New Belgrade: from abstract to personal

Nueva Belgrado: de lo abstracto a lo personal

Jelena Prokopljevic

Arquitecta jelena_pro@yahoo.com

Abstract. The paper forms part of the author's PhD research, carried out between 2001 and 2006 at the Polytechnic University of Catalonia Barcelona, titled "Architecture, Ideology and representation. Analysis of projects for New Belgrade 1947-1959". It addresses the issue of the role of the architectural project in the context of changing ideologies as a means of understanding of complex relations between architecture, dominant discourse, structures of power and the social consequences of the large scale urban interventions. The research focuses on different phases of development of the central and initially most representative part of New Belgrade, the intended new capital of the freshly created Socialist Yugoslavia, concluding with the changes of the early 2000 that had put into focus the values of the new town as well as the weaknesses of the modernist concept in the socialist context that has been it's original base. As means of conclusion, the text recalls the theories of Lefebvre and Lynch that stress the importance of the reappropriation of the architecture and urban spaces by its users, as well as the importance of social consensus in projects that involve meaningful urban zones.

Palabras clave. Socialist architecture; modernism; ideology; new city; urban planning; abstractions; appropriation.

Resumen. El artículo forma parte de la investigación doctoral de la autora, desarrollada entre 2001 y 2006 en la Universidad Politécnica de Cataluña, en Barcelona, con el título "Arquitectura, ideología y representación. Análisis de los proyectos de Nueva Belgrado 1947-1959. Trata la cuestión del papel de los proyectos arquitectónicos en el contexto del cambio de ideologías, como un medio de comprender las complejas relaciones entre la arquitectura, el discurso dominante las estructuras de poder y las consecuencias sociales de las intervenciones urbanas a gran escala. La investigación se centra en las diferentes fases del desarrollo de la parte central, e inicialmente más representativa de Nueva Belgrado, la pretendida nueva capital de la recién creada Yugoslavia socialista, concluyendo con los cambios de los primeros 2000 que pusieron el acento en los valores de la nueva ciudad, así como en las debilidades del concepto modernista en el contexto socialista, el cual fue su base original. Como conclusión, el texto sugiere las teorías de Lefebvre y Lyncs que enfatizan la importancia de la re-apropiación de la arquitectura y los espacios urbanos por parte de sus usuarios, así como la importancia del consenso social en los proyectos que implican a zonas urbanas llenas de significación.

Keywords. Arquitectura socialista; modernism; ideología; nueva ciudad; planificación urbana; abstracciones; apropiación.

Political abstraction

The first phase of the development of this part of state capital, comprehended between 1947 and 1950, was characterized by the powerful presence of the social change produced during the revolution; therefore it bears the marc of the political discourse and the necessity to represent the "new society" by the new construction. New Belgrade was conceived as the new settlement for the federal administration of the new state formed in the socialist revolution (of 1941-1944). It was to imagine a new capital city, not only as a functional one in relation to its content, but also as a city that could represent all the values promoted by the new social elite. These values, used in consolidation of a new "ourselves" (Vale, 1992: 47-52), were generally resumed in two concepts: of equality and of modernity, in reference to the relations between ethnic groups, social classes or other social groups; to the relations of property and production; to the means of production and its efficiency, etc. These concepts were the principal source of the imaginary of the new socialist state, and were to be reflected in the urban and architectonic form of its new capital -concentrating the state's projection towards the future. Other concept that was also to be read in the form of New Belgrade was related to the recent revolutionary past: the image of the profound social reinvention, traduced to the image of historical cut -a new beginning.



New Belgrade in 1946

The election of terrain for the new capital was related to practical and representational requisites: it was chosen a swamp between the existing cities, barely solid for the annual inundations and scarcely populated (a fact that facilitated the expropriation of the lands). The foundation of the new capital took place on April the 11th of 1948, after two years of intense labour: for one hand of projects -to determinate its general guidelines, and for the other -of construction— to consolidate the terrain and to facilitate transport connections. The enormous effort of construction of the proper building soil was realized with the popular mobilization without precedents: during the three seasons between 1947 and 1949, in this works participated more than 150.000 persons as members of work brigades -formed mostly by young voluntaries from all over the country. In the texts published in the epoch (mostly newspapers and reviews), these works were the best representation of the "victory of socialism", and of the "brotherhood and unity" of the peoples of Yugoslavia. The leader of this great victory was the Communist Party, and its personification, marshal Tito. Therefore, the idea to build the city was attributed to Tito himself; the importance of its materialization was elevated to the maximum level of state interest, as it was included, in 1947, in the first 5years plan of state's economic development.

