

BELGRADE FAIR COMPLEX: THE COLLAPSE OF YUGOSLAV PURISM

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Abstract:

In the wake of accelerated development in the vicinity of the Belgrade Fair and further plans for construction in this part of the city, the events that have unfolded during the past decade of Belgrade's urban development have situated Belgrade Fair as a key topic in the spotlight of the Serbian urban planning community. The objective of this paper is, first and foremost, the formulation of a methodologically broader critical matrix regarding the formation of an approach to the future adoption of strategies for the urban renewal of the Belgrade Fair (Sajam) complex. This complex, in addition to basic research on its architectural and urban qualities, also includes numerous current and temporal aspects from which it is possible to draw conclusions about the issue at hand. These analyses of the architectural and urban value of the fair complex observe the key themes and concepts that define the Sajam's spatial and developmental paradigm. They also accentuate current questions regarding the defragmentation of the heritage of modern architecture in architectural practice. Also highlighted, in addition to the architectural and urban planning composition of the first construction phase between 1953 and 1957, are the today less-known architectural and engineering aspects of the exhibition halls that lack heritage status, along with an exploration of the renewal or transformation of this space through an analysis of recent conceptual design proposals. This study, through synthesis, seeks to establish a comprehensive picture and the broader critical framework needed to pass judgement before the ideological and constructive breakdown of Belgrade's exhibition complex as a paradigm of Yugoslav purism. The conclusions leave space for the appreciation of different approaches, opening up new questions that clearly require social consensus and which have not yet been answered in the public or professional space.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Belgrade Fair (locally more commonly known simply as the *Sajam* (trade fair)) has for years been a spatial, architectural, and urban complex built for a new Yugoslav society, as efficient as an automobile (or machine) in Le Corbusier's concept of *Maison Citrohan* (Gresleri, 2021). The Sajam contains all of the social processes appropriate to its status, as a phenomenon from an epoch signifying the emergence of the city's development (Ilić, 2010). The dialectical matrix formed between the Sajam and a fairground (Serbian: *sajmište*) is no longer examined; and its broader significance was not expressed through programmes, characteristics, organisational forms, or meaning at the time of its construction. Instead, the Sajam is viewed as a paradigmatic phenomenon that will be replaced by elements that will be constructed for the one-off EXPO 2027 exhibition. At the time of its initial development, in the early 1950s, the concept of an exhibition space was viewed as a spatial concept and as a universal organisational form, that possessed and was defined by its own architectural narrative, while the concept of the Sajam simultaneously contained the meanings of ephemerality, changeability, and the concept of an institution for public events (Mandić, 1954). At that time, the decision to form new trade fair complexes (Ilić, 2013) shifted the focal point away from urban centres, which was of great significance for the urban development of Yugoslav cities. The Belgrade Fair, as the paradigm of Yugoslav modernism and purism, a place containing the memories of all the events that have taken place there since its construction in 1957, came to represent the material heritage of socialist Yugoslavia. In response to the construction of exhibition spaces in Yugoslavia, the Zagreb Fair – a near contemporary of the Belgrade Fair – developed as a sort of informal reflection of global architectural trends, accepting international pavilions as part of its complex. The Belgrade Fair, on the other hand, was handed a different task: to become the overarching site for constructing the identity of the state and its society, with an anatomy, form, and content given over to this paradigm. It was a paradigm in which, beyond the Sajam, the central motif of urban development was also a design brief for the development of Yugoslav cities – new urban spaces in the central zones of cities, the like of which Yugoslavia had not yet seen. Following years of searching for the appropriate style, the development of the Sajam's form and composition was founded on the late purist approach of Milorad Pantović and on prestressed concrete as an artefact: creating a new identity for the modern Yugoslav state, built on home-grown knowhow and technology (Žeželj, 1956). Following a public call for design concepts and numerous variations, the Sajam was shaped by rather unique forms that had until then been more familiar in bridge building and the industrial complexes constructed under the First Five-Year Plan (*Perspektivni petogodišnji plan investicija Ministarstva građevina FNRJ*, 1946). Purism – the architectural movement Pantović strove for, and in which Le Corbusier emphasised the simple aesthetics of the machines that had come to symbolise the modern age – takes shape through the perfect logic of machines, whose beauty stems from natural laws.

