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# **The Art of New Class Geography of the City - Culture-guided urban regeneration serving the *modernization* of the periphery**

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The capitalization of cultural resources has become a central issue of post-industrial urban rule, and in capitalist societies art and culture has become an important instrument in the processes of creating new spatial and geopolitical constellations. Creative armies of designers and artists are employed as a resource for cosmetic renovations of cities, production of simulacra of authenticity and symbolic capital in the process of creating a new class geography of the city. In the context of Serbia, such a structural connection between culture, art and capital is practiced within the framework of the project of *cultivating* the capitalist periphery through the practices of culture-guided urban regenerations wherein the art establishment, cultural and creative industries and social-entrepreneurial art take part. In the local context, culture-guided urban regenerations are most often presented uncritically, as an always positive contribution of the processes of city *development*, the shaping of its *identity*, its *modernization* and *progress*, both in public narratives and in the academic discourse. Such a discursive practice acts as an accomplice to the attempts at smoothly carrying out aggressive processes of transformation in cities that merely continue to produce the unendurable state of enormous social disparities, the degradation of workers’ and social rights and the environment, as well as the all-round discrimination of all those who do not belong to the desirable higher classes, ethnicity, race or sexual orientation. Understanding this state of affairs, as well as the role of culture and art, in a situation of constant production of manipulative images and false promises, turns out to be an important perspective towards articulating possible future forms of struggle and creation of "new territories".[[1]](#footnote-1)

## **Urban regenerations and the role of art and culture**

In capitalist societies, the connection between art and urban regenerations is established as a model of producing a new class geography of the city.[[2]](#footnote-2) Such connections have been made possible through the interpenetration of art and the entire social and cultural production mechanism under the conditions of the cultural colonization of life effected by capitalist production.[[3]](#footnote-3) Under these circumstances, art has become a resource and one of the important places when it comes to constructing power. The historical genesis of the connection between art and the transformation of cities is linked to the context of the USA and the 1970’s, when art created the preconditions for the increase of real estate prices in reindustrialized cities[[4]](#footnote-4) and thus for a new class recomposition of the city. In the districts where artists came to live, art studios and art galleries proliferated, and their symbolic capital increased the level of the rent, so that poorer inhabitants of such districts tended to move out, and were eventually followed by the artists themselves, who were replaced by richer city dwellers. Today, the processes of class recomposition of cities have been generalized at the global level, and their mechanisms include manipulating *collective symbolic capital* as a new apparatus of capitalist accumulation.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In the local context, the establishment of connections between art and urban regenerations became possible with the forcible transformation of socialist Yugoslavia after the 1990’s and the establishment of new capitalist relations. This change was accompanied by the wartime destruction of cities – urbicide, the transformation of ownership structure from social to private ownership, the switch from self-management relations to capitalist-exploitative relations, the development of corruption mechanisms and the absence of regulations when it came to the acquisition of capital, deindustrialization, the pauperization of the population, as well as the destruction of the existing mechanisms for work in the domain of culture and art, and the implementation of a new art/entrepreneurial model. In the era of socialism, the development of cities was based on central urban planning, and the state was the chief investor and planner of the new modern socialist city, aimed at fulfilling the needs of the new socialist man. Today, the new initiators of *urban development* are private and corporate investors, acting in cooperation with the state, city administration, global financial institutions, civil society organizations, and also with artists and workers in the sphere of culture.[[6]](#footnote-6) This kind of *investor planning* is characterized by a continual search for a profitable terrain where a surplus of value can be achieved, which is controlled by particular elites. In such a situation, urban regenerations no longer represent merely an act of repairing the neglected parts of the city, but most often constitute a radical act of pulling down the existing buildings and building new ones. Such processes are no longer a part of systematic thinking about cities. The idea and role of a general urban planning design almost matter not at all, for an investor who purchases a cheap plot of land, having previously deliberately lowered the building costs, will not have any great difficulties when it comes to changing the regulated function of that particular area. In this way, the city stops being a space where one strives to establish at least a nominal equality of its inhabitants, and becomes a space of drastic social and economic inequalities and tensions. The development of cities is promoted through new optimistic visions promising benefits for all. This urban optimism simultaneously hides the process of the creation of new class topography of the city, and a revengeful attitude towards those inhabitants who are not among the privileged ones.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Art and culture become an instrument and accomplices in such processes through the inclusion of creativity as applied imagination in the processes of producing optimistic urban visions. That is what metanarratives about creative industries, creative cities and creative economy are all about.[[8]](#footnote-8) In these narratives, culture and art are reduced to their economic function in the project of attracting investors, tourism and stimulating the economy through a reduction of labor costs and social contributions, giving a boost to the entrepreneurial model of work, privatization of culture and maximizing profit. On the one hand, it is an urban mantra, and on the other, it constitutes a social-economic and cultural policy. What is at work here is a complex mechanism that absorbs all the aspects of life in exercising control and exploitation in cities. In the local context and in other so-called transitional societies, the introduction of the cultural industry and the implementation of ideas about creative economy and creative city are viewed as an act of modernizing a *backward* society. The insufficient presence of such practices is explained by the incompatibility of the administrative, legal, banking and business systems in post-socialist countries with those of "advanced economies".[[9]](#footnote-9) In countries of South-Eastern Europe, this *modernization model* is implemented through state policies, the policies of cultural institutions and missions such as the British Council or the Goethe Institute, and also as a business strategy of private investors. Thus big cities in Serbia are regenerated through European and local *policies* about creative cities, such as the *Belgradisation of Belgrade* project and Belgrade’s bid for a European Capital of Culture in 2020,[[10]](#footnote-10) as well as the latest EU cultural project entitled *Creative Europe*. Also, regeneration is carried out by organizing cultural, entertainment or sports events such as the Universiade or the Eurovision Song Contest, and through individual projects promoting cultural industries and art as a generator of urban regeneration processes[[11]](#footnote-11) and a guarantor of social inclusion in their implementation. Such practices are aimed at creating an image of the city as an innovative, exciting, creative and safe place for living, playing and consumption, promising benefits for all, whereas what is, in fact, being planned is a city of walled fortresses wherein the elite and its way of life are to be reproduced.

