

2015

Book reviews: Designing Tito's capital: urban planning, modernism, and socialism in Belgrade

Kimberly E. Zarecor

Iowa State University, zarecor@iastate.edu

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Abstract

In this history of New Belgrade, historian Brigitte Le Normand writes one of the first comprehensive municipal-level case studies of a postwar socialist urban planning project. The book chronicles the development of a new urban district within the capital city of Belgrade from the first modernist plans for the area just after World War II through several stages of stop-and-go development that finally accelerated in the late 1960s with the construction of both official housing blocks and informal settlements. The text highlights the difficulties encountered by urban planners, residents, and the local government to agree on the project's goals and then to implement them. Le Normand frames the discussion around New Belgrade's adherence to and deviation from the Athens Charter, Le Corbusier's 1943 text based on discussions at the 1933 CIAM meeting. Arguing that the original 1950 master plan closely followed the functional city diagram from the Athens Charter, Le Normand shows that the city's subsequent development was far from the controlled modernist vision put forward by its earliest planners.

Disciplines

Architectural History and Criticism | Slavic Languages and Societies | Urban, Community and Regional Planning

Comments

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in *Planning Perspectives* on 22 January 2015. Available online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2014.1002211>.

Book Review

Brigitte Le Normand, *Designing Tito's Capital. Urban Planning, Modernism, and Socialism in Belgrade*
(University of Pittsburgh Press 2014)

Kimberly Zarecor, *Iowa State University*

In this history of New Belgrade, historian Brigitte Le Normand writes one of the first comprehensive municipal-level case studies of a postwar socialist urban planning project. The book chronicles the development of a new urban district within the capital city of Belgrade from the first modernist plans for the area just after World War II through several stages of stop-and-go development that finally accelerated in the late 1960s with the construction of both official housing blocks and informal settlements. The text highlights the difficulties encountered by urban planners, residents, and the local government to agree on the project's goals and then to implement them. Le Normand frames the discussion around New Belgrade's adherence to and deviation from the Athens Charter, Le Corbusier's 1943 text based on discussions at the 1933 CIAM meeting. Arguing that the original 1950 master plan closely followed the functional city diagram from the Athens Charter, Le Normand shows that the city's subsequent development was far from the controlled modernist vision put forward by its earliest planners.

Chapter one summarizes the current literature on socialist urban planning and the global influence of the Athens Charter. The case is made here for Yugoslav exceptionalism. Borrowing the idea of "in-betweenness" from Vladimir Kulić, Le Normand prefaces the book's case study by positing Belgrade and Yugoslavia as a unique case, not quite like Western Europe or the rest of the Eastern Bloc, because housing was not provided exclusively by the state, speed and standardization were not absolute priorities, and planning was decentralized and administrated locally by municipalities. Chapters two and three follow the early postwar debates about the planning of New Belgrade on a flood plain across the Sava River from the historic center. Competitions were held, committees formed, and a master plan presented in 1950 that separated the new city into "functionally defined zones" connected through modern transportation networks to the existing city. (53) This active period was followed by a decade-long postponement of the project due to economic problems. Since the region's population continued to increase, barracks and temporary housing were built on the site during this period. These provisional solutions only emphasized the state's inability to solve its growing housing crisis and contrasted with ideas about the Yugoslav 'good life' featured in magazines, exhibitions, and advertising.

Only in the late 1950s could planners return again to the question of how New Belgrade should be developed. As discussed in chapter four, planners introduced the concept of sections (*rejoni*) to divide the large site into units of eight to twelve thousand inhabitants. Sections were comprised of blocks and buildings within the blocks designed by individual architects commissioned by the Town Planning Institute for site-specific projects. This gave the area a much more varied appearance than others in the Eastern Bloc, which were notoriously monotonous and standardized. Local community and retail spaces were planned, but rarely

provided. Almost all construction in New Belgrade into the 1970s was housing, giving it a reputation as a bedroom community for the city center. As economic market reforms were introduced in the 1960s, housing also became a commodity that could be bought and sold with new classes of units such as luxury apartments appearing among the New Belgrade blocks.

The final three chapters expose problems with building fast enough to satisfy the housing demand as the city's population grew rapidly in the 1960s. What Le Normand terms "rogue construction," outside of state control, started all around the site and in adjacent communities as inhabitants built their own single-family homes on still open land since official units were so difficult to acquire. (148) The Town Planning Institute both acknowledged and tried to ignore the impact of these informal settlements until it decided to work with rogue builders in the mid-1960s to develop parcels at the edges of the city. Sociologists used the construction problems to launch attacks against modernist planning, which coincided with similar critiques in the United States and Western Europe. Rising social inequality, the slow pace of construction, and the unplanned settlement patterns all contributed to the sense that the original strategy for New Belgrade was fundamentally flawed. Planners wanted a new approach for a 1972 master plan. Working with consultants from Wayne State University in Detroit, the Town Planning Institute looked to cybernetics and early computer modeling to develop a data-driven approach to its now chaotic site.

Although useful as an analytical framework, Le Normand overplays the Athens Charter concept in the text. Portrayed here a set of instructions to be followed or rejected, the constant reference back to the 1943 diagram stops the analysis from developing a finer grain that would embed the debates around New Belgrade in CIAM's own changing discourse and postwar planning practices in general. The internal and local approach to the case study has the drawback that international trends are not woven enough into the story. Missing in particular are references to Scandinavian projects like Vällingby in Sweden or the plans for Chandigarh or Brasilia, which have both been studied as examples where the Athens Charter model develops deformities at the micro-scale. Despite these problems of context and comparison, this is a meticulously researched and thoughtfully presented case study that will be relevant to all scholars interested in global postwar urban planning.