR of Yugoslavia was in an economic and political isolation, thus no liberalization of foreign trade occurred until the country opened up and joined the European network of cities. Due to political and economic instability, the foreign investments were almost non-existent in the 1990's. The economic elite in these circumstances was closely connected by personal ties and common interests with the political elite, or was actually its part.

In the period when Slobodan Milosevic was in power, a certain vacuum in architectural form, because his project was "creation of territory, and not of architectural forms"[3]. Pluralism and serious social problems of those years, reoriented the relationship towards superficial and mostly illegitimate building practice combining the elements of illegal and unplanned construction, without any notion of what architecture is as serious conceptual or professional practice. The areas constructed in such a way, became an almost most interesting and inspiring fact of Serbian architecture of the 90's which was studied as a phenomenon with attention and interest by anyone visiting Serbia, and especially professionals from the West who in their practice encounter notably strict and well arranged town planning and formal regulations which do not permit surprises and such uncontrolled spatial phenomena.

3. TRANSFORMATION OF SPATIAL AND FUNCTIONAL STRUCTURE OF A CITY CENTRE THROUGH SERBIAN PHASES OF TRANSITION

A new age came for formation of the concept of the city center, and the bearer of change was in the first place the private sector. One of the most important segments which must be paid special attention is the expansion of office and retail outlet space which had a major influence on the changes in the structure of the post-communistic city. In all the countries in transition, the tertiary activities (services, trade, business) were marked by an intensive growth, which resulted in considerable spatial changes which are the consequence of transformation of a standard concept of organization of central activities. These changes are characterized by a great dynamics, aggressiveness towards urban structures, adaptability to poor existing conditions and by meandering of the regulations in pursuit of most varied interests. Such expansion resulted in numerous, visible spatial and structural deviations which represent the new traits of the city. The new concepts produced in this manner can serve as an insight of the population needs which should be articulated by planning into existing or remaining city areas. As sociologist M. Petrovic claims: "this is a process of partial and inconsistently conducted liberalization of socio-economic conditions where the tertiary activities increased because of the drastic decrease of overall economic might, high level of urban unemployment a large disturbance and contradiction in governing of urban development."

In terms of the spatial changes, new builders develop new action strategies which very often can be termed as "superprivate"[3]. For the buildings produced in the framework of this strategy, there is no need for new infrastructure or public area. Such private "pixel" construction does not require nor encourage development. It easily fits into obsolete ur-

ban plans and leads a parasitic existence in the already existing environment. Such construction followed the low cost logic – low equipment level, inexistent transport access for parking and supplying. The outlets and offices tenants in the commercial compounds of the city center do not offer diverse and "more advanced" services and function. Small family business and trading units with no recognizable identity are dominating – a substitution for already devastated and deserted large state-owned retail stores known as department stores.

After the democratic changes of October 2000, a relative political stability set in, thus the legislative opened up for the development of new forms of spatial concepts, but significant foreign investments occurred only after 2004. The biggest problem for the investors was that building land was still not privatized, but it had been worked on in the previous period, and the situation became quite different. This is the period when an entirely new logic of positioning and formation of centers was established, through shopping centers and hypermarkets which comprised a single, integrated and controlled management of diverse functions and facilities of a commercial entity. New corporate shopping malls grow into larger and improved structures which should offer a quality better than mere shopping. These are places of entertainment, socialization, of exchanging products, emotions, ideas, money and energies.

3.1. Spatial concept transformation of microrayons centers on the example of the City of Nis

The transformation of the spatial concept of city centers unfolded in the cities of Serbia under very difficult economic and political conditions, and was followed both with transformation of traditional concepts of centers from the period of socialism, and with the new logic of formation of spatial concepts characteristics for this phase of city development. The main characteristic of the city centers in transition (and the city as a whole) is fragmentation of space, in which the structures are constructed in an uncontrolled manner, observing only the market laws, negating natural ambiance values. Precisely this fragmentation of built areas is recognized through the logic of positioning of new functional structures and activities. A more detailed analysis, on the example of the city of Nis, which is a city of medium size, demonstrated that period of twenty years of transition had a significant influence on microrayon city centers. This influence, through various forms of changes managed to differentiate three basic types of present-day microrayon centers.

The first type is represented by microrayon city centers from the period of socialism which experienced its transition through:

- The trend of conversion, adaptation and extensions of existing structures (representatives of these centers are: Trg radničkih saveta, Palilula and Trijanga),
- The trend of construction of temporary and illegal structures (representatives of these centers are: Trg Svetog Save and Trošarina).

All the city centers formed until the beginning of the 90' of the 20th (the initial phase of the transition) were caught by this form of transformation .

The second type represents microrayon city centers which are an immediate "product" of the initial phase of transition. Represent of this type of center is Durlan. Their location, distribution of functions and spatial-functional organization, as well as the absence of town planning and architectural formation are based on the basic principles of entrepreneur know-how architecture.

The third type represents microrayon centers of the developed phase of transition constituted by modern principles of distribution of functions and activities, and formation of a single functional system, which is representative of the newly formed center Duvanište.

