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History, Memory and Everyday Environmentalism. The Case of New Belgrade

Abstract. The authors study experiences of the urban environment in New Belgrade and argue for an understanding of how environmental movements were mobilised and mediated by urban environments. In particular, they focus on the perceptions that have emerged through historical processes of state-driven urban development and urban appropriation by the population when the state retreated. Today, future visions of the city-to-be intersect with the lived reality of contradictions between memory, the production of public space, and its marketisation. Thus by engaging with memories of the production of the urban environment, the difficulties faced in attempts at redefining environmental relations within the city are highlighted and a broader sense of what can constitute an environmental movement is achieved.

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Introduction

In this paper, we argue that the growth and effectiveness of environmental movements in the western Balkans needs to be assessed in relation to the social, political, and material histories in which they emerged. In line with our example of urban development in New Belgrade (*Novi Beograd*) and local memories of its construction during the socialist era as well as its reinvention in post-socialist times, we demonstrate that specific urban histories shape today's perceptions of both the built environment and the possibilities for environmental activism in New Belgrade.

Mario Diani defined environmental movements as networks that involve individuals and organisations in collective action on the basis of a shared iden-

tity.¹ This emphasises a link between environmental movements and a rise in environmental consciousness. From this perspective, social movements incorporate both formal organisations and instances of spontaneous protest, but they are not reducible to either.² Much effort has gone into explaining the kind of ties that characterise such networks and what makes the movements actually 'move'.³ However, challenges to the assumption of a universal environmental consciousness arise from the recognition of a 'diversity of environmentalisms'.⁴ Engaging with this diversity entails understanding environmental movements in relation to the particular settings in which they emerge and to practical experiences of everyday environmentalism. Environmental politics emerges in this context as an expression of people's relationship to their local environment. It can be explored through people's interpretations of their ability to act on or through the environment and produce areas they want to live in. This approach focuses on local forms of civic participation rather than ideal types of environmental movements.

Our paper emerges from within a call for theories that address the social and cultural specificities of Central and East European (CEE) contexts of everyday environmentalism.⁵ Belgrade is a city archetype in which these theories can be reflected upon. In the former Yugoslavia, the environmental challenges that led to public outrage at the end of the 1980s posed a fundamental question to the urbanisation and industrialisation model extolled during socialism. Urban environmentalism in the western Balkans did not reproduce the processes of environmental awareness in other countries.⁶ Rather, it has emerged in relation to a history of local participation in the construction of urban neighbourhoods and to Yugoslavia's violent dissolution during the 1990s. These memories and experiences shape citizens' actions and ambitions in the contemporary period.

¹ Mario Diani, The Concept of Social Movement, *The Sociological Review* 40, No. 1 (1992), 1-25.

² Christopher Rootes / Robert Brulle, Environmental Movements, in: David A. Snow et al., eds, *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, Hoboken/NJ 2014, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm464/full>.

³ Clare Saunders, Using Social Network Analysis to Explore Social Movements. A Relational Approach, *Social Movement Studies* 6, No. 3 (2007), 227-243; Monica Di Gregorio, Networking in Environmental Movement Organisation Coalitions. Interest, Values or Discourse?, *Environmental Politics* 21, No. 1 (2012), 1-25.

⁴ Brian Doherty / Timothy Doyle, Beyond Borders. Transnational Politics, Social Movements and Modern Environmentalisms, *Environmental Politics* 15, No. 5 (2006), 697-712.

⁵ Michael L. Smith / Petr Jehlička, Environmental Values in Central and Eastern Europe. Perspectives from East and West, *Czech Sociological Review* 48, No. 3 (2012), 609-619, http://sreview.soc.cas.cz/uploads/ebbf4bc94e06be3c5120a0f85278b46001a58da1_609-619.pdf. All internet references were accessed on 10 September 2015.

⁶ William Markham, *Environmental Organizations in Modern Germany. Hardy Survivors in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, New York et al. 2013.

This article draws from insights generated through the *BG LOG: Memorijalni arhiv Beograda* (Memory Archive of Belgrade) project, led by artist Nela Milić and run by *Kulturklammer. Centre for Cultural Interactions*, a Belgrade-based civil society organisation with the mission to incite citizens' participation and to activate cultural resources in sustainable development through implementing diverse actions in the field of culture. In 2013, *Kulturklammer* ran a series of BG LOG workshops to bring together Belgraders to reminisce about their city's changes and to record these shared memories. The project included workshops, performances, and interviews with local residents as a means to support community cohesion and engage citizens in the development of their neighbourhoods. The project entailed collaboration and dialogue between senior citizens and young people. Participants were recruited through local secondary schools, pensioners' centres and word of mouth. The initial phase of the project established twelve workshops with 25 participants. The second phase involved 100 participants in another fourteen more loosely structured workshops. The structure of the workshops and methods applied—group and individual interviews, discussions, narration, creative writing, practical work with digital media—were defined in advance, but the team of three researchers was responsive to the needs and interests of the participants. A compendium of collective memories was compiled and made available online in an interactive map.⁷ Furthermore, as a means to visually illustrate these memories; images from a digital collection created by an informal Facebook group called 'Old pictures of New Belgrade' (*Stare Slike Novog Beograda*) are used to underline personal reflections in this article. The group is a forum for Facebook users to post their own photos of the area and provides an informal record of how New Belgrade has developed.

The development of New Belgrade was a key topic in the BG LOG project. Today, New Belgrade includes large residential neighbourhoods, business districts, and shopping malls, but the area had been a vacant marshland until the end of the 1940s. Older participants who had lived through the development of New Belgrade discussed its construction, its integration into the city as a thriving suburb, and its decline in the post-socialist period. These reflections on the area's evolution showed people's personal connections to the political project of building socialism. Their memories also showed how people experienced the decline and collapse of the socialist political economy and, in so doing, framed contemporary perceptions of the urban environment and possibilities to mobilise.