The post-war cultural template for Belgrade's urban renewal was fatal for the Old Exhibition Grounds (Bajford, 2011), in a not dissimilar manner to what is now reoccurring with the Belgrade Fair. With little heed being paid to the fact that it was at times so significant, spreading its influence, even in interaction between East and West at a time when the world had become polarised, or the importance of trade fairs and many other events that had taken place in Belgrade. The new wave of cultural shifts is today reflected in the expansion of developments that are rapidly encroaching on the Sajam from all sides: initially, in the form of the Ada Mall shopping centre, then the Skyline residential and business centre, and finally the Galerija shopping centre. In developing countries, there is a significance in that which has a global appeal, or rather that which is "nothing but the unfortunate enchantment of a Western glamour", according to Clowney (2011), who saw contemporary art as being more global than simply Western. In the immediate vicinity of the Sajam, there are examples of the successful revitalisation of industrial heritage, such as the Old Mill Hotel, the BIGZ building (Conić, 2023), and the Old Roundhouse (Serbian: *Ložionica*) (Gojkov, 2021). Conversely, other heritage has been treated with insufficient care, such as the demolished building of the Federal Ministry of Internal Affairs (Ćirić, 2011) – or the only remaining trace of an even more distant past, Milan Vapa's old paper mill (Mihajlov, 2010). The built environment of the city's central core has come to be enveloped on all sides by a series of self-enclosed cycles of hasty decision-making on divestment, a fate that Belgrade's Sajam also shares of late. As early as the first decade of this century, in his polemic with Nouvel, Baudrillard raised the fundamental question of the identity of cities, asking whether through its transformation a city 'becomes' something, bearing in mind that cities acquire their uniqueness over time, but have now begun to change at pace before our very eyes, leading to a state of confusion (Baudrillard and Nouvel, 2008). This is a fundamental question also for the Sajam, which may have already reached the stage that Nouvel defined as a fatal, automatic, and unavoidable change demanded by decision-makers as a sign of vitality and a harbinger of growth, and which can be used to justify many absurdities (Baudrillard and Nouvel, 2008). The participation of the public – that is, the population – is absent, and the construction industry and the real estate market have expanded, along with simultaneous transformations of the institutional structure of urban planning in recent decades (Maruna *et al.*, 2023). The main reason for the denial of the generally accepted status of the entire Sajam complex is its essence as an engine for growth in the capital city of a society that no longer exists, manifested as an architectural work of art and as a monument.

Research on this subject synthesises the spatial-sociological, the micro-urban, and the architectural, which is worth bearing in mind given the fact that Halls 2 and 3 of the Belgrade Fair, which have not been designated as protected heritage sites, are particularly threatened. In addition to Žeželj's central hall, the two other exhibition halls, which exemplify exceptional architectural and engineering value, along with the smaller halls and a footbridge, form a unified architectural and urban longitudinal composition.

Following the presentation of the main analytical body of the work, the principal conclusions will be provided by forming a critical matrix within a discussion that includes additional actualized topics of cultural revival, public involvement, global trends such as gentrification and transnational investment in real estate, management and planning, politics, public relations and private interest, the dying out of the technological epoch of concrete shells, architectural theory, and the classification of complexes as monuments or their treatment according to contemporary theories of urban space. The goal of the paper is to create a broad platform that will enable all participants from the critical public to position themselves more objectively in making judgments and decisions on this important topic.

2. THE BELGRADE FAIR AS A DESIGNED “ORGANISM”

The spatial concept of the Belgrade Fair was conceived and designed in 1953 as an attractive urban zone – a new centre of the city, which left a deep mark on the history of Belgrade. Through various transformations and devastations, the complex as a whole gradually lost its original significance and its authenticity as the first example of a comprehensive synthesis of architecture, engineering, and urban planning. With its role as a new urban centre and its more southerly location in relation to the old city centre, the Sajam contributed to the notion of creating regional centres and the expansion of Belgrade along the thoroughfares on the right bank of the Sava. This process continued through to the late 1970s, following the unique development of a socialist society (Kušić and Djokić, 2021). A very significant topic here is the role of the constructive artefacts of the main exhibition halls, situated in space as the integral motifs of the Sajam’s architectural discourse, with its deeply rooted yet veiled theoretical signifiers that would subsequently, through the dynamism of its spherical forms, come to be constituted in public life as new social values (Ignjatović, 2013a). In this sense, worthy of particular appreciation today are the domes by engineer Milan Krstić (1972) and architect Milorad Pantović that, by forging a path for other engineers to explore numerous previously unimagined future interpretations, forever transformed Yugoslav cities. To that point, buildings of such scale, in the form of a membrane, or rather a shell, had not existed in Yugoslavia, or further afield. Today, the technological period in which the complex was created is dismissed, as is the fact that these buildings were prototypes of engineering-based architecture. These elements of the Sajam, and the changes they gave rise to, ought to be viewed in a broader cultural context – that is, as the bearers of all contemporary ideas about the relationship between individuals and architecture. The first intended user is the self-managed worker, who is granted access to the foremost industrial achievements of his homeland. Milan Krstić moved the boundaries of what was possible, at least in this part of the world, by enclosing the sky in a thin membrane that – with its simple structure and the astonishing proportions of its area and cross-section, as well as the slender columns that support it – still leaves breathless every observer who finds themselves beneath it. In Žeželj’s central hall, the same effect is achieved through the formation of a hybrid system of linear supports in a radial pattern (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. Belgrade Fair – A view of Halls 2 and 1 from the main promenade (Source: Author's archive)