The new man –emerged from the revolution– was to confront the nature and conquest it, in order to inscribe in it his meaningful habitat, and also to construct himself as a social-historical actor. This rationalist challenge, according to the Marxist-Leninist science, simultaneously meant the confrontation of this new historical subject to its own antecedents. The confrontation and the reinvention supposed the selection of meaningful images and existences, in this case in favour of the non-existence, and the negative image. The non-existence practically meant erasing the existing construction and displacing the few existing urban referents in New Belgrade, while the negative image referred to the historical city of Belgrade, to the old urban plan of the capital (of 1923, that also included the expansion towards New Belgrade with its historicist forms and generally to the totality of social order previous to the civil war. Meanwhile the new was being developed; the populist discourse about the old was also being configured. The base for this new discourse –the discourse of the future- was criticism, above all the political criticism of the past; chances of continuity and dialog, at the level of symbolism were neither possible nor desirable.

All these relations about the social change and the need to represent it physically denote the importance of ideology (in this case the communist one) as a vehicle and as a generator of significance in the conception of a new urban centre. Its role corresponds to three social functions that ideology generally fulfills: of integration (of the collective around the public works of construction), of legitimation (of the new political and social order), of deformation (of the imaginary about the past and the tradition).

The beginning of the architectonic activity in the projects for New Belgrade, date back to January the 1st 1947, when the first public competition (after the revolution) was convoked. The competition included three representative buildings: the palace for the Federal Government, the building for the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and for a "representative hotel" for the visits of the highest institutional level –all of them located in New Belgrade that officially still didn't exist. The level of these parallel competitions was strictly national; the possibilities of participation were open for non professionals and members of the jury, in order to obtain the best ideas.

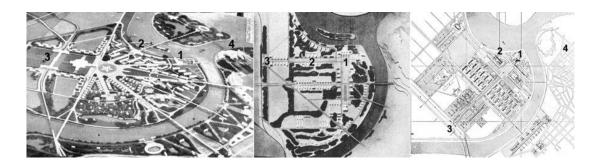
The urbanistic base for these competitions was a plan suggested by the architect Nikola Dobrovi? (head of the Institute for Urbanism of Serbia) in 1946. Three points of the urban landscape were initially fixed by this sketch: the Government building and the seat of the Communist Party —as symbols of the new political era- and the train station —as the symbol of the economic progress. Organization and the spatial implications of these points were to be object of urbanistic proposals that accompanied projects for both of the most important buildings in the new city.

New Belgrade developed in the projects of 1947 and 1948, contained the following urban elements (with a particular sense of urban zoning): 1) the state centre; 2) administration and diplomatic zone; 3) traffic and train connections; 4) plazas and itineraries for mass manifestations; 5) green zones and river banks; 6) residential zone; 7) light industry. The emphasis was posed on the public space that was dimensioned for tens of thousands of people, and on the state representation –the Government building was understood as the generator of the urban organization, while the Party building was to define the city's skyline. The predominance of public space over the private one was the star symbol of the new state that had abolished the private property; in the urban environment, the private sphere was reduced to housing, while the propriety over the building soil was municipal. Large squares projected in New Belgrade denoted this characteristic of the new system. On the other hand, development of the industry inside the capital city (despite of lack of resources), had the meaning of economical autonomy, in regard to the exterior and in regard to the rest of Yugoslav republics. The accumulation of industry and of "proletarian mass" –carrier of social progress– in the capital, was another distinctive of the new order.

The urbanistic proposals presented in the architectonic competitions for emblematic buildings, apart from the location of each building, contained a proposal for the organization of the centre. Unlike the architectural projects, the urbanistic ones didn't have an official importance: these projects were understood as ideas for the future development of the general urban plan of the metropolitan area of Belgrade. In the same way as the

station 4. Centre of old Belgrade

architectural proposals, especially for the government and for the party building, explored the possibilities of formulating a new representative language (i.e. modern, national, innovative and monumental), the projects of the urban center opened a parallel debate.



