“Whose Blok? Our Blok.”
Understanding Motivations Behind Community Resistance to Post-Socialist Urban Developments in New Belgrade

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Thank you to my family. Thank you to my mother, who never imagined that the city she left on her 18th birthday, in search of a better life in America, would draw her daughter back in. While she is often critical of Belgrade, she speaks about the city with an apparent love and sense of conflict that I have long sought to understand. Thank you to my grandfather, who bore witness to Yugoslavia's entire history—fighting in the Partisan Army to help forge it as a teenager and working as a day laborer in his sixties when it collapsed. Although he was never able to receive a formal education, he published his first book four years ago, at the age of 96, on the history of Montenegro. Like all my academic endeavors, this project is inspired by his wisdom, sacrifice, and the opportunities he never had. Деко, прочитала сам много књига на факултету, али ти си најлепши писац кога сам икада читала. Волим те више него што речи могу описати.

Thank you to the residents of Bloks 33 and 37, who took time out of their days to speak with me and received me with openness and kindness. This thesis is dedicated to them—and to all the ordinary people across Belgrade who continue to fight for change.

Abstract

In the years following Yugoslavia's collapse, New Belgrade's residential bloks—once conceived as ideal urban communities for socialist workers—have increasingly become the targets of commercial development. Scholars have deemed the current era of urbanization in New Belgrade inhumane and unsustainable, as once ample urban commons and green spaces have been rapidly privatized and developed. This process has been enabled by an increasingly undemocratic government, which has been characterized by scholars as a manifestation of authoritarian neoliberalism, giving way to an urban development climate rife with abuses. In response, residents of New Belgrade's bloks have begun resisting proposed developments in their communities. This paper focuses on two urban communities that have held anti-development protest movements in New Belgrade—Bloks 33 and 37. It seeks to understand the underlying motivations that drove residents' resistance and considers how their motivations change our understanding of the meaning of urban movements. Centered on interviews with residents of the two bloks, this paper finds that the urban movements are grounded in a complex array of circumstances and sentiments, ranging from highly localized concerns to broader, systemic issues. This study finds that the movements are neither reactionary efforts to resist all change, as community-led opposition to development is often portrayed, nor explicitly political efforts seeking to enact structural change, a criterion some scholars use to define a movement's effectiveness. Rather, the movements are part of a sustained process of local self-management and an assertion of residents' right to shape their urban spaces within a formal system of urban development that consistently fails to serve their needs.

I. Introduction

Belgrade, one of Europe's oldest continuously inhabited cities, has been made and remade according to the ambitions of empires and regimes over the course of multiple millennia (Hirt, 2009, 293). Belgrade's urban landscape reflects this dynamic history, hosting a wide array of architectural styles and eras, including Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, Neoclassical, Art Nouveau, and Modernist (Hirt, 2009, 293). Its location in the Balkans, at the periphery of Europe, has repeatedly rendered the city a geographic crossroads—between empires, between capitalism and communism, between East and West. In large part due to its strategic location at the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers, the city has long been the site of conflict and has been razed and rebuilt over 40 times (Norris, 2008, viii). While a civil war and bombing campaign marked the onset of Belgrade's most recent transition, it is not war, but the inflow of capitalism, neoliberalism, and a new political regime that are now reshaping the city's urban form in their image (Perić and Maruna, 2022, 1). This change is ongoing, and its manifestations and implications in two neighborhoods in a district of Belgrade called New Belgrade are the focus of this study.

New Belgrade was built upon previously undeveloped marshland across the Sava River from Belgrade's historic core when the city was the capital of Yugoslavia. Envisioned as an optimal residential sphere for socialist workers, New Belgrade was designed as a network of residential units known as *bloks* (Le Normand, 2014, 39). Rooted in socialist ideology and modernist design principles, each blok contained mass housing structures, ample communal green space, and shared facilities such as playgrounds, grocery stores, and designated gathering spaces (Le Normand, 2014, 41). When Yugoslavia collapsed in the 1990s and fragmented into six independent countries, Belgrade became the capital of Serbia, leaving New Belgrade's socialist-inspired urban form in the hands of new leadership with vastly different visions for the city (Calic, 2018, 98).

Post-socialist transition in Serbia has been fraught with challenges, marked by lingering effects of the crisis period that accompanied Yugoslavia's collapse, democratic backsliding, and rapid market-driven urbanization (Fridman, 2024, 1,029). In the years following Yugoslavia's dissolution, as residents of the former country have grappled with trauma from the civil wars that tore it apart, economic hardships, and drastic societal change, a phenomenon known as Yugo-nostalgia—a nostalgic longing for the former country—has emerged (Volčić, 2007, 21). Over the past 30 years, citizens across all the former Yugoslav republics have grappled with the reality that the country they once called home has ceased to exist, while their societies have been reconfigured in ways that challenge culturally ingrained identities, ideologies, and ways of life. These transformations have been acute in New Belgrade, which was initially created to embody Yugoslavia's ideals and has since undergone what scholars have referred to as a complete "functional metamorphosis" —from Yugoslavia's ideal socialist settlement to Serbia's business center (Jovanović and Ratkaj, 2014, 1). These urban transformations have been accompanied—and facilitated—by a highly controversial ruling party that has been described as embodying "authoritarian neoliberalism," steadily eroding democratic principles and consistently prioritizing foreign investment over public interest in Belgrade (Perić and Maruna, 2022, 1).

Walking through New Belgrade today, the post-socialist tensions that have become embedded in the district's urban form over the past three decades are palpable. The building that once housed Yugoslavia's communist headquarters, a centerpiece of New Belgrade's skyline, is now home to an Austrian bank and stands beside Serbia's largest shopping mall. Billboards advertising luxury real estate developments stand atop gray modernist mass housing structures.

Office buildings belonging to multinational corporations occupy land that was once communal. New Belgrade's skyline is now punctuated by high-rises and swinging construction cranes. Gazing upon New Belgrade from across the Sava River, the words "Huawei," "IBM," "NCR," and "Coca-Cola" can be read atop buildings in the once socialist urban district.

In the face of these transformations, a series of local, resident-led urban movements have begun emerging across New Belgrade. The protests have largely been blok-specific, as residents have mobilized to resist investors seeking to build commercial developments within the bounds of their urban neighborhoods (N1 Beograd, July 15, 2021). Though they have attracted limited scholarly and media attention, many of these movements have achieved success, effectively blocking proposed developments and emerging as resident-led enclaves of resistance against Belgrade's contemporary top-down urban power structure (BBC, June 11, 2021). This study seeks to understand, by interviewing residents of these communities, the conditions and motivations that drove citizens to mobilize in defense of their urban environments. It centers on two neighborhoods in New Belgrade—Bloks 33 and 37—which were among the first to organize successful protest movements against planned office developments in their bloks (N1 Beograd, July 15, 2021).

A range of simplistic explanations may emerge when trying to understand motivations behind the anti-development protest movements in New Belgrade. Anti-regime agendas, Yugo-nostalgia, or simple NIMBYism are among these surface level interpretations. In the capital city of a country as rife with corruption and mounting political dissatisfaction as Serbia, mobilizations may be interpreted as inherently political. In the years following the election of Serbia's current ruling party—the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), led by president Aleksander Vučić—Belgrade has repeatedly been the site of anti-regime demonstrations (Fridman, 2024, 1,024). Even movements that have emerged in response to urban developments in the city have taken on explicitly political goals. For example, the 2017 “Ne Davimo Beograd” protests, which emerged in opposition to the SNS-led Belgrade Waterfront urban megaproject, resulted in the establishment of a formal SNS opposition party (Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2023, 628). Another simplistic explanation of the protest movements may frame community opposition to change as a manifestation of Yugo-nostalgia. Under this interpretation, the protests may be understood as an effort to preserve the original Yugoslav forms of the communities in the face of drastic post-socialist changes. While he has not publicly commented on the neighborhood-level mobilizations in New Belgrade, Aleksander Vučić has dismissed protesters in Belgrade as “Bolsheviks,” invoking a charged historical parallel (Baletic, March 11 2025). An additional simplistic interpretation, especially when approached from an American frame of reference, may reduce the protests to a “not-in-my-back-yard,” or NIMBY framework. Because the protest movements in Bloks 33 and 37 involved neighborhood mobilization in response to proposed developments within the bounds of their communities, at the surface level, they appear to align with this narrative.

The goal of this study is to inquire beyond these simplistic interpretations to understand the true motivations and circumstances driving protest in the two bloks. In doing so, this study seeks to expand our understanding of the meaning of urban movements by highlighting the complex reasons that residents mobilized in the understudied case of New Belgrade.

II. Background

To comprehend contemporary resident-led urban movements in New Belgrade’s bloks, it is important to first gain an understanding of the urban district’s dynamic history. Over the past eight decades, New Belgrade has taken the form of an undeveloped floodplain, Yugoslavia’s utopian socialist residential district, and Serbia's business capital (Jovanović, 2014, 1). The following subsections provide a brief overview of the history of New Belgrade—from its inception, through Yugoslavia's collapse, and into the modern day—as well as political developments that drove its transformations. The final subsection overviews the specific histories of Bloks 33 and 37, the focuses of this study.

History of New Belgrade, from creation to golden years

When the Partisan army liberated Belgrade from Nazi occupation, they found large sections of the city reduced to rubble. Due to a series of Allied and Axis bombardments, Belgrade lost nearly half of its buildings, most of its bridges, its entire rail network, and almost all its buses and trams (Le Normand, 2014, xi). The Partisan military victory marked the establishment of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and the army's commander, Josip Broz "Tito" would go on to serve as its "president for life" (Calic, 2018, 32). Still in the midst of clearing rubble from the capital city of their young country, Tito and his administration turned their focus to a utopian vision—building an ideal urban district. Seeking a tabula rasa on which to realize their ideal district, they chose to expand Belgrade across the Sava River, onto a stretch of previously undeveloped marshland on its left bank, and named the development New Belgrade (Le Normand, 2014, xi). They envisioned New Belgrade as the new center of Yugoslavia's capital, serving as the country's administrative center and aligning more closely with its ideologies than the preexisting urban form of Belgrade's historic core on the Sava's right bank (Le Normand, 2014, 41).

The Yugoslav administration chose modernism as the architectural paradigm under which they would develop cities throughout the country. Unhindered by preexisting urban developments and a part of the country's capital, New Belgrade was envisioned as an exemplar of modernism (Le Normand, 2014, 14). The growing architectural movement was appealing to the Yugoslav administration because, while modernism was not an inherently political movement, communism and modernism were closely aligned in their approaches to urban development (Le Normand, 2014, 63). Modernist architects and communist leadership agreed that urban planning should seek to erase social inequality, incorporate modern technology, and combine physical, social, and economic efforts to achieve its goals (Le Normand, 2014, 38). Even after Yugoslavia split from the Soviet Union and developed its own distinct interpretation of socialism, which emphasized worker's self-management and political non-alignment from the east and west, modernism would continue to align with the administration's urban visions (Le Normand, 2014, 74).

The design of New Belgrade was based on the principles outlined in Le Corbusier's Athens Charter (Le Corbusier, 1941, 27). Published only four years before the Partisan army's liberation of Belgrade and written by one of modernism's leading thinkers, the Athens Charter presented a cutting-edge overview of modernist design principles at the time. The foundational modernist text discussed urban planning as a scientific pursuit, necessitating the involvement of experts from various fields, including architecture, sociology, and economics (Le Corbusier, 1941, 102). The separation of urban functions (outlined as lodging, work, leisure, and traffic), equitable access to sunlight, ventilation, and space, and the subordination of private interests to collective interests were central to its vision (Le Corbusier, 1941, pp. 94-105).

While New Belgrade was initially intended as an administrative center, Yugoslavia's split from the Soviet Union and shift to a socialist model of self-management prompted planners to reshape the district to embody the country's evolving priorities. Accordingly, New Belgrade was reimaged as an ideal residential district for the socialist worker, and its design became heavily inspired by the Athens Charter's housing principles (Le Normand, 2014, 74). Le Corbusier described the home as the "nucleus of urbanism", the design of which should be a "humane undertaking" (Le Corbusier, 1941, 101). In addition to providing access to sunlight and fresh air within the home, this entailed the provision of community facilities that would supply "food, education, medical attention, and the enjoyment of leisure" beyond the home (Le Corbusier, 1941, 101). To provide equitable and efficient access to these facilities, Le Corbusier advised that "habitation units" be formed, placing the facilities within groupings of apartment buildings (Le Corbusier, 1941, 101).

