

*Srdjan Radović, PhD, senior research fellow*  
Institute of Ethnography SASA, Belgrade, Serbia  
srdjan.radovic@ei.sanu.ac.rs

## **EVOLUTION OF A BELGRADE SQUARE FROM A TRANSPORTATION HUB INTO A (QUASI) HISTORICAL THEME PARK**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the urban, landscape and symbolical development of a Belgrade city square (Savski trg) and its surrounding area (Savamala, colloquially and locally called Štajga, presently evolving into Belgrade Waterfront), in the course of over a hundred years. The square and its gravitating area grew out of the turn of the century modernization after the erection of the main railway station, and together with other transportation facilities in the vicinity, it represented the city's main transportation hub in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This urban node and its surroundings started undergoing profound transformations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, mostly following the general transitioning of the city from an industry-based to a service-oriented economy, and Belgrade's evolving into a 'postmodern city' characterized by excessive urban development and entrepreneurial urbanism. The area first witnessed gentrification occurring in the area north of the Savski trg, and later on a large-scale development project taking place west and northwest from the square, gradually replacing earlier transportation and other facilities. Savski trg itself also underwent two successive symbolic and memorial renovations in the last ten years, and the paper will examine neighbourhood transformation, uses of public space, and identity politics shaping the makeover of the square and its vicinity.

**Keywords:** Belgrade, Belgrade Waterfront (Savamala, Štajga), Savski trg, urban (re) development, symbolic urbanscape, modernity and postmodernity

## ŠTAJGA: ENTER MODERNITY

On May 5<sup>th</sup> 1980,<sup>1</sup> journalists of the Yugoslav state broadcaster solemnly reported in a live TV broadcast: “Since the early hours of the day, columns of Belgraders have poured towards the grand Square of Brotherhood and Unity in front of the main railway station to await the special train from Ljubljana and Zagreb, carrying the body of the late president Tito. It is exactly 5 PM – the ‘Blue train’ with the late president of the Republic Tito, enters Belgrade’s central rail station (...) Entire Belgrade congregated on the Square of Brotherhood and Unity.”<sup>2</sup> On that day this city square had witnessed probably the largest crowds in its entire history which now spans over 135 years, since when Belgrade’s main railway station (a landmark building defining the creation of the square), had been opened. Savski trg (Sava Square, named after the river Sava passing nearby), as it is now called, started to form around the railway station opened in 1885 – this hub was central in the development of the nascent Serbian railway system and in the urban development of this part of town. Just north of the building stood the neighbourhood of Savamala with the city’s river port, and towards the south a large marshy bog called Ciganska bara (Gypsy pond) or Bara Venecija (Venice pond) - its draining enabled the gradual development of this vast area. At the turn of the century, the square in front of the rail station and surrounding streets became a bustling area of flux of people and goods, and the square was thus named Žitni trg (Grains Square) because it also provided for the massive shipment of grains and cereals.<sup>3</sup> Another unofficial name of the square and its wider surroundings referred more specifically to the circulation of people – for the most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the present day, Belgraders have called this location Štajga, a term stemming from German steigen – to climb (also absteigen – to get off; aufsteigen – to get on; etc.), alluding to the coming and going of people by primarily trains. Indeed, the square (renamed to Vilsonov trg after World War I, commemorating the US president Woodrow Wilson) and the neighbouring area established itself as the city’s prime transportation hub. Traversed also by tram lines, the square provided for the circulation of people and goods – besides the rail station and the adjacent river port, the city’s biggest post office building was built in 1929 on the location, and by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the entire area catered for the most of the transfer of people in and out of the capital, and transport of merchandise and mail. In 1966 city’s central bus station was erected just next to the railway station building, and given that one of the urban transit routes for trucks also passed through this area, the square and its surroundings became the most important urban node in Belgrade. For the most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the neighbourhood of Savamala or Štajga, hosted working and middle-class housing and primarily catered for city’s transportation accompanied by storage facilities, repair shops, retail, restaurant and lodging businesses (small hotels and inns), including unofficial and sometimes illegal activities that usually go along with

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<sup>2</sup> Transcribed and translated from the videotaped live broadcast of the funeral of Josip Broz Tito on TV Titograd station on May 5<sup>th</sup> 1980 (last viewed and accessed on August 1<sup>st</sup> 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Historical overview of the square’s and area’s development is based on Čubrilović 1974, and relevant onomastic data stems from Leko 2003.

constant circulation of people (such as unofficial open-air trading and barter, small-scale con artists, dealers of illegal substances, prostitution, also a pornographic movie theatre, etc.). Although technically centrally positioned in the city's perimeters (less than 500 meters away from Belgrade's point zero and main square), present-day Savski square and surroundings were not symbolically and culturally perceived as being central, foremostly because of their primary transport functions, lack of representative public buildings and sometimes shady reputation.