Projects for New Belgrade of 1947, architects: 1. Nikola Dobrović, Institute for Urbanism of Serbia; 2. Macura, Kortus, Anagnosti, Ilić; 3. Edvard Ravnikar, Technical Faculty, Ljubljana Reference points: 1. Building for the Communist Party Central Comity 2. Federal Government building 3. Train

We have selected three projects that resume and illustrate these initial conceptual and formal quests of Yugoslav urban planners. The form that the city centre, extended up to 1.300ha, was to adopt, was debated between interpretations of garden city (1) and radiant city (3); proposals that intended to include both conceptions in a single plan, using formal resources of lineal city (2) were also presented.

Respecting the three referent points of its organization —the train station, the seat of the Government and the Party building— the projects varied the following parameters that defined public space: its extension, complexity, centrality and orientation. Public space was mainly comprehended in traditional sense, as an extension of the representative building into a plaza and a processional route. With the idea of connecting the principal buildings, public plazas could become up to 2km long. We should remember that the historical centre of Belgrade has just a few planned squares, and none of them surpasses dimensions of 200x200m. The use of the historic public spaces is spontaneous: it depends on identity, structure and meaning (Lynch, 1998: 17-19); it looks for a significant referent —personal or general (move-find), for an intimate space (stay), and for a visual aperture (contemplate). The drastic change of the scale of public plazas in New Belgrade meant also a change of their significance, basically via variation of use from individual to multitudinous and from spontaneous to organized and controlled. With this requirement is also related the intent of simplifying the form of public spaces, to reduce their multiplicity or to eliminate the possibility of their structuring in a net.

In their relation with the centre of Belgrade, these proposals have foreseen a mayor grade of spatial independence, already assured by the width of the rivers Sava and Danube (about 300m at the point of confluence). New Belgrade was not projected at the river banks, although they are still the city's mayor natural and visual attractive; it was separated from

them by the "security belt" of 150m wide. In consequence, starting with these initial projects, New Belgrade was the city within a city in which it participated only punctually or functionally.

April the 11th 1948, known as the foundation day of the city of New Belgrade, actually corresponds to the beginning of construction of the visible part of one of its emblems – of the seat for the Federal Government of Yugoslavia. By the end of 1949 was concluded the concrete structure of this building, with the largest ground floor extension in whole Belgrade –25.000m2. In spite of the progress, in the second half of 1948, the volume of works in New Belgrade started to decrease rapidly. The resolution of the Soviet Inform-buro, of June of 1948 qualified the Yugoslav political elite as nationalist and revisionist; as a result, the state was expulsed from the sphere of Soviet interests and all the economical exchange was blocked. During the decade of 1950's, Yugoslavia went through an economic crisis that required restructuring of some of the important government investments of the first 5-years plan. Therefore, the construction of 400ha of federal administration in 1.300ha of New Belgrade was understood as hardly viable.

The (unexpected) changes of the political course, and most of all, budget cuttings had initiated a series of projects changing the initial direction of urban ordination. The surface planned for state administration buildings was gradually being reduced in order to gain space for social housing, and resolve the housing crisis that reigned in Belgrade since the War had finished. The city, rhetorically presented as "the city of all and for all", was starting to be exactly that: at the level of projects, the multitude of variations produced dissolution of an architect-author figure of its urban plan.

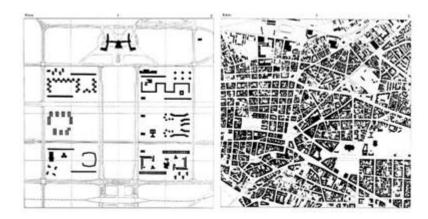
Architectonic abstraction

We have called the second phase of evolution of New Belgrade as "architectonic abstraction" in reference to the predominant use of architectural and urbanistic procedures in development of urban plans between fifties and seventies. Using the scientific methods to determinate volumes, sections, services and fluxes, this phase produced a city equally separated from the inherited manners to perceive and use the urban space. 1950 was in some sense a new beginning for the new city: the general urban plan for Belgrade was approved, including the extension of the city to the left bank of the Sava (New Belgrade). The plan defined the principal connections at the metropolitan level of this new institutional centre. In reference to the previous plans and projects (of the forties), the general plan increased the residential zone, from 500 to 700ha; this quantity was to augment even more in the regulation and detailed plans of different parts of New Belgrade.