Figure 2. Belgrade Fair – A view of Hall 3 from the main promenade (Source: Author's archive)

According to its creator, Pantović, the Sajam was conceived as a single architectural composition of buildings connected by a walkway raised above street level, giving observers the opportunity to take in a continuous architectural form. His idea was to bring into being an unenclosed area that would function as a large exhibition space during trade fairs, and which could, at times when such events were not being held, serve as a park that could be used by local residents from surrounding neighbourhoods. This concept called for the construction of a smaller number of larger buildings, rather than a larger number of smaller exhibition halls (Pantović, 1957). This is, today, not immediately evident, primarily because the part that was once intended as a universal focus for social activities became neglected and was transformed into a large, under-utilised, parking lot. The main axis of the exhibition space was laid out along two longitudinal zones for events, in accordance with the established concept of a multifunctional urban zone or park (Figure 3). Pantović's transformation was spurred on by the newly acquired freedoms and cultural fabric of socialism with a "human face", which was developed through an interpretative model of contrasts – both in relation to the construction of exhibition spaces across Europe, and in opposition to the local historical context (Ignjatović, 2013b). In the composition as a whole,

an important space was occupied by the three shell-like forms of Halls 2 and 3. Like Hall 1, these spaces were leading achievements of the engineering prowess and architecture of the day, even in global terms, as is evidenced by the contemporary appearance of similar buildings such as the auditorium of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA (Figure 4), and Lambert Airport in St. Louis, USA (Pickens, 1956) (Figure 5), which are still in use today and are – with their spans and unique conception, their synthesis of interior and exterior spaces, and the general impression they leave on observers – considered significant sites of architectural heritage.



Figure 3. Construction of the Belgrade Fair – a view of Halls 2 and 1 and the park (Source: <https://sajam.rs/sanu-izlozba-posvecena-fenomeni-beogradskog-sajma-ulokalnim-i-svetskim-razmerama/#>)



Figure 4. Auditorium of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge (USA), 1954-1956. Eero Saarinen, calotte-shaped shell on three supports (Source: *One hundred years of significant building* (1956). 6: *Public Assembly*, *Architectural Record*, November 1956, Vol. 120, No. 5, pp. 197-200)



Figure 5. Terminal building of Lambert Airport, St. Louis (USA), 1953-1956, Minoru Yamasaki (Source: *Pickens*, 1956)

With Hall 2, Pantović and Krstić created a symmetrical composition in its exterior form and a unified building framed by the longitudinal ensemble of exhibition halls reminiscent of the artistic elements of Le Corbusier's *Still Life* (Guedes, 2015). The relationships of symmetry between all of the halls are, in this case, manifold. Viewed from without, the seemingly separate twin buildings of Hall 2 are essentially, in a functional sense, a single complex containing three segregated tiers. These relationships merge from the point of view of the observer who perceives the architectural composition from the imaginary plane of symmetry (Nikolić *et al.*, 2015). Even though the Sajam is constituted of three large halls,

the perception and experience of it as a levitated space becomes supplanted by the possibility of passing through four different environments, two of which are the concrete shells of Hall 2, with interruptions that appear as one passes through conventionally constructed spaces and customary visual perceptions, creating a unique experience without leaving the internal space. In addition to the innovative nature of their doubly curved forms, Halls 2 and 3 contributed to the development of a completely new system of construction (Figures 6 and 7). The application of prestressing in the construction of Halls 2 and 3 by forming bundles of steel cables was one of the first uses of this technique in the world. The significance of these buildings is made ever greater because Milan Krstić was the custodian of the apparently anonymous school of doubly curved surfaces (Lazarević, 1975).