Our analysis of the BG LOG memories shows three periods of engagement with the built environment in New Belgrade: building socialism after the Second

⁷ BG LOG: Memorijalni Arhiv Beograda, Mapa, <http://www.kulturklammer.org/bglog-mapa/>.

World War, the end of socialism in the late 1980s, and the popular movements that have shaped the post-Milošević era in the early 2000s. The memories show that history influences contemporary perceptions of the urban environment as well as opinions about what action can be deployed in the current context. This allows us to discuss an urban politics of the built environment which provides the material basis for the establishment of civic relationships but lacks a homogeneous shared identity and a strong capacity for action, in contrast to Diani's definition of social movements. BG LOG has been an activist project that emphasised multiple views and identities as a means to build a collectively owned city.

In the following, we first situate our argument in the context of debates about mobilisation in the urban environment in the western Balkans. We then include a partial and highly context-dependent history of citizen participation in the construction of New Belgrade, as revealed through the personal histories from the BG LOG project. Thirdly, we analyse contemporary perceptions of the urban environment and how doorstep issues inspire mundane forms of environmental activism. And finally, we examine how memories of past actions may help reignite a sentiment of care for the challenges posed by the need to cope with what the neighbourhood represents today.

Mobilisation and the Urban Environment in the Western Balkans

The political project of building socialism in postwar Eastern Europe was bound up with processes of industrialisation and urbanisation, leading French and Hamilton to argue that socialism produced specifically socialist urban environments.⁸ The end of socialism has been loosely interpreted as a struggle over environmental issues resulting from the industrialisation and urbanisation of this period. Pavlínek and Pickles have argued that

if the velvet revolutions that swept across CEE in 1989 were, in the first instance, struggles for democracy, they were also at root cries of desperation from people fearful for the deterioration of the environment and their children's and their own health.⁹

The rapid deterioration of the environment combined with the lack of institutional capacity to address the visible problems and involve citizens in environmental decision making led to 'a gradual groundswell of dissent over natural

⁸ Richard Antony French / F. E. Ian Hamilton, eds, *The Socialist City. Spatial Structure and Urban Policy*, New York 1979.

⁹ Petr Pavlínek / John Pickles, *Environmental Transitions. Transformation and Ecological Defence in Central and Eastern Europe*, London, New York 2000, 127.

resource use and ecological pollution that would culminate in the late 1980s'.¹⁰ What is less understood is what kind of environmental politics were played out in urban neighbourhoods where environmental experiences were tied to a number of mundane 'doorstep' issues such as noise, waste, and the control of access to space. By the 1980s, these civic experiences of doorstep environmental issues were interpreted as a manifestation of the inadequacy of institutions to distribute resources justly alongside the social impact of the contraction of the state-managed economy.

The environment was a point of dissent within the broader call for democratisation.¹¹ Yet, when international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and institutions linked to the European Union flocked to the Western Balkans in the late 1990s they often assumed a landscape empty of social mobilisation, let alone around environmental issues, and lamented the absence of civil society.¹² International NGOs advocating environmental action ran courses for would-be activists, which brought in alien concepts, such as environmental justice (the formulation of environmental issues in relation to civil rights), which were readily adopted in the newly established environmental organisations. The work of international NGOs in the western Balkans should be commended where their involvement in environmental action has clearly improved the wellbeing of citizens.¹³ However, some commentators have pointed out that they played a role in the reformulation of environmental policy objectives away from local concerns. Imported foreign discourses obliterated the quotidian but nevertheless effective local experiences of grassroots mobilisation within specific environments, to the detriment of local environmental knowledge.¹⁴

Driven by the policy requirements set by the prospect of accession to the European Union, debates on environmental mobilisation in Central and East European countries have focused on the changing role of civil society and the extent to which existing policies have been effective to improve of environmental quality. The twin histories of the region—ecology and environmental politics—are described in three steps related to 1) the socialist legacy; 2) the transition experience; and 3) the contemporary conjuncture and aspirations, including

¹⁰ Saska Petrova, *Communities in Transition. Protected Nature and Local People in Eastern and Central Europe*, Farnham et al. 2014, 86.

¹¹ JoAnn Carmin / Adam Fagan, Environmental Mobilisation and Organisations in Post-Socialist Europe and the Former Soviet Union, *Environmental Politics* 19, No. 5 (2010), 689-707.

¹² Adam Fagan, Global-Local Linkage in the Western Balkans. The Politics of Environmental Capacity Building in Bosnia-Herzegovina, *Political Studies* 56, No. 3 (2008), 629-652.

¹³ Vanesa Castán Broto, Environmental Conflicts, Research Projects and the Generation of Collective Expectations. A Case Study of a Land Regeneration Project in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Public Understanding of Science* 21, No. 4 (2012), 432-446.

¹⁴ JoAnn Carmin / Petr Jehlička, By the Masses or for the Masses? The Transformation of Voluntary Action in the Czech Union for Nature Protection, *Voluntas. International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 16, No. 4 (2005), 397-416.

the lack of contemporary attention to environmental issues in the region from within academic debates. However, while there are some commonalities in the countries of CEE, empirical evidence has demonstrated the need to take a nuanced view on the diversity of transformations, both because of their distinct legacies and the way multiple transitions played out.

In the western Balkans, the socialist legacy relates to how the centralised management of the economy and the intensity of exploitation of natural resources led to widespread pollution, on the one hand, and the extent to which the lack of participation of citizens in government led to a generalised apathy with regard to the environment, on the other. Western Balkan cities exemplify the best and the worst aspects of environmental management under the socialist system. As industry concentrated in cities, these suffered the worst share of environmental pollution. Simultaneously, there were extensive investments in public transport and district heating systems. Urban form as such was tightly controlled into compact spatial structures.¹⁵ In relation to citizen participation, the former Yugoslavia maintained a system which existed outside the Soviet sphere of interest and, in comparison with other states in the region, it was more open to economic competition and bottom-up in governance, with a specific variety of self-management.¹⁶ In this setting, a relatively active environmental conservation movement developed.¹⁷ Carmin and Fagan argue that by the late 1980s a division had emerged between party-sponsored environmental organisations and radical pockets of activism that linked environmental pollution to structural problems in the political system.

