

Over the rainbow: Urban oasis as an inclusion hub

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Abstract

Focusing on the case of a new urban oasis in Belgrade (2024), situated on the site of a Drop in Shelter for the street children, the paper examines a relationship between marginalised group(s), neighbourhood community and multidisciplinary professionals, involved in a project launched by the EUNIC Serbia and the Goethe-Institut. The project involved a group of the second-year undergraduate students of the University of Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture working on a proposal for a unique hub of/for social inclusion, safety and inter-neighbourhood interaction. The selected case is presented through the lenses of educational process, highlighting the synchronisation between the expected environmental and social outcomes, a comprehensive participation of future users (marginalised children and local community) and the estimated/achieved sustainability of the implemented project.

Keywords: Integration, Inclusion, Public Space, Children, Education.

Introduction

The cities exposed to multiple transitional flows have been facing various challenges which especially affect vulnerable and marginalised groups. The strong division between the winners and the losers of the neoliberal mechanisms reflects in urban setting and its public spaces, where the discrepancies between the reality and the globally announced imperatives of sustainability, resilience, equity and justice become extremely visible (World Cities Report, 2024). Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, represents one of the multilayered examples of this practice, fuelling the atmosphere of growing uncertainty, far away from the postulates defined by SDGs, 2030 Agenda or the New European Bauhaus framework.

Highlighting the case of a new urban oases (2024), situated on the site of a Drop in Shelter for the street children, the paper presents a process of a studio project, based on a relationship between marginalised group(s), neighbourhood community and multidisciplinary professionals, all involved in an initiative launched by the EUNIC Serbia (European Union National Institutes for Culture) and the Goethe-Institut. Conducted in cooperation with the Center for Youth Integration, the Belgrade International Week of Architecture (BINA), the Italian Institute of Culture, the Embassy of Portugal, as well as a group of the second-year undergraduate students of the University of Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture, this endeavour triggered the transformation of a small open space into a new hub of/for social inclusion, safety and inter-neighbourhood interaction. Having in mind that street children represent one of the most vulnerable groups, often threaten by socioeconomic inequalities, violence and the lack of any kind of support, their education, safety and healthcare could be challenging or non-existent. Therefore, any action directed toward the improvement of this damaging condition should be based on the set of policies which provide functional support systems, as well as equally accessible resources (Sovacool et al., 2022).

Following these recommendations, the project and its inclusiveness were elaborated through several phases

related to research, design, implementation and the promotion of achieved results. The integrative potential of the upgraded space was emphasised during all organised events - from participatory workshops, lectures, exhibitions, to presentations and public gatherings. The newly created public node was conceptualised and shaped according to the specific needs of identified users, representing a common good for the entire local community. Consequently, the design program stimulates exploration, play and learning through the application of art, ecology, recycling and digitalisation. As a new popular place, the urban oasis should also raise both the environmental awareness and the quality of space while connecting the different groups in their personal experiences.

The important segment of this initiative represented the work of students which was constantly exposed to both professional and public evaluation. Therefore, the educational process and the applied methodological approach had to correspond with expected environmental and social outcomes, while the participation of future users (both the marginalised children and the local community) stimulated a balance between the detected neighbourhood dynamic and the anticipated project sustainability.

The theoretical drivers

Grounded in the concept of social production of space (Lefebvre, 1991) and the concept of social capital (Putnam, 2000), the process conducted within the studio project continuously emphasised the role of integrative potential of public spaces, within the boundaries defined by socio-economic context and the networks of trust, cohesion and exchange within a community (Whyte, 1980; Castells, 2000). The shared development vision, which would stimulate inclusion and transmission of ideas and practices, represented a project necessity leading toward green transition, long-term sustainability and the integration of marginalised children into local community.

The ideas and methods based on tactical urbanism (Lydon and Garcia, 2015), participatory design (Muller and Kuhn, 1993; Bannon and Ehn, 2012) and situated design (Simonsen et al., 2014) were used as a framework for human-centered approach which included affordable, responsive and flexible spatial interventions in order to create engaging public node - an urban oasis which instigates spontaneity and a higher level of accessibility for all interested parties. Both problem- and project-based learning were incorporated into studio curriculum, ensuring a dynamic setting which encouraged students to obtain multidisciplinary knowledge, increase their creative abilities and develop self-esteem and confidence when dealing with real-life problems and challenging situations (Frank and Barzilai, 2006; Barrett and Moore, 2011).