Many Belgraders perceived this area as a non-place, to use Marc Augé's term, a location not significantly connected to any particular cultural or symbolical value, as transport hubs and station facilities usually are depicted in such a discourse (Augé 2005: 75-76). On the other hand, Savski trg and its stations were the place for people coming to Belgrade (sometimes arriving in the city for the first time, with a plethora of modern cultural references connected with Savski trg as an entrance point for Belgrade 'newcomers'), and those dwelling in this area. Thus, it could be argued that the Štajga area ultimately could not be relegated to a complete symbolical void by almost anyone – the bustling, yet unrepresentative and somewhat shanty service-oriented area placed just next to the brightly lit downtown zone could not be completely ignored. It was culturally projected into the realm of urban "otherness" by some (when envisioned from the perspective of urbanite and well-established social strata with advanced cultural capital, both in capitalism and socialism), while others (area locals, commuters, long-distance travellers, newcomers to the city, and most of the city's blue-collar strata) perceived, practised and performed Štajga in more favourable and culturally intimate ways. The area generally lacked prominent onomastic or architectural memorial markers in the area – the neighbourhood was not the site of any major monuments or landmark buildings (part for the train station), or regular mass rallies (part for the one mentioned in the beginning of this paper).<sup>4</sup> The square's penultimate official name, Trg bratstva i jedinstva was the only ideologically pronounced spatial marker (English: Square of Brotherhood and Unity, as it was renamed in 1946, following the establishment of socialist and federal Yugoslavia, and commemorating the country's unofficial slogan denoting the Yugoslav socialist concept of multiethnicity).

Socialist urban modernity in its Yugoslav iteration also meant large scale development of the capital, best epitomized in the erection of the Novi Beograd (New Belgrade) borough. Coordinated actors (political and professional-managerial social strata leading public institutions and the economy) of the planned and, for the most part, controlled and supervised urban politics, also envisaged gradual relocation of the existing transportation hub further from the city centre through the deployment of railway infrastructure to other parts of the city, opening up Štajga area and Sava river banks for further development.<sup>5</sup> Gradual execution of this endeavour was progressing in the 1960s and 1970s, but was halted due to the economic crisis of the 1980s, and (temporarily) abandoned by the beginning of the 1990s – collapse of socialism and multiethnic Yugoslavia also heralded the end of the modern(ist) era, including its urban public projects.

<sup>4</sup> Political and other organized mass rallies were taking place more frequently on the squares of the Belgrade's historic nucleus (municipality of Stari Grad/Old Town).

<sup>5</sup> Urban development plans for the area are presented in detail in the journal *Urbanizam Beograda*, vols. 1–66/67 (1969–1982).

## SAVAMALA: ENTER POSTMODERNITY

The beginning of the Yugoslav wars did not affect Belgrade directly as it did many cities in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina that suffered brutal warfare and destruction, but it profoundly altered its social and urban fabric. Economic and cultural downfall ignited by fueling nationalism led to the ‘deformed urbanization’, and ‘dysfunctional urban functions’ (Petrović 1997), mass (in)voluntary emigration and immigration, and increasing poverty. The Square in front of the central rail station symbolically and factually bore witness to that. On a symbolical level, it was renamed in 1992 from a previous socialist multiethnic marker into its current newly coined name. On a factual level, it testified to a significantly smaller number of guests and travellers exiting railway and bus stations, with refugees and displaced persons walking those routes instead. Besides a short-breath 1995 propaganda stunt announcing the development of the wider area around the square (branded as Europolis – Beograd na Savi, and echoing earlier visions of the area’s development), no actual development or renovations occurred by the end of the century.