As the state and the idea of Yugoslavia fell apart, different processes shaped civil society. In Bosnia after the end of the civil war in 1995, many NGOs operated under the assumption that the conflict had 'destroyed any vestiges of scientific know-how, conservationism and collective action worth salvaging from the socialist period that could be positively deployed in defense of the environment'.¹⁸ In Serbia, civil society became visible at the end of the 1990s with a wave of social mobilisation that led to the fall of Slobodan Milošević. International support for civil society development was channeled through human rights organisations. Some commentators at the turn of the millennium expressed their concerns about the extent to which internationally sponsored NGOs actually captured public sentiments, although cross-country research shows that perceptions of NGOs present different ambiguities which should

¹⁵ Petrova, *Communities in Transition*.

¹⁶ Petrova, *Communities in Transition*.

¹⁷ Carmin / Fagan, *Environmental Mobilisation and Organisations*.

¹⁸ Fagan, *Global-Local Linkage in the Western Balkans*.

be read within their operating context.¹⁹ Yet, with respect to environmental movements, the assumption of an empty governance landscape was deployed to the detriment of existing forms of mobilisation and environmental knowledge that defied the analyses of what kind of civil society is effective in the context of Western European countries.²⁰ For example, democratisation efforts for the most part 'ignored the mass organisations, state-sponsored interest groups, and quasi-independent associations in existence for many years'.²¹

The European Union has had a central impact on the formation of environmental movements in Central and Eastern Europe, influencing both the topics and the means for activism.²² Moreover, the EU has not just influenced environmental policies, but also national politics through, for example, conditionality mechanisms.²³ Joining the European Union provided impetus for mobilisation, even in the countries in the western Balkans, where accession prospects were rather uncertain.²⁴ Yet, the forms of civil society promoted by the European Union, which are recognised in the application of tools such as environmental impact assessment, have not provoked a move away from command and control models of environmental management.²⁵ Moreover, western-style NGOs have not mobilised a great wave of public support and, in order to survive, many have instead become think tanks engaged in advocacy and consultancy and moved away from grass roots work. People who were already organised in networks and local groups felt excluded from these new forms of civil society. These dynamics have halted political opportunities for environmental activism.²⁶

Are there forms of environmental mobilisation outside these conventional models of civil society? An understanding of cities as shaped by 'everyday urbanism' focuses on urban citizens as the key agents of change in the built

¹⁹ Åse B. Grødeland, Public Perceptions of Non-Governmental Organisations in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39, No. 2 (2006), 221-246.

²⁰ Fagan, Global-Local Linkage in the Western Balkans.

²¹ Carmin / Jehlička, By the Masses or for the Masses?, 397.

²² Brendan Hicks, Setting Agendas and Shaping Activism. EU Influence on Central and Eastern European Environmental Movements, *Environmental Politics* 13, No. 1 (2004), 216-233.

²³ Adam Fagan, EU Conditionality and Governance in Bosnia & Herzegovina. Environmental Regulation of the Trans-European Road Network, *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, No. 10 (2011), 1889-1909.

²⁴ Pavlínek / Pickles, Environmental Transitions.

²⁵ Carmin / Fagan, Environmental Mobilisation and Organisations; Adam Fagan / Indraneel Sircar, Compliance Without Governance. The Role of NGOs in Environmental Impact Assessment Processes in Bosnia-Herzegovina, *Environmental Politics* 19, No. 4 (2010), 599-616.

²⁶ Adam Fagan / Indraneel Sircar, Environmental Politics in the Western Balkans. River Basin Management and Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) Activity in Herzegovina, *Environmental Politics* 19, No. 5 (2010), 808-830.

environment.²⁷ Citizens' routine actions co-evolve with the urban ecologies that sustain the city. For example, research on everyday experiences on environmental pollution in Bosnia and Herzegovina has shown how communities mobilise using a range of resources from individual experiences of the landscape to international discourses of environmental justice.²⁸ Similarly, this mobilisation can be found in other urban areas in the western Balkans.

Burningham and Thrush argue that environmentalism does not exist as a separate area of concern but is intricately bound up with 'wider assessments of local life' and understandings of one's own ability to act.²⁹ This approach is particularly suited to the context of Belgrade today, where broad disillusionment with the political elite and the continued economic crisis constrain the possibilities to act. Thus, in the following section, we provide an account of the original construction of New Belgrade, building upon the memories of individuals. People's lives are tied up with the development of the district, from its conception as a symbol of socialism, its configuration into a residential area in which socialist and market mechanisms coexisted, and its further mutations during the transition period. As we will show, shared memories of participation in processes of urban change have created forms of activism that still resonate with today's calls for mobilisation within the urban setting of New Belgrade.

History, Memory, Participation and Environmental Consciousness

Radna Akcija and the Construction of New Belgrade

New Belgrade is the largest borough of Belgrade, occupying an area of 41,000 hectares that is separated from the old city by the river Sava. Approximately 230,000 inhabitants live in housing estates of prefabricated buildings constructed mainly between 1948 and 1990. Green space surrounds the residential buildings, and wide boulevards provide the thoroughfares for public buses, trams, and trolley buses. The buildings vary in quality, with those in the peripheral areas and near industrial zones being of lower quality than those in the central

²⁷ Cf. Jennifer Robinson, *Ordinary Cities. Between Modernity and Development*, London et al. 2006; Abdoumalig Simone, *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar. Movements at the Crossroads*, London et al. 2010.

²⁸ Vanesa Castán Broto et al., *Stigma and Attachment. Performance of Identity in an Environmentally Degraded Place*, *Society and Natural Resources* 23, No. 10 (2010), 952-968; Vanesa Castán Broto, *Exploring the Lay/Expert Divide. The Attribution of Responsibilities for Coal Ash Pollution in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina*, *Local Environment* 17, No. 8 (2012), 879-895; Vanesa Castán Broto, *Symbolic Violence and the Politics of Environmental Pollution Science. The Case of Coal Ash Pollution in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, *Antipode* 45, No. 3 (2013), 621-640.

