

## VALORISATION OF THE URBAN BLOCKS' INTERIOR SPACES AS SITES FOR SOCIAL ACTIVITIES IN THE 'OLD TOWN' OF NOVI SAD

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**Summary:** *The urban structure of Novi Sad is intertwined with public spaces of streets and squares, as well as with a multitude of micro-ambient entities formed in the interior of urban blocks. The historical development of the city has caused different morphological genesis of its urban blocks, which resulted in the creation of variations in their shape and function, as well as in the different possibilities for usage of open public spaces in their interior as places of socialization. The case study includes evaluation of the interior spaces of five residential urban blocks in the central city core of Novi Sad. Analysed blocks of 'Old Town', one of the oldest parts of Novi Sad, are blocks with closed structure, uniform number of floors, dominant feature of multifamily housing, and among only the few city blocks that reach out the Danube River. The paper analyses different qualitative parameters which make this open spaces suitable for the social life of the inhabitants of blocks, and which are creating the conditions for a wide range of activities for other citizens of Novi Sad. The study of morphological and functional characteristics of urban blocks' interior public spaces indicates the relationship between the analysed parameters and the constancy of different user groups and public activities that take place on them. The aim of the study is to point out shortcomings and problems of evaluated public space through critical valorisation, in order to take advantage of observed potentials for future transformations of the interior spaces of urban blocks in the central zone of the city.*

**Keywords:** *public space, urban block, socialization, Novi Sad*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

'Open spaces like squares and parks were the lungs of the city, the centre was the heart pumping blood (traffic) through the arteries (the streets)' [1], as urban life historically 'circulated' through city. Afterwards 1950s the open public spaces experienced functional alteration by introduction of vehicular traffic, in addition to the simultaneous loss of pedestrians as the main users. Alongside key public spaces such as streets and squares, many micro public spaces of the city like courtyards of urban blocks have become contested spaces transformed into traffic roads or parking lots. Through numerous transformations of its urban tissue, Novi Sad has been divided into large number of urban blocks diverse in purpose, function, size and shape, with each one of those urban blocks forming even more divisions into smaller micro-ambiences inside them. Second half of XX century has brought up a change in the physical and functional organisation of the Novi Sad with the construction of Liberation Boulevard and Liberty Bridge, which has divided city into two major socio-spatial units. First one is its central part with a compact historical centre which attracts great number of tourists and people from other parts of the city, and the other part is 'new' part of the city built in the period afterwards the Second World War.

The second half of the XX century had led to the demographic changes and spatial expansion which had left 'marks' in the urban environment of Novi Sad. Such fluctuations in co-option with numerous political, economic and social transformations, have led to the lack of public spaces, particularly in newly built areas of the city. Lately built traffic infrastructure has devastated irregular street network of old city centre, and changed the nature of some public spaces in order to accommodate large number of vehicles. Contrasting to the newly built parts of the city, various economic, social, cultural and other factors influenced affirmative architectural characteristics of public spaces in the older part of the city, particularly of urban blocks' inner spaces. Inner courtyards of urban blocks are unique elements of the urban matrix, as well as a core of urban life in the blocks of the city. As essential part of social life of the city, they are intended for diversity of outdoor activities and gatherings of people from various age groups and categories.

'Space created between buildings is seen as something that has its own life beside the buildings that create it' [2], indicating that some of the public spaces inside residential blocks were traditionally important part of inhabitants' everyday life. On the other hand, irresponsible behaviour of occupants and infrequent public investments have left serious consequences on public spaces, leaving the impression of negligence. A great number of urban blocks' inner spaces in old city centre have been unkempt and highly devastated public spaces, with poor urban equipment, large parking spaces, active vehicle traffic, insufficient vegetation, inaccessibility for disabled, reduced public lighting, and lack of general maintenance. Increased number of cars and lack of parking spaces had led to the conversion of this potentially respected places of socialization into the spaces reserved only for the cars.

