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***In-betweenness as destiny.***  
**Paradigm shift in urban and architectural design of  
post-World War II Belgrade**

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Belgrade has undergone significant changes in its geopolitical position in the Balkans throughout history. Situated on the edge, Belgrade holds a unique position where cultures and civilizations converge, struggle, and interact over time. The city lacks continuity, both in its legislation and in its development. The only constant is its state of perpetual "in-betweenness" culturally, politically, and technologically. This "in-betweenness" serves as an architectural factor in post-WWII Belgrade, giving rise to spaces representing a radical political paradigm shift. These spaces transition from heroic ideological scenes to ordinary living spaces, where "in-betweenness" remains a daily destiny for the people of Belgrade.

Keywords

Belgrade — In-betweenness — Balkans

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### **Introduction**

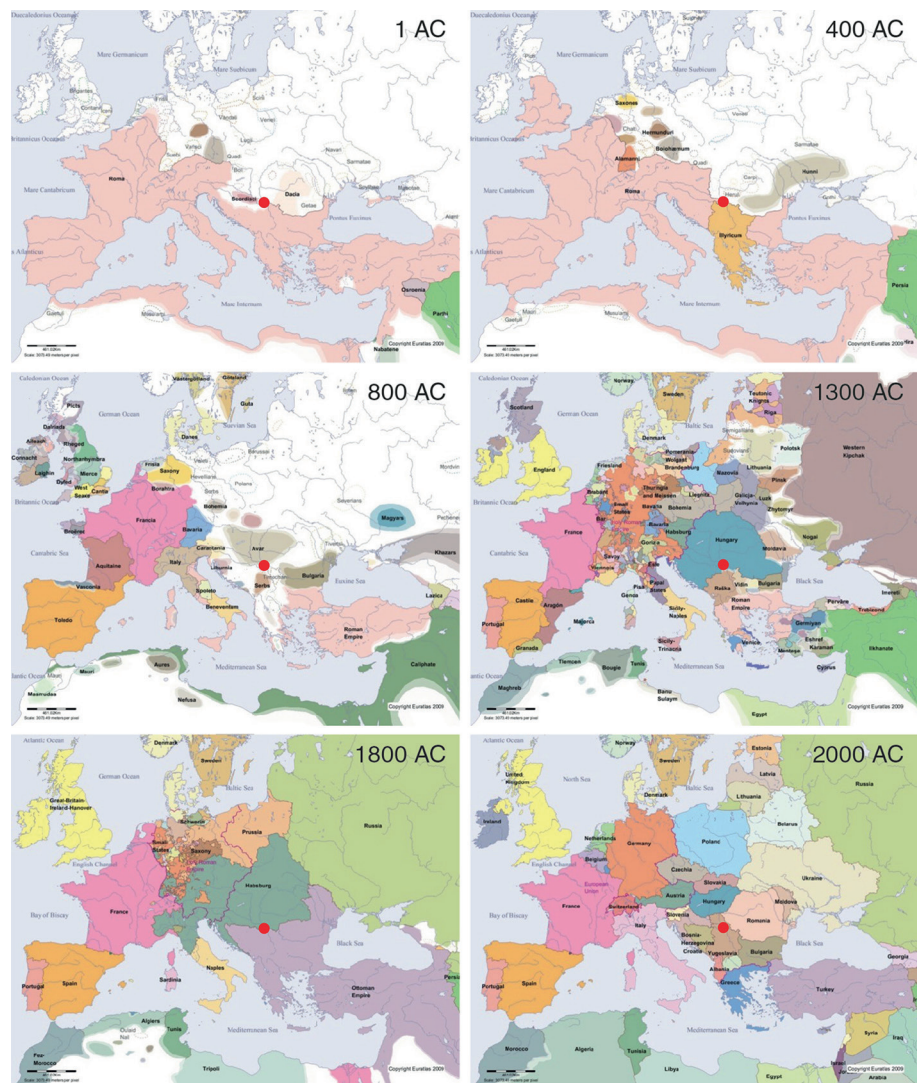
Over the past few decades, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, there has been a growing interest in the architecture and urbanism of the eastern, former socialist countries. Although Serbia was not part of the Warsaw bloc and remained a relatively open country, it has attracted significant research interest. The curiosity about architecture and urbanism in Serbia, particularly in Belgrade, intensified after the end of the wars that ravaged the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Belgrade, with over two thousand years of history, has predominantly existed on the fringes, positioned between different cultures, enduring their influences. This historical context has given rise to multiple interpretations of the same phenomena.