The fall of the regime of Slobodan Milošević in 2000 (in the aftermath of the 1999 NATO intervention), reopened the possibilities for social and economic development of Serbia after the devastating *fin de siècle*, but also faced the society with challenges of the so-called (post-socialist) transition and (late) inclusion into postmodern and globalizing currents already enveloping throughout Europe. Capillary effects of the wider circumstances were also felt in the Štajga area. Many local retail stores, workshops and storage facilities (including most of those run by former socially owned enterprises), started going out of business, and coupled with the crippling of the transportation sector, led to the demise of this branch of industry. Dubious bankruptcies, buyouts and privatizations added to the generally unstable economic climate, and new establishments found their place in former industrial facilities. Gentrification has swung in full force in the Savamala area north of the Savski trg, less so by means of influx of new residents, so much as by the opening of bars, clubs, hostels, galleries, cultural and NGO hubs, and other entertainment and hospitality businesses that conveniently took over former industrial, artisanal and transport spaces.<sup>6</sup> Soon, this area gained novel cultural capital, eloping previous industrial and shantytown perceptions, and already in 2015 residents of the neighbourhood could attest to the public image transformation of Štajga (a slightly derogatory name, how most of the locals and Belgraders used to call the area) into Savamala (historic and more upscale name, prevailing in recent times) (Bukumirovic 2015). The area’s ‘rebranding’ was promoted by city’s officials (together with raging marketing of Belgrade as a tourist and nightlife hotspot, bordering on self-exoticism), testifying to more or less coordinated effort of politics, business and cultural industries (the way most gentrifications usually operate in other places as well).

Urban ‘renewal’ of (former) Štajga could be monitored as a small-scale case of a steady transformation of Belgrade into a textbook ‘postmodern city, with properties transformed into marketed real estate, entrepreneurial and investors’ monopoly in the creation of the urban content, and the absence of defined urban politics (Petrović 2009). Consumption has become one of the cornerstones of the area’s development, and the people to whom the new

<sup>6</sup> The process could only partially be defined as pioneer gentrification (Backović 2019), and some depict it as a culture-driven urban transformation (Lazić 2019).

urban content was created were the consumers (mostly meaning consumers not living in the neighbourhood itself). The ‘upgraded’ Savamala was to attract people from other parts of the city (and beyond) for leisure and entertainment, as one of the showpieces of the new image of Belgrade as open for guests (primarily tourists), symbolically overcoming and setting aside the difficult years of wars and isolation of the 1990s. Just south of the emerging slick neighbourhood, Savski trg with its stations stood ready for its own makeover to add up to the flare of the gradually refurbished and rebranded Serbian capital.

In 2006, city authorities and the Serbian Ministry of culture commissioned what would eventually be known as the “Memorial to victims of the wars and defenders of the Fatherland from 1990 to 1999”, to be situated on Savski trg. Following initiatives to commemorate war victims of the 1990s, but also initiatives from Serb veterans’ associations of those same wars, the authorities came up with a mish-mash concept which left many discontent. A monument obscuring the nature of the Yugoslav wars and equating war victims and perpetrators was in complete accordance with dominant self-abolitionist Serbian discourses, renouncing any real accountability for the recent wars in former Yugoslavia. At the same time, this gave an opportunity to authorities to leave their memorial footprint in the public space, and an elaborate memorial blueprint was chosen for the site. However, although not big in numbers, vocal opposition to the monument ensued, triggering a public debate on the matter mostly procured by the artists’ group Spomenik.<sup>7</sup> This caused the stalling off the erection of the memorial, and gradual falling into the obscurity of the entire question, just until 2012, when city officials decided to swiftly proceed with the placement of the monument, only not in its elaborate original form. Savski trg thus hosted the opening ceremony of a modest and rudimentary small-scale memorial which left almost everyone disheartened (which showed already at the opening event with incidents and angered shout-outs from the congregated public).

Prolonged instalment of the war memorial on Savski trg unveiled multiple actors taking part in the process of creating symbolized urban space, with the political sphere eventually having the last say on the matter. Plurality of social actors engaged in the practising of contemporary Balkan cities is obviously hierarchically ordered, and participatory decision-making involving citizens is decreasingly present and sometimes discouraged. Primacy of the business/entrepreneurial sphere in urban development and of the political elite in memorial and symbolic production of urban space thus seems to be almost unchallenged. Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Belgrade has witnessed mostly undisputed advancement of entrepreneurial urbanism and excessive real estate development (in Serbia sometimes dubbed as investment, or investor urbanism), enabled by this neoliberal urban alliance, which will reach an unprecedented scale from 2014 onwards, precisely in the Savski trg area.

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<sup>7</sup> The group’s website: <https://grupaspomenik.wordpress.com>. More elaborately on the entire issue of the memorial see Radović 2013 and David 2014.

