Nenad Makuljevic

Visuality, Conflict and Space

Belgrade Among Ottoman, Habsburg and Serbian States (17th–19th Century)

What take a prominent place in the history of visual culture are charged sites – places which have for centuries been perceived as points of contact and conflict among cultures, religions and ideologies. These are the spaces marked by alternating processes of construction and destruction, cultural discontinuity and damnatio memoriae. The past, which is marked by dramatic events, transforms the urban space into the place of trauma, and creates a charged site.[1] One of the models of urban space as a charged site is Belgrade, the contemporary capital city of Serbia.

In contemporary Serbian historiography and literature Belgrade has often been described as »a house on the road,« a border between Europe and the Balkans, the crossroads of the East and West, a city of eternal wars and constant devastation.[2] Built on a ridge above the confluence of the river Sava into the Danube, Belgrade is well-positioned strategically and in terms of communication. For this reason people have lived here continuously from prehistory to present day. At the same time, this position gave rise to perpetual fights for domination and terrible wars and devastation.[3] Even though contemporary Belgrade keeps only some fragments of the past cultural heritage, visual culture was used for the ideological formation and demarcation of dominance in the city space.

In the period from the 17th to the 19th century, Belgrade was the scene of numerous wars and a city governed by the Ottoman, Habsburg and Serbian authorities. Since its governments, which changed from the 17th to the 19th century, stood in religious, political and national opposition, the city's visual identity experienced tremendous changes. The fight for power over the city was directed to the important symbolical places in urban space. This was the reason for their constant violent conversion, and the dynamics of destruction, construction and conversion of public buildings was the reason for intense visual production.

Islamization

At the end of the Middle Ages, Belgrade was ruled by Serbian and Hungarian States, with a number of churches, a cathedral and a military fortification. The end of the Middle Ages was marked by the Ottomans' breakthrough into Europe. In 1521, the Ottomans finally conquered Belgrade and the city came under Ottoman power.[4] The city's development, following the trends of European mediaeval urban culture, was stunted and early modern Belgrade was shaped after Ottoman urban practice. Following the principles which had already been implemented in Constantinople and other conquered Byzantine cities, the Ottoman authorities transformed Belgrade into an Islamic city.[5] The symbolic act of conversion of the city from Christianity to Islam was the transformation of the metropolitan Church of the holy Mother of God into the conqueror Sultan Suleiman mosque in 1521.[6] Belgrade's fort, the place of government and power of Christian mediaeval rulers, was changed into the headquarters of Ottoman rulership with all symbols of its power.[7] In this sense, the space that had symbolized the Christian rule for centuries was converted into an Islamic and Belgrade gained a new political and religious identity.

Many European and Ottoman travellers made descriptions of the city.[8] However, the best known Ottoman writer Evliya Celebi rendered an utterly ideal and unrealistic image of the Ottoman Belgrade. He described the City of Belgrade as »a diamond in a ring,« with more than 200 mosques and approximately 160 beautiful palaces in the city. Further, he also mentioned the main city mosque, the Mosque of Sultan Suleiman, as built by the best known Ottoman architect Mimar Siman, and claimed allegedly that it was »the top of his skill.«[9]

From the 17th to the 19th century around 50 or 60 mosques were built in Belgrade, together with a great number of commercial and residential buildings (bazaars, hans, caravanserais).[10] Many dervish tekkes (monasteries) were also founded in the city. In Belgrade there were also mausoleum complexes devoted to the deceased dignitaries, from which only Damad Ali-pasha's türbe (tomb),[11] and Sheikh Mustafa's türbe are preserved.[12] According to Ottoman-Islamic customs, charity buildings, such as fountains, were constructed for public usage. The first Vizier Mehmed Pasha Sokollu-Sokolović built a fountain from 1576/77,[13] and a caravanserai. At the same time meaning of Belgrade's fortress rose because of numerous war-attacks, and it was constantly refurbished.[14] From the 17th to the 18th century, the non-Muslims were in a particularly unfavorable position. The public and private life of Christians was discriminated by Ottoman laws,[15] and the Greek-orthodox community had only one church.[16] Ottoman dress code and politics of visibility emphasized the subordinated position of the Christians.[17]