Today, while no longer situated at the edge of a state but on the northern boundary of the Balkan Peninsula, Belgrade remains in-between as the capital of Serbia. It is a small European country with uncertain territorial and population dimensions, undergoing a comprehensive, multilayered transition between the East and the West, autocracy and democracy, socialism and capitalism, collectivism and individualism, atheism and zealotry, isolation and globalization, and the contrast between "honey and blood." Belgrade represents a unique amalgamation, containing elements from the East, West, South, and North, all coexisting in the same place. Everything converges here: Belgrade with Zemun and New Belgrade; the densely populated city with the uninhabited Great War Island, its natural green heart; the rugged cliffs of the Belgrade ridge with the shimmering surface of the rivers and the vast plains of Vojvodina; modern glass high-rise buildings alongside bombed ruins; classicism and art nouveau next to traditional

**Fig. 1**

Belgrade the city on the edge - Belgrade marked with a red dot on each image.



Ottoman houses; trendy, fashionable individuals alongside the homeless; Sachertorte with baklava; kebabs with Wiener schnitzel; disco clubs with belly dance performances; cigarettes with hookahs; Porsches with horse-drawn carriages; noise blending with silence; and glory juxtaposed with defeat.

This eclectic mixture is evident not only in the etymological origins of the names of various city areas but also in the vocabulary of the Serbian language. Everything interlaces and overlays with everything else, not only on a spatial level but especially on a cultural and semiotic plane. To borrow from Calvino, discourse becomes secretive, rules appear absurd, perspectives become deceptive, and everything conceals something else. Due to its complexity, Belgrade consistently and effectively evades being fully grasped (Calvino, 1972).

To comprehend Belgrade, one cannot be a passive observer. It requires a deep engagement in a reciprocal process of sharing dreams and fears, a desire to partake in and relish the contemplative unity of the city. Throughout its history and continuing today, Belgrade has the ability to offer something for everyone, precisely because it has been shaped by everyone (Jacobs, 1961).

### Between and betweenness

The complex betweenness in Belgrade is essential for understanding urban processes, city life, and the city's development. The permanent condition

of being “in-between” requires a clear definition of terms.

The Oxford dictionary defines the term “between” in-between (adverb) as a position in space (or time)—to be at, into, or across the space (or time) separating two objects or regions or two points in time. However, the term “in-betweenness” does not exist in that vocabulary.

The Collins dictionary defines the term “betweenness” (noun) as the condition of being between. Meanwhile, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the same “betweenness” (noun) as the quality or state of being between two others in an ordered mathematical set.

For us, betweenness is a process; it’s a relational state established among the subject and the two-surrounding otherness, which requires the investment of resources in the realization of those relations. In this context, the importance of establishing external relations exceeds the concern of realizing internal relational categories. Therefore, it involves compromise. Betweenness also means being in a condition where two others could fade or even cease, but the subject is still under the influence of both. Betweenness is a transitional/hybridizing state in which the subject is always in between the beginning and end, border and threshold, i.e., limes and limen. It’s a state of tension in which the gravitational forces of surrounding otherness shape the essence of what is between them. Betweenness means being far from the centers, on the periphery, or beyond the horizon — remaining far away from strong interest but not without any influence or interaction with the center (Beretić et al., 2022).

In the open call for the conference “In-betweenness: spaces, practices, and representations” (Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3, May 29th, 2019), “in-betweenness” has been understood as a liminal space or state that implies dynamics of continuity, separation, transition, overlapping, and mobility. It involves issues related to territories, practices, and representations. This concept can be studied in a range of fields, including history, geography, sociology, anthropology, political science, geopolitics, linguistics, translation, literature, and different types of art.

