

Small steps towards big vision: Taking people to the river (again)

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Abstract

All over the world, cities are rediscovering their waterfronts potentials for public use and enjoyment. If approached in such a way, waterfronts create a new city image which attracts visitors, tourists and investors alike. This cannot be done over night. It takes a long-term vision of mutually dependent development trajectories of a city and its waterfront. Large waterfront (re)development projects and port transformations are complex activities that involve various, usually confronted parties. They depend on numerous planning, land reclamation and procedural steps. Being sensitive to social, political and economic fluctuations, those projects often end up waiting for better future, particularly in developing countries. They tend to get stuck between seductive visions of new iconic architecture surrounded by inspiring public spaces – and grey reality of abandoned warehouses and industrial garbage no man's land.

Looking forward to seeing those big projects realised, we argue that there are many small but important steps that can and should be taken in order to bring people back to the river to appreciate its gifts and understand its importance for the city life in general. Some of those steps, performed in downtown Belgrade waterfront during the last decade, are presented in this article.

Key Words: waterfront (re)development, port transformations, public use and enjoyment, Belgrade

Report

1. City–River Dreams and Realities

Belgrade is the capital and the largest city in Serbia,¹ often referred to as *the gateway to the Balkans* and *the door to Central Europe* due to its unique position. It lies at the confluence of two international, navigable rivers – the Sava and the Danube, where the Pannonian Plain meets the Balkan Peninsula. These two rivers define the city structure – separating its territory into 3 units while, at the same time, integrating it around centrally located Big War Island, Belgrade's natural oasis.²

Figura 1. Panoramic view to the river Sava, Belgrade (right) , New Belgrade (left) and Big War Island (photo: Jelena Zivkovic)



Set at the historical East–West fluvial border, Belgrade was predestined to suffer from numerous attacks from its rivers, but also to become an important merchant city in this part of Europe.³ City ports have been developed on both of its rivers but, interestingly, had different roles and importance for the city life and economy through history. Although the first urban plans concentrated on the Danube waterfront, the main development during the second half of the 19th century switched to the Sava waterfront, where commercial centre flourished.⁴ Some of the most important public buildings were built there and the area (called Savamala) gained a riverfront appearance. It was a period of the most intense city–river integration, based on trade and transport.

At the beginning of the 20th century, industrialisation introduced new activities in the waterfront, related to the industrial and port complexes, railroads, central railway and bus stations. These massive structures made the city turn its back to the rivers, and from then on the city and the port have lived their lives separately.

Belgrade's commercial and business centre moved to the top of the hill facing the confluence and the waterfronts were left for the port activities. The area in-between (called Kosancicev venac), once commercially vital and outstanding in its appearance, became neglected, introvert housing area.

A new phase in Belgrade waterfront development started in 1961, when the Belgrade Port was formed on the Danube riverbank in downtown Belgrade, near the Pancevo Bridge.⁵ A new railway was built to connect it to the central railway station, which further separated the city from its rivers. The old cargo port on the Sava riverbank was converted into a passenger port, making the existing warehouses and industrial facilities obsolete. The era of its overall decline has started.

Figura 2. Passenger port on the river Sava in Belgrade (photo: Jelena Zivkovic)