In the local context, since the 1990’s culture and art have become an instrument of *progressive* *EU* *policies* aimed at creating an environment conducive to effecting a transition to neoliberal capitalism by way of carrying out the so-called *democratization of culture*, the proclaimed goal of which was to free art and culture from the patronage of the state and the Party, as a system which, allegedly, *a priori* jeopardizes the basic human rights and the potential for creative expression of individuals. What was produced in this process was a new entrepreneurial subject of the artist, one no longer protected through public financing but struggling for him/herself on the market.[[12]](#footnote-12) In this way, art was used as a convenient tool for *cultivating* people on the capitalist periphery. This neo-colonial process has not been finished yet. Today, it is reproduced in the sphere of the implementation of cultural industries and social-entrepreneurial art used in the project of a *new modernization* of local society, which is viewed as backward, and is particularly in evidence in the cases of instrumentalisation of art in the processes of urban regenerations. A new profile of the artist that is promoted in this way is the entrepreneurial artist – artepreneur[[13]](#footnote-13) who resolves problems in a non-linear and creative manner. He/she is a precarious worker who manages his/her human capital through self-employment from one project to another. The figure of artepreneur assumes a particularly important role in times of crisis, when it emerges, on the one hand, as a victim of the macroeconomic situation, and on the other, as a force that brings salvation.[[14]](#footnote-14) In contemporary art, the very idea of emancipation and activism has become an issue related to entrepreneurship, and thereby, being placed in the service of capital, normalized to a great extent.