The idea of urban oasis was considered as a multipurpose stage and a medium for both social and environmental themes, acting as an open public space which supports diversity but also provides informality and equality in communication and use (Oldenburg, 1991). Furthermore, the issues of environmental awareness and microclimate quality were considered as an additional level of future cooperation and understanding between local users - from inhabitants and the Shelter beneficiaries to experts and local government. In line with this aspect, the importance of environmental issues was highlighted during the iterative process of studio work, especially the problems of pollution, climate shift and declining biodiversity. The students had an insight into the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) approach (Stern et al., 1999), the concept of green transition (Mol & Sonnenfeld, 2000; Geels, 2002) and the ecological modernisation theory.

In the direct interaction with street children the students were able to identify a number of challenges which this sensitive group of users has to face everyday - from violence and exploitation, to inadequate access to food, education and healthcare. Consequently, the design of a new urban oasis, based on co-creation, co-production and co-benefits, had to address all these issues in local context, overcoming the occasional hostility of neighbours. Social integration with and beyond neighbourhood was stimulated, while the introduction of green spaces was used as a tool for reinforcing the overall sense of belonging through a playful design and various types of activities. These changes could attract new artistic and educational programs, also acting as mediums of inter-institutional cooperation.

Urban oasis: identification, interaction, integration

The project entitled 'Belgrade urban oases' was initiated at the beginning of 2024, by a team of several institutions led by the EUNIC Serbia and the Goethe-Institut. Targeting three typologically diverse sites, which were selected before the application process, the main idea was to increase their spatial comfort, as well as environmental and social sustainability. Characterised by different problems, these (mostly neglected or underdeveloped) open spaces became unique polygons for activation, upgrading and/or renovation which was supposed to improve their condition while increasing a general wellbeing of both immediate beneficiaries and local communities. The project initiative also included the students of two faculties of the University of Belgrade - the Faculty of Architecture and the Faculty of Forestry, which contributed to several phases of the project - from the process of design to implementation.

The site of the Shelter for Street Children (Krfska Street, No. 7a) represented one of these potential urban oases, offering a small open space positioned within the building plot, perpendicular to two parallel streets (Figure 1). Due to its specific position between two public buildings and the lack of any physical barriers which would separate it from the public space of streets, this L-shaped open space represented also a specific corridor (especially during the non-working hours of the Shelter), used as a shortcut between two streets, or a gathering (noisy) spot for local teenagers, often causing official complaints of the neighbourhood. Consequently, the idea was to provide a redesign of this urban pocket, in accordance with a specific set of needs expressed by the direct users - the street children from different age groups (up to 18 years). Additionally, it was necessary to instigate a higher level of social inclusion with(in) neighbourhood, increase the overall safety and decrease the level of hostility, often expressed by local residents. The future urban oasis also anticipated other roles - from the stage for various activities, events and gatherings, a generator of positive identity and pride, to the instrument of ecological and aesthetic transmission, exchange and awareness.



Figure 1. The site of the Shelter for Street Children.

The partners in charge of this oasis were the Center for Youth Integration (as the umbrella organisation coordinating the activities of the Shelter), Belgrade International Week of Architecture (BINA), Goethe-Institut, Italian Institute of Culture, Embassy of Portugal and the University of Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture. The students involved

in the project attended the second year of bachelor studies (2023/24) and their work was conducted within the studio supervised by Professor Dr. Aleksandra Stupar (assistant Aleksandar Grujičić), representing a segment of the course entitled Sustainable Urban Communities (Professor Dr. Ksenija Lalović). Considering the complexity of this project, as well as the number of involved participants, the process was based upon an elaborate timeline, which enabled an intensive collaboration of all partners and involved actors, facilitated participative design and stimulated efficient implementation supported by the immediate users (Figure 2).



Figure 2. The project time-line.

The work on urban oasis used a problem-based approach, which also had an important educational and experiential dimension - both for the students of architecture and the street children/teenagers. It stimulated their mutual bonding, understanding and trust, resulting in a number of creative ideas, later used in the final draft. The theme conditioned the concept of an open-ended project due to a dynamic in-situ context which demanded flexibility and collaboration of all involved parties.

The closer involvement of students started in February 2024, at the beginning of spring semester. Their first task related to the overall topic and the selected site was the analysis of local context which revealed the status of activities, environment, local community and the Shelter beneficiaries - their needs, expectations and mutual interactions. SWAT matrix was used for the classification of results and a further decoding of the ongoing processes in the space, while an elaborated insight into communication flows and existing multileveled networks provided conceptualisation of possible channels of integration, collaboration and exchange. The connection between the direct and the indirect users of space, students and educators was also established, tracing the path for upcoming participative activities. The final outcome of this phase represented a data-base of relevant examples which were assessed according to their specificities and the potential benefits for project context.