While the development of New Belgrade was a decades-long affair that spanned multiple master plans and ideological shifts among Yugoslav leadership, the resulting urban landscape on the left bank of the Sava River remained closely aligned with the principles outlined in the Athens Charter (Le Normand, 2014, 244). Under the habitation unit model, New Belgrade was divided by large boulevards into 72 bloks, which contained densely populated apartment buildings, ample parks and greenery, and essential community facilities such as schools, pharmacies, and bakeries (Le Normand, 2014, 217).

By the 1960s, New Belgrade had become a bustling residential sector, housing socialist workers and their families from all corners of Yugoslavia in state-provided, socially owned apartments. Following a postwar period of austerity, Yugoslavia began entering its "golden years" (Le Normand, 2014, 104). The state loosened its control over public life, opened domestic markets, and began working to provide greater living conditions for its citizens, giving way to what would come to be known as "the Yugoslav dream" (Patterson, 2011, 19). Life in the country during this period was marked by economic stability and unity, as Yugoslavia carved out a distinct middle path between Soviet communism and American capitalism, creating a hybrid system that promised both social security and personal comforts. In the difficult years to come, this relatively brief but prosperous era of Yugoslav history would become a significant subject of Yugo-nostalgia (Volčič, 2007, 3).

The collapse of Yugoslavia and the crisis period of the 1990s

This period of prosperity lasted only a couple decades, and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia itself did not even survive fifty full years (Patterson, 2011, 38). Tito's death in 1980, followed by the fall of the iron curtain nine years later, destabilized Yugoslavia's experiment in socialist, multi-ethnic governance. In 1991, Slovenia, Croatia, and Macedonia declared their independence, followed by Bosnia in 1992 (Calic, 2018, 297). In response, the then Serb-dominated Yugoslav army retaliated. What ensued was a brutal decade-long civil war, the loss of 100,000 lives, and the final collapse of Yugoslavia (Calic, 2018, 304).

While Belgrade was not a battleground for the civil wars, life in the city was profoundly changed in the 1990s. As a result of escalating war, international sanctions, and internal corruption, residents weathered a period of hyperinflation, which peaked at a rate of 313 million percent per month (Stojković, 2019, 44). In the spring of 1999, Belgrade became the target of a 78-day bombing campaign launched by NATO in response to the Yugoslav military's ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians (NATO.int). While Belgrade was in a state of immense crisis in the 1990s, the decade was also defined by robust civil resistance. Throughout the decade, citizens gathered for mass demonstrations in the city, demanding the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević's regime, before successfully removing him from office in the fall of 2000 (Fridman, 2024, 1,025).

Democratic backsliding in Serbia

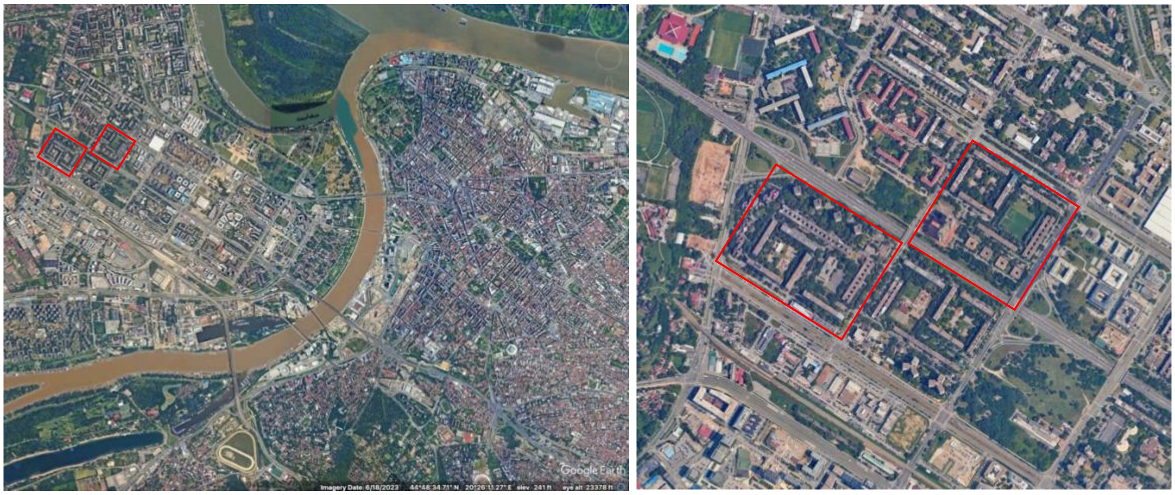
In the aftermath of Milošević’s authoritarian regime, resistance leaders worked to instill democracy in Serbia. While the early years of struggle toward democracy were marked by significant setbacks—such as the 2003 political assassination of Serbian Democratic Party leader Zoran Đinđić—Serbia reached liberal democracy status in 2007 (Milačić, 2024, 47). This venture into democracy was brief, however, as Aleksander Vučić—Milošević’s former Minister of Information—took power shortly thereafter, leading Serbian citizens to wonder if the overthrow of the former dictator had achieved meaningful change (Fridman, 2024, 1,024). Vučić’s SNS party gained control of Belgrade’s City Assembly under dubious circumstances in 2012, and two years later, he became Serbia’s prime minister. Almost two decades after removing Milošević from office, Belgrade erupted in protest again when Vučić was elected president in a 2017 election riddled with credible reports of irregularities (Fridman, 2024, 1,027). In the years following Vučić and SNS’s rise to power, Serbia has undergone a steady and ongoing process of democratic backsliding, marked by media censorship, political suppression, and the erosion of civil liberties (Freedomhouse).

Post-socialist urban development in New Belgrade

In the early 2000s, as Serbia underwent the neoliberal reforms characteristic of post-socialist transition, such as housing privatization, market liberalization, and the opening of foreign investment channels, the role of New Belgrade rapidly began to change (Jovanovic and Ratkaj, 1). Serbia’s geographic location on the periphery of Europe and its weak domestic economy following the crisis period of the 1990s made the country heavily reliant on capital in-flows. In response, its economy was structured to attract foreign capital, often at the expense of public interest (Piletić, 2022, 291). Foreign investors flooded into Serbia, and, when searching for prime locations for construction projects, turned to New Belgrade’s ample and largely undeveloped urban commons (Jovanovic and Ratkaj, 8). In the decade following Yugoslavia's collapse, New Belgrade's number of retail spaces quadrupled and its total office building footprint more than doubled. Many of these developments have occurred within the residential communities of the bloks, occupying once open communal spaces initially reserved for public use (Jovanović and Ratkaj, 2014, 9). After the SNS party came into power, initiating widespread urban regulatory rollbacks and signing a series of investor-friendly agreements, these transformations only accelerated (Piletić, 2022, 287). The typologies of New Belgrade's post-socialist urban transition will be explored further in the upcoming literature review.

Urban context of Bloks 33 and 37

Bloks 33 and 37, the primary focuses of this study, were constructed in the late 1960s and are situated in a northwestern section of New Belgrade (Jovanović, 2021, 263). They are separated from one another by highway e-75—one of Belgrade's main thoroughfares. Both bloks are roughly 30 acres in size and are primarily comprised of open green space.



Figures 1 and 2. Maps of Belgrade, Bloks 33 and 37 outlined in red. (Source: Google Earth).

The bloks' designs closely resemble one another, primarily featuring eight story, roughly 415-foot-long rectangular apartment buildings, which are arranged around central outdoor common spaces. Each blok contains a farmer's market, pharmacy, preschool, basketball court, grocery store, multiple playgrounds, and additional shops and community services. Blok 37 also contains an elementary school, and Blok 33 is home to the Genex tower, one of Belgrade's most iconic Yugoslav-era buildings.

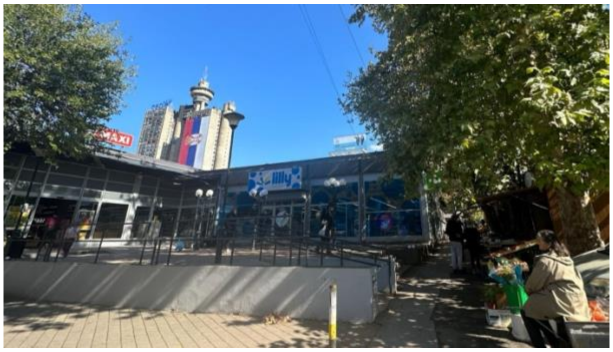


Figure 3. Grocery store and pharmacy in Blok 37.

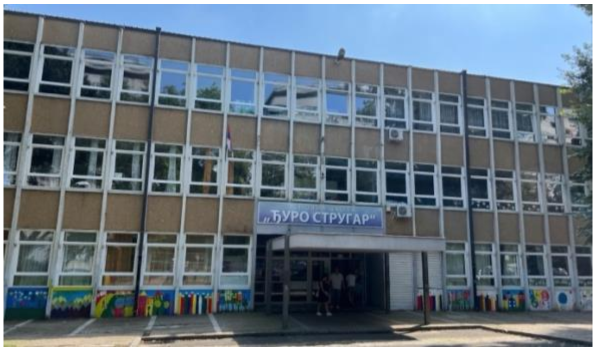


Figure 4. Elementary school in Blok 37.

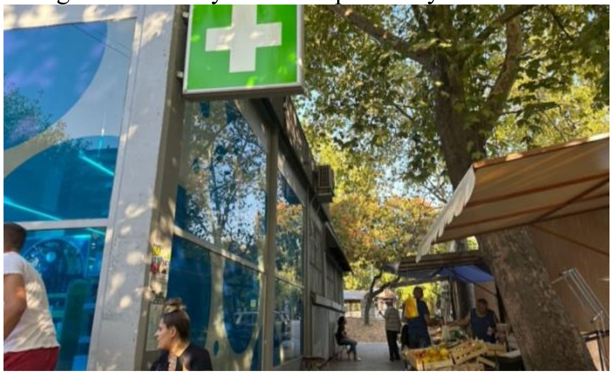


Figure 5. Pharmacy and farmer's market in Blok 37.

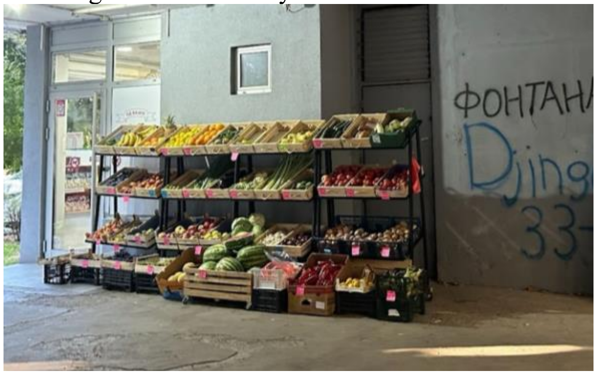


Figure 6. Fruit stand outside of grocery store in Blok 33.

Figure 7. Section of New Belgrade's skyline featuring Blok 33's Genex Tower.

Unlike many of the urban communities in New Belgrade, Bloks 33 and 37 have largely retained their original Yugoslav forms. While preexisting buildings have been slightly modified and playground structures have been updated, no new buildings have been constructed in Blok 33. The inner core of Blok 37 has also remained nearly identical to its original Yugoslav form, but post-socialist developments have encroached onto its peripheries. In 2006, a four-story office building was built on the southwest side of the blok, along Milutin Milanković Boulevard. Today it is operated by Uniqa Insurance Group, an Austrian-owned multinational insurance provider. Three years later, an additional office building was constructed beside the first. It now houses Belgrade's branch of Fidelity Information Services, an American financial technology company.

In 2021, residents in Blok 37 learned that a parcel directly north of the two office buildings had been purchased by Italian digital printing company Durst Group. The company had received approval to build a 650 foot long, eight story office building on the site (N1 Belgrade, 2021, June 21). The development was planned to be over twice the size of the two previously constructed office buildings combined and would obstruct the entire southwest façade of one of the bloks' apartment buildings.