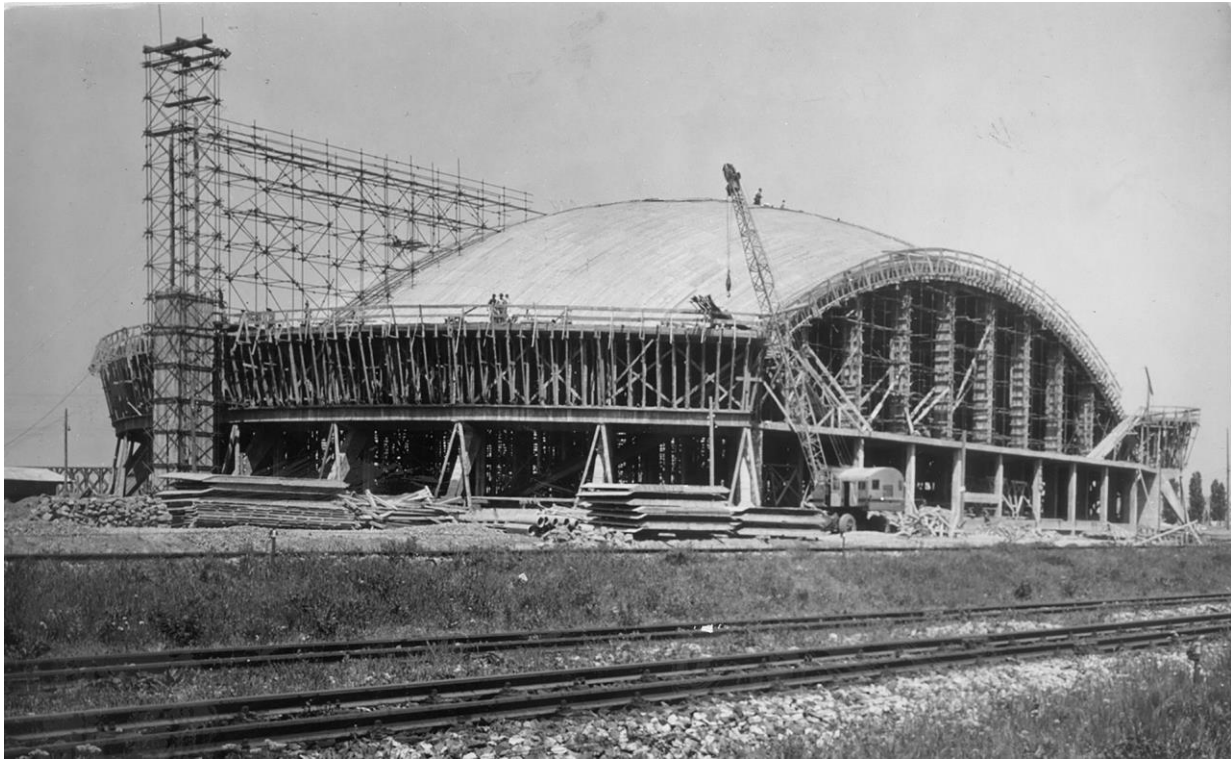


Figure 6. Construction of Hall 3 of the Belgrade Fair (Source: <https://sajam.rs/sanu-izlozba-posvecena-fenomenu-beogradskog-sajma-ulokalnim-i-svetskim-razmerama/#>)

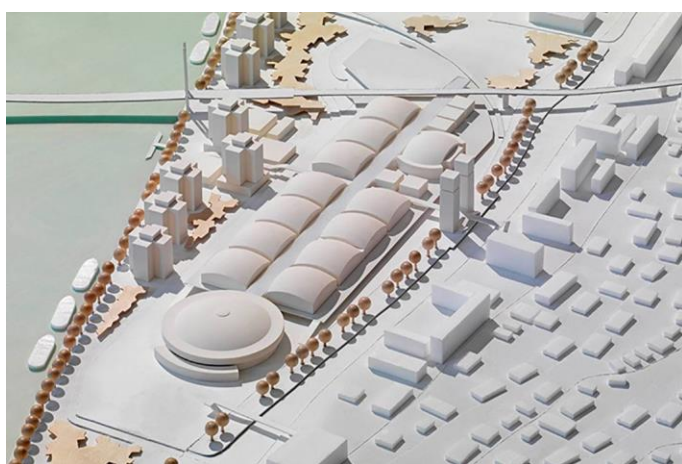
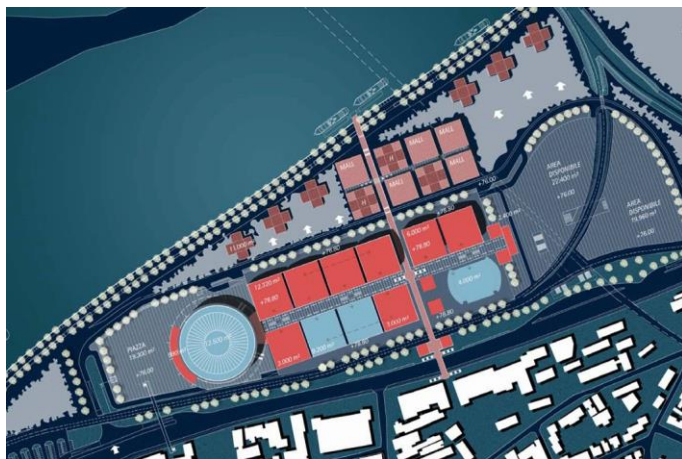


Figure 7. Construction of Hall 2 of the Belgrade Fair – assembly of the rebar for the edge arches and the structure of the shell (Source: <https://sajam.rs/sanu-izlozba-posvecena-fenomenu-beogradskog-sajma-ulokalnim-i-svetskim-razmerama/#>)