Habsburg-Baroque Belgrade

Around 1700 Belgrade became a trouble-spot between Habsburg and the Ottoman Empires. The city was first conquered by the Bavarian Elector Maximilian Emanuel in 1690, and then in 1717 by Prince Eugene of Savoy. From 1717 to 1739 Belgrade was ruled and governed by the Habsburg Monarchy.[18] The Habsburg authorities completely changed the city's visual identity. The Islamic shape of the city was effaced, and the Ottoman Belgrade was transformed into a baroque Catholic-Christian city. The architects effected a change in Belgrade's fortress, and it was fortified and refurbished in baroque style. According to the culture of power and visual manifestation of Habsburgian rule, they built a baroque palace for the city mayor Alexander of Wurttemberg, as well as a gate named after Emperor Karl VI.[19]

The most important change took place in the attitude towards Islamic religious buildings. In this period there was a mass persecution of Muslims and attempts of the Roman Catholic Church to christianize the entire city. Catholic orders – such as the Jesuits and Franciscans, took part in the new management of the city. Some of existing mosques were turned into churches,[20] and in this manner the Christians symbolically and formally took over positions of the former masters. This was also clearly indicated in the text on a map cartouche »Belgrad oder Grieschisch Weissenburg,« issued by Matthias Seutter. The last sentence of the text dedicated to the conquest of Belgrade: »An Statt der Tuercke Moscheen sind anjezo Iesuit u: Capuziner Kirche darin, welche leztere erst A. 1735 vo neue aufgebaut worden.«[21] In 1739 the short period of the rule of the Habsburg Empire ended by handing over the city back to the Ottomans, with considerable consequences for the urban appearance. A great number of destroyed and damaged mosques were never restored. However, some Habsburg constructions, palaces, gates and military barracks survived war damages, and gave a new specific identity to the Ottoman Belgrade in the 18th century. During this period of time the Ottoman government did not manage to reconstruct the city and restore the former glow it had before the Ottoman and Habsburg war.

From Ottoman to Serbian Belgrade

At the beginning of the 19th century the Serbian national revolution took place. One of the consequences of the 1804/15 war was a reduced sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire over Serbia and Belgrade by establishing of the principality of Serbia.[22] As a result of these events, from 1815 to 1867 Belgrade was in a specific regulated position. It became an Ottoman and Serbian city, managed by two governments fighting for domination, with constant political and cultural conflicts.[23] The result of the two-fold government in Belgrade was a multisided cultural city identity and presence of both Islamic-Ottoman and contemporary European visual cultures.[24]

At the beginning of the 19th century Belgrade was divided into several different urban districts. Like other Ottoman cities, it had a fortress and a town organized in »mahalas« (quarters) and surrounded by a wooden wall. This space was mainly organized by the Ottoman authorities, whereas the space outside the town wall was under Serbian rule. The center of the Ottoman government was the fortress, where in the upper town there were pasha's residence (konak), mosques and barracks.[25] The visual identity of the city was characterized by numerous minarets of Belgrade mosques, the Ottoman and Balkan architecture, as well as the costume and specific communication of trade. The preserved images of Belgrade of that time, like for example Felix Kanitz's drawings, show a typical »Oriental« city, with wooden houses, specific stores, street trade and people following the Ottoman dress code.[26]

In this predominantly Ottoman and Islamic city with around 14 mosques, as well as on the territory of principality of Serbia, the new Serbian government was trying to stress its presence and Serbian national identity.[27] This implied a clear strategy of construction in the city and careful city-planning of a new Belgrade. Within the city, the Serbian government initially adapted Ottoman visual forms. This can be seen from one of the rare preserved examples of architecture of that time – the Residence (Konak) of Princess Ljubica.[28] This building was constructed as part of the complex of the court of Serbian Prince Miloš for his wife Ljubica. The residence was built according to the Ottoman architectural principles of that time and it provided a separate female space, for the princess's privacy and representation. This separated space for female power and representation emanated from the practice of the harems in the Ottoman and Islamic culture, and the political importance of the pasha's harem in the Ottoman Belgrade. In the 19th century the private space of the Belgrade pasha's wife was a place of power, also frequented by Christian women.[29] The Residence of Princess Ljubica was obviously built according to the same principle. In this sense, by the adaptation of the Ottoman cultural patterns, Serbian institutions came in the forefront.