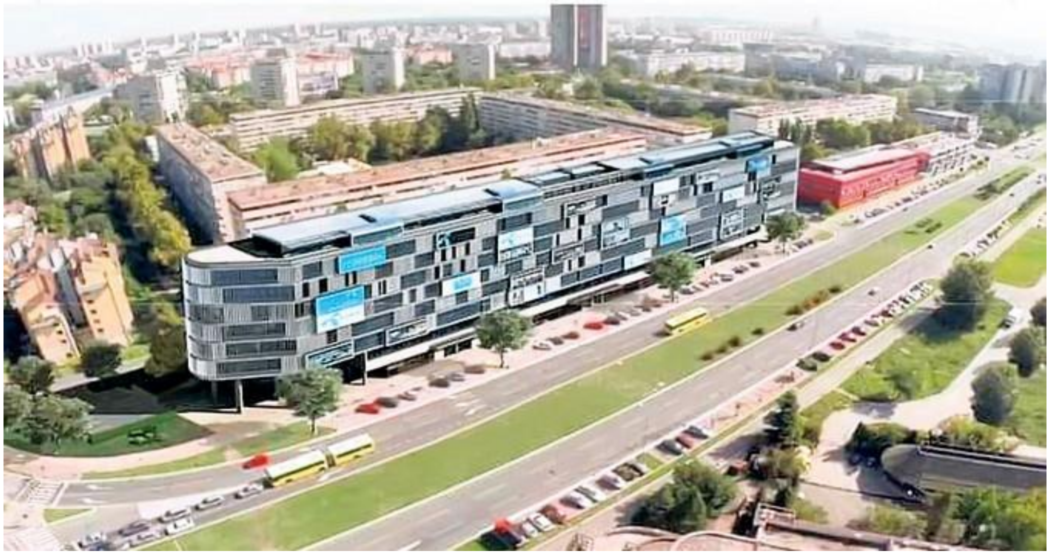
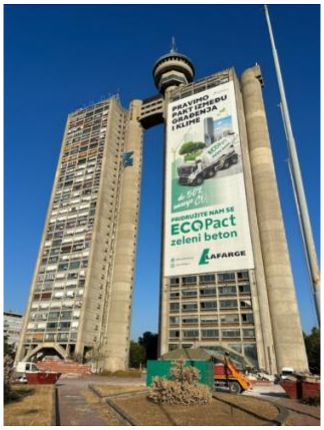


Figure 8. Rendered image of the proposed office development in Blok 37 from Miliutin Milanković Boulevard. (Source: beogradske.rs, 2021).

In response, residents organized to block the building's construction. For months, community members contacted municipal authorities, staged traffic blockades, and formed "living chains" around the construction site (N1 Beograd, July 15, 2021). Finally, after sustained grassroots efforts and appeals to Goran Vesić, Serbia's construction minister at the time, excavators halted and the proposed development was relocated (BBC, June 11, 2021). Later that year, residents in Blok 33 learned that an investor, operating under the ambiguous name "BEOBLOK33," intended to construct an office building beside the Genex tower (Gradnja, 2021, June 7). Drawing inspiration and support from the organizers of Blok 37's protest movement, residents of Blok 33 mobilized to block the office building's development. They too combined grassroots activism and formal appeals, which resulted in the designation of Genex tower as a cultural monument and the successful halting of the proposed office development (*Blok 33*).



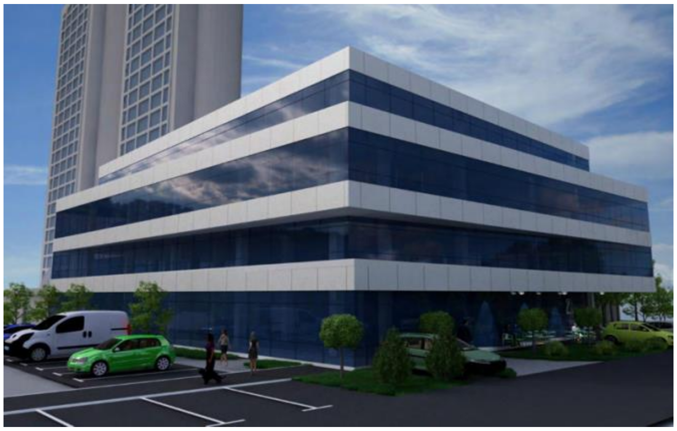


Figure 9. Genex tower. Figure 10. Rendered image of proposed development in Blok 33, beside Genex (Source: Ekapija, 2021).

III. Conceptual Framework

Bloks 33 and 37 were chosen as the focus of this study because they were among the first urban communities in New Belgrade to lead successful anti-development protest movements, serving as pivotal examples of urban activism in the area. The urban context of New Belgrade was chosen due to its deeply dynamic and contested nature, making it a compelling site for urban and political inquiry. The urban district offers a lens into the ways that urban spaces evolve under drastically different political, economic, and ideological forces, and how ordinary citizens respond to the manifestations of these transformations in their backyards. Today, New Belgrade reflects the extreme outcomes of top-down, market-driven urban development, largely at the hands of foreign investors and an increasingly authoritarian government (Perić and Maruna, 2022, 1). The urban movements that arise from these conditions—that seek to assert their right to the city in the face of such entrenched and corrupt urban power structures—are worthy of study. Despite its complexity and richness, Belgrade remains markedly underrepresented in post-socialist and urban movement studies, making it a critical site for the expansion of both fields.

This study aims to address the following research questions: What are the circumstances and motivations that led to the anti-development protest movements in Bloks 33 and 37? How do the residents' motivations change our understanding of the meaning of urban movements? It seeks to answer these questions through interviews with residents of the two communities, aimed at understanding the largely overlooked perspectives of the people affected by and resisting New Belgrade's urban transformations.

Guided by literature on urban movements, which asserts that spatial issues in the urban environment are grounded within broader political, economic, and social contexts, these questions aim to explore the wider circumstances—beyond opposition to a single office development—that drove residents to mobilize. In doing so, it seeks to reveal the attitudes that community members hold toward the broader trends defining the city's post-socialist transformation, while also expanding upon and challenging understandings of the meaning of urban movements.

The question of motivation is a central focus of this study because it offers insights into both the underlying drivers of urban movements as well as the tensions present in New Belgrade's urban environment. This guiding question speaks to a fundamental and longstanding inquiry within urban movement literature—what drives people to mobilize in defense of their urban environment? It seeks to understand this in the context of a city that has seldom been incorporated into global or mainstream studies of urban movements. Accordingly, mobilizations in Belgrade are influenced by an array of distinct local circumstances that may not be considered in mainstream studies, and the insights they yield may expand upon or challenge conclusions generated in other contexts. Studying the reasons that citizens mobilize to defend their urban environments can also generate meaningful insights into the nature of the cities in which they take place, illuminating their fault lines, tensions, and sources of contestation. Many fundamental insights can be gained from focusing on motivation, such as whether an urban movement is reactionary or visionary, whether its emergence was triggered by a single event or longstanding tensions, or whether it seeks to preserve the past or pursue new directions of urban change.

Seeking to rigorously understand the motivations and causes behind urban movements dispels simplistic interpretations, which minimize the meaningful and pressing reasons that residents come together to defend urban space. In Bloks 33 and 37, explanations such as Vučić opposition, Yugo-nostalgic longing, or NIMBYism oversimplify and entirely neglect key factors that led to the protest movements. These explanations obscure not only pervasive issues in New Belgrade's urban environment and residents' critical concerns and desires regarding their urban spaces, but also the meaning of urban movements.

Through analysis of interview statements, this study finds that the protest movements in Bloks 33 and 37 do not fit neatly into any one simplistic or scholarly understanding of urban movements. The inability of mainstream theories of urban activism to adequately explain the motivations driving the protests is in large part because many of the motivations cited by residents are deeply local, and thus overlooked by a body of literature that largely excludes the specific urban context of New Belgrade. This study observes a notable emphasis among interviewees on immediate spatial issues, with residents acknowledging the systemic problems driving urban issues in Belgrade, but focusing primarily on the local, tangible manifestations of these issues within their communities. The specific motivations cited by residents include a desire to preserve open public space and greenery, disapproval over the broader typologies of post-socialist urban developments, emerging self-management practices over urban commons, and distrust in the politics and legality of urban development in Belgrade. The findings suggest that the movements are neither reactionary efforts to resist all change, as community-led opposition to development is often portrayed, nor explicitly political efforts seeking to enact structural change, a criterion some scholars use to define a movement's effectiveness. Rather, the movements are part of a sustained process of self-management and an assertion of residents' right to shape their urban spaces within a formal system of urban development that consistently fails to meet their needs.

IV. Literature Review

This study's primary research question—aimed at understanding the motivations and circumstances underlying protest in Bloks 33 and 37—is informed by scholarly perspectives that assert that even local urban movements are shaped by more than physical space. These viewpoints within urban movement literature argue that broader societal conditions underly mobilizations responding to spatial issues. Because New Belgrade was initially constructed to embody Yugoslav socialist ideals and has undergone significant market-driven urban change following the country's collapse, its status as a post-socialist city fundamentally shapes these broader conditions. While Belgrade is underrepresented in both urban movement and post-socialist transition literature, insights offered by the substantial bodies of literature provide a useful framework and established vocabulary for understanding urban changes and mobilizations. The following subsections synthesize (A) theoretical perspectives on urban movements, (B) international studies of post-socialist urban transition, and (C) Belgrade-specific perspectives on urban issues and movements.

A. Theoretical perspectives on urban movements

Scholarship on urban movements examines social movements in which the city is both the site and subject of contestation. Manuel Castells—a foundational scholar in the field—presents one of the first definitions of distinctly urban social movements. His definition centers on outcome and efficacy, recognizing only efforts that enact structural change. Castells' definition states,

> An urban social movement, as defined by effects on urban, political, and cultural change, appears when a movement articulates city, community and power, develops its own consciousness, and operates through a political party, while keeping its autonomy and continuing to relate to society through the support of professionals and the images transmitted by the media. (Castells, 1983, 284)

Under this framework, mobilizations that are apolitical, led solely by organizations, disconnected from broader structural critiques, or limited to achieving immediate goals without enacting systemic change are not considered urban social movements (Castells, 1983, 284). While Castells' definition of urban social movements is foundational to the field, it applies only to specific manifestations of mobilization and offers limited guidance in answering questions related to context and motivation. While much of his work focuses on outcome, Castells, in his discussion of key tensions driving urban social movements, provides insight into the question of underlying cause. Urban social movements, Castells argues, seek to redefine urban space from a domain defined by "exchange value," prioritizing the interests of those who profit from urbanization to one defined by "use value," prioritizing the collective needs of the communities that engage with the space (Castells, 1983, 326). Subsequent scholarship builds significantly upon this exploration of underlying tensions and provides insights into central questions driving this study.

Chris Pickvance uses the more straightforward and broad term, “urban movement” rather than Castells’ specific “urban social movement” because he is “interested in all kinds of urban movement, rather than only those that lead to structural change in urban power relationships”, (Pickvance, 1986, 222). As the body of literature grew and evolved to address shifting urban dynamics and emerging forms of activism, scholars increasingly omitted the “social” qualifier, focusing, like Pickvance, on an array of manifestations of urban movements. Alongside this shift came an increased emphasis on studying the goals, rather than outcomes, of urban movements. Hans Prujit defines urban movements as “social movements through which citizens attempt to achieve some control over their urban environment”, basing his definition in aim rather than outcome (Prujit, 2007, 1). While scholars expanded their scope to movements beyond those that enact structural change, they maintained a notable focus on the structural forces that influence them. Prujit notes in his definition that the term “urban environment” encompasses “the built environment, the social fabric of the city, and the local political process” (Pruijt, 2007, 1).