The geometric setting is such that the relationship between the height of a structure and the height of its separation from the surface perception is one of the most important parameters, as is the relationship between the massing of a building and its total volume. In the cases of Halls 2 and 3, these relationships are brought to the edges of theoretical perfection, given the thickness of their shells, edge elements, and columns. At the time, they gave off the sense of the ‘structures from space’ or the architecture ‘on paper’ of Buckminster Fuller and Ron Herron, respectively; such ideas were to take shape several years later elsewhere in the world. The genius of Eduard Torroja and Pier Luigi Nervi has long been recognised worldwide, but Serbia has its own equally worthy examples: Milan Krstić and Branko Žeželj. At the time, they stood shoulder to shoulder with world-leading constructors and, through the Sajam, brought to life the theoretical postulates of Max Bill, who popularised the concrete art of Theo van Doesburg (Bill, 1952). This was especially so, given Bill’s love of Mailart who, through elements of composition, space, geometry, and mathematics, linked Mondriaan’s compositions with the logic of construction – that is to say, he thought that the form of a building or structure must be the coming together of the rationalism of engineers and a naturally occurring beauty – as defined by van de Velde (Pereira, 2013). In that sense, the spatial composition of the Sajam is part of the world’s architectural heritage.

3. URBAN RENEWAL OR TRANSFORMATION OF THE BELGRADE FAIR

As the city's flagship space for numerous large-scale events, the Belgrade Fair complex retained its universal character for a very long time – that is, until in 2007, when it was almost entirely surpassed in this role by the Belgrade Arena. Still, it has preserved until today some of its significance in terms of representing Serbia internationally through the organisation of many international trade fairs, in which it is a regional front-runner, with close to 40 events annually (Stambolić, 2017). Successful trade fairs in Europe have undergone permanent transformations, such as reconstructions or expansions (Frankfurt), the construction of entirely new exhibition spaces at a different location (Milan), or consolidation and the formation of clusters or similar (Rimini and Vincenza). In the 20th century, the Sajam expanded its capacities through the building of additional temporary exhibition spaces. Some of these, interventions by Pantović himself, represented self-destructive changes to the original project – primarily through the removal of the restaurant adjoining Hall 1 and the construction of Hall 14, today known as Hall 4. With the exception of a failed privatisation attempt in 2009, since the opening of the Sajam no systematic remodelling or paradigmatic transformation of the space has been undertaken. All that remains of this idea and this initiative are the concept designs of the eminent studio *GMP Architekten* from Hamburg, conceived in collaboration with *Mijic Architects* from Rimini. Although the designs did not address the whole monumental worth of the Sajam complex, it can be said that, to a large extent, they at least respected the spatial value of the complex, even though it was not a protected heritage site at the time, and neither were its more significant buildings, as is the case today. *GMP Architekten* and *Mijic Architects* created a pleasant concept of a modern exhibition centre dominated by interior spaces. Along with the preservation of the larger buildings, they also presented a unique narrative through the faces and façades of the same geometric forms and different construction elements and materials, as well as a refined reflection and cohabitation of two technological and historical epochs. The new concepts made use of the geometries of the concrete shells, along with construction elements such as intersecting glulam arches, drawing inspiration from the design of the new exhibition space in Rimini. This architectural narrative was not chosen by chance; on the contrary, the same recognisable concept was repeated in Belgrade. As was noted in the preamble of the project, the contours of the site and the unmistakable typological elements that grant the complex its unique and coherent identity were retained. The old vaulted square pavilions became the basic building blocks of the new compositions. The project was intended to be implemented across two phases, as part of which the first phase would involve the formation of a series of six pavilions similar to Hall 2 along the Sava promenade, following which a pavilion would face Živojin Mišić Boulevard with two towers serving as landmarks for the entrance to the complex. A long central avenue would be formed by the rows of pavilions, across several levels, which would lead to Hall 1, the main hallmark of the exhibition complex. A zone for hotels and commercial and office space was planned between the Sava River and the exhibition space (Figures 8 and 9).



Figures 8 and 9. GMP Architekten (Hamburg) and Mijic Architects (Rimini), Belgrade Fair, expansion project – plan view and 3D view (Source: <http://www.mijicarchitects.com/exhibition-event/new-fair-complex-belgrad>)

Unfortunately, this approach never materialised. In the miscomprehension of a mix of private-sector capital and public-sector management, the greatest harm was caused to the public interest – not an uncommon turn of events in this part of the world. This concept design was a very successful example of a possible approach to revitalising, preserving, and expanding the spatial complex of the Sajam within a new programmatic framework worthy of a modern society entering a new millennium. This approach could have been an effective transformation of the Sajam in line with the needs of the 21st century, whilst also retaining its identity by preserving the most significant elements of its architectural composition.