The importance of similar experiences, as a possibility for a know-how exchange, was emphasised by a lecture delivered online by Dr. Valentina Talu, a researcher at the University of Sassari (Department of Architecture, Design and Urbanism) and a co-founder and administrator of the spin-off company Tamalacà Srl. Organised by the Italian Institute of Culture in April 2024, the lecture entitled Tactical Urbanism and City Tailored to Children highlighted

the importance of a synergy between theory and practise, local circumstances, available budget and preferred outcomes. It was followed by a discussion which raised issues related to the detected problems of participation process and implementation, legislation drawbacks, funding, sustainability, maintenance, neighbourhood safety, social cohesion and integrative potential (Figure 3). The studio data-base was enriched by the recommended material from the platform Tactical Urbanist's Guide and the e-book The City at the Eye Level for Kids (Danenberg at al., 2018).



Figure 3. The online lecture Tactical Urbanism and City Tailored to Children by Dr. Valentina Talu. Photo: Aleksandar Grujičić.

After this thematic introduction, the students participated in a workshop which was organised on the site of the Shelter and the future urban oasis. The aim of this step was to establish a face-to-face interaction with both the immediate users and their supervising team, while identifying their needs, preferences, dynamic of their daily/seasonal activities and the problems affecting their integration into the neighbourhood (e.g. hostility, prejudice, rejection, segregation). During the workshop, which was also assisted by the BINA representatives, the attention of all participants was directed toward several issues - physical, functional and social limitations of the space, expected/preferred flexibility, environmental upgrading and its sustainability. Students prepared various examples of successful design possibilities as an input (playgrounds and playground equipment, landscape, urban gardens, urban furniture, textures, colours and shapes etc.). Both digital and analogue formats were used as initiators for discussion, creative process and the evaluation of preferred elements and activities. The duration of the workshop was estimated by the supervisors from the Shelter and conditioned by the attention span of involved children and teenagers. The outcomes outlined the possible directions of spatial conceptualisation - urban oasis as a generator, transmitter and display of sustainable and integrative practices and exchange (Figure 4). The collected material and ideas produced by both users and students created a starting point for defining the main goals and design principles.



Figure 4. The first participatory workshop at the Shelter. Photo: Aleksandar Grujičić.

According to the initial findings of the first workshop students developed their conceptual solutions in an iterative process which relied on both the participative and situated design methods. Studio work enabled elaboration of collected ideas and the first public presentation of 23 students' posters, organised in front of the Shelter and in the adjacent park, triggered a positive response from the local community. Children from the neighbourhood and their parents also showed interest in the proposed designs and took part in an informal discussion and interviews. Consequently, the information gathered through the interaction with neighbours, Shelter beneficiaries, supervisors, as well as occasional passers-by, contributed to a common system of values (Figure 5). This public event, partially conducted on the site of the future urban oasis, contributed both to the increased inclusiveness of design process and the further elaboration of exhibited proposals. They were evaluated by simple voting/rating process (with colourful stickers), not only by Shelter users, but also visitors and observers. As a result, a list of most desirable spatial and functional elements was created, directing the next phase of project elaboration conducted during the last few weeks of spring semester.



Figure 5. Public discussion during open-air exhibition. Photo: Aleksandar Grujičić.

The last phase of design, concluded in the end of May 2024, was presented during the 19th Belgrade International Architecture Week - as the exhibition held on the premises of the Shelter and a public lecture related to all activities within the Belgrade Urban Oases project. The exhibition displayed in June 2024 included a simple voting process and a discussion with users and the neighbourhood which led to the selection of six projects and main design elements (Figure 6). Their authors (students Tamara Šuljagić, Tatjana Paunić, Katarina Rančić, Marko Šepa,

Katarina Nikolić, Đorđe Lazarević) were chosen as a team for project elaboration, coordinated by their supervisor and a BINA representative.



Figure 6. The exhibition during the 19th Belgrade International Architecture Week. Photo: Aleksandar Gazibara

The finalisation of project design was conducted during summer, while the implementation of the project was scheduled for October and November 2024. The selected team described the new urban oasis as a 'place of fun'. Intended for both the Shelter users and the neighbourhood, spatial upgrading enables exploration, learning, relaxation and play, simultaneously increasing environmental awareness, sense of belonging, as well as spatial, social and ecological responsibility.