## **Art-guided urban regenerations in Belgrade**

In Serbia, culture- and art-guided urban regenerations have been promoted over the course of the past decade, and the realization of such ideas has only intensified in the last few years. We find examples of practices of culture- and art-guided urban regenerations in Serbia in big cities, mostly in Belgrade, where the political, economic and cultural life of Serbia is centralized. The epicenter of such activities is in the area of Belgrade’s riverbanks, which is currently the most exclusive and profitable location in Belgrade. There has been interest in the areas on the banks of the Sava and Danube rivers for a number of years, and various projects prepared for that part of the city have reflected the political, economic and cultural climate in the newly established state. In early 1990, the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts called an internal tender, within the framework of which the project “Water City” emerged, and in 1996 the Socialist Party of Serbia commissioned the project *Europolis*.[[15]](#footnote-15) These projects have never been realized, but that part of the city has never stopped attracting the attention of new investors and the political parties in power, most often during the course of pre-election campaigns.

The interest shown in Belgrade’s riverbanks is not accidental and does not concern only the attractiveness of the actual location. It also has to do with the systematic work aimed at creating a new identity for Serbia and Belgrade, in a place which, during the pre-socialist period, in the first half of the 19th century, was projected to become the economic centre of the city.[[16]](#footnote-16) It was there that the history of capitalist Serbia was made, aiming to establish a continuity through a systematic erasure of the socialist history and the industrial development of this area. What is worrying about this is the fact that this old Belgrade was a city of enormous class differences, where more than 80% of the population lived in extreme poverty.[[17]](#footnote-17) The riverbanks are also a place of memory engineering, connected with the recent history of the wars fought in the 1990’s on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, which represents a continuation of the processes of historical revisionism in Serbia, without which a projection of Belgrade as a new European-Serbian urban centre for the higher classes is not possible. One of the first great state projects of the regeneration of that area was the renovation of Sava Square[[18]](#footnote-18), which began by the expulsion of female sexual workers from the area, whose place was taken over by a new revisionist monument to all war victims and defenders of the homeland in the 1990-1999 period, thus equating victims and executioners, and continuing the tradition of forgetting the fact that the role of Serbia in those wars was that of an aggressor.

Today, that profitable area has become a battlefield where two megaprojects vie for power: the project launched by the privately owned company the Port of Belgrade entitled *Water City*, and the project initiated by the Government of Serbia entitled *Belgrade on Water*. *Water City* is an elite settlement occupying an area of 96 hectares of land, whereas *Belgrade on Water* occupies a considerably larger area of around 950 hectares of land, for which, apart from housing, the building of business parks and a new port for yachts are also planned.[[19]](#footnote-19) By planning the processes of urban regenerations and involving art and cultural industries in the local strategic plans, the new creators of optimistic visions wish to make Belgrade a part of the world market of cities and make up for the decline of economic activities in the city. The main social trump card of these projects is their promise to resolve the problem of unemployment by creating new jobs in the sphere of construction work during the realization phase, in the service sector of the new walled communities, and also in the sector of cultural industries, whereas what is happening in practice is a flexibilisation and deregulation of the procedures for investors and undertakers, coupled with a degradation of workers’ rights, which means an increasingly frantic exploitation of all those engaged on the projects. Experienced engineers of urban transformations, such as renowned world architects, as well as mayors of cities wherein such processes have been practiced, have already been involved in the initiation of urban regeneration processes through the projects *Water City* and *Belgrade on Water*. Thus the main designer of the *Water City* project is the studio of Daniel Libeskind, whose biography includes numerous projects through which similar processes have been initiated in other cities, and the main consultant of the *Belgrade on Water* project is the well-known New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani, whose brutal class and racist cleansing of New York in the 1990’s is well known.[[20]](#footnote-20) The initial phases of both projects involve the use of art and cultural industries, which play the key role in the preparatory phase of changing the function of the area in question. They are a part of the marketing strategy for promoting its transformation, as well as a *guarantor of* *the social awareness* of new spatial transformations. These involve the projects *Soho in Belgrade*, *Mixer* and *Urban Incubator*.