The same year, in Dubrovnik, took place the first conference of Yugoslav architects and urban planners, which ended the local debate about principles of the new socialist architecture. In the conclusions of this conference, the participants were decidedly in favour to abandon the cultural directive from Stalinist Russia: "national in the form, socialist in the content", that was barely definable in the Yugoslav multicultural milieu. To the contrary of this

mainly symbolic approach, Yugoslav architects posed for scientific and interdisciplinary method in the conception and realization. 1950 was also the initial year of a series of social and political changes that aimed to emphasize the particularity of Yugoslav socialism. The "decentralization", conducted by the Communist Party, started that year with the law of associated work, which would later culminate in the workers auto-management, publicly promoted under parole "factories to workers, land to peasants".

All these changes had their reflection on the urban form of New Belgrade: the residential zone was decentralized and organized in residential units, popularly called "blocks", and officially: basic units of urban organization. Blocks were planned for 5.000 to 10.000 inhabitants, with the medium density of 300 persons per hectare, and a maximum of 500 –a density that surpassed the maximum density of the old town. New Belgrade was following the basic principle of modern movement urbanism: free ground floor in the green zone, which meant that the density was achieved through high rise edification in blocks of 400 by 600m. In consequence, the urban composition was tending to a total geometry; the most representative example of this tendency was the detailed plan for the New Belgrade central zone of 1959. The denominated urban centre –previous state centre– was comprehended (as in the first projects) between still unfinished government building and the train station.



Difference of urban scale: 1. New Belgrade centre 2x2 km; 2. Old Belgrade centre 2x2 km

This centre was composed by three public plazas, each of them 400 by 400 m, with gradual variation of social importance. The first one, adjacent to the government building (finished at the beginning of sixties) was to be the "administrative plaza", enclosing the functions of public administration, this time on a city level. This large square is in a sense, a rest of what during the previous decade, was intended to be the "centre of the new state". The second plaza, that over crossed in its whole amplitude the new built highway Belgrade-Zagreb (known as the "highway of brotherhood and unity"), was the "cultural plaza": the contents of its perimeter were destined to the cultural centre of the new town. The third, next to the train station was to be the commercial centre. This manner to centralize (and to homogenize) different uses in a single space was paradoxical to the idea of decentralization of the totality of the urban functions: the diversity of functions like administration, culture, leisure and

consumption were presented in a single formal marc, in order to define a basically institutional axis.



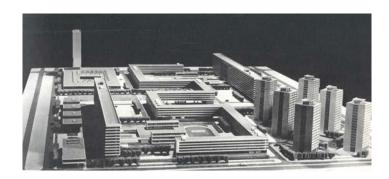
Institute for Urbanism of Serbia, project for the New Belgrade central zone, 1959, architects: Martinović, Lenarčić, Glavički, Mitić, Milenković

Reference points: 1. Building for the Communist Party Central Comity 2. Administrative plaza 3. Cultural centre 4. Commercial plaza 5. Train station

Realization of partial plans corresponding to the plan of 1959 started at the beginning of the 60's and lasted until the beginning of the 80's, when the construction was again paralyzed due to the economic crisis and political changes that followed the death of Tito. The city that was emerging since the sixties was publicly presented using the quantitative indicators: more than 3 million of square meters of housing were constructed, over 20 million tons of sand expanded to consolidate the soil, and in between of 90km of the traffic network. That level of construction brought about a variation of the structure of population due to migrations: in 1961, only 33% of Belgrade population was autochthonous.

New Belgrade was still a "great victory of socialist construction", but which were the qualitative indicators of the new town? Like other cities of its epoch, the city of "blocks" was primarily dimensioned for a car and not for pedestrian: it was foreseen one vehicle for each 8 inhabitants; the avenues had 4 or 6 lanes for a medium traffic of 20.000 passengers per hour. This level of circulation is being reached nowadays, but in the sixties and seventies, this type of planning meant a city district where sometimes the basic supplying wasn't accessible, as it had been planned in unity centres —one per block, and mainly without interconnections. The absence of tertiary sector in the ground floors, together with the "protection zones" 20m wide of green space by the avenues, in resume, the abolition of the traditional street, converted New Belgrade into a boring and impersonal city. The construction of residential macro structure was the inversion of different public enterprises or the national army, which through a system of preference rent ceded houses to their employees. Activities of culture or commerce belonged to specialized enterprises that were always more interested for construction in the old city, as for the confluence of public, had their profit ensured in that zone. In the system of auto management, paradoxically, public

enterprises looked after proper interests at the general level, and not as much on the particular workers level; the overall system decentralization obstructed the influence of the republic or the state in order to relieve the possible incompatibilities. In all this network of confronted general interests, in New Belgrade was increasing the inhabitants perception of this zone as a dorm city, highly dependent on the historical centre, but with insufficient and controlled connections with it.