The Belgrade Fair, according to the announcements of the city authorities and based on the presented urban plans, is set to soon undergo a transformation that will include its relocation and the construction of a new EXPO centre, near the planned national stadium in the suburb of Surčin (Gradnja, 2022). The plans for the site of the Belgrade Fair and the construction of the complete infrastructure for an exhibition centre have already been openly presented to the public and are an architectural deletion of the identity and remaining traces of an historical centre of an urban epoch. Nothing remains of the Sajam in

the new concept design, by *Niall Montgomery + Partners (NMP)* from Dublin, that has been touted in the media, neither in an urban sense, nor as a memory on the map – except the central hall (Nicović, 2023) (Figure 10). The plans for the renewal of Hall 1, which is a listed building, use the language of the creative industries, but take no account of the original and acquired values of the space, nor its universal function, which was once a paradigm for altering a nation's consciousness. In Serbia, the same scenario has already played out for the Leskovac Fair and its symbolic space – the round pavilion by Edmund Balgač (Lj. F., 2020). Both examples rely on the concept of the incomplete as a dialectical process (Stamatović Vucković, 2016), as part of which the Sajam, as a built environment within the broader context of the city's development, has always been open to further development and urban renewal through the incorporation of new elements inside the boundaries of its immediate environment.



Figure 10. Niall Montgomery + Partners (Dublin), the Belgrade Fair, a project that envisages the demolition of the Sajam (apart from Hall 1) – 3D view (Source: Gojkov, 2024)

The development of Belgrade is an insufficiently controlled process because it is largely centralised through the increased participation of the higher levels of government in urban development processes at the local level (Maruna *et al.*, 2023). These central authorities have recently declaratively supported urban renewal with the simultaneous development of suburban settlements – mainly through the acquisition of land on the periphery for residential purposes (Zeković *et al.*, 2015). In the meantime, the area of agricultural land has been significantly reduced, while the Belgrade Waterfront has emerged as the most prominent example of financialization (Zeković *et al.*, 2023). With the most recent legislative changes at the state level and rapid changes of plans, this trend has accelerated further still, both in the city's outskirts and its urban core. Today, the Belgrade Fair is under attack from policies that advocate the principles of efficiency and economic growth above all, which includes, principally, the creation of new privatised spaces for the elites, the construction of megaprojects intended to attract investment, and the reconfiguration of local land use patterns (Milojević *et al.*, 2019).

As a fundamental precondition that would give a chance to the selection of the right choice for the urban recycling of the Belgrade Fair, it is first necessary to highlight its specific *genius loci*, followed by applying the best practices pertaining to the scope of planning in better-ordered societies. Vienna, where decisions are made at the local level according to clear procedures and without sudden shifts, could serve as a model here. Intensive development of parts of the city is conditioned upon the preservation of identity along with the protection of natural qualities and the optimal land management in terms of the necessary supporting infrastructure and the leaving of space to be developed by future generations (Dillinger, 2014).

4. DISCUSSION

The moment the Belgrade Fair stops being recognised as a place in need of its own cultural renaissance, with all of its valuable spatial elements, which are, after all, its genesis, will be a challenge thrown down before all of Serbian society. Given that certain measures and initiatives have already been implemented in the immediate vicinity of the Sajam, taking in buildings that have value in terms of architectural heritage, this process must also be possible for the complex of the Sajam and the adjoining riverbank. Making hasty and poorly thought-through decisions that threaten the preservation of architectural heritage, often justified as the gentrification of authentically maintained urban areas from earlier eras, has become common practice in Belgrade. Such episodes have become commonplace as a pattern of post-industrial revitalisation, supported by transnational real estate investment. In contrast to the successfully revitalised buildings in its immediate vicinity, which according to the Riegl's theory can be categorised as historical monuments, the Belgrade Fair has as an urban entity been a deliberate monument since its very inception (Riegl, 2006), as is the case with the contemporary complexes built around it over the past decade. Due to its dual scope, the Belgrade Fair has a recognisably polyvalent urban nature, which is often overlooked by critics. Pantović himself described it as an "organism", and this perhaps determines the structuralism of the Sajam, in the proper sense of that term (Stojiljković and Ignjatović, 2019), bearing in mind that its original urban conception had an integrative role of architectural artefacts and the social relationships yet to develop. In it, urbanism is present at various scales, as are the transformations that have taken place both inside the complex and without, that can today be traced only through photo archives, and which is itself a historically under-researched field of study. Presently, the phenomenon of the Sajam has been completely erased, and not only from the space it inhabits. It has also been erased, as a consequence of biological analogies in architecture (Šijaković and Perić, 2018), from the city's memory; above all, through observation of the permanent architectural recycling of the Sajam as a process of changing the existing complex by using all available and useable material for new purposes. Alois Riegl believes that the violation of natural laws, the interweaving of creation with disappearance, and vice versa, the restraint of nature by human hands, and the premature destruction of human creations through natural forces are all strictly to be avoided (Riegl, 2006). By losing the strongest aspects of its identity to megalomaniacal spatial forms, it will lose the last traces of that which makes