Another important event for the Serbs was the construction of a new church. Instead of the small Orthodox church hidden in the city's architecture, Serbian Orthodox community build a new cathedral church with a bell tower between 1837 and 1840.[30] The construction of the tower was perceived as fight for the rule over the city, since the cross rose to the height of the minarets. In this way, the visual domination of Islamic religious buildings was thwarted.

The fight for Belgrade also included the strategic construction of new urban areas. Prince Miloš started to construct buildings and city quarters in order marginalize the Ottoman city by enclosing in the fortress and town.[31] Unlike the architecture of the Ottoman town, new Belgrade was mainly designed according to contemporary European architectural principles. So Belgrade gained a specific physiognomy. In the city center were wooden Ottoman houses, narrow streets and mosques, whereas new Belgrade had European architecture. This twofold appearance was described by the English travel writer Andrew Archibald Paton: »On the one side, several large and good houses have been constructed by the wealthiest senators, in the German manner, with flaring new white walls and bright green shutter-blinds. On the other side is a mosque and, dead old garden walls, with walnut trees and Levantine roofs peeping up behind them. Look at this picture, and you have the type of domestic architecture lying between you and the snow-fenced huts of Lapland; cast your eyes over the way, and imagination wings lightly to the sweet south, with its myrtles, citrons, marbled steeps and fragrance-bearing gales.«[32]

In 1867, after Ottoman-Serbian war and the bombardement of the city, Belgrade was completely taken over by the Serbian government. Ottoman military and Muslim citizens left the city and Belgrade started to gain a new visual identity. Prince Mihailo Obrenović had a prominent role in this process, which had great influence on his commemoration in Belgrade's public space at a later date.

After the Ottomans had left the city, there was space for shaping Belgrade as the capital of the Principality of Serbia. The Serbian and European character of the city was emphasized, and any memory of the hostile Ottoman rulership for centuries had be erased. Therefore the strategy was to erase Ottoman Belgrade, including the destruction of the buildings which the Serbs associated with the power and cruelty of the Ottoman government, and Europeization of the urban space.

Such radical attitude towards the Ottoman heritage was claimed as a great urban feat. The architect Emilijan Josimović took a prominent role in this project, and he designed a new city plan for Belgrade based on destruction and construction.[33] Changes in the organization of urban area can be seen from the city plans before and after the Ottoman desertion. Josimović transformed the Ottoman city with narrow winding streets and mahalas into a compact and well-connected city core. He pulled down the wooden wall around the old parts of the city and designed new streets which changed the communication network of the city and had a strong symbolic meaning. The most important transformation was to cuttof Knez Mihajlova Street, that connected the fortress with the Serbian city outside the moat. To tag the city's new identity the streets were now renamed after Serbian rulers and heroes. In the entire city only one mosque was left (Bayrakli mosque), whereas the others gradually decayed or were converted.[34]

Further, the departure of the Turks opened the possibility for the construction of public national monuments. At the place of the former Stambol Gate, which was memorized as the space of torture of Serbs under Ottoman domination, a monument of Prince Mihailo was erected together with the National Theatre.[35] In this way they extinguished memory of Ottoman power and created a memorial site, emphasizing the national character of this area.

In Belgrade the new Serbian government devoted special attention to the construction of public buildings and national institutions. University building, the parliament, the railway station and hospitals were built in Neoclassical and Historicist style.[36] Special attention was devoted to the construction of the new palace, which was built during the 1880's outside the former Ottoman part of the city. The new palace, built by architect Aleksandar Bugarski, was shaped as a representative neoclassical construction whose architecture is connected with the European courtly culture.[37] It became another symbol of the new identity of Serbia and Belgrade. Around 1900 Belgrade gained the physiognomy of an European city with marginal remains to the Ottoman culture.

During the 20th century the destruction of Belgrade continued. In the First World War the city was devastated by Austro-Hungarian bombing. After 1919, Belgrade became the capital of the newly founded Kingdom of Yugoslavia, but during the World War II it was bombed several times, both by German and Anglo-American air rades, so that

a considerable part of the city centre was heavyly destroyed. After World War II, Belgrade became the capital of communist Yugoslavia, that resulted the construction of a new and modern socialistic Belgrade.[38] After the breakdown of Yugoslavia in 1990s, Serbia was involved in war with NATO in 1998/99, and during this period of time important military and civilian buildings were destroyed.