### **New Belgrade**

At the end of World War II, Yugoslavia was a devastated country, and its capital, Belgrade, was a city destroyed by multiple bombings and brutal acts of war. Yugoslavia emerged from the war as one of the victorious Allied countries, expanding its territory, abolishing the kingdom, declaring a socialist revolution, and organizing the state based on the Soviet model. Total nationalization followed, involving all resources on the entire state’s territory, except for private houses with minimal plots in villages (the so-called land minimum), thus becoming a socially-owned state. Reconstruction began quickly in the first months after liberation, adopting the Soviet development model of industrialization and urbanization defined by five-year development plans and centralized administration.

The reconstruction of the cities started instantly, and the significant migration of people from the countryside to the resurrected cities required the urgent, extensive construction of a large number of new apartments as well as technical and social infrastructure facilities. To meet these needs, all technical and social resources were engaged, but they were not enough for the rapid recovery of the country.

The destabilization of political factors in the environment caused by Yugoslavia’s refusal to fall under the strong influence of the Soviet Union further complicated the already difficult situation. Belgrade, as the capital



**Fig. 2**

Master Plan of the Greater Belgrade Area - Existing Condition (1949) by Nikola Dobrović, courtesy of The Urban Institute of Belgrade.

**Fig. 3**

Rudolf Perco, Erwin Ilz and Erwin Bock (1922) - Singidunum Novissima, second prize at the International Competition for the General Urban Plan of Belgrade.

of the new state, became a special focus of the new government.

The reconstruction of Belgrade aimed to build a new magnificent socialist capital for a new socialist state. This kind of representation was intended to show and celebrate the success of the achieved double victory over Nazism and capitalism. For this purpose, a monumental, wide, flat, almost completely empty, spatially luxurious scene—huge marshes on the opposite, left bank of the Sava river in the total volume between Belgrade and Zemun, framed on both sides by the Belgrade and Bežanja ridges and cut by a shining strip of the river flow—was chosen for construction (Fig. 2). With the task of planning a new city on the left bank of the Sava River, experts were gathered, led by architect Nikola Dobrović (Blagojević 2007). The experts were few but well-educated, having studied at the best foreign schools and offices in Prague, Vienna, Berlin, and Paris. Many of the employed architects had previously worked in Le Corbusier's office or were supporters and followers of his ideas (Pignatti 2019).

On the other hand, after breaking with the USSR, the ruling political oligarchy, with the adopted CIAM architectural model, additionally wanted to show a determined break with Stalin's political ideas. Moreover, it was expected that this model could be an appropriate tool for clearly expressing the will for a definitive break with the royal and clerical traditions of the previous state. In this regard, the CIAM declaration and Corbusier's ideas led to a successful meeting of professional aspirations and political will. Tito personally participated in these affairs by constantly monitoring and actively participating in decision-making (Pignatti 2019).

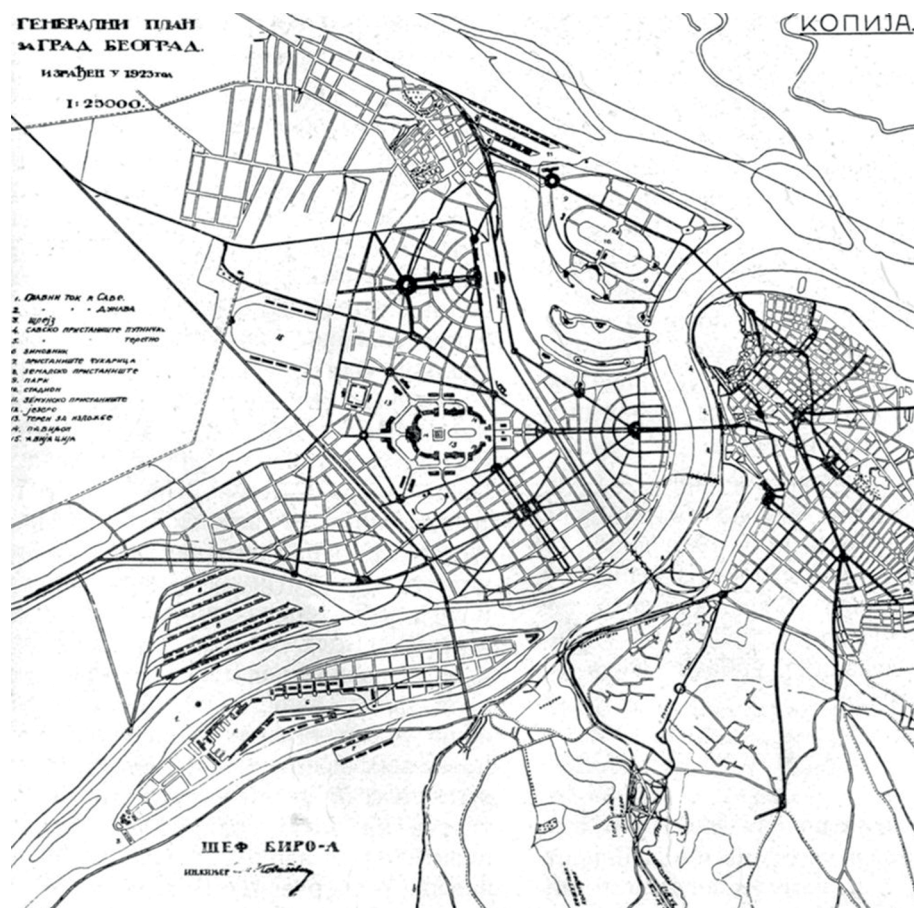
The idea of building a city on the left bank of the Sava was not entirely new. It appeared twenty years earlier, immediately after the unification of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, at the international competition for the General Urban Plan of Belgrade, realized in 1922. In the second award-winning work of the Viennese team of authors, extensive construction was proposed for the first time in the area where, decades later, New Belgrade would be created (fig. 3).