The outcome

During the implementation, the main construction works were focused on the pedestrian corridor between two buildings which was improved by the ACO drainage system and painted (MAPEI) by the Shelter children, with the support of students and the BINA team. The painted drawings represent a result of a series of creative workshops organised by Dušana Nikolić from the Architecture studio for children La Villette, with the assistance of student Tamara Šuljagić. This activity had an important symbolical significance depicting mutual effort and creativity of all involved children. It also contributed to the evolving identity of urban oasis, open to the Shelter users, but also to the neighbourhood. The oasis was additionally upgraded by the wooden decking with integrated benches and planters, creating a flexible area for different kinds of events, gatherings and concerts. New green walls/fences were included, as well as a projector and a white board on the outer wall of the Shelter, new trampoline and chairs (Figure 7).

Due to weather conditions and approaching winter months only a part of planting activities was completed. However, the space got new trees and some plants, while the remaining vegetation has been added during

Spring 2025. This intervention also improved the overall atmosphere and comfort, strengthening the link to nature while enriching green infrastructure of the area.



Figure 7. New urban oasis as a node of social interaction, learning, fun and environmental responsibility. Photo: Aleksandar Gazibara.

The activities of the urban oasis, as well as the experiences gained in its space, are regularly shared via digital media. The Shelter users are encouraged to contribute with their own posts which promote activities and features of the space. Due to additional funding from the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia the online accessibility and digital skills of children have been improved. Consequently, new possibilities for learning, exchange and promotion of successful practices on various digital platforms and social networks have been open, but with a controlled approach, especially important for marginalised children. Additionally, project visibility has been increased enabling more intensive participation of the public, as well as the introduction of numerous environmental themes which could be presented and/or tested within the urban oasis.

In total, the project initiative included about 200 participants, several institutions (Municipality Zvezdara, Beograd put, Public Company - Greenery Belgrade, Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia) and donor companies (MAPEI, ACO). During the active period of 2024 (April to November) many activities were organised and successfully realised, gathering over 840 participants. Students were actively involved until the end of spring semester, while the selected team of students-authors continued their work until November in various capacities.

Conclusion

The problem-based approach used for the conceptualisation and design of a new urban oasis in Krfska street was user-oriented and adjusted to transformative imperatives embedded in the project application of the Belgrade Urban Oases. The studio work with the students of the Faculty of Architecture was structured around several phases and core activities which ensured elaboration, multidisciplinary effort and a high level of collaboration between various actors. The urban co-creation method was applied in order to produce a coherent and sustainable solution based on active user participation, real-time experiences and iterations within a constant design focus (Hertzum, 2014). The importance of situated design - related to context, knowledge and action, was also emphasised as a way toward lasting sustainability of the implemented spatial intervention.

The established node for multiple mutual interaction and integration, conceived as an urban oasis, provides a setting for numerous community activities which could have a positive impact on both the neighbourhood and the Shelter users. Although it is still early to conduct an elaborated evaluation of the achieved results, the event organised during the 20th BINA festival (May 2025) enabled a survey of the current situation. During the annual

celebration of the Center for Youth Integration/Shelter a photo exhibition dedicated to the Oasis was launched, gathering children, employees and other interested guests. They provided their personal insight into several aspects of the established public space commenting its quality (functional, aesthetic and environmental), activity content, (un)fulfilled expectations, frequency of use, ideas for further upgrading and the achieved exchange with neighbourhood.

The feedback is mostly positive, especially from the direct users and participating institutions. According to them, the space of urban oasis has become an attractive outdoor spot, a new feature for positive identification, pride and empowerment of the marginalised Shelter children. They appreciate its flexibility and the vibrant appearance of colourful pedestrian corridor, the wooden decking of the plateau, greenery and new urban furniture with integrated plants and trees. This setting influences their environmental awareness, instigating interest in gardening (planting, watering, cleaning, watering etc.) and overall well-being. The neighbours of the Shelter also noticed better design and maintenance, which attracts local children.

However, some problems were also mentioned, mainly caused by the public character of the place, especially after working hours of the Shelter. Consequently, the problematic evening noise created by various groups of local teenagers (who occupy the wooden deck after school) can be solved by additional enclosures of the space which will be locked during evening, preventing uncontrolled trespassing. This intervention could be realised during 2025, due to the next phase of funding, provided by the Goethe-Institut. In the meantime, it is important to keep the momentum of activities, supporting the social and environmental sustainability of the oasis.

Although the project represents a specific booster for the inclusion of marginalised children into environmental practices, their position in the green transition should be further empowered. Previously detected hostility of the neighbourhood could be diminished through common actions focused on environmental challenges and maintenance of green infrastructure, while the cooperation with students should be developed and eventually directed to similar transformative projects. Their mutual experiences and reflections, as a unique collaborative learning process, could gradually become an example of successful practise and an encouragement for equally sensitive contexts, willing to discover their environmental consciousness.

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