Housing block in the centre of New Belgrade, model 1959, architects: Martinović, Lenarčić, Glavički, Mitić, Milenković. Block dimensions: 400 x 600 m; building height: 4, 10, 16 and 24 floors

Personalization

"The distant order is projected over the immediate one. Although, the immediate order does not reflect in transparency, the distant order. The latter subordinates to it the immediate through mediations; it doesn't give in. Moreover, without revealing, it dissimulates itself. This is the way it works, though it doesn't give us the right to talk about a transcendence of an Order, of the Global or the Total" (Lefebvre, 1969:66). In this quotation of Henry Lefebvre, the "distant order" refers to ideologies, and the "immediate" to the use – to inherited habitat. The dissimulation of heritage in ideologies is a possible way to explain the processes of change of New Belgrade urban form, through its history and in the present.



Kiosk architecture: private commerce and individual housing. Photo: 2003

The qualification "impersonal" was used a lot to designate this part of Belgrade, in reference to the repetition of architectonic forms of the residential macro structure. One of most repeated critiques was about the bad orientation in its urban tissue, or of the lack of

functional-significant referents in the homogeneity of its blocks. The deficit of the public initiative (although not of transformation projects) was corresponded with numerous intents on micro scale –of inhabitants– trying to designate their own habitat. These intents were referred to the only space where it could be intervened individually –the individual housing (its access or its façade), but there were also initiatives at the neighbourhood level to personalize "the housing prolongation", i.e. green spaces around residential blocks.

General dissatisfaction due to the lack of autonomy of New Belgrade lead to an informal solution, derived from programs for economic stabilization after the death of Tito in 1980, which included permissions for small private companies. The symptom known as "kiosk" reached its maximum in the legal disorder of the nineties, when whole blocks perimeters or traffic crossings were converted into ephemeral open air markets, called "flea markets". The conventional stand construction was soon to be transformed into an adapted village house type, inclosing individual housing on the first floor and commerce on the street level. Their traditionally inspired forms started to fulfil the void of "green and open spaces" that once symbolized an open and democratic city of everyone. In this way New Belgrade started to achieve a certain level of auto sufficiency that was a component of its attractiveness for newcomers, apart from the functional distribution of flats in housing blocks of the 60's and the lower price of these flats (when compared to the city centre). Informal constructions only accentuated the lack of a proper urban centre, even in a traditional sense, still necessary to perceive New Belgrade as a city.

The planned centre of three big plazas, between the government building and the train station, was never realized, but gradually displaced to more transited streets. The "administrative square" was, until recently, a vague green block; actually it is under construction of a future office building. In what was to be the "cultural square", in 2004 was inaugurated the "Belgrade Arena" —a sports palace— and in the block of the "commercial square" were constructed, as early as the eighties, housing blocks with postmodern reminiscences. The pedestrian connection that was to unite these plazas is now being substituted with traffic nodes to communicate the highway with the perimeter streets of this pseudo-centre. In spite of all, with all the small scale changes, New Belgrade achieved a certain non-planned polycentrism, with the predominance of the economic criteria in urban distribution. In the resident's perception this criteria doesn't conform a network with a value of significance, but a network of merely functional referents. Therefore, it could be assumed, that New Belgrade as a city only existed when it was imagined as a new capital of Tito's Yugoslavia.

The search for a perception of an urban space as such (and also in historical sense), is being reflected on actual construction in New Belgrade. The development of this zone at the beginning of the XXI century is following the path of: 1) densification of urban tissue —in diminution of green zone; 2) reduction of the residential buildings height (limited to 9 floors); 3) adoption of traditional architectonic elements —pitched roofs, decoration and colours, volumetric emphasis of street corners; 4) recreation of the closed urban blocks that restore patios of reduced scale. The actuality reveals that the city, emerged from scientific urbanism

and international style architecture, was accepted more in terms of destruction of an inherited habitat, then as a contribution to the improvement of the city's functionality. The mass edification during the fifties, sixties and seventies was based on the conceptual critique of the historical city in the same manner as the actual construction is criticizing the "socialist heritage".