Charged Site: Space of Urbicide and Visuality

The history of Belgrade shows the model and characteristics of a city as a charged site. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, Belgrade changed its visual identity several times. The city survived urbicide several times and completely changed the population structure, the dominant religion, the political and ideological identity. The multiplied urbicide transformed the city into a charged site, and »Kriegslandschaft.«[39] Due to intense war destructions, Belgrade was defined as a constant war zone. Urbicide destroyed city life and culture, and yet it did not result in desertion but in constant rebuilding the city.

Due to the destruction of the city and alternation of different religions and ideologies, Belgrade as a charged site became a place of intense visual production. War fights resulted in destructions, but changes of power brought intervals of piece in which architecture and urban culture were supposed to emphasize the ideological and cultural presence of new rulers.

Changes in various ideological and religious systems (Ottoman, Habsburg, Serbia) were clearly reflected in the visual identity of Belgrade. This was particularly emphasized through the need for visual domination in space; urban culture and destruction of symbols of previous rulers' power. The charged site is characterized by a »damnatio memoriae,« so places of memory do not have a permanent character. Each government created their official culture of memory, through public edifices and monuments, which were later destroyed.

Visual domination in space was most clearly expressed through the strategy of emphasizing the Islamic or Christian religious character of the city. The Ottoman Islamic domination in Belgrade was expressed through numerous mosques. Thus, during the Habsburg rule from 1717 to 1739, and Serbian conquests of Belgrade mosques were targets of military attacks and objects of conversion into Christian worship places.

The urbanism of Belgrade also shows strategies of this conflict. As an Ottoman-Islamic city, Belgrade was divided into quarters-mahalas. Violation of this concept was started during the Habsburg rule, but in the 19th century, after 1867, the new urban fabric was designed by the architect Emilijan Josimović who shaped Belgrade as a modern European city.

Belgrade, as a city which suffered frequent war devastations and changes of different governments, shows that such charged sites »suffer« from a »surplus« of history and »lack« of preserved cultural heritage. In the case of Belgrade this is also confirmed by the facts that after three hundreds of years of Ottoman rule there is only one mosque, two turbes, and a few Ottoman-Balkan houses. What is preserved from Habsburg's heritage is the gate of Karl VI.[40] Conflicts, destruction and reconstruction of Belgrade from the 17th to the 19th century clearly show that the conflict area – the charged site was also a place of intense visual production.