This paper aims to identify the physical qualities of the urban blocks' inner spaces in the central city core of Novi Sad, and to study the presence of the people, various public activities, and the ways in which people are using the inner courtyards of urban blocks. Critical valorisation of the physical parameters can primarily describe the disposition, geometry, shape and size of urban blocks, adjacent street network, relations between private and public spaces, etc. Another aspect of the research is the analysis of basic

parameters inside the physical structure of urban blocks such are functional organization, traffic manners, programs in the ground floors, urban furniture, vegetation, elements of urban identity and ambient values. This research aims to point out the current problems of public spaces inside urban blocks, and to conduct evaluation of possibility of their usage for socialization, in order to give the proposals and recommendations for its future development. The case study includes five residential urban blocks in the central core of Novi Sad within the border of Ive Lole Ribara street, Dunavska street, Belgrade Quay, Victims of raid Quay, Radnicka street and Sonje Marinkovic street (Figure 1.).



Figure 1. Position of analysed blocks in the built structure of Novi Sad

## 2. SOCIALIZATION IN THE URBAN BLOCKS AS IMPORTANT ACTIVITY OF ITS INHABITANTS

The frequency and nature of social activities on public spaces are dependent on many factors, including the physical qualities of public space expressed through its structural and functional characteristics. The elements of the structure and identity of public spaces have impact on the presence of users and their needs in terms of public spaces' quality, available public activities, protection from the weather conditions, infrastructural facilities, urban furniture, etc. Traditionally, all the public spaces of the city functioned as a significant meeting places of its residents. Withdrawal of people and public life from public spaces has correspondingly relocated some of the public activities out of numerous micro-locations such are various passages, inner courtyards, or urban 'pockets'.

In the same way, public spaces inside urban blocks has lost their role in the social life of the city as a meeting place for residents of blocks. Lack of socialization in inner spaces of urban blocks indicates that grouping buildings around an open space cannot spontaneously result in an area for socialization. Instead, considered design, planning and sustaining of such places can be starting points in creation of favourable conditions for socialization between people. Structure of 'building frame' around such inner courtyards can influence abovementioned processes through optimal size of the space in proportion to the surrounding buildings, the interaction of buildings' ground floors and their facades with pedestrians, or merely through physical 'closeness' of open public space [3] as important characteristics of space in order to provide a 'stage' for socialization.

Physical and mental health of citizens can be influenced by the quality of public spaces and the possibilities which they offer, and such link can significantly be dissimilar depending on different urban districts of Novi Sad. Public spaces of 'Old Town' have distinctive urban identity to which inhabitants can identify with. Unbuilt open spaces inside urban blocks in this area provide a context for social interaction of their inhabitants, enabling them to fulfil a need to socialize with other people.

During last years, public life has been relocated inside shopping malls, indicating distancing of people from the unmediated social interactions between them that takes places at the public spaces. There is evident absence of people in analysed spaces, although what makes public space public is 'when a people occupy the space in order to fulfil a specific need, and through their actions make it public' [4]. In the present-day, most of the people are not using public spaces out of necessity, but only if it offers high quality. Good public spaces share the four qualities - 'they are accessible, people are engaged in activities there, the space is comfortable and has a good image, and finally, it is a sociable place' [5]. In that sense, the concepts of necessary, optional and social activities [6], introduce the idea that optional activities are probable only when weather conditions, quality of public space, surrounding attractiveness, and all other features are met, pointing out the importance of the quality of public space.

In that sense, dynamic public space has to offer a wide range of necessary, optional and social activities which occur whenever people interact with each other. Even though that the public spaces need to meet diverse requirements of various user groups and age categories, they do not offer a variety of public programs, and are commonly not completely adapted to socialization of the children or elderly.

### 3. INTERIOR SPACES OF URBAN BLOCKS - CASE STUDY OF URBAN BLOCKS IN THE 'OLD TOWN' OF NOVI SAD

The case study includes five residential urban blocks in the central core of Novi Sad, in one of the oldest parts of the city known as 'Old Town', and one of only the few city blocks that have link with the left bank of the Danube River and municipality of Petrovaradin on the right bank. 'Old Town' is an ambient entity with numerous public spaces, historical and cultural monuments, and place where public life has been gradually abandoning spaces inside urban blocks during the last years. Five analysed urban blocks (Figures 2. and 4.) are respectively within the borders of:

- a. Ive Lole Ribara street, Dunavska street, Belgrade Quay, Unknown hero Square and Vojvode Putnika street;
- b. Ive Lole Ribara street, Vojvode Putnika street, Unknown hero Square and Mihajlo Pupin Boulevard;
- c. Sonje Marinkovic street, Mihajlo Pupin Boulevard, Unknown hero Square and Vojvode Misica street;
- d. Sonje Marinkovic street, Vojvode Misica street, Unknown hero Square, Victims of raid Quay and Maksima Gorkog street;

- e. Sonje Marinkovic street, Maksima Gorkog street, Victims of raid Quay and Radnicka street.



Figure 2. Five analysed residential urban blocks and their interior spaces compared to the proportioner with the size of 100x100 meters

Studied blocks have closed structure and uniform number of floors with the dominant feature of multifamily housing, and with only few commercial contents (shops, restaurants, coffee bars, etc.). All five blocks have the similar size, rectangular or pentagonal irregular shape, similar lifestyle of inhabitants, and as part of district with a medium number of inhabitants these blocks have an optimal urban density. Physical frame of the inner courtyards consists of buildings analogous in architectural style, number of floors, residential function, etc. The upper floors of the neighbouring buildings are mostly residential, whereas the programs in the ground floors are in general commercial with closed facades lacking in any relation with activities on adjacent public spaces.

Contiguity with public buildings, landmarks and sites such as Museum of Contemporary Art, elementary school Djordje Natosevic, preschool Sonja Marinkovic, Unknown hero Square, Varadinska duga Bridge, the Danube Park and Petrovaradin Fortress, make this urban blocks highly attractive in the overall structure of the city. On the other hand, they have not fully used the advantages of their location and the unique experience they could offer, by negative aspects such as a strong traffic arteries Belgrade Quay, Victims of raid Quay and Varadinska duga Bridge which make traffic in this part the city highly active. High frequency roads separate analysed blocks from the bank of the Danube River (Figure 3.).



*Figure 3. Diversity in intensity of traffic, urban equipment, character and ambience of surrounding streets - Victims of raid Quay (a. and b.) in contrast to Vojvode Putnika street (c.) and Radnicka street (d.)*

Most of the inner courtyards have been devastated and neglected for past years, and predominantly turned into privatized parking lots with forbidden entrance for non-residents. A great number of inhabitants and lack of parking spaces have led to conversion of these spaces into illegal parking lots, whereas cars have taken dominant role at the expense of pedestrians. Inner space of block a. (Figure 4. - a.) is fragmented into several smaller enclosed courtyards utilized as parking lots, garage spots and communication routes. Courtyards of other blocks are mainly unified as a whole (Figure 4. - b., c., d. and e.), with interlaced spaces intended for parking, playgrounds, sports fields, green areas and pedestrian movement. The analysed inner courtyards are riddled with connections, walkways, passages and pedestrian routes in their physical structure, which are often interconnecting interior spaces of courtyards with outside spaces of the city.



*Figure 4. Devastated interior spaces of urban blocks - Spaces for socialization or parking?*

All analysed open spaces inside urban blocks have the issue of vehicle traffic and illegal parking (Figure 5.). There is significant overlapping between pedestrian and vehicular traffic, disabling complete usage of this spaces as places for socialization. Most of the entrances are closed with automatic gates, reserved only for tenants of the individual buildings (Figure 5. - a. and b.), dominantly designed merely for cars (Figure 5. - c.). There is evident interweaving between private and public space, creating conflict among two. 'The public space requires behaviour that is subjected to the established rules, while at the private space communications occur correspondingly to the unfettered character of the individual' [7] and in such manner this issue is preventing the creation of spaces planned for socialization. Central plateaus of all inner courtyards are devastated, with damaged and abandoned buildings and structures, inadequate urban furniture, public lighting, landscaping and vegetation. As such, this spaces have been turned into parking lots and