²⁹ Kate Burningham / Diana Thrush, *Experiencing Environmental Inequality. The Everyday Concerns of Disadvantaged Groups*, *Housing Studies* 18, No. 4 (2003), 517-536, 518.

areas.³⁰ The construction of New Belgrade was a highly symbolic project during the socialist era, but it has been an area in continuous change. The area was designed to house a mix of social classes, but large areas were developed for high status groups such as the military.³¹ As Serbia has joined global markets since the 2000s, large boulevards and open spaces have become sites for new shopping centres, and the neighbourhood has become the city's new central business district.

The planning of New Belgrade began in 1946 and from the outset was designed to be a socialist alternative to established cities of previous political orders.³² Its development had a 'symbolic charge [which] greatly outweighed its practical necessity'.³³ At the time, postwar Belgrade was in ruins with large numbers of homeless, and the country had few construction materials at its disposal, and a low level of mechanisation. Building a new socialist city 'in the middle of a flood-plane'³⁴ turned resources away from efforts to repair and rebuild the old city. However, the construction served another role: to create and celebrate the new Yugoslav workers. Work brigades recruited from across the new federation were mobilised to provide the labour force. This is how citizens first put themselves into the picture of rebuilding New Belgrade (Figure 1).

In the postwar period, citizen labour played a key role. It was used to create the physical infrastructure required for industrialisation and contributed to an official discourse which celebrated the superhuman abilities of idealised socialist citizens. In the Soviet model, mass participation in manual labour was known as shock work. Susan Buck-Morss explained its symbolic function: Shock work was executed in rushes or 'storms' by a large manual labour force who aimed to produce awe inducing constructions or production runs.³⁵ The construction of New Belgrade began during the period of Soviet influence with an initial drive which saw 100,000 people working on the site over three years.³⁶ For Yugoslavia, this type of project created both infrastructure and national myths about the

³⁰ Mina Petrović, Diversification of Urban Neighbourhoods. The Case Study in New Belgrade, paper presented at the European Network for Housing Research (ENHR) International Conference, Rotterdam, 25-28 June 2007.

³¹ Petrović, Diversification of Urban Neighbourhoods.

³² Lilijana Blagojević, Novi Beograd oder die Hauptstadt von Niemandsland, *Stadtbauwelt* 47, No. 48 (2004), 34-41; English version Lilijana Blagojević, New Belgrade. The Capital of No-City's Land, *Art-e-Fact* 4 (2005), http://artefact.mi2.hr/_a04/lang_en/theory_blagojevic_en.htm.

³³ Vladimir Kulić, New Belgrade and Socialist Yugoslavia's Three Globalisations, *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 2, No. 2 (2014), 125-154, 129, DOI: 10.5117/HCM2014.2.KULI.

³⁴ Kulić, New Belgrade and Socialist Yugoslavia's Three Globalisations, 130.

³⁵ Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe. The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Cambridge/MA, London 2002.

³⁶ Blagojević, Novi Beograd oder die Hauptstadt von Niemandsland.



Figure 1: Labour action 'Banovo brdo' in 1959, a month of arranging Košutnjak. Source: private collection of Milica Popović-Milicević; copyright *Kulturklammer*, with courtesy.

(re)construction of the Yugoslav nation, celebrating the Yugoslav citizens who were rebuilding their war torn country.³⁷

In 1948, as the first foundations of New Belgrade were being dug, Yugoslavia broke from the Soviet Union and with this break came the need to distinguish Yugoslavia's politics. By the summer of 1950 there was a shift away from the Soviet model of shock labour towards principles of self-management. Yugoslav workers unions lobbied against the rhythm and mobility of shock work surges, and argued for more permanent employment within local areas. This move, Unkovski-Korica argues, was designed to put workers' councils (unions) at the centre of Yugoslavia's self-management system.³⁸ The newly invented economic system aimed to devolve political power away from Soviet-style centralism to smaller, local political units. The extent to which this was achieved remained a subject of debate.³⁹

Yugoslavia continued to use 'volunteer' working actions which sent students and workers around the country to work on infrastructure projects. These labour brigades were officially voluntary, although participation could also be

³⁷ Paul Waley, *From Modernist to Market Urbanism. The Transformation of New Belgrade, Planning Perspectives* 26, No. 2 (2011), 209-235.

³⁸ Vladimir Unkovski-Korica, *Workers' Councils in the Service of the Market. New Archival Evidence on the Origins of Self-Management in Yugoslavia 1948-1950, Europe-Asia Studies* 66, No. 1 (2014), 108-134.

³⁹ Milovan Đilas, *The New Class. An Analysis of the Communist System*, London 1957.

understood as mandatory, given the social and institutional pressure to participate. Through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Youth Working Actions (*Omladinska Radna Akcija*) built 'infrastructural milestones' such as railways, motorways, and, precisely, buildings in New Belgrade.⁴⁰ Such 'actions' took place during holidays and brought together young people from each Republic, mixing classes, ethnicities, urban, and rural communities to work and learn new skills.⁴¹

Participation in these youth labour actions was a key part of the memories of many BG LOG participants that were interviewed through 2013. Stana, who now lives in New Belgrade, explained how participating in youth actions in New Belgrade changed her own perceptions of landscape, in contrast to those of her father, for example, who lamented the loss of the rural environment. For those who lived in or near Belgrade and worked on the construction of New Belgrade, the city's changing environment provided a record of development. However, the new urban area did not erase the memories of previous rural landscapes, which had been built over.

Like Stana, other BG LOG participants understood New Belgrade in relation to their memories of the pre-urbanised landscape that it replaced. A married couple, Gojko and Novka, came from a village displaced by the development of New Belgrade and received a flat in compensation. They moved in and witnessed the dramatic change as the village became part of the city and farm labourers became factory workers. Gojko discussed the labour action from 1976 when his unit was built, and although he himself only participated occasionally in the action, he still remembered the celebrations that marked its completion. He remembered all the youth in the area being drawn in to hear live music and celebrate the end of the labour action. Both Stana's and Gojko's memories of labour actions were positive, with no mention of darker experiences of exhaustion and tuberculosis, which were also part of this enforced 'superhuman' or afterhours labour and mentioned by other participants.