The project “Soho in Belgrade” was initiated by the Port of Belgrade company in 2012, as part of preparations for the realization of *Water City*. The project presupposed enabling artists with well-established reputations to use studios, free of charge, in one of the warehouses inside the port, located in Dunavska Street, which formerly belonged to the *Srbijateks* company. The aim of this joint initiative of tycoons and the art establishment was the creation of the so-called *Soho effect*. Over the past several years, this term has become a synonym for urban regenerations in a number of instances involving the relocation of art studios and artists’ flats to derelict part of cities in the hope of producing additional symbolic capital and thus initiating the accumulation of capital. In the case of the project *Soho in Belgrade*, the bringing of artists to the warehouse had another function in addition to the aforementioned one, namely, participation in the process of changing the purpose of the space where the port operator is located.[[21]](#footnote-21) What this is all about are the efforts of the *Worldfin* company to close down the port through a drastic reduction of its scope of business operations, and to effect a symbolic and legal change of its function, so as to be able to build a new luxury settlement on that plot of land. From the very start, the new owner wanted to hide the fact that, according to the general urban plan, that plot of land was designated to have an economic function, and that its privatization involved a port operator only. Through corruptive arrangements between political parties and tycoons, a change of the general urban plan was brought about, so that the function of that part of the city was changed from an economic one to a housing-commercial one. Further room for maneuvering was provided by the problem that arose over entering the city in the registry book as the owner of the said plot of land. To put it more precisely, the new owners made use of the fact that the city failed to observe the deadline and submitted incomplete documentation, and proclaimed that plot of land to be theirs. Apart from the change of the general urban plan, manipulation over entering the owner in the registry book and the reduction of the operative capacity of the port operator, art was also involved in the process of changing the function of that plot of land through the project *Soho in Belgrade*.

That artists are activists operating in the service of local tycoons is evidenced by the situation that arose after the Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy, acting upon a request submitted by the Anti-Corruption Council, passed a decision on evicting artists from the Port of Belgrade on account of irregularities in the procedure of allocating studios to artists. Artists from Soho mobilized themselves in defense of the owner of the Port, whom they presented to the public as a new patron of the arts who, as opposed to the state, provided artists with a *roof above their heads.[[22]](#footnote-22)* It is a fact that the working conditions of artists, after the degradation of the socialist-era mechanisms that enabled artists to obtain a studio, had become almost unendurable. However, the artists in question here are not a part of the class of artists who do need help. These are successful artists-entrepreneurs, who are favorably positioned on the world art market, most of whom do have their own working space, whereas some of them do not live in Belgrade. These *Sohoite* artists constitute the embodiment of everything that the new art establishment represents today. These are positions that are defended through a return to aestheticism and individual expression as the main criterion of art. Within the framework of this kind of positioning, opportunism and commercialism become desirable characteristics and a generator of success. What is at work here is a reactionary artistic practice that is articulated in opposition to the domain of critical and contextual practices, with which it enters into an open conflict through its insistence on being separated from sociability as the measure of true art. In Belgrade’s Soho, studios were allocated to select elite artists, without anything in the nature of a public competition, which resulted in the exclusion of those artists who are engaged in non-market-oriented artistic practices, who are dependent on public financing and who do need a working space. This resulted in an unbridgeable gap on the art scene, which became visible to the public when the *Sohoites* organized a panel discussion at the Kolarac People’s University, in the course of which public interest was defended by a group of artists presenting themselves as *The World Communal Heritage*. [[23]](#footnote-23)

To the present day, the artists in the service of tycoons have not been evicted from the studios in the *Srbijateks* warehouse, for the commission that is supposed to carry out their eviction has never inspected the site, which, once again, serves to hide the corruptive mechanisms in the state. The epilogue of the story about the Port of Belgrade commenced in August 2013, through the initiation of the bankruptcy procedure. Parallel with this, the Government of Serbia, through the representatives of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, embarked on a new campaign of promoting the project *Belgrade on Water*.[[24]](#footnote-24) It is important to point out that a part of the project *Belgrade on Water* is being planned on the plot of land held by the operator of the Port of Belgrade, which sheds more light on why the bankruptcy procedure is being initiated right now, despite the efforts of the Anti-Corruption Agency of many years to point out the irregularities surrounding the privatization and operation of that company. In this case, it would appear that the more powerful bureaucrats have used the tycoons to close down the port operations in order to take over a part of the land already prepared for this purpose.