## BELGRADE WATERFRONT: SUPER MODERNITY RELOADED

Since 2014 Savski trg has become the epicentre of a large-scale urban (re)development project (brownfield investment), when a special public-private joint venture (enacted also through a special bill passed in the Serbian parliament) took off. Business partnership between the Serbian government and an Emirati investment and development company envisaged the creation of a new urban quarter in the place of still existing transport and storage infrastructure west and northwest from Savski trg and Savska street, branded as Belgrade Waterfront (Serbian: Beograd na vodi). This joint venture projected densely built properties mostly comprising residential, office and retail real estate leaning on the Sava riverbank, and is currently under intensive construction. Echoing 20<sup>th</sup> century general visions for the development of this area, the project, however, maximized the share of real estate for sale and lease (also by projecting compact clusters of high-rise properties) and minimized the share of non-commercial public-use facilities. Neglect of the public interest in this business venture became evident with hasty shut-down of the main railway station on Savski trg in 2018, while no other fully capacitated major train station was still operational in Belgrade, which is presently still the case (central bus station is to be relocated in 2022). Vocal public criticism and opposition channelled by a number of political, NGO, academic and professional organizations targeted many aspects of the project. Besides the gargantuan proportions and planned cramming of buildings, critics pointed out dubious legality of the venture, non-transparent financing, disregard for public interest, illegal and violent evictions of previous users and owners and their property in the area, etc. Proponents of the project (centred around, but not limited to Serbian and Belgrade authorities and their business partners) ignored or downplayed these issues, and despite the fact that Belgrade Waterfront has become one of the focal points of political struggle and public debate for years, the project is being executed mostly without interruptions.<sup>8</sup> A firm grip of leading business and political actors on urban development has further tightened compared to the preceding decade.

By now fully ongoing urban development plan has already attracted academic attention, and has been interpreted also through the lens of advanced and state-led gentrification (Backović 2019), while similarities with the Dubai-style development initiated analysis of the project's operational aspects and transnational capital-flow (Koelemaj 2021). Novelty of the Belgrade Waterfront in the Serbian and even wider context is the driving role of the state authorities in this development, and the fact that the nation-state (and not the local authorities which is more common), is not only assisting the investors, but also directing the development process (see Grubbauer and Čamprag 2019). Such a situation which resembles the prime time of modern urban development can lead us again to Augé and his explanation of supermodernity as a pinnacle of modernity, or being in excess of the modern, and the haste, spatially and temporally saturated development of Belgrade Waterfront could be designated as supermodern in this sense.

Given how David Harvey (2008) has repeatedly shown that excessive urban development and rapid urbanization serve the aim of surplus capital absorption, it is clear that this specific development does the same with (transnational) migrating surpluses. The twist with the

<sup>8</sup> For more details of the venture and scholarly analysis see Petrović and Backović 2019.



nation-state's prominent role in the process relates to the 'supermodern' Waterfront maybe not only with its super/post-modern Dubai role model, but even more so with the 'classic' modern Paris of Haussman and Bonaparte, and the then intensive symbiosis of capital, nation-state politics, and state authority in the radical reordering of the capital (see Harvey 2005). The uncanny parallels diverge in the 'supermodern' conditions of the Belgrade case, with its peripheral location in the globalized world of capital and limited spatial scope of the project. On the other hand, what also makes this development akin to 'classic' modern grand-scale projects is the effort to also inscribe ideology into public space and "project values onto stone and space" (Schorske 1998:25). The backdrop for such a symbolic intervention in the public space of an otherwise bland sum of mass-produced buildings was found on Savski trg.

With the eviction of the railways, Savski trg no longer served the function of transit of people and vehicles to the station, presenting a more or less clean slate for public space design, ready to be inscribed with (an) 'identity'. Fabric for identity (re) modelling can stem from diverse and layered local heritage, and from what can be described as cumulative texture of local urban culture (Spasić and Backović 2017: 23). Štajga area and its long-lasting and defining tradition of transportation offered quite a bit in this respect, but Serbian and Belgrade officials had other priorities in mind. Thus, the initiative to turn the defunct rail station building into a railway museum was outright rejected, with authorities proclaiming that the facility will host some kind of historical museum. After prolonged considerations of what kind of historical museum would suit the location (potentially also a newly established one), the latest decision (November 2020) of the building's proprietor (Serbian government) is to relocate the existing Historical Museum of Serbia to these premises. Elaborate redesign of the square itself was the priority, clearly aiming at grandeur and the historical, as announced by the leading national and city-level politicians who acted in this instance as deal-breaking 'memorial entrepreneurs' (Jordan 2006: 77).