Whereas Castells classifies urban movements according to the degree of structural change they achieve, Pickvance classifies them according to their aims and contexts. He identifies multiple typologies of urban movements: “movements for the provision of and access to housing and urban services, for control and management, and for the defense of housing and neighbourhood” (Pickvance, 1985, 31). He identifies five key contextual features that lead to urban movements. These include:

> rapid urbanisation; state action (intervention in consumption, responses to protest); the political context (presence of a broad political movement, cultural understandings about the scope of urban politics, ability of political institutions to express political conflicts); the development of the middle class; and general social and economic conditions. (Pickvance, 1985, 39)

Pickvance’s categorization of circumstances and motivations underlying urban movements is in part influenced by his identification of authors “automatically [interpreting] opposition to changes in the built environment as anti-capitalist rather than...NIMBY,” noting that the motivations underlying urban movements are “highly diverse” (Pickvance, 2003, 103). The role of NIMBYism within urban movement discourse is complex and somewhat convoluted, in large part because, as Luloff et al. articulate, “as currently used in literature, [NIMBY] has limited utility because of the absence of conceptual and operational clarity” (Luloff et al, 1996, 81). While, in the broadest sense of the term, NIMBY is used “to describe a locally based action group protesting against a proposed development,” it is often understood as “intolerant, shortsighted, “free-loading” and, in extreme circumstances, socially and racially prejudiced” (Mcclymont and O’hare, 2008, 1). In his discussion of urban movements “for the defense of housing and neighborhood,” Pickvance accounts for the varied reasons that neighbors may gather to block proposed developments in their communities. He notes that some manifestations are conservative and regressive, such as those that arise in response to “‘social threats' such as the arrival of 'problem families' in council housing, Blacks, or the siting of facilities for the mentally handicapped or for ex-prisoners” (Pickvance, 1985, 39). In other cases, he states that they can “take on anticapitalist overtones when the threat is from a developer” (Pickvance, 1985, 39). Pickvance offers a cautious caveat to this statement, noting that anticapitalist sentiments within these movements “may be coincidental to the concern to preserve the status quo… tout ce qui bouge, nest pas rouge” (Pickvance, 1985, 39).

In the years following Pickvance’s early discussions of context, scholarly attention to contextual factors behind urban movements steadily increased. While, as Anna Domaradzka states, “at their core, urban movements remain locally based and focused on the particular needs and conflicts", scholars largely agree with Pickvance's assertion that the issues that ignite urban movements are rooted firmly within broader contexts (Domaradzka, 2018, 616). While Pickvance argues that the political, economic, and social context must be understood to effectively analyze social movements, Peter Marcuse further contends that "most problems have a spatial aspect, but their origins lie in economic, social, political arenas, the spatial being a partial cause and an aggravation, but only partial" (Marcuse, 2009, 195).

Kerstin Jacobsson agrees that urban movements are inextricably rooted within the broader economic, political, and social conditions in which they operate. Accordingly, she asserts that in post-socialist cities, "Both the urban environment and the urban movements in the region reflect the post-socialist complexities characterizing the region as a whole" (Jacobsson, 2015, 283). She argues that, because post-socialist cities are underrepresented in urban movement studies, traditional frameworks often neglect urban tensions that emerge in the post-socialist context (Jacobsson, 2015, 282). Therefore, an understanding of the complexities of post-socialist urban environments is required to understand urban movements in cities like Belgrade, which have socialist pasts.

B. *International studies of post-socialist urban transition*

Literature on post-socialist transition began to emerge in the 1990s, following the collapse of various socialist regimes throughout Europe. While post-socialist studies in the immediate years following regime collapse focused on institutional reforms, contemporary literary contributions reflect ongoing processes of transition, many of which are urban. In his 1999 article, Luděk Sýkora stated, "The political change took only a few weeks and the core institutional transformations of economic system were accomplished within a few years, however, the change of settlement structures will take many years or decades" (Sýkora, 1999:

79). The contemporary era of literature on post-socialist studies reflects this trajectory, largely focusing on ongoing urban transformations in formerly socialist cities.

Various authors have attempted to describe the specific typologies of urban restructuring that occur in post-socialist cities. Kiril Stanliov describes them as changes "From high-density, monocentric settlements, dominated by high-rise public housing and communal modes of transportation…into sprawling, multi-nodal metropolitan areas reaching extreme levels of privatization of housing, services, transportation, and public space" (Stanilov, 2007, 7). Kersten Jacobsson describes post-socialist urban complexities as,

> the unevenness of neoliberalisation and the resulting co-existence of socialist and post-socialist layers in the urban fabric, the messiness of urban development, the co-existence of affluence and deprivation in the cities, the unresponsiveness or repressiveness of public authorities as well as the multiplicity of social cleavages (including a marked generational cleavage between those who experienced state-socialism and those born after 1989). (Jacobsson, 2015, 282)

While general urban trends have been identified among formerly socialist cities, authors of comparative studies between post-socialist cities urge against generalizing them. Jiří Malý, Petr Dvořák, and Pavel Šuška, who studied Brno and Bratislava, conclude that "the post-socialist city should not be considered a specific entity but rather a general term…Next to a dynamic nature of transformation stages, there are internal urban conditions which affect transformation" (Malý et al. 2020, 13). Similarly, in his chapter on Budapest and Moscow, Pickvance states that, "the 'post-socialist city' does not imply a common pattern of social movement activity. The post-socialist city is not a homogeneous reality" (Pickvance, 1996, 265). Pickvance attributes differences between the post-socialist experience in the two cities partly to the fact that "they represented different variants of state socialism, and partly because transition processes in the two countries have differed greatly" (Pickvance, 1996, 265).

While scholarship on post-socialist transition provides meaningful insights into many of the urban transformations occurring within Belgrade, the city remains a blind spot in the literature. As a result, certain complexities of the city's transition are overlooked by broader post-socialist frameworks. In Belgrade, both the variant of socialism—marked by Yugoslavia's model of self-management—and process of transition—which involved a civil war, NATO bombing campaign, and the disintegration of one country into six, were distinct. Accordingly, Belgrade-specific studies should be analyzed alongside broader post-socialist studies to grasp a more complete understanding of the specific urban conditions in the city.

C. Belgrade-specific perspectives on urban issues and movements

Because there remains a gap in literature that examines anti-development protest movements in New Belgrade's bloks, the following subsections bridge studies on other urban movements in Belgrade with studies of the specific urban conditions in the bloks. Scholarship on other urban mobilizations that emerged in response to Belgrade's urban environment provide context into the broader systemic issues that generate urban discontent in the city. Because these studies neglect the specific urban conditions that residents in Bloks 33 and 37 protested, the next subsection synthesizes a growing body of literature on the post-socialist urban conditions in New Belgrade's bloks. The following subsections discuss (a) studies of urban movements in Belgrade and (b) scholarly discussions of urban conditions in New Belgrade.

a. Studies of urban movements in Belgrade

Scholarly focus on urban movements in Belgrade has largely centered on the city's large-scale "Ne Davimo Beograd" protests, which emerged in 2017 in response to plans for a state-led luxury residential-commercial urban megaproject on the right bank of the Sava River (Piletić, 2022, 295). Protesters sought to block the development, rallying around concerns that it was catered to investors rather than Belgrade’s residents, lacked transparency, and was architecturally incompatible with the city’s character and existing developments (Piletić, 2022, 295). Scholars studying the Ne Davimo Beograd protests have situated the movement firmly within the broader political and economic environment of Belgrade, which they have often characterized as taking the form of “authoritarian neoliberalism” (Perić and Maruna, 2022, 1). Ana Perić and Marija Maruna, in their study of the protests, describe urban development under authoritarian neoliberalism as marked by a state which, “instead of controlling development mechanisms to reduce negative externalities, strongly supports the development visions pursued by market forces, suppressing any other parties” (Perić and Maruna, 2022, 2). Accordingly, they identified urban development in Belgrade as “subject to various abuses, such as the misapplication of legal procedures, neglect of the public interest, and politicization of planning” (Perić and Maruna, 2022, 1).

Ana Piletić builds upon Perić and Maruna’s thesis, arguing that in Belgrade, the urban form is not only subject to the forces of authoritarian neoliberalism, but also a catalyst for its expansion (Piletić, 2022, 291). She describes how, after the SNS party gained control of the City Assembly in 2012, they advanced the Belgrade Waterfront development—a project championed by Aleksander Vučić during his failed mayoral bid that year—despite its clear violation of existing urban regulations (Piletić, 2022, 291). To facilitate the project’s development, they gutted regulatory frameworks in Belgrade’s city plan, eliminating regulations on height and floor limits, public space quotas, and requirements for international tenders, public debate, and approval by local architectural firms (Piletić, 2022, 293). She argues that the intensification of authoritarian neoliberalism in Belgrade was a direct catalyst for the Ne Davimo Beograd protests, stating that it has “rendered the urban scale more susceptible to contestation, as dominated social groups have sought out new outlets for countering an increasingly coercive and oppressive state apparatus" (Piletić, 2022, 297).

While discussions of the Ne Davimo Beograd protests provide important insights into the political, economic, and urban tensions specific to Belgrade, the movement differs in fundamental ways from the grassroots, blok-level movements that are the focus of this study. The scale of the Ne Davimo Beograd protests was significantly larger, as they extended beyond the localized-blok level concerns that have characterized the anti-development movements in New Belgrade. Additionally, the Ne Davimo Beograd protests were distinctly political and explicitly aimed at the state, ultimately giving way to the creation of an established SNS resistance party called the Civic Front (Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2023, 628). Methodologically, the previous studies have largely relied on press releases and public government communications, offering limited insight into the perspectives of the citizens at the forefront of the protest movements.

Sabrina Kopf's study on bike activism in Belgrade is perhaps the most directly applicable to the goals of the present study, given its alignment in both subject matter and methodological approach. Employing semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and observations, Kopf investigates citizen-led urban movements contesting spatial rights in New Belgrade. While the specific subject matter of her study is bike activism, exploring grassroots initiatives to implement bike-friendly infrastructure in New Belgrade, several applicable themes emerge in her research. She states that, "Regarding the activists' goals and strategies, bike activism in Belgrade can be viewed as part of a popular global movement by which people not only demand their equal share of space in the city but also oppose neoliberal politics and urban planning" (Kopf, 2015, 100). This highlights the ways that seemingly apolitical urban movements in Belgrade are intertwined with broader political and economic currents. Kopf identifies an array of themes throughout interviews, such as widespread political discontent and a perception among citizens that Serbia is in a state of crisis (Kopf, 2015, 101). At the same time, she notes that, “the activists play down the political dimension of their activism. Instead, they emphasize that their fight for 'space in the city' is rather a struggle for better living conditions” (Kopf, 2015, 115). Ultimately, Kopf concludes that bike activism “offers activists a legitimate way to act politically without having to declare themselves political activists or their cause a political one” (Kopf, 2015, 116).

Studies of other urban movements in Belgrade outline an array of systemic issues that generate discontent in the city, many of which are overlooked by broader studies of post-socialist urban conditions. The framework of authoritarian neoliberalism provides a useful lens through which to understand these dynamics, offering insights into the specific political and urban conditions in the city. Additionally, the limited scholarship that methodologically engages directly with New Belgrade’s residents provides compelling insights into the perspectives of urban activists in the city, which warrant deeper exploration. However, while the aforementioned studies on urban movements in Belgrade provide valuable insights into certain aspects of this research, they do not engage with the specific case of blok-level anti-development mobilizations. The following subsection synthesizes scholarly perspectives on the urban conditions from which the protest movements examined in this study emerged.

b. Scholarly discussions of urban conditions in New Belgrade

Scholars in Belgrade largely agree that the urban trends present in New Belgrade’s post-socialist landscape have resulted in an array of harmful consequences. Various scholars frame the recent developments as architecturally thoughtless destructions of once meticulously planned urban spaces. Ljiljana Blagojević describes New Belgrade’s current era of urban development as being heavily influenced by the “post-socialist primitive accumulation of capital”, which has resulted in “persistent, street-by-street, block-by-block advance of new private development” (Blagojević, 2014, 304). Marić et al. state that developers “[neglect] the real needs of the existing users and existing models of life in the city” and “[produce] spaces which are appropriate for narrow interests of capital holders, while interests of direct users, as well as interest of a wider public, have been neglected and even often jeopardized” (Marić et al. 2010, 47). Dragutinović et al. state that the district’s contemporary developments are not “related to the improvement of the modernist blocks, nor [do] they address social relations. Instead, these practices are only intensifying socio-spatial polarization, usurping the common spaces, and devaluing the existing blocks” (Dragutinović et al. 2022, 276). Zeković et al argue that New Belgrade’s recent urban developments have “often generated, reproduced and intensified urban and social inequalities and gentrification” (Zeković et al, 2023, 5).

What all these authors share, in addition to their critical views towards New Belgrade’s urban changes, is the observation that the district’s contemporary era of urban development has been overwhelmingly characterized by the filling-in of once open green space in the bloks. Jovanović and Ratkaj state, “previous vast, open green-area spaces of the housing blocks are now rapidly consumed by the expanding commercial drive of the private capital” (Jovanović and Ratkaj, 2014, 8). Zeković et al state, “the commons built up during the socialist period were rapidly privatized, commodified and financialized, becoming the main drivers of urban development” (Zeković et al, 2023, 5). Blagojević states, “Open communal spaces of housing blocks are being parceled, privatized and developed”, and filled with “up-market residential, business, retail, leisure, banking, gambling and religion” (Blagojević, 2014, 303). Marić et al. state, “in the case of New Belgrade, the main problem of its current and probably future development is a process of filling undeveloped parts of blocks under the pressure of new commercial facilities which basically change the character of space" (Marić et al. 2010, 47).