it a monument to a given era – regardless of its significance as an urban centre. There are multiple issues in terms of confirming the Belgrade Fair as a cultural monument – i.e., as a work of art. As criteria, Riegl cites, above all, *commemorative and current values*. The commemorative values of the Sajam that are recognised to their full extent, declaratively if nothing else – its history and its age – make it a symbol of the city. What is insufficiently highlighted is its *deliberate commemorative value*, which remains under-researched, precisely because of a lack of historical distance. Meanwhile, it should be borne in mind that its evaluation was carried out in 2005 (Mišić, 2006). In 2008, the Belgrade Fair was not granted listed status as an urban complex – above all so that the privatisation intended to regenerate it could be successful – because the Government of Serbia overturned its original decision, according to which the whole site would be protected (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 4/2009). At that time, the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia proposed to the Ministry of Culture that Halls 1, 2, 3, and 4, and the space around them, would be classified as a cultural monument, which would prevent any intervention that sought to alter the visual identity of the complex (B92, 2009). Alas, the privatisation fell through, and the well-deserved listed status for the complex did not come to pass, with the small exception of the decision to grant protected status to Hall 1 (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 16/2009). Even today, that status is used to ease quick and efficient decision-making about the Sajam's fate, even though the final decision was accompanied by numerous controversies. The exposition of more in-depth research takes in a much broader picture, including ideological and political evaluation of the past. Above all, the construction of the Sajam took place in anticipation of what would take place on the country's urban planning and architectural landscape, as a rationalist and progressivist approach to the architecture of the period, a turning point in architecture seen as a "period of intensive Europeanisation" which overlapped with a wave of the post-war Yugoslav industrial revolution (Mišić, 2006); that is, the emergence of a new wave in architecture known as socialist aestheticism (Denegri, 2016). These critical practices are placed in the foreground because they complete the picture of the Sajam. Pantović's unfinished competition submission for the Belgrade Fair was a reflection of purism, more than it was of structuralism. The winning design was, above all, a well-thought-out concept of a contemporary urban public space shaped by cubic forms. It is political decisions and a volte-face in the way this topic has been handled that have made it what it is today.

The proposed listed status of 2009 adequately defined the spatial and architectural worth of the complex, and the significance of the Sajam as testimony to the domestic technical, technological, scientific, and creative rise of Yugoslav society in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the last two or three decades, most significant urban locations that have not been completely devastated have come under, more or less, a certain influence by the aforementioned activities, giving legitimacy to private and individual interests (Milojević *et al.*, 2019). This has altered the physiognomy of the city in an undesirable way, with little regard for ideas of the valuation, treatment, and protection of valuable urban and architectural examples of modern architecture as part of the general plan of 2003 (Macura *et al.*, 2019). For spatial and historical entities of such importance, the timely application of

best practices, which assumes institutional action and public participation, is imperative (Dimitrijević-Marković, 2010), as is the strengthening of the awareness of heritage and a sustainable built environment in higher education in the fields of architecture and urban planning (Đokić *et al.*, 2021).

Beyond the 1970s, the construction of concrete shells became rare, due to changes in the fashions of the time, the price of materials, and the appearance of new technologies, as well as construction regulations, the non-transparency of such surfaces, the complexity of their static analysis, and so forth (Tang, 2015). Concrete shells are insufficiently flexible constructions and, considering their potential for a new lifecycle of the building, are often very demanding in terms of reconstruction. Additionally, they fail to meet modern standards when it comes to building maintenance and thermal, air, and acoustic comfort, in addition to other socially accepted requirements that have come to be imposed over time (Nenadović and Milošević, 2022). Thus, today, all of the technological achievements of Halls 2 and 3 have been left behind by later technological revolutions and, though rare, they remain insufficiently anachronistic and have been publicly declared to be out of step with modernity and contemporary architecture. The artistic value of all of the Sajam's buildings, which are first-class engineering accomplishments, has been recognised (Ivković, 1975). A special symbolic connection is created by the domes as the basic building shapes – the bearers of certain messages and new paradigms. The vague or ambiguous measures currently prescribed for the protection of the Sajam include the mandatory preservation of the appearance of Hall 1, along with the promotion to primacy of its function as an exhibition centre and the introduction of complementary, secondary content into the existing facility. Architecture today often has no answers regarding Belgrade's legacy, instead developing mature ideas of and social consensus around novelty. Rafael Moneo sees architecture as an instrument that should perform the much-needed mediation between the future and the recent past (Moneo, 2018). The most enduring elements of the Sajam persist as spatial artefacts, dominating through their dimensions, transparency, and inscribed memories, every consumer or incidental observer of this space. Architects will surely welcome critics willing to explain to them why the world of forms has become what it is. If contemporary architecture is viewed as a medium of consumption and production, in search of answers to Di Maggio's artistic classification of society, it oscillates along four dimensions: differentiation, hierarchy, universality, and boundary strength. What we can particularly highlight in his theory are the dynamics of ritual classification, which he claims is mediated according to whether artistic production is carried out by commercial, professional, or bureaucratic means (Di Maggio, 1987). The domes of the Sajam are today a remainder of the apotheosis of the society of liberal socialism and, as such, have become a disturbance in the space needed for contemporary social structures and internal relationships between cultural dimensions. The fundamental counterpoint of the polemic on the fate of the Sajam lies in two competing views on the path toward future development. One view is conservative, or better yet primordial, and is presented insufficiently coherently in the context of the free flow of capital. According to this view, the Sajam should be viewed as a preserved exhibit on the market economy of the 20th century,