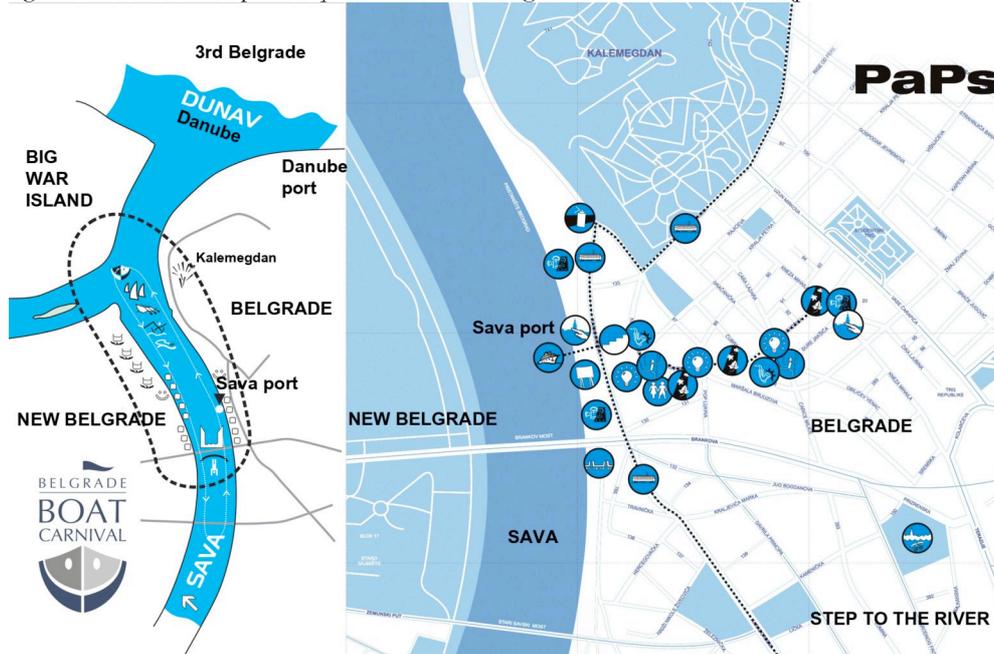


2. *Public art Public space* Projects: Small Steps towards Big Vision

Although located in downtown Belgrade, this area remained abandoned or underused for decades. Beautiful but shabby facades and derelict port structures were testimonies of waterfront's merchant and industrial past. As a part of the most attractive and the most memorable city veduta, it became a symbol of Belgrade's big vision – to finally descend to its rivers.

That was the very reason for showcasing it within *Public art Public space* (PaPs) programme⁶ (established at the Faculty of Architecture University of Belgrade). The area between the city centre and the Sava River, and between Branko's bridge, the passenger port and Beton Hala⁷ was chosen for small-scale but numerous temporary public art interventions and public events that were supposed to revive interest for all the possible gifts the Sava waterfront has to offer to the city.

Figura 3. Locations map of *Step to the River* and *Belgrade Boat Carnival* events (photo: PaPs archive)



2.1 Project No. 1: *Step to the River* (2003)

The first of the *PaPs* projects was to gather ideas on how to revive interest for the paths that lead from the city centre to the Sava River. The strategy was to – so to speak – sprinkle those paths with magnetic dust i.e. create new attractions (various forms of public art) that will lure more people into taking these shortcuts between the existing public spaces. The aim was obviously not to speed up the walk but to make it more enjoyable.

One-day event, entitled *Step to the River*, was a simultaneous presentation of the results of 14 workshops within which interdisciplinary teams of students from the Belgrade University and the University of Arts worked with the international team of mentors, local community and officials. The project was structured in 3 phases: initiation, concept design, and realisation – each having its own spatial and media results that were presented to the public, thus generating support for the next phase. Uncertainty related to the budget and timing resulted in a two-tier project: *BIG Vision* (the optimal solutions) and *SMALL but Possible* (low-cost project proposals).

Figura 4. Waterfront promenade in Sava port area - location of *Step to the River* and *Belgrade Boat Carnival* events (photo: Aleksandar Kujucev)



The event, presented as a series of public events on the chosen pedestrian paths, took place on the 12th of July 2003 and was opened by the city mayor. A wide range of public art installations and performances included:

- Choir concerts, theatre plays, children's workshops, workshops for people with disabilities
- Actors in the role of tourist guides
- Interactive turf (grass) labyrinth set up on the streets leading to the Sava River
- Redesign and reuse of trams: graffiti, turf floor, musicians
- Video art screenings, art on billboards (*artvertising*), fashion and music shows on railway wagons in the old Sava port
- Fireworks, waterfront party and boat tours

With no professional experience in organising public events and with practically no budget – more than 2,500 people that attended the event and rather surprising media attention have to be considered a remarkable success. After decades of living in oblivion, the old Sava port belonged to the people again – at least for a day. As a result, *Public art Public space* gained greater political, institutional and media support for its next event.

Figura 5. *Step to the River* public art installations and events - Public art Public space annual project, 2003
(photo: Aleksandar Kujucev)



2.2 Project No. 2: *Belgrade Boat Carnival* (2004)

After bringing people to the river, the following event aimed at keeping them by the river in the same area (the old Sava port and the opposite riverbank) – relying on the repetition strategy⁸. Apart from exhibitions and events organised in the riverfront as before, the idea this time was to make the Sava River the main stage and to present it as an attractive public space. And this is how the idea of the *Belgrade Boat Carnival* was born.

It took place for the first time on the 24th of July 2004 and included:

- Events on the riverfront: student design exhibition, children's theatre and workshops, boat models exhibition, fish soup cooking competition
- Events on the bridge: water jumps
- Daily events on the river: sailing boats, rowboats and jet ski parade
- Final event on the river: 250 boats in a carnival parade

Approximately 100,000 people attended this one-day event and it was followed by more than a hundred journalists. It was one of the most attended events in Belgrade that summer.

Figura 6. *Belgrade Boat Carnival* installations and events - Public art Public space annual project, 2004
(photo: PaPs archive)



3. Epilogue

The *Belgrade Boat Carnival* became an official Belgrade's annual summer event. From 2005, it has been run by the Tourist Organization of Belgrade and supported by the City Government. Belgrade became a member of the European Association of Carnival Cities. This year the *Belgrade Boat Carnival* was held for the 7th time. But that was not all. Extensive cleaning of riverbanks also became an annual public action – aiming at raising ecological awareness. Finally, diversity of public art interventions and activities, number of visitors that attended *Step to the River* and *Belgrade Boat Carnival* events, and their broad public promotion, confirmed the importance and high development potential of the old Sava port. As a result, private investors, as well as the city and republic governments were stimulated to invest in reconstruction of buildings and public spaces in the port area – which attracted new commercial and cultural activities. In 2006, some parts of the old Sava port facility (Beton Hala) were converted into an exhibition space, a jazz club and an exclusive shop. Lot of concerts, exhibitions and other cultural events started to take place in the port area. In 2010, new Museum of Sport settled in the same building, confirming yet again the cultural character of the new city–river integration. It became clear that the passenger port and the city life can benefit from each other.