The urban tensions at the center of the anti-development protest movements in New Belgrade have been extensively outlined by local scholars. While the scholarly perspective is clear, there remains a limited understanding of the perspectives of the community members whose neighborhoods have been directly impacted by these transformations. None of the aforementioned studies involve interviews with residents as part of their methodological approach, and none engage with the urban movements that have responded to the issues that they outline.

Literature Gap

Scholars argue that while urban movements are largely motivated by local spatial issues, these spatial issues are inextricably linked to broader political, social, and economic forces. In post-socialist cities, these forces take on distinct forms. In New Belgrade—a context that is underrepresented in both urban movement and post-socialist literature—a political and economic environment that has been described as authoritarian neoliberalism has given rise to an urban development landscape rife with abuses. Scholars largely agree that the district's resulting urban fabric is marked by widespread market-driven developments which often privilege the needs of investors over residents. They note that many of these developments, much like the proposed office buildings in Bloks 33 and 37, have been built in the once open, communal spaces in New Belgrade's residential bloks. While a substantial body of literature by local scholars explores post-socialist urban transformations and reflects on the resulting tensions in New Belgrade, the voices of the community members who are impacted by these changes remain largely absent. Interviews are seldom employed in studies of New Belgrade's rapidly changing urban environment, leading scholars to assert that these changes are harmful and against public interest without engaging directly with the public.

There remains not only a gap in literature regarding the grassroots urban movements that have begun emerging across New Belgrade, but also a gap in literature that addresses the perspectives of residents living in the urban district. This study seeks to fill these gaps, interviewing residents from two urban communities that have organized protest movements against proposed developments in their neighborhoods. In doing so, it seeks to address a notable literature gap concerning the urban context of Belgrade in international urban movement and post-socialist transition literature, as well as a local literature gap in Belgrade-specific scholarship, concerning the perspectives of residents in the urban communities and the protest movements that they have led.

V. Data and Methods

This project employs interviews and observations to address the central research question: What were the conditions and motivations that led residents in Bloks 33 and 37 to organize anti-development protest movements? A total of 46 interviews were conducted over a two-week data collection period in August 2024. Among the interviewees, 21 were residents of Blok 33 and 25 were residents of Blok 37. Interview subjects were recruited through a variety of methods. Three residents responded to posted flyers, ten were recruited through snowball sampling, and the remaining 33 were approached in-person in the bloks' common spaces. Among those recruited in-person, 14 were recruited while watching their children—and one was watching their grandchild—at the playground within their blok; two were sitting in front of their ground floor apartments; six were sitting on park benches; four were drinking beer or smoking cigarettes at picnic tables or benches; three were walking on the path in the inner core of their blok; one was waiting at their blok’s bus stop; one was walking their dog; and one was picking up trash in a common space. Residents who responded to posted flyers were interviewed over the phone, those recruited through snowball sampling were interviewed in their apartments, and those approached in-person were interviewed in the common spaces in the two bloks.

Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, with all interviewees being asked to talk about the protest movements in their bloks and the ways that their surroundings had changed since the fall of Yugoslavia. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, conversations often expanded into related topics and varied greatly in length. The variation in interview length, ranging from three minutes to over an hour, was also influenced by the varied circumstances under which interviewees were recruited. Some residents who were walking to the grocery store or watching children, for example, did not have the time to speak in depth. Nonetheless, this study prioritized gathering the perspectives of as many community members as possible, and the average interview length was 14 minutes.

At the beginning of each interview, participants received consent forms and provided verbal consent to be recorded. Due to the limitations of transcription software in accurately processing recordings in Serbian, interviews were transcribed and translated manually. They were then coded using ATLAS.ti. Following an inductive analytical approach, each transcript was read repeatedly throughout the coding process to identify recurring concepts and themes. An initial set of 21 codes were developed through open coding, which were then analyzed for relevance and grouped into four broader thematic categories. Groupings were made based on overlapping content and thematic similarities. The four central themes presented in the following section were chosen based on how frequently they were discussed as well as the depth, detail, significance and emphasis with which interviewees discussed them.

One anticipated challenge in the methodology involves the potential reluctance of interviewees to speak openly during interviews, due to the complexities of Belgrade's historical, political, and geopolitical circumstances. These include the Serbian government's history of harshly suppressing protesters, memories of Yugoslav-era surveillance practices, and negative sentiments towards the United States (Sapsford, 2006, 59). Many of the interviewees lived through the NATO bombings of Belgrade, an experience that fundamentally transformed the way that many people in the city regarded the United States. While distrust is often directed toward the American government more than individual Americans, this could have led to hesitancy in speaking openly with an American interviewer (Fulbright). Another potential limitation involves translation, as the interviews were conducted in Serbian and later translated to English. This could have resulted in the loss of nuance and culturally specific expressions, among other important contextual cues that inform interpretation.

VI. Data and Analysis

Discussions surrounding the urban movements in Bloks 33 and 37 spanned hyper-local considerations as well as broader political, economic, and cultural topics. While conversations about motivations behind the protest movements typically began with critiques and concerns surrounding the proposed office developments, they often expanded into an array of broader circumstances and sentiments. Several salient themes emerged across interviews. These include (A) Appreciation for open public space and greenery, (B) Disapproval over post-socialist urban developments, (C) Emerging self-management practices over urban commons, and (D) Distrust in the politics and legality of urban development in Belgrade. The following subsections discuss these themes, drawing directly on the perspectives shared by interviewed residents.

A. Appreciation for open public space and greenery

> “There is a lot of space in our blok. It’s like you have self-standing buildings in greenery. Corbusier described it like that.”

Because the proposed office developments in Bloks 33 and 37 targeted previously open, undeveloped, and communal land, the urban commons in both bloks were frequent subjects of discussion. Interviewees described their bloks’ urban commons as vital to the functioning and standard of living in their communities and expressed concerns over the threats that the proposed developments posed for these spaces. As the urban commons in both bloks largely take the form of outdoor green spaces, discussions often highlighted the benefits of having access not only to communal areas in general, but specifically to green communal areas. Interviewees discussed environmental, social, and democratic benefits provided by the ample access to open green space in their communities.

Discussions of environmental benefits centered primarily on access to fresh air, exposure to sunlight, and the cooling effects of greenery. One interviewee, when asked about the design of his blok, remarked, “there is not much spectacular architecture in the residential bloks, but the arrangement of those buildings, the types of open spaces they create, those raised ground floors so that the blok can have nice air flow, that’s what is really significant about these structures.” This appreciation for air flow, coupled with the temperature regulating effects of the bloks’ green spaces, became especially pronounced following a three-day heat wave that occurred during this study’s data collection period. Discussing her commute to Old Belgrade to pick her grandchild up from school, an interviewee stated, “when I would come back to the blok, it was a few degrees cooler here. You could feel the difference.”

Concerns about the loss of these environmental factors were especially emphasized in Blok 37, where the proposed office development was planned directly alongside the full length of a preexisting residential building. One Blok 37 resident stated, “this planned building was supposed to be huge, bigger than the biggest building in our blok, and we realized that we would lose our air supply.” Another added that the office building, “would completely enclose the buildings on the edge of the blok. They would be completely shaded all the time. They wouldn’t have direct sunlight.”

Figures 11 and 12. Views from the eighth floor of an apartment building in Blok 37.

Greenery and open public space were also regarded as having social benefits, with the capacity of the urban commons to simultaneously serve the social needs of multiple generations referenced repeatedly. Motioning to the benches along the walking path in his blok’s inner core, one interviewee stated, “there are many benches. These old timers, when they walk around and get tired, they sit and rest and continue.” An elderly resident, interviewed while sitting on one of the benches, stated, “this is my only form of recreation. I come out here, either in the morning before noon or the evening around five or six. I watch the kids play. I look at the nature. I like to see the young people. But hey, what else am I supposed to do?”

Figure 13. The central communal area in Blok 37. Photographed from the walking path along the inner core of the blok. Elderly residents are seen sitting on a park bench in the foreground, a child is seen biking in the mid-ground, and children playing in the playground can be seen in the background.

Referring to the playground bordered by the walking path where the previous interviewee had been sitting, one resident stated, "there are mothers who never bring their kids to other parks, just the one right in the center of our buildings." Another described her blok as "a place to want to be and raise your kids," adding that this had "always [been] the case here because of the spatial placement, the open spaces, and all these trees that New Belgrade has." Echoing this sentiment, another resident stated, "if we only had concrete, we wouldn't have kids or dogs here. The ambience of the blok pushes you to have both."

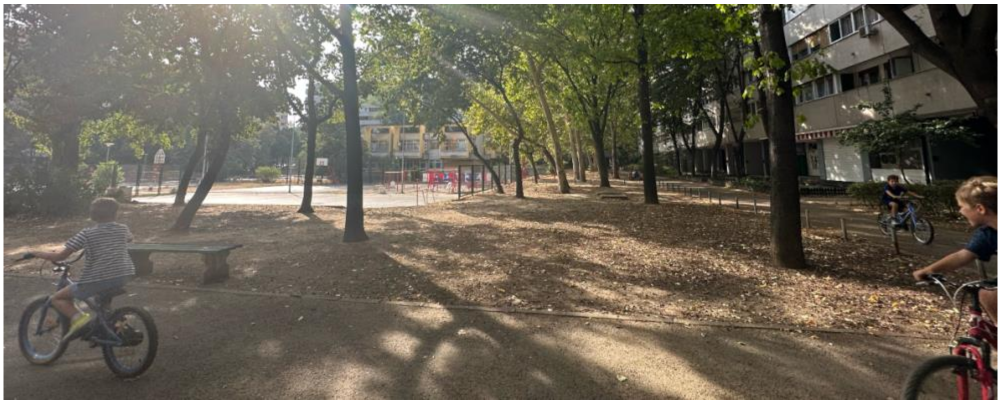


Figure 14. Children biking on the path along Blok 37's inner core.

A leader in Blok 37's protest movement described the urban commons in his blok as not only an asset that the protests aimed to preserve, but also a feature that created the conditions for community organizing in the first place. He shared his belief that,

> Open public space is the basis of democracy. It's a space where every man and woman can meet each other and talk about everyday life. And here you have opportunities to interact with people in your community on multiple levels—on grass, on a bench, on a pedestrian path…Residents can only become involved in how the community works and engage in activism through that physical gathering space. The more of those spaces that exist, the more successful a community is…So, in that sense, it was important for me that those places not be threatened.

Referencing the slogan that had become a rallying cry during the protests in his blok, "Čiji blok? Naš blok," or "Whose blok? Our blok," he shared his belief that control over the urban commons should belong to residents. He added, "one of the most powerful aspects of open public space in modernist urbanism is that it stays flexible and can be adapted and changed over time by residents. The life of these spaces is dynamic, and it is for different communities to adapt them to their needs."

These accounts demonstrate the deep connections that residents have with their urban commons and the vast array of functions that the spaces serve for the communities in which they are situated. The vibrancy of these spaces was also apparent through firsthand observation. During this study's two-week data collection period in August 2024, the urban commons were consistently highly frequented, with the exception of a brief decline in activity during the heat wave. Kids flooded parks, parents and pet owners walked strollers and dogs on walking paths, men drank beer at picnic tables, and elderly residents socialized on benches. Multiple residents described the planned office developments as attempts to "usurp" their urban commons, threatening not only physical space within the communities, but also the valued forms of community life that they supported.

B. Emerging self-management practices over urban commons

"Somehow, it has always been the opinion that some institution will take care of the block—fix it, clean it, trim the trees. But they won't."

While appreciation for the urban commons was frequently cited as a driving force behind the anti-development protest, so too were the complicated dynamics underlying the management of the spaces. Long-term residents recalled that during the Yugoslav period, well-defined systems of self-organization, collectivist cultural values, and strong institutional involvement together ensured the rigorous upkeep of common areas. They observed a breakdown of these structures with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, which fundamentally changed ownership and management dynamics over the commons and in turn their physical condition. The most frequently mentioned result of this change was the deterioration and neglect of the spaces. Interviewees spoke about the state of their commons with frustration—towards the city, their neighbors, and themselves. At the same time, in the absence of well-defined management frameworks, some residents noted an increased capacity for individual initiative and direct involvement in adapting the common spaces.