Positive memories and nostalgia for this period also emerge in other publicly shared personal reflections, for example, in the Facebook groups that share stories of New Belgrade's construction. Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 8 are taken from a digital collection created by the Facebook group called 'Old pictures of New Belgrade' (*Stare Slike Novog Beograda*). The group's photos capture memories of the state's project of producing an industrialised country, and the capacity of local groups to contribute. This virtual group celebrates a sentiment of nostalgia for the Yugoslav version of socialism and for how a visible improvement of the quality of life was achieved during that period. This nostalgia celebrates

⁴⁰ Dragan Popović, Youth Labor Action (*Omladinska radna akcija*, ORA) as Ideological Holiday-Making, in: Hannes Grandits / Karin Taylor, eds, *Yugoslavia's Sunny Side. A History of Tourism in Socialism, 1950s-1980s*, Budapest 2010, 279-302, 280.

⁴¹ Popović, Youth Labor Action.



Figure 2: Workers in New Belgrade, pavilion 14/15. Source: Stare Slike Novog Beograda Facebook group, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Stare-slike-Novog-Beograda>. Used with permission.



Figure 3: New Belgrade rises. Source: Stare Slike Novog Beograda Facebook group, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Stare-slike-Novog-Beograda>. Used with permission.

the best of self-management and Yugoslavia's ability to steer its own developmental path independently from both the Soviets and the West; it overlooks the contradictions inherent in the system and how these impacted on everyday life.

Living in New Belgrade. Experiencing Socio-Ecological Change

As Yugoslavia negotiated its position between the Eastern and Western blocs, its political focus shifted onto the economy and the ability for self-management to deliver comfortable living standards for all. The 1960s saw political reforms which aimed to decentralise economic management structures and better align political institutions with the principles of self-management. The 1963 constitution introduced the concept of 'local community' (*mesna zajednica*) as the smallest political unit, described as the 'basic cell of self-management society, its social, economic, political, and urban unit'.⁴² These reforms meant that care for the local environment and work in the neighbourhood became a form of political participation. Although the definition and operation of a 'local community' as a political unit remained vague, neighbourhoods were organised around the concept that local services should be provided for and managed by the local population.⁴³ Specific community centres were designated as places for collective discussions. In established urban neighbourhoods these spaces had to be carved out of existing buildings and sites, but in new neighbourhoods like those in New Belgrade they were included in the neighbourhood layout.

The attempt to create a new social order through the built environment was also part of the lived experiences of the BG LOG participants. Their memories recalled not just the labour involved in constructing New Belgrade, but also the process of turning this new environment into a liveable neighbourhood. The buildings were designed to support a socialist consumer society, but creating this lifestyle required more than modernist planning and the new neighbourhoods of New Belgrade were seen as lacking an urbane quality. Residents in old Belgrade, for example, felt pity for friends that went to live in New Belgrade, as if they were expelled from the urban centre to the far other side of the river Sava. Jelica remembered her neighbours moving out of the old centre during the postwar period, worrying that they would miss out on the city's culture:

My father was a pilot and his best friend's family, after he died, got a flat in Pavilions [a neighbourhood in New Belgrade]. We [still] lived in the city centre [...] and my grandmother would send them a card and say: 'On Thursday I am cooking *ajmokac* [a Serbian pepper meal]; come along'.

⁴² Marija Martinovic, Social Space, Property and Everyday Life. Common Areas in Socialist Yugoslavia, in: The Production of Place. Conference Proceedings, University of East London, Docklands Campus, 2012, 1-13.

⁴³ Martinovic, Social Space, Property and Everyday Life.



Figure 4: Creating an urban culture in New Belgrade: The members of the Lemon Tree band. Source: Stare Slike Novog Beograda Facebook group, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Stare-slike-Novog-Beograda>. Used with permission.

Jelica's grandmother's gesture aimed at creating a tangible relationship with the 'old' Belgrade, so residents of New Belgrade did not miss out on the 'real' city. In 1965, Jelica's own family moved to New Belgrade. Jelica remembered how the area evolved from an area that had few facilities and a limited cultural life into a more multifaceted urban environment:

When I moved to New Belgrade, my whole life still revolved around old Belgrade [...]. I continued to go to school in the city, but later a lot of things in my life changed. In the meantime, New Belgrade got all the contents that a city should have: we even had a theatre, a cinema [...] I arrived to New Belgrade in 1965. [...] And now I do not go more than two or three times a year across the Sava river [to 'old' Belgrade]. Only if I have to.

Jelica's account summarises the process whereby living in New Belgrade turned the city into a neighbourhood with 'all the contents that a city should have', to the point that living in New Belgrade has become comparable to her life in 'old' Belgrade (Figure 4).

The making of New Belgrade is also manifest in people's accounts of how flats were allocated. Housing allocation served both to demonstrate the state's abil-

ity to provide for the average worker, and to reward status groups within the Yugoslav political economy. Accommodation standards in New Belgrade were subject to public scrutiny as examples to hold the government to account.⁴⁴ This awareness came through in Jelica's memories of a neighbourhood called 'Old Mercator', allocated to military personnel. The neighbourhood high rise buildings had been designed for high status citizens with four big flats on each floor:

Then Tito held the famous speech in Split about workers and the working class and the flats were divided diagonally so that there are eight in each floor now. The kitchen is literally a triangle. That was mostly divided among the workers of IMT (Industry of Machines and Tractors). They are really workers' flats [although originally] they were made to be huge, luxurious flats.⁴⁵



Figure 5: Women walking on the promenades of New Belgrade. Source: Stare Slike Novog Beograda Facebook group, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Stare-slike-Novog-Beograda>. Used with permission.