Figura 7. Old Sava port facility - Beton Hala (photo: Jelena Zivkovic)



Figura 8. New uses of old Sava port facility - Beton Hala - Exhibition place (photo: Jelena Zivkovic)



Figura 9. New uses of old Sava port facility - Beton Hala – Café (photo: Jelena Zivkovic)



4. Lessons Learned

There are many lessons to be learned from organising *Step to the River* and *Belgrade Boat Carnival* events that can be applied to waterfront development. To mention but a few:

- It is vital to choose strategically important location for the temporary projects that test the development alternatives and to connect them with broader, strategic vision of the city and the waterfront development.⁹ It brings both public and political attention, attracts investors and enables initiation of more complex development and more substantial investments in the area. Working on media attention and public attendance is as important as working on the projects.
- As the ability to make things happen within various constraints is vital, creativity and realistic planning are the most important issues in realising the event. It is important to make alternative solutions and presentable products in each project phase because that enables public, political and media promotion. Success of the project helps to fund future projects.
- Synergy of individual and political goals, when possible, can be very useful. In the case of Belgrade, enthusiasm for urban spatial improvement was rooted in the social and political changes in the country.¹⁰ The new democratic city government and the academics had the same goals: to change the attitude towards urbanity and to bring public spaces back to the citizens.
- Even in countries with transition economy and undeveloped democracy, it is possible to form a public–private partnership and benefit from it. Presented projects are among the first examples of PPP in Serbia.¹¹

Although established as an alternative way of education of future urban designers, *Public art Public space* annual events brought various benefits not only for the students involved but also for the local community and the city in general. They showed that well planned, temporary public-oriented projects can be seen not only as creative exercises and isolated phenomena but also as an important step in realising long-term development visions. By constantly attracting people to waterfronts, they can create more familiarity with them and raise awareness of their importance for the quality of the city life. As a result, waterfront development visions stand a better chance for getting realised in a creative and people-friendly, environmentally and historically sensitive way.

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¹ Official population of the Belgrade region is 1,576,124. First emerging around 6000 BC as the prehistoric settlement of Vinca, Belgrade was settled in the 3rd century by Celts before becoming the Roman settlement of Singidunum. (<http://icp.donauhanse.net/index.php?id=296>)

² Belgrade's riverfront has a total length of 155 km and aquatoria of 3,300 ha. (Tilinger 2008)

³ Transformation from a border city to a merchant city coincides with transformation from an Oriental to a Central-European city, and can be linked to changes in approach to urban planning. (Maksimovic 1967)

⁴ "During the 19th century, trade along the Danube with Budapest, Vienna and the Black Sea region enabled urban development of the waterfront, where the city has had port, commercial and residential structure from the Middle Ages." (Radosavljevic 2005)

⁵ It is a cargo port, with transfer capacity of 3,000,000 tons per year and 10,000 TEUs. It also has 300,000 square metres of warehouses and 650,000 square metres of open-air storage. (<http://www.port-bgd.co.rs/>)

⁶ *Public art Public space* (PaPs) is an educational interdisciplinary programme that aims at integrating art into public spaces and city life as a way of improving their quality. It was established in spring 2003 at the Faculty of Architecture University of Belgrade, with a purpose to explore alternative approaches to academic urban design education. The idea is to promote collaboration among future urban designers, planners, landscape architects, artists, and engineers, not only in designing but also in realising projects and integrating them in everyday life. This implies developing realistic projects with local people, local groups and officials, as well as with government representatives. (www.publicart-publicspace.org)

⁷ Built in 1937 as an industrial facility, Beton Hala (Concrete Hall) is one of today's most intriguing buildings with a strong influence on the panoramic view of Belgrade.

⁸ Repetition strategy is based on creating familiarity with a place by repeated visitation.

⁹ Vision of Belgrade on its rivers is integrated in the Master plan of Belgrade 2021. Projects that promote Belgrade waterfront and quality public spaces are high priority in the City of Belgrade Development Strategy and the City of Belgrade Tourism Strategy.

¹⁰ Milosevic regime, connected with wars on the Balkans and with political and economic isolation of Serbia, ended in October 2000.

¹¹ The events were realised in partnership with Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Trade and Tourism, City of Belgrade, 3 municipal governments, public institutions, civil sector, and private investors.