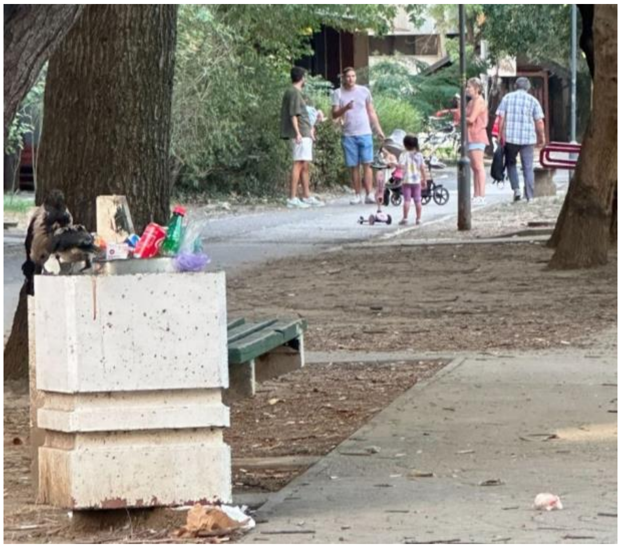
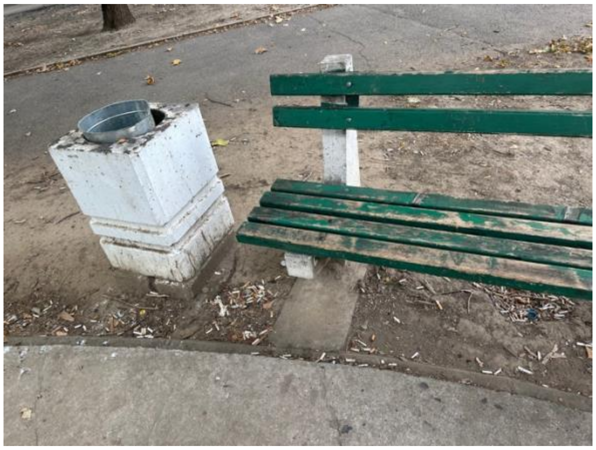


Figure 15. Crows pecking at an overflowing trash in the foreground, families socializing on a walking path in the background.

Throughout interviews in both bloks, residents regularly expressed frustration toward the state of their urban commons. Interviewees expressed that, although they paid municipal cleaning services to clean common areas, maintenance workers rarely visited their bloks. In large sections of the two bloks, the ground is littered with beer bottle caps, cigarette butts, and small white tiles that once lined the facades of the residential buildings. Paint is chipping, trash cans are often found overflowing, and many benches stand broken, rendered unusable.



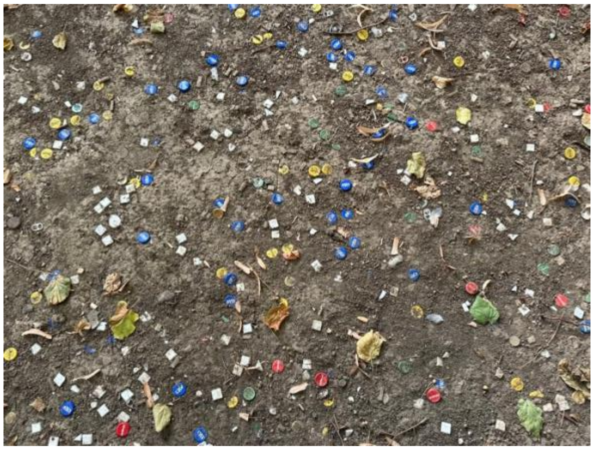


Figure 16. A park bench and trash can in Blok 37, surrounded by cigarette butts. Figure 17. White square tiles, which have fallen off of the facades of apartment buildings, and bottle caps littering the ground in Blok 33.

One resident stated, “we have public agencies, which we pay for, that are supposed to come and clean those common spaces. We pay. But they do nothing.” Another said, “nobody comes to empty our bins. Sometimes they’re so full that they overflow.” Pointing to a broken bench, another resident remarked, “nobody does anything at the city level”, then added “that bench over there broke and nobody came to fix it. We put a plank down so we could sit on it.” Residents also discussed the crumbling facades of their buildings, piles of fallen branches, and broken sidewalks, noting that these issues had persisted for months without attention from city services.

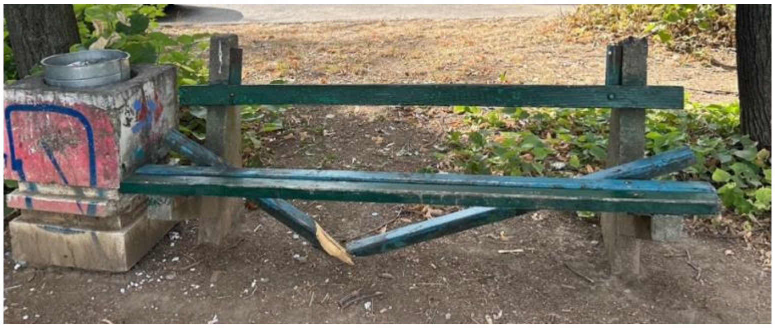


Figure 17. A broken parch bench in Blok 33.

In addition to speaking about municipal neglect towards the common spaces, some interviewees placed responsibility on their communities, suggesting that residents should take matters into their own hands. As one interviewee remarked, “I’m unhappy with these conditions. People keep saying the state should do it, but why don’t we just clean the areas in front of our apartments instead of asking for help from others?”

Interviewees described a significant drop in resident-led community maintenance practices since the fall of Yugoslavia, pointing to changing cultural values, top-down reforms like privatization, and the crisis period in the 1990s as key factors in their decline. One interviewee, who moved into her apartment in the 1970s, shared her belief that newer residents had fundamentally different relationships to the urban commons than her generation. Rather than receiving access to collectively owned housing from the state—as she and others who moved into the blok during the Yugoslavia period had—newer residents gained entry to the community by way of monetary transactions. In her opinion, these starkly different dynamics of acquisition and ownership, in addition to changing cultural values that have made younger people “more individualistic,” were major causes of disrepair in the urban commons. She pointed to the Yugoslav rallying cry, “svi za jednog, jedan za svi” or “all for one, one for all”, expressing that collectivist sentiments in society once encouraged a high degree of accountability over urban commons, which had since eroded. Another interviewee pointed to the crisis period that accompanied Yugoslavia’s collapse as an ongoing cause of disrepair, stating,

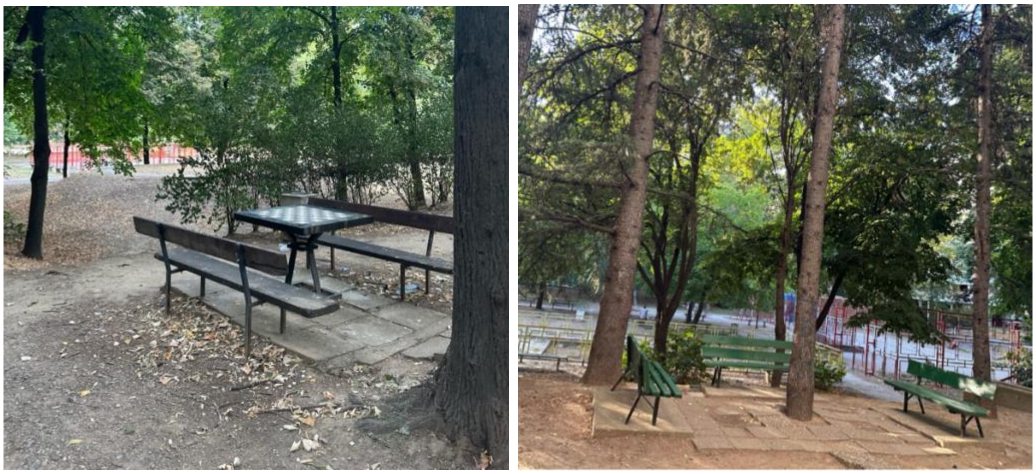
> When you have these terrible experiences, you kind of give up. The sentiment is, ‘hey, all that matters is that we can eat tomorrow’. People still look at life like that...Sure, some things are like they were in the ‘90s. Corruption, criminals, that is like it was in the ‘90s. But back then we really couldn’t eat…But with the collapse of Yugoslavia, I think people decided ‘well, everything has gone to hell, there’s nothing I can do’.

Among expressions of frustration over municipal neglect, changing cultural attitudes, and the ongoing impacts of the 1990s, some residents saw the absence of clear management frameworks as an opportunity to freely adapt the urban commons to their needs. One resident explained that during the Yugoslav era, it was difficult for individual residents to enact changes over their shared spaces. He stated,

> The way that arrangement worked, as an ordinary citizen, you couldn't really do everything you wanted in those spaces. Instead, you would always have to ask some designated institution to do things for you. If you wanted to set up a bench, trash can, or playground, only institutions could do those things. There wasn't much resident-led participation.

He went on to discuss the ways that the current management landscape has allowed for a greater capacity for direct participation in the urban commons. He stated that while residents must still rely on formal institutions to solidify changes made to the urban commons, there is now greater flexibility for resident-led interventions. He continued,

> The most successful gathering spaces are just when you have a table and benches. And on those benches you can lean and hang out, and people sit there all day. And when it's partly in shade it's a great gathering space. When you notice these spaces you notice how actually in a lot of cases they were created spontaneously, meaning that people made them themselves, and then eventually through some park renovations, institutions come in and replace the spontaneous structures with more durable materials… These institutions still fear resident-led participation, perhaps it's some kind of legacy, but today you can actually organize things directly that meet the needs of your community.



Figures 18 and 19. Gathering spaces in Blok 33

Multiple residents discussed the ways that they were informally reshaping the common spaces in their bloks to meet the needs of their communities. One interviewee said that she had begun using an indoor storage space as a venue to host birthday parties for kids in her blok, and another had plans to turn an abandoned terrace in Genex into a community garden.

Alongside this process of informal adaptation, residents have been working to re-establish an organized framework of self-management over the urban commons. In searching for effective models of self-governance, they have begun reinstating Yugoslav-era practices. Interviewees explained that under Yugoslavia's policy of self-management, each blok had a formal "mesna-zajednica," a title that residents simultaneously used to refer to the Yugoslav-era blok-level unit of self-governance and the physical gathering spaces in which the bodies would meet. Under the mesna-zajednica structure, representatives from each building would meet and discuss administrative matters pertaining to their blok. The mesna-zajednica would coordinate "radne akcije", or "work actions" which brought residents from each building together to clean their bloks' common spaces.

Residents explained that when Yugoslavia fell, these practices and self-organizing bodies fell with it, but that they still presented meaningful approaches to the management of their communities. One community organizer explained that while mesne-zajednice were "more tied to communism", many aspects of the model could be adapted to the contemporary climate. In the past, through this model of self-organization, he said that residents "could discuss what was wrong or missing, what the communities needed, and figure out what had to be done." Based on this model, he and a few other residents in Blok 37 created an opt-in citizens' association, which maintains the self-management practices of the mesna-zajednica model but forgoes ties to a formal state apparatus. Blok 33 adopted a similar model soon after. In recent years, the citizens' associations have begun re-instating work actions to repaint playground structures, pick up trash, and repair infrastructure in the bloks' common spaces. In 2021, they were responsible for organizing the anti-development protest movements in both bloks.

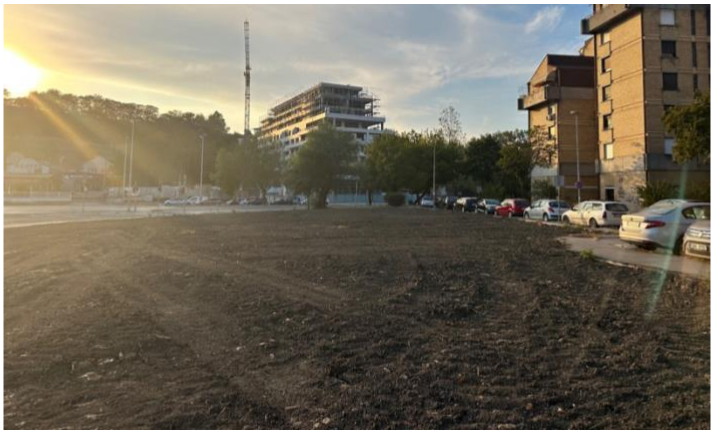
When asked about cleaning efforts organized by the citizens' association in her blok, one resident responded, "they've started organizing things like that, but they're all reactionary and fall short. It's out of sheer necessity, like the community has almost been forced to come to this point." Her comment highlights the vacuum that has been left by formal institutions in the bloks, necessitating the creation of self-management practices that work to meet community needs neglected by the state. Over time, however, as these self-management bodies have begun responding to threats from institutions, such as the planned office developments in both bloks, they have risen to challenge institutional power over urban space.