Notes

1 Aleida Assmann: Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses. Munich 2003, pp. 328–337.
2 Vladimir Velmar-Janković: Pogled sa Kalemegdana: ogled o beogradskom čoveku. Beograd 1992, pp. 19–20.
3 Istorija Beograda. 3 vols. Ed. by Vasa Čubrilović. Beograd 1974.
4 Hazim Šabanović: Beograd kao vojno-upravno i privredno središte u XVI-XVII veku. In: Istorija Beograda 1974 (note 3), vol. 1, pp. 323–348.
5 Divna Djurić-Zamolo: Beograd kao orijentalna varoš pod Turcima 1521–1867. Beograd 1977.
6 Djurić-Zamolo 1977 (note 5), p. 53.
7 Marko Popović: Beogradska tvrdjava. Beograd 2006, pp. 165–175.
8 Radovan Samardžić: Beograd i Srbija: u spisima francuskih savremenika XVI–XVII vek. Beograd 1961.
9 Evlija Čelebija: Putopis: odlomci o jugoslovenskim zemljama I. Sarajevo 1957, pp. 88–90.
10 Djurić-Zamolo 1977 (note 5), pp. 21–55.
11 Marko Popović: Turbe u gornjem gradu beogradske tvrdjave. In: Godišnjak grada Beograda, 38, 1991, pp. 61–69.
12 Djurić-Zamolo 1977 (note 5), pp. 77–78.
13 Marko Popović: Česma Mehmed paše Sokolovića, In: Godišnjak grada Beograda, 28, 1980, pp. 71–81.
14 Popović 2006 (note 7), pp. 183–208.
15 Aleksandar Fotić: Izmedju zakona i njegove primene. In: Privatni život kod Srba u osvit modernog doba. Ed. by Aleksandar Fotić. Beograd 2005, pp. 27–71.
16 Branko Vujović: Saborna crkva u Beogradu. Beograd 1986, pp. 20–27.
17 Donald Quataret: Clothing Laws, State and Society in the Ottoman Empire 1720–1829. In: International Journal of Middle East Studies, 29, 1997, pp. 403-425. – Nenad Makuljević: Vizuelna kultura i privatni identitet pravoslavnih hrišćana u 18. Veku. In: Privatni život kod Srba u osvit modernog doba 2005 (note 15), pp. 97–105.
18 Dušan J. Popović: Srbija i Beograd: od požarevačkog do beogradskog mira (1717–1739). Beograd 1950.
19 Pavle Vasić: Barok u Beogradu 1718–1739. In: Istorija Beograda 1974 (note 3), vol. 1, pp. 573–583.
20 Djurić-Zamolo 1977 (note 5), pp. 24, 34, 37.
21 Seutter's map is in the collection of National Library of Serbia in Belgrade (Narodna biblioteka Srbije): Belgradum sive Alba Graeca Kartografska građa, URL: http://scc.digital.nb.rs/document/KR-II-433 [01.11.2012]: »Instead of Tukish mosques now Jesuit and Capuzine churches are in here, the latter was recently built, AD 1735.«
22 Radoš Ljušić: Kneževina Srbija 1830–1839. Beograd 2004.
23 Vladimir Stojančević: Politička istorija do oslobodjenja grada od Turaka. In: Istorija Beograda 1974 (note 3), vol. 2, pp. 81–104.
24 Nenad Makuljević: Efemerni spektakl u multikulturalnom Beogradu: Povratak Vučića i Petronijevića u Srbiju. In: Beograd u delima evropskih putopisaca. Ed. by Djordje Kostić. Beograd 2003, pp. 169–184. – Nenad Makuljević: Trade zone as cross-cultural space: Belgrade çarsi. In: Common culture and particular identities: Christians, Jews and Muslims on the Ottoman Balkans (5th-20th century), Abstracts of papers. Ed. by Eliezer Papo/Nenad Makuljević. Beograd 2011, p. 38.
25 Djurić-Zamolo 1977 (note 5), pp. 210–216.
26 Felix Kanitz: Serbien: historisch-ethnographische Reise aus den Jahren 1859–1868. Leipzig 1868, p. 438. – Felix Kanitz: Das Königreich Serbien und das Serbenvolk: von der Römerzeit bis Gegenwart. Leipzig 1904, vol. 1: Land und Bevölkerung, p. 41.
27 Nenad Makuljević: Umetnost i nacionalna ideja u XIX veku: sistem evropske i srpske vizuelne kulture u službi nacije. Beograd 2006, pp. 263–265.
28 Branko Vujović: Umetnost obnovljene Sbije 1791–1848. Beograd 1986, pp. 137–139.
29 Radmila Gikić Petrović: Dnevnik Anke Obrenović. Novi Sad 2007, pp. 147–148.
30 Vujović 1986 (note 16), pp. 37–40.
31 Branko Maksimović: Urbanistički razvoj grada od 1830. do 1867. In: Istorija Beograda 1974 (note 3), vol. 2, pp. 301–306.
32 Andrew Archibald Paton: Servia, the youngest member of the European family or, a residence in Belgrade and travels in the highlands and woodlands of the interior, during the years 1843 and 1844. London 1845, pp. 49–50.
33 Maksimović 1974 (note 31), pp. 307–311.
34 Djurić-Zamolo 1977 (note 5), pp. 25–27.
35 Miroslav Timotijević: Mit o nacionalnom heroju spasitelju i podizanje spomenika knezu Mihailu M. Obrenoviću III. In: Nasledje, 4, 2002, pp. 45–78.
36 Bogdan Nestorović: Arhitektura Srbije u XIX veku. Beograd 2006, pp.177–189.
37 Nestorović 2006 (note 36), pp. 299–302.
38 Ljiljana Blagojević: Novi Beograd: osporeni modernizam. Beograd 2007.
39 Kurt Lewin: Kriegslandschaft. In: Raumtheorie. Ed. by Jörg Dünne/Stephan Günzel. Frankfurt a.M. 2006, pp. 129–139.
40 Branko Vujović: Beograd u prošlosti i sadašnjosti. Beograd 2003, pp. 97, 114–115.