This leads to an irrefutable conclusion that the developed phase of transition brings about a new period in the development of city centers, both in the territory of Nis and as a general phenomenon which occurred in other medium-sized cities in our country.

From previous research, it is evident that, if the ambiance and quality of a traditional city center as a champion of living quality in the old city fabric are to be preserved, those derelict areas "taken care" by the city (most frequently it turns out that none is taking care of them) must be regenerated and healed. Such "healing" procedures must not be singular, temporary and pre-electoral actions (the so called "good-will" manifestations) but they must be systemic, strategic and institutional actions.

4. CONCLUSION

A contemporary city in our region, represents a structure overrun by a galloping process of transitional changes, and as such is at the watershed between the traditional and contemporary globalistic model. This historical crossroads is an unconventional challenge, and in the face of it, the consequences for the city space in the future cannot be either fully identified or foreseen. What must be feared is a hasty and blind acceptance of new models. The work on revival and return of identity and motivation of the city centers area, which became alienated from their essential character by the transition period, would be a necessary intervention in order to support any notion of sustainable existence and development of our cities. The city centers, as nodal points, have a significant role in achieving the economic and political prestige, thus becoming main focus of urban transformation, which in turn initiates entire urban development.

As architecture is a corporate structure, whose fourth dimension is a change in time, this future, which is also the future of the city, would have to be built through new hybrid structures. These structures should be "produced" by mixing activities, because a dangerous sort of structure for the future is exactly the mono-functional structure. When planning the new concept, from the outset the problem of already existing structures of the city should be tackled. It must be borne in mind that it is not possible to erase the past, and that this erasure would be the biggest mistake and very frequent structural weakness of new concepts both of the Serbian society and Serbian cities, as very often the communist project reemerges in various forms in new partnerships of a deregulated state and all sorts of local and foreign protagonists. Annulment of the extant state of affairs would require considerable time and finances, and positive circumstances would be unpredictable. This suggests that the prospects of future real progress will depend on the efforts and capacity of the profession to restore the existing potentials, to adequately improve and actively transform adapting to the future demands, with obligatory observation of regulations and value principles.

The only successful strategy is that offering new concepts for the already existing and for newly planned structures. As architecture is not only form, but interface of public and private space, where it is necessary to include all its other aspects, it is possible, in the development of the future typologies of city centers, to provide a scheme of basic layers of

spatial "hybridization" of activities which would serve to the city in transition, depending on whether it is an already existing or future center.

The first principle would represent a potential urban recycling of already existing centers, of their spatial-functional housing organization, by addition of all the activities which are currently missing, and their positioning and overlapping along the vertical direction, with an obligatory presence of cultural facilities across all layers.

The second principle referring to building of new structures offers a potential solution for further structural improvement of the designs of large centers which are almost exclusively based on the functions of commerce, catering and business. This is a characteristic of new transitional centers, both in our country and in the neighboring countries passing through the similar phases of transformation. Such solution would include the inclusion of cavities in the solid bodies of present-day structures. These "hollow" spaces would be the public areas, and areas for cultural activities. The housing functions, which traditionally occur in central zones of our cities, can be organized at higher floor of central zone structures; however the principle of introduction of cavities should be observed – for these housing units those would be the accompanying inner yards and public and recreational area.

As a reflection of topical post modernistic logic of space management which dictates individuality, particularity and difference, a contemporary city and its traditional fabric, are striving to formulate the best possible response on current problems and needs of the users. The city area as an extremely complex and polysemic artifact, utilizes urban memory placing it into a new dynamic context of globalization, attempting to change its meaning and identity, with a goal to adapt, as much as possible, to the new spatiotemporal context and character of global tendencies. However, in order to keep the strategies for further development of our cities operative, one should firstly redirect our attention from the physical space to the domains of politics and culture, to possibly understand the apparently confronted factors which characterised them and resolve the momentary spatial conflicts at their roots.

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TRANSFORMACIJA PROSTORNO-FUNKCIONALNE STUKTURE GRADSKOG CENTRA U PROCESU TRANZICIJE

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Cilj ovog rada je da ukaže na ambivalentnost uticaja koju je period tranzicije doneo urbanim sredinama. Fenomen "tranzicije" definiše se kao kompleksan, višeslojni proces koji je praćen novim tržišnim i društvenim principima. Hronološkim praćenjem promena koje su nastale u morfologiji grada u radu se daju preporuke za prevazilaženje krize identiteta gradskog centra kao najznačajnijeg javnog gradskog prostora. Kroz definisanje i preispitivanje prostorno-funkcionalne strukture gradskog centra u kontekstu savremenih uticaja procesa tranzicije, ističu se elementi koji bi se direktno ili indirektno mogli ugraditi u buduće strategije ili planove. Shodno tome predlaže se set mera za moguće redefinisavanje postojećeg koncepta gradskih centara i njegovo približavanje zahtevati vremena koje je pred nama.

Ključne reči: gradski centar, tranzicija, transformacija, restrukturiranje, urbanističko planiranje.