In 2016 it was announced that a monument dedicated to Stefan Nemanja (ruler of medieval Serbia and founder of its prominent feudal dynasty) would be erected in front of the former station building. The location was presented as convenient since Savski trg is also the endpoint of a major street named after this ruler (Nemanjina st.). At the same time, this identity choice towards medieval traditions corresponds with prevailing memory discourses throughout contemporary Balkans which bypass most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a symbolic pool for legitimization of current national identities, and turn to earlier, often medieval past (Radović 2003: 310–315). The actual public discussion about the proposed monument started only in 2018 when the winning design of the competition was unveiled. A 23 meters high mastodon monument was chosen, and immediate uproar from professional and general public ensued (lasting almost till the present day). The contentious points included firstly the enormous scale of the monument, but also its style and detailing, symbolism present in monument's segments, competition procedures and financing, etc.<sup>9</sup> The opponents of the statue perceived it as a disproportionate pseudo-traditionalist kitsch (comparing it to the infamous Skopje 2014 project), while its supporters applauded its over-scaled grandiosity and historicism. Regardless of the conflicting response of the public, the project (expectedly) proceeded as planned, which also included the overall remodelling of the square (changes

<sup>9</sup> For a minute overview and commentary of the issue see Makuljević 2019.

in traffic layout, partial pedestrianization, new public and decorative lightning etc.). In the novel context, the 1990s war memorial (appearing miniature in comparison) became a sidekick of the new show, and was relocated to the storage facility of the city's heritage protection institution, until a new location is found for its placement.

## THE BEGINNING OF AN EPILOGUE

The grand opening of the monument in January 2021 (organized regardless of the raging Covid pandemic) revealed the intentions and functions of the upgraded Savski trg. Political and religious leaders of Serbia, joined by ethnic Serb dignitaries from other post-Yugoslav countries, espoused "national unity" in a political rally on a stage consisting of the biggest standing statue in Serbia and soon to be a historical museum. Savski trg is probably to become a rallying ground for manifestations like this, and its vast open space has proved to be convenient for such purposes since (either for organized or spontaneous rallies and demonstrations). When not used in such a manner, the square is saturated with national symbolism, and can serve the ideological function indirectly, echoing archaic architectural and monumental concepts. We should be reminded how national identity is forged around certain objects, including the built environment. In a two-way process whereby a nation projects on to the environment certain values (as though on to some blank screen), and then reads itself back into that environment, invested as it now is with certain values (Leach 2002: 89). It might well be that the square's remodelling had this as an intention, to concoct not just a new symbolic space in the urban tissue, but also to create a national symbol in Belgrade's urbanscape, and (as increasingly frequent public narratives allude), city's new main square in what could become the new city center (Belgrade Waterfront after its completion).

While the potential transition of the city's epicentre to a different location can prove to be a long stretch (which also depends on a number of unaccounted factors), restructuring of the square decisively alters its uses and image. Given that on the side opposite of the former station lay infrequently visited public and commercial facilities and housing, current state of the square could be depicted as a theme park (Makuljević 2019), moreover, a (quasi) historical one. Of course, only once the entire Belgrade Waterfront project is completed will it be possible to definitely assess what the actual dynamics of the square will be. One of the paradoxes of this renovation is the fact that Savski trg, for now, represents one of the rare public spaces in central Belgrade (apart from parks), that offers vast walking spaces (given that majority of downtown's sidewalks and pedestrian streets are infected with sprawling open-air cafes and restaurants), and free leisure. Free nationalist leisure though. While consumption of prime real estate and upscale retail in Belgrade Waterfront is accessible to few, and consumption of cultural lifestyles in Savamala affordable to some, former Štajga's main square is free to consume for everyone, as national(ist) public markers usually are.

With Belgrade Waterfront west of the square still mostly under construction, and Savamala north of it for the most part catering for nightlife, Savski trg is presently not too lively, except for mostly West Asian migrants and refugees who largely contribute to the area's vivacity. Since the central bus station is still located in the area, people on the move spend most of their quotidian life in open spaces near the facility, being also a reminder of bygone dynamics



of former Štajga. When the bus station relocates further away (next year according to plans), so will the migrating community probably. Once that occurs, and most of the adjacent development is completed, Savski trg will likely become a social and cultural laboratory providing us with insight on how an urban public space born out of the intersection of gentrification, entrepreneurial urbanism and nation-state politics grows.

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