garage spaces (Figure 5. - d. and e.). Different age groups can be using inner public spaces of urban blocks, among which the children, the youth and the elders are the most prominent ones. Children playgrounds (Figure 5. - f.) and sports fields (Figure 5. - g.) have been highly neglected during last years. Spaces for children and youth are unkempt, and there is evident lack of spaces intended for elders. There are only few benches protected from the sun, without any other contents interesting for a growing number of senior citizens who have the need to spend time outdoors. The security is a particular problem, as the need of the inhabitants is to feel safe and secure in public spaces inside urban blocks. For this reason there are 'written and unwritten rules how public space is actively or passively used without disturbing other individuals, sharing space with others while retaining your privacy' [8]. Lack of public lighting, dark and neglected passages are giving the impression that these spots should be avoided (Figure 5. - h.), and resulting in that the people are infrequently present in the evening hours.



Figure 5. Various deficiencies of analysed urban blocks' interior spaces

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

'What is missing in contemporary city is not a matter of any particular building or place, it is the spaces in between, the connections that make sense of forms' [9]. In that sense, certain improvement of physical qualities of spaces inside urban blocks are needed, in order to emphasize their function as places for socialization with a noticeable role in the social life of the city. Enhanced utilization of inner-block courtyards would raise the overall quality of this blocks, and furthermore ignite the socialization of its inhabitants by creation of unfavourable conditions for cars, and in favour for pedestrians. Prospective direction for solution can be in the future plans for the construction of new underground garages inside analysed blocks, with the possibility of landscaped public areas on top. Any further revitalization of these spaces needs to resolve the existing traffic and parking issues, define new spaces for children (playgrounds), youth (sports courts), elderly and pets, but also to introduce urban furniture, vegetation, and public lighting, having in mind protection of pedestrians from vehicle traffic and weather conditions. Opening of existing buildings' ground floors to public contents, and their extension to the open public spaces

of courtyards, with the respect towards the privacy of inhabitants, can bring back social life and create conditions for socialization. All the future transformations and alterations of analysed inner courtyards have to be intended for all categories of inhabitants in order to reduce negative effects (e.g. gentrification). Quality improvements of inner courtyards would result in an increased number of public activities, different user groups, and possibilities of socialization for all age categories of users. Inner spaces of urban blocks can be transformed into network of ambiances for the social life of the analysed blocks, which could even be used for the organization of various public events in the open (exhibitions, music and film festivals, fairs, etc.). Instead of individual projects, spaces inside urban blocks need to be transformed through series of projects for their multi-layered optimization in a functional and aesthetical sense.

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## ВАЛОРИЗАЦИЈА УНУТРАШЊИХ ПРОСТОРА УРБАНИХ БЛОКОВА „СТАРОГ ГРАДА“ У НОВОМ САДУ КАО МЕСТА ЗА ДРУШТВЕНЕ АКТИВНОСТИ

*Резиме:* Урбана структура Новог Сада је испреплетена јавним просторима улица и тргова, али и мноштвом микроамбијената формираних у унутрашњим

*просторима urbanih blokova. Istorijски развој града је условио различиту морфолошку генезу његових blokova, што је резултирало стварањем варијације облика и функција, али и различитих могућности коришћења отворених јавних простора у њиховој унутрашњости као местима социјализације. Студија случаја обухвата валоризацију унутрашњих простора пет urbanih blokova централног градског језгра Новог Сада. Анализирани blokovi „Старог града“, једног од најстаријих делова Новог Сада, су blokovi затворене структуре, уједначене спратности, са доминантном функцијом вишепородичног становања, и међу ретким градским blokovima који директно излазе на реку Дунав. У раду су анализирани различити квалитативни параметри који ове отворене просторе чине погодним за друштвени живот становника blokova, односно који стварају услове за широк спектар јавних активности и за остале грађане Новог Сада. Истраживањем морфолошких и функционалних карактеристика јавних унутарblokovских простора може се сагледати однос између анализираних параметара ових простора и постојаности различитих група корисника и јавних активности које се одвијају на њима. Циљ студије је да се критичком валоризацијом постојећег стања истакну недостаци и проблеми ових јавних простора, али и да се уочени потенцијали искористе за будуће трансформације унутрашњих простора urbanih blokova централне зоне града.*

**Кључне речи:** јавни простор, urbani блок, социјализација, Нови Сад