New Belgrade hosted both high status group and working class people, in a form of social stratification that was coded in the buildings. Nine, for example, explains the spatial distribution of urban classes:

Here was a labourers' settlement, there [were] police, military and post office [employees]. You knew exactly who moved into each building. The military had their own buildings, the police had their own, the post office and IMT their own.

This ranking process incorporated employment status and other marks of symbolic importance at the time. At the same time, there were attempts to construct a classless society through the provision of standardised housing. Standardised also meant an uncharacteristic environment, in which disorientation was possible within a familiar landscape, as Nine recalls:

⁴⁴ Brigitte Le Normand, *The House that Market Socialism Built. Reform, Consumption and Inequality in Socialist Yugoslavia*, EUI Working Paper MWP 2008/33, <http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/9289>.

⁴⁵ IMT is a manufacturer of heavy machinery and previously was a large employer in the area.

When I moved in, I lived in [an area of] four-storey buildings—they were all the same. [Once] my mum sent me to buy bread [...] I went and I did not know how to get back—no numbers, nothing, all the same.

A specific variety of place attachment was created through this attempted classlessness. In an officially classless society, social structure was connected to the workplace and experienced through the allocation of housing and the neighbourhoods one lived and worked in. For example, Gojko described how strongly his attachment to his place of work was embedded in the surrounding area where he still lives (see Figure 5):

My firm is IMT, I was eager to be around here and now it is a habit. Believe me, for a short period of time, my wife and I went across the river to the old city to live [...] but we did not like it at all. New Belgrade is urban, with wide streets, spacious, big promenades and the big planned green surfaces aside from this last part that is built, the ghetto, as they call it, blocks 61, 62, 63, 64. The other parts are wonderful and the Sava... you can see us here almost every evening. I even like fishing, we like water, the 'sea', this 'sea' of ours, this Sava river.

Gojko witnessed and participated in the industrialisation and the urbanisation of his local area. The agricultural life was replaced by a factory job with a mass produced flat. He represents an archetypical proletariat experience. Yet, his experience was felt as a deeply unique personal one, which generated a profound but specific attachment to his local environment. In summary, the accounts show how New Belgrade moved from being a symbol of the making of a nation to being part of the lived experiences of its residents who transformed it into a functioning and thriving neighbourhood.

Transition and Turmoil in the 1990s

The economic crisis of the 1980s precipitated the breakup of the federation, and by the 1990s Yugoslavia dissolved into war. The liberal capitalist economy was not immediately established. Serbian sociologists have distinguished two periods of post-socialist transition in Serbia; the first between 1989 and 2000 which is described as 'blocked' because international sanctions prevented Serbia's economic integration into regional markets and Serbian political elites appropriated sectors of the economy.⁴⁶ The second phase of transition started as Milošević lost power, but has gained momentum only since 2003, when Serbia's economy started to move towards liberalisation and integration into EU market structures.

⁴⁶ Mladen Lazić / Slobodan Cvejić, Post-Socialist Transformation and Value Changes of the Middle Class in Serbia, *European Sociological Review* 27, No. 6 (2010), 808-23; Mladen Lazić, Serbia. The Adaptive Reconstruction of the Elites, in: John Higley / György Lengyel, eds, *Elites after State Socialism. Theories and Analysis*, Lanham/MD, Oxford 2000, 123-140.



Figure 6: Sand and mud at the edge of New Belgrade. Source: Stare Slike Novog Beograda Facebook group, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Stare-slike-Novog-Beograda>. Used with permission.

These phases are visible in changes to the built environment, as previous planning standards and norms have been replaced. In the early 1990s, tenants in socially owned housing were given the right to buy their apartments in a move which, Petrović argues, was politically expedient and not subject to public debate.⁴⁷ Such flats were initially offered at roughly 30% of their market value, but by 1993 hyper-inflation had dramatically reduced their cost causing a rush to buy. By the end of 1993, 95% of Belgrade's socially owned flats had been bought up.⁴⁸ This was accompanied by a dramatic reduction in living standards, and poverty shifted from rural areas to urban centres.⁴⁹ On top of this, the armed conflicts of the 1990s meant that Belgrade received an influx of displaced people with about 113,000 refugees registering in the city.⁵⁰ The housing shortage became chronic, driven by an estimated 10% increase in demand. Under a war economy, political isolation and increased criminality, the

⁴⁷ Mina Petrović, Post-Socialist Housing Policy Transformation in Yugoslavia and Belgrade, *European Journal of Housing Policy* 1, No. 2 (2001), 211-31.

⁴⁸ Petrović, Post-Socialist Housing Policy Transformation, 219-221.

⁴⁹ United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT), *Housing and Property Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia, and Montenegro*, Nairobi 2005, <http://unhabitat.org/books/housing-and-property-rights-bosnia-and-herzegovina-croatia-and-serbia-and-montenegro/>.

⁵⁰ Radoslav Stevanović, Izbeglištvo i Demografski Rast Stanovništva Srbije [Refugees and Serbia's Demographic Growth], *Stanovništvo* 8, Nos. 1-4, 2005, 43-60.

much needed new housing was provided by private marketeers in unregulated environments, described by Petovar as 'cowboy capitalism'.⁵¹ Self-provision of housing also rose so that the impact of citizens in urban development became a 'cumulative effect of widespread illegal construction practices' (Figure 6).⁵²

This situation has led to visible material changes. Ilija, for example, described the changes to the communal area in his building. He started by describing the community room in his residential block, where he had organised games and activities for the children of the block:

This building had a room of about 80m². I had organised a voluntary donation, bought tables for ping-pong, nets, rackets, two school tables [...]. When people moved out and left old tables and chairs [I used them] [...] I gathered books and we had a library for our children from the building. We socialised there, our children and the children from other buildings, [we] read books, played ping-pong. All until one day some rascals came, some druggies, and they took the keys to play ping-pong and they made love on the table with some girls. When I saw that, I went to school here to speak to the Head[master]. I asked him if he wanted to take the ping-pong table, rackets, balls and two chess sets as a donation. I told him that building number 107 was giving [these things] because our children go [to his school] there. I picked it all up and took it to the school.