Even though the project *Belgrade on Water* was presented to the public only midway through 2013, systematic preparations for its implementation have been carried out for several years, by engaging art and cultural industries in the district which, by means of the fabrication of tradition, has become known again under the name of Savamala. The model of regeneration being implemented in Savamala today is based on an attempt to introduce a creative economy through creative industries, within the framework of a project of increasing the symbolic capital of the place and resolving the problem of economic deficit through *creativisation* and artistic-communal-participatory-social entrepreneurship with a view to normalizing the situation of social dissatisfaction, as well as a new legitimization of the history of the place. These processes were not initiated by the city authorities but by *independent* cultural initiatives, in cooperation with business groups and with the German cultural mission – the Goethe Institute. Still, the city and municipal authorities support the initiatives undertaken through budget financing, allowing the use of space owned by the city, and through affirmation by means of projects of establishing creative economies and producing a creative city such as *Belgrade 2020*, which accompanies Belgrade’s bid for a European Capital of Culture.

The introduction and affirmation of cultural industries and stimulation of the development of entrepreneurial creative economy as a form of social activism and struggle for the revitalization of Savamala is a task set by the project *Mixer*, which includes the eponymous festival and the newly opened venue *Mixer House*.[[25]](#footnote-25) Even though *Mixer* proposes a model of partnership with the business sector, as a practice of the *de-etatization* of the creative sector and its *liberation*, in a parallel development public budget funds are invested in the project through a number of public companies and funds, which clearly shows a switch in the domain of public financing – from support given to critical practices to support given to commercial initiatives. The idea of *Mixer* is to turn Belgrade into a Balkan creative centre and incubator for young creative talents by developing the concept of the creative city with a nucleus in the industrial zone that is losing its function. What is at work here are efforts aimed at the accumulation of symbolic capital in Savamala through the promotion of established creators and entertainers, and through a frantic exploitation of all those who are not privileged. The ethics of entrepreneurial inventiveness is used to hide the issue of the precarious work conditions of those who do not belong to the top echelon, their enforced volunteer work and the imposition of hierarchical models, and often the investment of the personal funds of young artists during the realization of works that are featured in the programmes of “Mixer”. On the other hand, “Mixer” is also a form of incubator for producing an army of creative workers who are supposed to set the creative industry in motion, as a sphere that is broader than cultural industries, in the domain of a new urbanization of Belgrade. *Mixer* is deeply involved in the processes of the so-called "creative destruction *[[26]](#footnote-26)* through initiating new mechanisms for the accumulation of capital in the course of paving the way for the arrival of investors and the building of *Water City*. It is one of those entrepreneurial tactics that glorifies the successes of individuals and neglects the failures of the majority, and instead of new social networks, it offers alienated consumerism. What is created in this way is a false promise of creating new *authentic* relations, paving the way for capitalist uniformity at all levels.

Parallel with *Mixer*, the processes of urban regenerations in Savamala are also initiated using a somewhat different method, through the practices of communal-participative-social art, as a subgroup of the creative sector, which are realized within the framework of the Goethe Institute project *Urban Incubator*.[[27]](#footnote-27) *Urban Incubator* was presented as a participative model of urban development, whose aim is to improve the quality of life of the local population and to *democratize* the process of decision-making by means of a higher degree of involvement of the inhabitants of the district. The project is a short-term one, will last one year, and during that time it should accumulate symbolic capital and increase the market value of the district, following which the artists will withdraw, leaving room for the coming of investors and the development of tourism. *Urban Incubator* represents an attempt at implementing the *Western model* of culture-guided urban regeneration in the local context (of the eleven projects that were accepted in the competition, only two were initiated by local artists and architects), and has been recognized as such by the local city authorities and the municipality of Savski venac – as having potential for the *development* of Savamala.