C. Disapproval over post-socialist urban developments

"The trees grew. Our parents planted them in the 60s and 70s, and now they've grown…and the new developers keep cutting them down. They just cement over everything."

By the time residents in Bloks 33 and 37 learned about plans for the proposed office buildings in their bloks, they had already watched their surroundings rapidly urbanize for years. When explaining their opposition to the two proposed office buildings, residents often pointed to the urban developments around and within the peripheries of their bloks, which they referred to as "excessive" and "inhumane."

One resident expressed that while the inner core of Blok 37 had remained nearly unchanged since her childhood, "the surroundings are completely different, they're much more urban now." She went on to state that, "new parts of New Belgrade are popping up like mushrooms. We used to have a field where we could play, which isn't there anymore. This boulevard was not here, and those office buildings that house banks and companies didn't exist before." Interviewees acknowledged that this process of urban transformation was ongoing, evidenced by the fact that, as one resident verbalized, “there are a million construction sites in New Belgrade.”



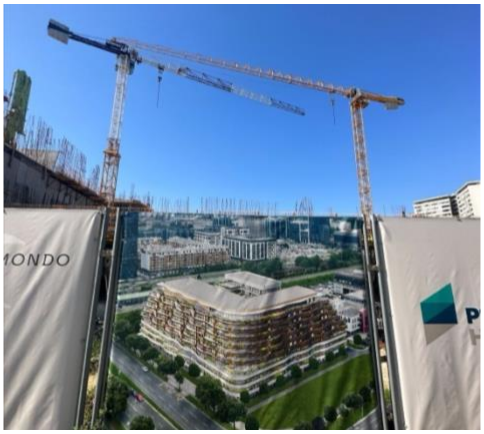


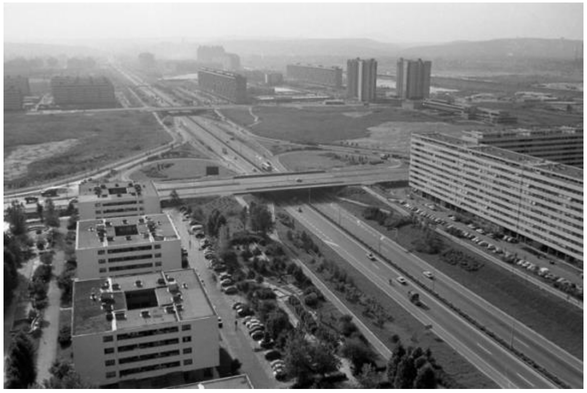
Figure 20. The filled-in construction site of the blocked development in Blok 37 in the foreground, an active construction site directly across Tošin Bunar street in the background. Figure 21. The construction site for a planned development across Arsenija Čarnojevića Boulevard from Blok 33.

An elderly resident in Blok 37, who recalled a time when the land upon which New Belgrade was built was still an undeveloped floodplain, said that he barely recognized large parts of the city. Motioning beyond his blok, he remarked “I wouldn’t know my way around there.” Another long-term Blok 37 resident stated, “this used to be the last stop on the 65 bus, but now the bus route goes on and on and on beyond here. This all used to be fields, and now there are boulevards…You used to be the end of the world, and now you’re the beginning.”

Many interviewees expressed disapproval over the typologies of contemporary building projects in the city. One resident, who provided access to the observation room on the 36th floor of Blok 33’s Genex building, highlighted the increasingly urbanized nature of developments in New Belgrade over time. From the panoramic viewpoint of the observation room, he stated,

> In New Belgrade, the first buildings that were built were these white buildings [referring to Bloks 33 and 37, the peripheries of which are visible in the photographs below]. They made sure that only 30% of the space was used for buildings, while the other 70% was reserved for greenery. So you see, internally in the blok, there are big parks. That was a terrific concept. As newer developments started popping up, they kept on decreasing the percentage of greenery. You can see those buildings with the red roofs [not pictured]. Already there you can see the percentage of green space decreasing considerably. And

> over there is the newest wave of buildings–the green one, the black one behind it [pictured in the middle ground to the left side of the contemporary photo below]. Look at those bunkers.



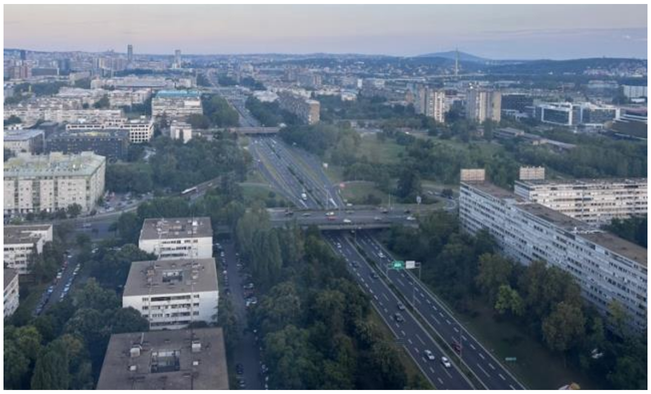


Figure 22. View from Genex, under construction at the time, in 1974 (source: Stare Slike Novog Beograda). Figure 23. View from Genex in 2024 (Blok 33 to the left, Blok 37 to the right)

Residents often referred to this phenomenon, in which developments have begun filling green spaces and increasing the urban density of New Belgrade, as “betoniranje”. The word transforms “beton”, meaning concrete, into a verb, to mean the process of turning space into concrete. They often framed betoniranje as a consequence of a real-estate landscape in which profit, rather than public interest, drives development. One resident stated that investors “use the whole parcel, build as many apartments as they can, sell as many apartments as they can, make as much profit as they can, but they’ve made a concrete box.” Another stated that “expensive new constructions don’t have grass. Let alone a park, post office, school, anything like that. All the new bloks only have concrete.” Another said, “just beyond us, there are expensive bloks, 3,000 euros per square meter, and they just keep building and building.” Reflecting on living conditions in the new developments, another resident expressed, “it’s not a humane life. You have to raise kids in concrete.”

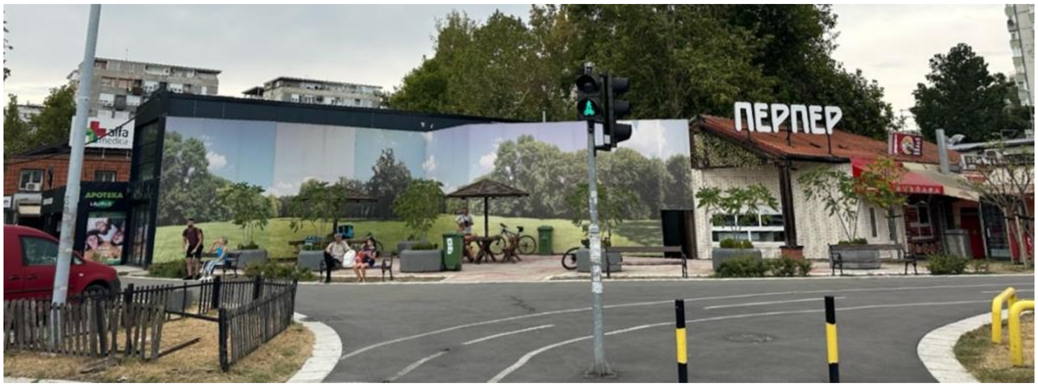


Figure 24. A seating area in New Belgrade, set to the backdrop of artificial greenery.

When residents in Bloks 33 and 37 learned about plans to build office buildings in their neighborhoods, they feared that their communities would be subjected to the same process of "betoniranje" that they had seen transform their surroundings. When describing their protest movements, interviewees framed them as efforts "to save our blok from excessive urbanism" and "keep away inhumane urbanism," expressing a rejection of the prevailing development models that they had witnessed throughout their city. Their disapproval was largely rooted in the sentiment that the contemporary developments were not created with human life in mind. Within their bloks, they feared that the encroachment of "excessive urbanism" would impact their quality of life, imposing a form of development that favored profit over the well-being of the community.

D. Distrust in the politics and legality of urban development

"People get active and they want to participate in the creation and meaning of these spaces, but the question is if you even have that ability or if it's all in the hands of some powerful people."

Themes of corruption, money laundering, and a lack of transparency in urban development across Belgrade consistently surfaced in interviews. Interviewees made frequent references to Serbia's "broken system", described the SNS party as fascist, and referred to government-run news sources as regime media. They made frequent connections between the built environment, their protest movements, and Serbia's political situation. Despite the explicitly political nature of their critiques, however, residents repeatedly framed their protest movements as apolitical.

Interviewees often responded to questions about the built environment with political answers. One interviewee, when asked about changes that had occurred in her blok, began speaking about an investor who had purchased the empty tower in Genex. She referred to him as a "rich scavenger," before stating "he's in the business with this ruling mafia of socialists and radicals" —describing the SNS party. A few residents even connected Serbia's current ruling party to the state of disrepair in their bloks' urban commons. Referring to the lack of municipal cleaning services in her blok, one interviewee stated, "since SNS has come into power, there's none of that. Because if this corner isn't theirs, they won't do anything. If they happen to live there, they'll invest in it somehow."

In both bloks, residents repeatedly and casually pointed out what they perceived to be money laundering in the nearby built environment. When asked about the abundance of slot clubs in New Belgrade, one interviewee remarked that he didn't know anybody who visited them, which led him to suspect that they served as fronts for money laundering. Another made a similar claim about the entire Belgrade Waterfront development. He stated that the urban megaproject was created by "the Serbian mafia, in collaboration with the Serbian government," before saying, "unfortunately, I have come to realize that they are one and the same." The Belgrade Waterfront development arose repeatedly in interviews and was often referenced as a prime example of the city's politicized, unregulated urban environment. Criticisms of the development nearly always overlapped with criticisms of Vučić. The interviewee who provided access to Genex's observation room, referring to the most prominent skyscraper in the Belgrade Waterfront development, which was visible from Genex's 36th floor, stated,

> It just stands there and shimmers. You see commercials on it, and then when elections roll around you just see Vučić all over it. That's how it is. They've made a joke out of Belgrade. In under ten years. And they've turned everything into concrete.

Two separate interview subjects—one from Blok 33 and one from Blok 37—described the urban megaproject as a "billboard to Vučić."

In spite of these frequent references to politics, the sentiment expressed by one interviewee— "Politics is thrown in everywhere. It disgusts me" —was pervasive. Even the most civically engaged interviewees voiced a rejection of politics. A resident in Blok 37 stated that his citizens' association had "no ambitions to engage in politics in the sense of running for office, or to found a party, and so on, but to deal with the problems our community is facing." A community organizer in Blok 37, who was instrumental in leading his blok's anti-development protests and participated in the demonstrations against the Belgrade Waterfront project, expressed disapproval over Serbia's entire political spectrum. This disapproval extended to opposition parties which, at face value, he seemed closely ideologically aligned with. When asked about a Facebook group that appeared to be affiliated with his blok's protest movements, he was quick to note that it had been made by members of the opposition party Civic Front, which arose from the Ne Davimo Beograd protests. He stated,

> We see a lot of opposition political parties start trying to cash into these issues. Ne Davimo Beograd is the biggest one. They start representing the issue, and then the whole story is politicized. You no longer see the residents, the real issue is obscured, and it just turns into "let's take down Vučić."

He went on to state,

> I am just excited for the moment in my life where I don't care what the last name of the president is, and that I know that each one will serve their four-year term and be done. I

> mean, civil servants. I don’t think it’s an easy job, but the people have made a second Tito from this man. I hope that that is coming to an end too.