Ilija went on to link these changes with broader changes in the political economy:

The big political shaking had begun [by then]. [The president of the local community] reported to the council that we had extra living space [in our building]. The council gave the space to the heating plant and the plant gave it to a man who was a porter there and he turned it into a flat for himself and he already had a flat in 29th of November Street. And so, he still lives in that flat, we are left without a club in the building; that is all closed.

This enclosing and privatising of formerly socially owned space can be seen at different scales, from small storage areas, to whole attics. Areas that were once used by residents were shut off and turned into private assets through the turmoil of the 1990s, regardless of the housing needs of those who acquired them (the porter in the example did not need it because he had another flat). New Belgrade today bears witness to the impact of this turbulent period. Wide boulevards have been narrowed as new buildings have been erected to increase the density of neighbourhoods. Along with infilling, there are informal

⁵¹ Ksenija Petovar, *The Social and Political Basis of the Destruction of Belgrade's Built Environment at the Close of the 20th Century*, in: Sven Gustavsson, ed, *Stockholm-Belgrade. Proceedings from the Third Swedish-Serbian Symposium in Stockholm, Stockholm 2007*, 117-125.

⁵² Sretan Vujović / Mina Petrović, *Belgrade's Post-Socialist Urban Evolution. Reflections by Actors in the Development Process*, in: Kiril Stanilov, ed, *The Post-Socialist City. Urban Form and Space Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe After Socialism*, Dordrecht 2007, 361-384, 361.

additions to older buildings that have changed their aesthetics and the service provision at the neighbourhood level. Green spaces have become car parks, and the heating and water infrastructure struggles to cope with the demands of additional population. Residents of New Belgrade read into the built environment a change in social norms, and their personal accounts indicated the continued sense of responsibility for the built environment and frustration at not being able to act on this.

In addition to these material changes to the local area, there have been changes in the institutions that govern social relations. The local community has disappeared in practical terms. For residents such as Ilija, local authorities play no role in managing neighbourhoods, which compares negatively with their memories of life earlier on in New Belgrade:

Twenty years ago we had our police, three men who were responsible for New Belgrade [...] we introduced our children to them [...] They sat with us in the garden, watched how we played chess: our 'domestic police', as we called them. That's gone now, now it is chaos, flower pots upturned, swings broken... in the night [thugs] turn around the containers [...]. They enter the communal space, the local shop... I complained once and I was told: 'What's it to you, old man?'

Dušan from the Pensioner's Club in Block 70 explained the collapse of the Yugoslav political economy through the breakdown of the housing allocation system. When he arrived he was offered an opportunity to pay cash to access a flat, but chose not to. He explained: 'I could have given 8,000 Euros, but because I was a pilot, I was waiting for a flat and they foxed me. [People] younger than me got flats and they were not even pilots.'

The transfiguration of the housing allocation system was perceived as a betrayal. Today Dušan is still living in the emergency accommodation he received in the early 1990s. He describes the estate as usurped by an illegitimate authority full of 'crooks and thieves'. This is experienced through the built environment:

In block 63 there's some Martinović guy who has built on the green space. First he said that he would build a copy shop and now he's opened some restaurant; then he installed some air-conditioning units so we haven't been able to sleep for a year now because we can't open the window. Ten times I've been to his [place] to complain, but they aren't budging on the matter at all. We even brought in Studio B television the other day [to publicise the problem], and the man does not want to do anything. The whole building is noisy. It stinks. So, we brought in the local authority, but he bribed them. They come, measure, and say all is well.

Dušan explained different forms of social mobilisation he had spearheaded but without being able to find the institutional support to act upon doorstep issues as noise and smell. His account shows the disappearance of mechanisms for citizens to participate in the production of an equitable and high quality urban environment.



Figure 7: A postcard showing images of the construction of New Belgrade. The script reads: 'They built New Belgrade... comrade brigadiers, THANK YOU...'. Source: Stare Slike Novog Beograda Facebook group, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Stare-slike-Novog-Beograda>. Used with permission.

Figure 7 shows an image taken from the current limits of New Belgrade where the built environment ends and the marsh environment of waterlogged sand emerges. It is an image that shows how the area's ecology became part of the urban setting in which New Belgraders lived. The sand figured in the stories of the BG LOG participants as the representation of nothingness, the materiality of desert. Equally, people's stories give a sense of paralysis and of the lack of the kind of mobilisation that had led to the construction of this new city space in the first place. The sense of pride with what was achieved contrasts with the lack of channels to act upon their localised forms of activism. BG LOG showed a declining neighbourhood that hardly corresponds with people's memories of their own hopes for the city's future.

Limits to Activism Within the Urban Environment

There is a mythical quality to the New Belgrade of memories and story-telling. There is a myth of urban and rural coexistence generated by remembering how the built environment of today was produced through processes of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation. Residents' accounts show that the neighbourhood



Figure 8: A new construction project in New Belgrade. Source: private collection of Nela Milić.

is still remembered as a rural one, as if the old rural livelihoods were dormant beneath the asphalt. In this manner, New Belgrade is constructed as an 'only-just-urban environment'; one which is still described as sandy, swampy, and muddy. Perceptions of the 'rural' as uncontrollable or uncivilised are overlaid with contemporary understandings of New Belgrade as being 'beyond control', but they also observe urbanisation as a transformation that required sacrifices:

There, where the heating plant (*toplana*) is, we used to bathe. We picked bamboo and sold it. Ages ago this was all under ponds; from *Studentski Grad* (Student City) to here, there was nothing. I even remember when it was demolished—that dam where the railway was. All has drastically changed.

These accounts reproduce the sense of profound environmental contradictions, and a sense of nostalgia for the rural environments that enabled a closer connection with resources such as bamboo and water. That sense of rurality, however, was never extinguished. Yet, the built urban environment is also linked to another myth, one about the possibilities for citizens to shape their own environment through collective work. Claiming these myths of collective action through the narration and representation of memories is also a form of

contemporary activism. Figure 8, for example, a postcard, shows the gratefulness to the 'comrade brigadiers' who built the new city.