Realizing projects within the framework of *Urban Incubator*, the artists engaged assume the competencies of urban planners, social workers, ethnographers and researchers, and pass themselves off as experts when it comes to reinventing the space of Savamala through interventions in public space, collecting personal stories from the community, participative design, *crowdsourcing*, designing small businesses and micro factories with a view to enlivening the area and engaging people from the local community in order to establish a continuity with the entrepreneurial history of the place. Such an artistic practice represents a specific architecture of the community that includes economic exchange, civic life, public property and the establishment of various new connections. What is evident about this project is that it privileges participative art as a tool for cosmetic interventions aimed at resolving the systemic problems of Savamala, or even resorting to enforced participation or imposing parameters of art projects onto the inhabitants of Savamala with the intention of "beautifying their living space and increasing the market value of their flats".[[28]](#footnote-28) This coupling points to the ideological subtext of participative-social-entrepreneurial artistic practices, which can be defined as a *culturalisation of politics* or a dislocation of discourse on complex and provocative social and political topics into the sphere of culture and art.[[29]](#footnote-29) “Urban Incubator” is a symptom of social architects’ *paranoid fear* of social unrest, and they engage art as a *dependable means* of pacifying the accumulated dissatisfaction of the inhabitants of Savamala, offering them a promise of a better life, all the while, in fact, paving the way for the arrival of real estate traders and opening more and more nightclubs and cafés.

## **Conclusion**

The transformation of the existing socialist structures and mechanisms of cultural and artistic production, as well as the abandonment of certain projects of sociability, the diminishing and increasingly non-transparent public financing and the devastation of cultural institutions, as well as giving in to the operation of the market forces, have created conditions that are unendurable for the vast majority of artists and workers in the sphere of culture. Seemingly paradoxically, the public and investors give their support to the art establishment and initiatives that promote *apolitical* entrepreneurial artistic-designer practices. The creation of such conditions has produced a fertile soil for manipulation and instrumentalisation of art by the state and its powerful bureaucrats, tycoons and their firms and corporations, the cultural missions of national European states and the broader EU policies, as well as local cultural entrepreneurs who believe that they are on their way to becoming capitalists.

As has been shown in the local context and in countries of the periphery, what is at work here is practicing certain creative-economic models of regeneration of cities in the name of the *modernization* and *democratization* of local society and its economy, within the framework of which are intertwined *national and neo-colonial modernization*, which act as accomplices in the process of producing the spaces of capitalist periphery. What this is about is the implementation of new neoliberal regimes of producing cities and creating conditions for producing a new class geography in spaces where there are still populations of different social and economic status living together, and, naturally enough, the production of new mechanisms of flexibilisation of work and legislation in a project wherein the local environment continues to be produced as a resource for *the developed world*, and which is kept under control by means of carefully measured loans which create a condition of *debt slavery*. Through the use of art, culture and the cultural industry, *Western models* of urban regenerations are implemented, the intention being to produce a quick effect of changing the function of the given space, increasing its symbolic capital, producing a new *identity* of the city, introducing new forms of capitalist economy, as well as normalizing potential social conflicts.

Still, despite their above-mentioned instrumental function in the processes of reshaping cities, art, creativity and culture can also represent significant factors of the destabilization of such *smooth* processes of capital-guided urban transformation, and can participate in producing a city based on different and more egalitarian relations, outside the proven exploitative relations of power and division of labor. For them to be established as such, it is necessary, to begin with, to articulate a radical class critique of the (newly established) capitalist relations in formerly socialist cities in Serbia, as well as a critique of the use of art and culture, and also to be engaged in continual theoretical-activistic-political work on producing different relations, which are anxiously articulated today through certain local practices in a state of *insobriety* produced by the social transformation and the new rules of the game wherein (artistic and cultural) activism becomes an instrument of capital.

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