Although too ambitious and formal, this work left a strong mark because it immediately initiated further reflections on this topic. That initiation was already fruitful the following year in the General Plan of Belgrade (1923), which also foresaw the expansion of the city in this direction (Fig. 4). However, this idea also ended up only on paper.

For centuries, Belgrade has looked at this space with longing and a desire to enter it. Yet, the border, where the city was nestled, between the two

**Fig. 4**

Đorđe Kovaljevski (1923) - Illustrative plan of Belgrade on the Sava's left bank, General urban plan of Belgrade.



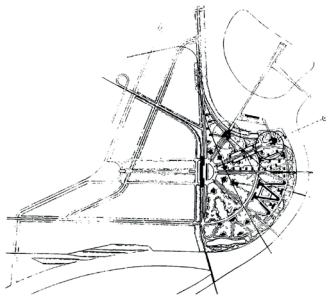
great world empires, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian, was an insurmountable obstacle to that historical undertaking. Finally, in 1937, four years before World War II starts, Belgrade Fair was built across from the city center, on the left bank of the Sava River.

Nevertheless, in the post-war period, carried by a strong wave of reconstruction and supported by the overall political, social, and economic resources of the state, this idea finally got a chance to be realized. The development of the new General Urban Plan of Belgrade began in 1945, with the preparation of studies and the first spatial sketches, already published in 1946. That year, Nikola Dobrović, the leader of the design and planning team, published his first sketch (Fig. 5).

The solutions proposed in this sketch are described as a garden-city with buildings immersed in protective greenery, well connected by roads and rails to other parts of the city. The complex is fully subordinated to the realization of the political program aimed at creating a monumental urban composition, the most significant in the future image of the whole of Belgrade. The composition was supposed to be a center of political power with prominent Government buildings, including a complex for 20 ministries and the building of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia as the most eminent architectural unit of this urban composition. These compositional criteria were also part of the political decision expressed in an official document drawn up by the Ministry of Construction of the Republic of Serbia, which was in direct subordination to the state institutions of Yugoslavia, including President Tito himself.

Later, the ideas from Dobrović's sketch (1946) were elaborated and strongly criticized. Ultimately, his solution was completely rejected, and accordingly, he and his team created a new conceptual sketch, which became the iconic basis for further planning and construction of New Belgrade (Fig. 6).





**Fig. 5**  
Nikola Dobrović (1946) - Sketch of the regulation of Belgrade on the left bank of the Sava River.



**Fig. 6**  
The Draft Master Design of the Greater Belgrade Area (1948) by Nikola Dobrović, courtesy of The Urban Institute of Belgrade.

Based on this sketch and further elaborations, in 1949, the final proposal for the Master Plan of Belgrade was presented to the President of the State, Josip Broz Tito (Fig. 7). After a positive opinion, the proposed plan entered further verification procedures. Finally, in 1950, the preparation of the Master Plan of Belgrade was finished, ending the phase of revolutionary enthusiasm to create New Belgrade as a new spatial and ideological model of Yugoslav socialist society. Verification of the Master Plan of Belgrade ended the era of innocence of urbanism in the Yugoslav socialist city.