The project of building New Belgrade provided a number of direct and indirect ways of participating in the transformation of the environment. If the construction of New Belgrade achieved an urban space out of marshland, the turmoil of the 1990s meant that standards of living reverted to more basic, survivalist ones. Today there is an ongoing concern that standards of living continue to fall short. Corruption permeates all discussions about city life. Where previously there were a variety of ways to contribute to urban spaces and civic identities, today these institutional conditions do not exist. In the face of violence against the urban environment, there are no arenas for urban environmentalism.

The night clubs built on moored river rafts are a metaphor of this development as they create an excruciating noise which makes life impossible for many. New Belgrade is bounded by the Sava and Danube rivers and the waterfronts provide foot and cycle paths for the city. As Belgrade's real estate market has moved into the global economy, the city's old industrial waterfronts are providing new development space for global finance. But there is little formal development on New Belgrade's banks. Instead, cafes and bars float in the water. Some mentioned these promenades as characterising the area, but for those living by the river the night clubs are a nuisance. The interviewees associated them with noise, violence, and forms of criminality sanctioned by Belgrade's political elite.

Ana is a Romanian lady who arrived in New Belgrade with her oldest daughter in 1975 and moved into a flat with a terrace overlooking the Sava. Her account of the changes, grounded in the myth of the labour actions, provided a summary of New Belgrade's development discussed above:

I remember when the youth made this beauty. I remember when all was finished and [there were] boats so we [could] go to [the island] Ada properly and not with fear. From then on 'til today it was beautiful, silence, we did not even use keys, or have interphones. The children would play on the playground, clean. The mothers would call out 'Vesna, Silvana, Bojan, come home for lunch'. And now, there is silence, weed grows... it started—thieves, drug addicts: disaster. And then we used interphones, all sorts of keys and feared the stranger ringing the bell. The neighbourhood broke up: no one contacts anyone today. It has been like this for about 15 years. There is no coffee, or New Years' Eve, or caring for other people's children [...]. It is nice here now, but it is private, everyone is lonely, sad [...].

This declining sense of neighbourhood is exemplified by the conflicts represented by the clubs in the river and the noise pollution:

The music is terrible, believe me [...]. One night I could not take it anymore. It was very cold outside and I took a coat and went outside to see if I could at least report them. [...] I saw all my neighbours' lights were on. It was 3.15 in the morning, but no one had the courage to report it [...] When I got close to some *gusar* [pirate], I

got scared and thought 'Run, they will kill an old woman'. [...] I came back, closed my ears and prayed to God to fall asleep.

Left without any support, whether this is at the national or local level, citizens draw on the experience from the past system of Yugoslav socialism to challenge the problems that manifest in their everyday lives. Addressing their problems would mean engaging with the individuals that encroach their collective goods, e.g. with noise, but this entails danger because such action would put them in confrontation with those who profit from the now established irregularities. Like Ana, Ilija referred to a sense of lost order and danger:

Some order should be created, but there is no one to collaborate with, or talk to, to come here; there is no one in the local community office to address; some president that could react. He could influence the council president, call the council staff, communal service, police [...]. There is no support, everyone is afraid of everyone, threats [...] so, people withdrew.

There are many accounts of disillusionment with the state and disappointment with people who abandoned solidarity at the end of Yugoslavia, but new generations are using novel grassroots structures, whether borrowed from Western models or not, to build a desire for a different system to contribute to the community. Artists are moving into abandoned community spaces, tagging what used to be socially owned property with graffiti, drawing attention to the potential for using the urban environment as a resource for political organisation. The BG LOG project is but one of numerous examples. However, actions are developed very cautiously, both because they relate to an ethos which does not correspond to the reinvented city after the transition, and because people feel threatened by both the lack of support of current governance structures and the pervasive corruption of authorities.

Projects like BG LOG have emerged from the need to build a sense of collective capacity to intervene in changing the immediate environment. Idealised memories of collective action such as shock work and the way New Belgrade was transformed into a thriving neighbourhood, however selective, are employed as a means to think what can be done in today's urban environment.

Conclusion

Our analysis emerges from an approach to environmental politics that starts exploring people's relationship to their local environment and questioning how they understand their ability to act on or through the environment to create the kind of areas they want to live in. We have found that this approach highlights

local forms of civic participation that might be otherwise missed when searching for environmental movements that match an externally defined ideal.

Urban environments are key sites for the redefinition of socio-ecological relations. Such relations emerge in the context of everyday experiences of the city and its environment as manifested in doorstep issues.⁵³ These doorstep issues have worsened in the post-transition context both because of the lack of capacity of the authorities to govern the urban environment and because of the unsanctioned proliferation of activities that are perceived as dirty and unsafe by local residents. Residents themselves feel that they lack capacity to act both because they lack a point of reference of an authority and because of the sheer fear of intervening against violent groups or organised criminals. In this context, environmental mobilisation, whatever its type, needs to be celebrated and supported.

One way to do so is by finding a common base for environmental mobilisation in relation to people's shared histories and memories. We have highlighted people's accounts of their city as establishing the grounds for progressive environmental action. Our narrative of New Belgrade's postwar evolution has provided an overview of a number of forms of collective participation and action. We have highlighted the contrast between the labour actions and the way the city was shaped in a subtle way by a range of practices of living in the city, in which the city became reimaged and appropriated beyond state plans.

In New Belgrade the breakdown of the state and the collapse of possibilities for action has been experienced through the built environment, but this also shows how struggles to normalise relations and to improve conditions can be mobilised in response to these infringements and absences of order. The picture is bleak: citizens have been losing public spaces, their environment has been infringed upon, and they have not been able to find spaces to act against these developments. In this context, their memories of a past in which they intervened in the making of the city and actively shaped their environment constitute a key anchorage for mobilising around environmental issues.

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⁵³ Cf. Burningham / Thrush, *Experiencing Environmental Inequality*.