Formal changes experimented in the urban landscape of New Belgrade are affine to similar tendencies in East-European post war cities, most of all in capitals of the former Yugoslavia. The specific point in development of New Belgrade was the political intention inscribed in its first phase, when it was conceded the condition of the state capital. This phase, although never realized, was very important at the level of formation of public opinion about the zone, as it imprinted in it a conscience of urbanity of highest level. The non-accomplished pretension (or only partially) during the process of construction, derived in the constant search for meaning of its urban form and its urbanity.



New private housing and offices blocks. Photo: 2003

The process of transformation of New Belgrade presented in this text, reveals different facts that can be taken as "lessons for the future": 1) that a profound change of urban form and of inherited use is normally driven by a political intention; 2) that this change carries along a change of social signification of urban space —of the new construction as well as of the existing one; 3) that, during the process of elaboration of the urban plans, apart from the consensus between political and proyectual entities, a consensus with the citizenship organizations is indispensable; 4) without this agreement, and without respecting its conclusions, the realization of the plan can provoke discontent and informal interventions; 5) that the urban development should comprehend and maintain coherence in the sphere of significance, having in mind all the layers of the past (realized or intended), and 6) that the critique can be one of initial elements in the generation of the new form, but never the only element to define the course of the urban change.

Bibliography

Colquhoun, A. (1978) Arquitectura moderna y cambio histórico – ensayos: 1962–1976, Editorial Gustavo Gili S.A. Barcelona

Dobrović, N. (1946) "Obnova izgradnja Beograda. Konture budućeg grada". Tehnika, Belgrade Direction for construction of New Belgrade (1961), New Belgrade-New Town, Belgrade Frampton,

K. (1992) Modern Architecture. A Critical History, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London Giedion, S. (1957) Aguitectura y comunidad, Editorial Nueva Visión, Buenos Aires

Glavički, M. (1983) "Novi Beograd kao predmet istraživanja". Izgradnja, Beograd

Jović, D. (2003) Jugoslavija –država koja je odumrla. Uspon, kriza i pad četvrte Jugoslavije (1974-1990), Samizdat B92, Belgrade

Kara-Pešić, Ž. (1983) "Okvir dostojan slike". Izgradnja, Beograd

Kultermann, U. (1989) Arquitectura contemporánea en Europa Oriental, Editorial Stylos S.A

Macura, M. (1947) "Problematika naše arhitekture – u svetlosti konkursa za zgradu Pretsedništva Vlade FNRJ". Arhitektura, Zagreb

Muntañola Thornberg, J. (2000) Topogénesis. Fundamentos de una nueva arquitectura, Edicions UPC, Barcelona

Lefebvre, H. (1969) El Derecho a la Ciudad, Ediciones Península, Barcelona

Lynch, K. (1998) La Imagen de la Ciudad, editorial Gustavo Gili, edición GG Reprints, Barcelona

Seissel, J. (1947) "Konkurs za urbanistički plan Novog Beograda". Arhitektura, Zagreb

Stojanović. B (1970) "Posleratna Beogradska arhitektonska izgradnja". Godisnjak grada Beograda, Muzej grada Beograda, Beograd, Knjiga XVII

Stojanović, B., Martinović, U. (1978) Beograd 1945 – 1975. Urbanizam. Arhitektura, Tehnička knjiga, Beograd

Ricoeur, P. (1989) Ideología y Utopía, Gedisa, Barcelona

Vale, L. J. (1992) Architecture, Power and National Identity, Yale University Press, New Haven & London

Historia editorial

Recibido: 4/4/2016 **Aceptado:** 27/4/2016 **Publicado:** 4/5/2016

Formato de citación

Prokopljevic, Jelena (2016). New Belgrade: from abstract to personal. *URBS. Revista de Estudios Urbanos y Ciencias Sociales*, *6*(1), 9-20. http://www2.ual.es/urbs/index.php/urbs/article/view/prokopljevic_jelena



Los textos publicados en esta revista están sujetos —si no se indica lo contrario— a una licencia de Atribución CC 4.0 Internacional. Usted debe reconocer el crédito de la obra de manera adecuada, proporcionar un enlace a la licencia, e indicar si se han realizado cambios. Puede compartir y adaptar la obra para cualquier propósito, incluso comercialmente. Puede hacerlo en cualquier forma razonable, pero no de forma tal que sugiera que tiene el apoyo del licenciante o lo recibe por el uso que hace. No hay restricciones adicionales. Usted no puede aplicar términos legales ni medidas tecnológicas que restrinjan legalmente a otros hacer cualquier uso permitido por la licencia.