## Conclusions

We posit that the condition of betweenness possesses the potential to serve as a catalytic agent for instigating transformative processes. It functions as both an instigator and an incentive, as well as a mechanism for making choices that engender intricate relationships within the spatial context. Additionally, it can function as an instrument of control, as evidenced by the case of Belgrade and New Belgrade. Subsequently, the ensuing discourse endeavors to elucidate several plausible interpretations of betweenness and the intricate relational dynamics that can be established during the conceptualization, inhabitation, and comprehension of New Belgrade as an urban system.

Between external and internal:

A crucial characteristic of betweenness is the external relationship with the world. For instance, the relationship with the developed European countries had overflow effects on the internal social and spatial fields. There were only a few architects, and most of them were educated abroad, bringing back internationally gained experiences to Yugoslavia. Despite this noble idea of knowledge transfer, the process is beyond the control of architects. It depends on the cultural capacity of society, not solely on the knowledge and skills of architects. This process was often stuck between progressive cultural experiments and re-traditionalization.

Life between two discontinuities:

Belgrade, like the Balkans, is in a permanent state of discontinuity. Experiencing 115 wars (Nurden 2009) on its territory in two thousand years of history means that Belgrade and its citizens face a war every 17.5 years. In other words, for centuries, there has not been a single generation without a direct experience of war, at least once in their life. In the same period,

**Fig. 7**

Presentation of the final proposal for the General Urban Plan of Belgrade to the President of the State, Josip Broz Tito (1949).

**Fig. 8**

Nikola Dobrović, Milorad Macura (1948) - The competition for the urban plan of New Belgrade.



Belgrade was razed to ashes 44 times (Nurden 2009), implying that every 45 years, we rebuilt our beloved city almost from scratch. In this lens, New Belgrade is not such a significant undertaking to construct.

Between to have and to be:

Betweenness enables the emancipation of choice in which the state, as the owner of social property, has rights over all resources. It ensures, or at least tries to ensure, equality in the distribution of those resources. Among the best examples of how that principle works is the production of apartments by society, social ownership of the housing stock, and the distribution of apartments based on the criteria of equality. Another example is the inalienable right to use the apartment, but not to privatize it because a flat is a social good. New Belgrade was conceived and built as a socially-owned city (Blagojević 2007). Another possible reading: Between top and down. This implies establishing relationships along the vertical lines of social organization and hierarchy, but also between an individual and the community—the establishment of social and spatial relations horizontally.

Between Utopia and Pragmatism:

Socialist architecture in Yugoslavia, as a pragmatic field, between Corbusier and Marx, existed between utopian, ideological, and dogmatic fields, with Tito as a mediator (Pignatti 2019). The position of the architect, in this case, could take on the role of interpreter and articulator of all four fields (pragmatic, ideological, dogmatic, and utopian), leading to the dangerous demiurge position of the supreme priest of the new order who knows what people need better than themselves. Even Dobrić could not resist this challenge, neither could Corbusier, but Tito did.

Life between the rigid centers of political power and the vibrancy of everyday life: A life between real needs and the ability to satisfy them.

The heroic environment is not suitable for the average person's life. In a heroic setting, the nearest kindergarten or supermarket is often located in another part of the city or on the other side of the river. This was the danger of the original idea in New Belgrade. However, private initiatives quickly intervened, furnishing the basic necessities of life, and the weak technical potential of the construction industry to complete heroic ideas. "Ambitious plans to create a new city on the left bank of the Sava were not accompanied by adequate technical equipment," while "construction



based on craft production was unprepared for such high goals and expectations” (Đukanović 2015). When, over time, the technical potential grew to the limit of realizing the heroic idea, the city was already finished, the war began, and the state-investor dissolved.

Between modernization (as a process) and modernity (as a goal): That is, architecture between modernism and modernization. Discussions about contested modernism (Blagojević 2007) and unfinished modernization (Mrduljaš, Kulić 2012) show that modernism was not the ultimate goal, and modernization was realized only to the extent that local society was ready to modernize.

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