In both bloks, residents explicitly connected Serbia’s political situation to the proposed developments in their communities. Residents referred to the proposed office buildings as “illegal” or “half-legal,” expressing that the process by which an investor acquired land within their community was opaque and legally questionable. The notion that, as one interviewee stated, “it's not really clear how all of a sudden, certain plots were set aside on which developers could build” was widespread among residents.

The negative perceptions that interviewees held toward anything political seemed to stem from a long history of disappointment in the political system. One interviewee stated, “when Djindjic was killed, and when I saw a million people come to his funeral in 2003, I hoped that things had changed a lot and started to go back to normal.” Others expressed the sentiment that no matter who was in power, corruption seemed endemic to Serbia. One resident, discussing Serbia’s recent political history, stated, “and then these people came into power, it doesn’t matter which party was in power.” Another remarked, “everything is done via politics. Back then it was the democrats, now it’s SNS, it’s all the same. There’s no difference. They do the same things.”

VII. Discussion

While a surface-level reading of the anti-development protest movements in Bloks 33 and 37 may reduce them to Yugo-nostalgic longing, anti-Vučić opposition, or straightforward NIMBYism, interviews with residents complicate this narrative. The sentiments and circumstances underlying the protests are far more layered and complex, touching on an array of longstanding tensions and processes related to the immediate spatial and broader systemic issues shaping life in the two communities. Rather than stemming from reactionary impulses or simplistic ideological positions, the protests emerged after years of quiet observation, growing frustration, and emerging self-management structures in the two communities.

While interviewees often shared recollections of life under Yugoslavia, none cited nostalgic sentiments as drivers of protest. Rather than an abstract sense of longing for the past, discussions of motivation centered on concrete factors that impacted contemporary life in the two communities in tangible ways. While residents expressed an appreciation for the Yugoslav-era designs of their bloks, none described their protest movements as efforts to preserve their original urban forms. In fact, many articulated ways that their urban environments could be improved and described adaptations that they had made to the urban spaces to meet the needs of their communities. Rather than a blanket resistance to change, the movements were motivated by a belief that community members—not far away investors—should hold the right to adapt urban space in the two bloks.

This core emphasis on community control over urban space is part of why the movements cannot be dismissed as manifestations of Yugo-nostalgia. Urban planning under Yugoslavia was a technocratic process with limited opportunities for meaningful public engagement over urban space. While top-down structures of development under the former regime produced urban spaces that residents deemed more livable and humane than those produced under the current regime, they lacked the community-driven urban dynamic that protests sought to create. The fall of Yugoslavia gave way to significant threats to New Belgrade's urban commons, but, as interviewees explained, it also opened pathways for greater direct participation in these spaces.

Many of these pathways seemed to be opened, as one interviewee articulated, "out of sheer necessity, like the community has almost been forced to come to this point." This echoes Piletić's assertion that Belgrade's current politics of urban development have "rendered the urban scale more susceptible to contestation, as dominated social groups have sought out new outlets for countering an increasingly coercive and oppressive state apparatus" (Piletić, 2022, 297). Throughout interviews, residents rooted their movements in the prevailing sentiment that the political and urban landscape of New Belgrade had become fundamentally dysfunctional. Residents learned through firsthand experience that institutions in the city could not be trusted to facilitate urban development or manage urban space in an effective, humane, or even logical manner.

While expressions of political discontent were common throughout interviews, the protest movements were never discussed as having partisan political goals. In fact, residents repeatedly framed their protests as apolitical, voicing disdain toward politics as a whole. This gave way to a sense of contradiction in the accounts of interviewees, marked by frequent critiques of Vučić and SNS followed by assertions that the protest movements were apolitical. This trend echoes Kopf's observation of similar contradictions in the rhetoric of bike activists in New Belgrade. However, while Kopf interprets these assertions of apoliticism within political subject matter as an opportunity for citizens "to act politically without having to declare themselves political activists or their cause a political one," interviews with residents of Bloks 33 and 37 suggest different motivations (Kopf, 2015, 116).

This alternative understanding, in which residents hold an acute awareness of rampant politicization and corruption within Belgrade's built environment while maintaining local, apolitical goals, may not be inherently contradictory. While interviewees discussed politics when identifying the *causes* of the urban problems affecting their communities, they only mentioned local, community-level considerations when discussing the *goals* of their movements. Protests ceased once they successfully blocked the development of the two office buildings, seeking no partisan political concessions. In a society saturated with corruption and politicization, residents viewed their protests as efforts to assert the right to shape their own communities, which they believed should not have been political in the first place. While this may be understood as an inherently political act in a western context, the word “politics” holds a different cultural definition in Belgrade, carrying connotations of corruption and personal gain following decades of abuse by political leaders. Accordingly, interviewees expressed a rejection of politics and a desire to live unhindered by Serbia’s current political environment—as one resident articulated, to not “care what the last name of the president is.” Residents believed that the politicization of their local urban movements was harmful to their community-centered goals and resisted incorporation into political groups, clearly indicating that they were not driven simply by political agendas.

While the protests align with Pickvance’s discussion of urban movements “for the defense of housing and neighborhood,” or as some scholars may label, “NIMBY,” this framing is reductive for various reasons. First, the common understanding of NIMBY movements in the western context portrays them as socially regressive or rooted within the narrow interests of residents, often at the expense of marginalized communities. While many scholars express skepticism over urban movements that seek to block developments in residential neighborhoods, illustrated by Pickvance noting that even those that frame themselves as anticapitalist may do so “to preserve the status quo,” the movements in Bloks 33 and 37 were far from regressive (Pickvance, 1985, 39). In the context of Belgrade, where many residents lived under state socialism for years and now face an influx of market-driven developments, urban movements emerge in vastly different conditions than those in the western context.

The movements in Bloks 33 and 37 were not aimed against affordable housing efforts, but multinational corporations. They were struggles between residents and investors, centered on the fundamental tension between exchange value and use value in the urban commons of the two bloks, as articulated by Castells. While developers view the urban commons in Bloks 33 and 37 as vacant land ripe for investment and capital production, they serve a far greater purpose for the community members that use them every day. Open green space and communal facilities in the urban commons provide room for play for children, ample social opportunities for residents from all generations, protection from environmental hazards, and vital gathering points where neighbors can discuss pressing issues in their communities. Critiques concerning the inhumane nature of urban developments driven by capital accumulation throughout the city were common, with residents often speaking directly to this tension between exchange and use value.

Additionally, under Pickvance's framework, the movements in both bloks can be understood as extending beyond the "defense of housing and neighborhood" category. Pickvance identifies several subsets of urban movements, noting that multiple categories could apply to a single movement (Pickvance, 1985, 31). Among these were urban movements "for control and management," which Pickvance describes as efforts "for self-management of public housing schemes, for neighbourhood councils" (Pickvance, 1985, 39). While the protests in both bloks were largely concerned with blocking the development of the proposed office buildings, they emerged as part of a broader self-management framework, led by citizens associations. Thus, the anti-development movements can be understood as part of a sustained process of engagement, responsibility, and ownership over the urban commons. This process of self-management, rising out of a political and urban landscape that is increasingly misaligned with the interests of citizens, asserts that residents should possess the right to adapt their urban environments to their needs. It represents a far more aspirational and radical aim than simply halting the construction of two office buildings, one that transcends the narrow logic of NIMBY-ism.

Moving beyond these simplistic interpretations provides insights into the layered and complex reasons that citizens come together in defense of urban space. Accepting any one of these simplistic explanations would completely obscure the motivations articulated by residents and outlined throughout this study, misrepresenting the complex nature of urban movements. Moreover, solely thinking in terms of structural, systemic issues would obscure many of these circumstances and sentiments. While these findings are aligned with scholarly assertions that broader systemic forces create the conditions that trigger urban movements, they display a much greater emphasis on immediate spatial scale than is often afforded by many scholars. While numerous interviewees acknowledged that, as Marcuse articulates, many issues that drove residents to mobilize were rooted in “economic, social, political arenas,” spatial concerns certainly served as more than “an aggravation” (Marcuse, 2009, 195).

The motivations provided by residents are deeply grounded in the specific cultural and spatial context of New Belgrade, but even further, the specific context of life in the two bloks. While broken benches signify a lack of institutional support, first and foremost, they are broken benches—rendered unusable for elderly residents to sit and converse, or for parents to watch their children play. Interviewees expressed disapproval over contemporary urban developments throughout New Belgrade not for political reasons, but primarily because they imagined that daily life in those spaces would not be pleasant. While the loss of green space throughout New Belgrade was driven by authoritarian neoliberal investment policies, the access to sunlight, cooling effects, and opportunities for connection that were jeopardized by the loss of these spaces were of greatest concern to residents. These tangible and sensory experiences that shape life within neighborhoods were deeply emphasized among residents as reasons for protest. While residents were acutely aware of the array of political and economic forces shaping their immediate urban spaces, their movements were most concerned with addressing the specific manifestations of these issues in their communities.

VIII. Conclusion

Less than two months after the conclusion of this project's data collection period, many of the mounting tensions explored in this study came to a head. On November 1, 2024, a concrete awning on a train station in Serbia's second city, Novi Sad, collapsed and killed 15 commuters (Smeltzer, 2025, April 10). The collapse occurred only six months after the Serbian government, in conjunction with a Chinese construction conglomerate, initiated the train station's renovation as part of a broader modernization effort to create a high-speed rail between Belgrade and Budapest (Olterman, 2024, December 22). The renovation was highly publicized and politicized, with Vučić attending the modernized train station's unveiling and reporting to news outlets that "everything was done according to the highest standards" (De Launey, 2025, March 15). Prior to the renovation, Novi Sad's train station, completed in 1960, had remained structurally sound for decades (De Launey, 2025, March 15).

The collapse of Novi Sad's train station has triggered widespread political unrest across Serbia. The protests began as local vigils for the dead in Novi Sad, which multiplied into expressions of solidarity across the nation, before erupting into mass demonstrations in the country's capital. Protesters have deemed the train station collapse "not a tragedy, but a crime," demanding government accountability and increased transparency (Baletić and Stojanović, 2024, November 4). At first, the Serbian government withheld relevant documents and denied that the concrete canopy had been a part of the modernization project (Olterman, 2024, December 22).

As protests persisted and crowdsourced evidence of the canopy's reconstruction emerged, multiple top officials, including Serbia's trade minister and prime minister, have stepped down (Gec, 2025, January 28). Among them was Goran Vesić, Serbia's construction minister, and the primary government official with whom residents of Blok 37 engaged during their protest movement (Gec, 2025, January 28).

The recent protests have brought global attention to Serbia's political climate and revealed the intimate relationship between government corruption and the built environment in the country. They were triggered by a core tension outlined throughout this study—between foreign investors and the Serbian government, on one side, and the public interest of the Serbian people on the other. In Bloks 33 and 37, these tensions became exceedingly apparent to residents when, after years of being overlooked by municipal institutions and witnessing sweeping market-driven changes in their surroundings, residents saw pieces of their own neighborhoods sold to investors planning large office developments. As a result, residents, who had already begun self-management practices over their neighborhoods, asserted their right to control their urban environments. Residents had long been aware of the political and urban issues plaguing their society, but once these issues began to encroach into their backyards and threaten their daily life at an intimate scale, many felt they had no choice but to resist. The local anti-development movements in Bloks 33 and 37, and the mass anti-corruption movements overtaking Serbia, reveal the ways that citizens negotiate urban space—and urban life—in cities and societies that seem to be increasingly developed without them in mind.

While the motivations outlined by residents in Bloks 33 and 37 provide insights into the reasons that communities rise to defend their urban environments and contest urban space in Belgrade, the findings presented in this study are specific to the two communities it examined.

Urban movements are distinct, deeply mediated by the specific cultural, economic, and political context—but also immediate spatial scale—in which they arise. This emphasis on immediate spatial scale stands out as a key takeaway from this study, observing an acute understanding among residents of the systemic forces that give rise to spatial issues, but also a more concerted focus on immediate spatial issues than is often represented in literature. This study only explored two urban movements in the city, arising from closely parallel circumstances in two closely comparable communities. As the city of Belgrade erupts in protest following the Novi Sad train station collapse, and political and urban tensions continue to mount, it is vital that additional urban movements in the city be explored in literature. Additionally, as Yugoslavia collapsed three decades ago, it is vital that post-socialist transition in the city be documented. Doing so not only captures a critical period of urban, political, and social transformation, but also contributes to an understanding of the ways that citizens continue to adapt, resist, and reimagine their local urban environments amid sweeping change and systemic instability.

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