but with no adequate answers to questions regarding the further development of the Sajam as a paradigmatic element of Belgrade – which is at the heart of the unresolved problem, and it reflects the lack of social consensus on this topic. The other view is outlined by ever more present plans to knock down the anachronistic Sajam, which is the shortest possible route to exchanging the concept of the Belgrade Fair for something more universal – primarily by building exhibition facilities at a new location, using the EXPO 2027 event as justification. In this complex urban planning and socio-political landscape, where architecture and free capital lock horns, a key question has been left by the wayside: the dialectical framework of the Sajam and exhibition space, which answers questions about the status of the Belgrade Fair as a generator of continued development and the treatment of old exhibition grounds as the “used up” infrastructure of the same fair. The exhibition space on the right bank of the Sava, as the telos of Yugoslav purism and the development of the self-management order in Yugoslav society, a symbol of continuity, in a sense monopolises its own status in the face of 21st-century progress.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This interdisciplinary analysis and the synthesis of results reduces gaps in the available research between the key areas important for understanding the valorization of the status of the Belgrade Fair and developmental strategies for its future. Through the discussion and synthesis of the research results, this paper reveals that the Belgrade Fair has already been anointed as a unique place in the city, regardless of the final outcome.

In the foreground is Pantović’s primordial developmental concept of the “organism” – i.e., what remains after numerous spatial and organisational transformations. It is clearly defined, in the public and media spheres, above all by the unique spatial conception of three halls linked by a walkway and some smaller buildings, with all of its architectural and engineering characteristics and the narrative of the past. These, based on the conclusions of this research, should be preserved in any case, but in concert with the achievement of a general social consensus on the method of their urban renewal.

The central hall of the Sajam itself is also threatened by the proposed design concepts. In the construction of its significant purist buildings, which still remain, we recognise that its framework makes the Sajam essential in the historical development of the teleological and metaphysical in architecture – the heavenly firmament as a contemporary allegory of the Pantheon. This study concludes with the formation of the sky as the main specificity of the technological epoch of shells, which has been inviolably preserved in other similarly important objects in the world, although today it is more easily achieved on newer objects by other means.


The urban transformations of the Sajam in this text are merely touched upon as generators of the identity of public spaces. Through two potential proposed scenarios for the Sajam, two opposing rival attitudes in the architectural, public, and media spaces have emerged, which communicate with one another with no clear strategies for reaching a compromise. In the analysis of a possible concept of urban renewal, particular significance is given over

to contemporary theories on the establishment and redefinition of the variable scope of the Sajam's gravitational field and the elements that it is composed of: from individual buildings with various levels of institutional protection, to its compositional basics, the complete composition of the complex itself, and the broader environment including a riverside and unique morphological and infrastructural characteristics.

Ultimately, this research has pointed out that each historical event is, by its very nature, irreplaceable for us, which makes the current Sajam and fair, in the broader sense, a significant historical monument. This reflects a conglomeration of values from the apotheosis of Yugoslavia's 20th-century society, its never-completed modernisation, its technology, and its media environment, actualizing topics of cultural revival, public involvement, and the classification of the complex as monument according to contemporary theorists of urban space. Apparent political or market expansions are an ever-present narrative, as is unending urban transformation – from a Bolshevik city, to a socialist one, to today's ideas about multi-family housing replacing a trade fair, founded on notions about breathing life into the EXPO 2027 project. Bearing in mind global trends of real estate investment, politics, public relations, and private interest, as well as the Sajam's genesis as a deliberate monument, it can be concluded that, due to the impossibility of its convergence with the Belgrade Waterfront project, it has, as the dominant trace of a previous age and a foreign micro-entity in a space intended for the reception of a new epoch, become a kind of disturbance.

Finally, in creating a broader platform (critical matrix) enabling all participants of the critical public to position themselves more objectively in making judgments and decisions on such an important topic, it was determined that erasing the analysed elements of the architectural and urban composition of the signature space of a medial and superior socialist Yugoslavia would mean erasing an incredibly important segment of the current values of this urban space, as well as Belgrade's own history. However, these conclusions and the critical matrix from which they stem anticipate further opportunities for deeper analyses toward the formulation of more serious urban renewal strategies for this complex.

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