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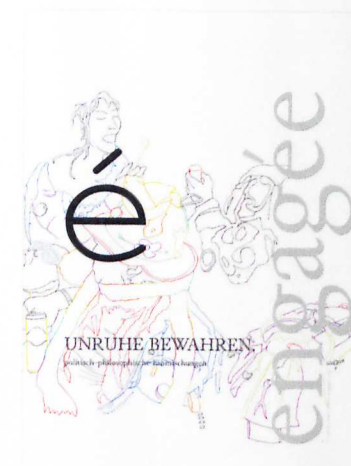
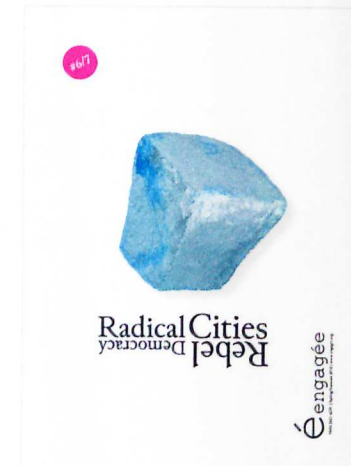
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# III

# III



// Wimmelbild „Recht auf Stadt“ von Marc Amann und Markus Wende

# Taking back the city

Ne da(vi)mo Beograd - Don't let Belgrade d(r)own

Initiative

The Belgrade Waterfront project, the latest incarnation of Bilbao-inspired “urban renewals”, is among the most grandiose examples of “investor urbanism”. Its costs for the taxpayers and the potential risks linked to the construction are immense, as are the various regulations violated by the planners. Yet, the Serbian government instigates a frightening social consensus for the project.

The Belgrade Waterfront was presented in 2012 during the Serbian parliamentary and re-emerged in the elections of the 2014 campaign. The media presented the project as a vision to turn the devastated and neglected part of central Belgrade, the Waterfront, into a 2-million square meter commercial complex: the project included hotels, office buildings and luxury apartments for 17,000 people, the largest shopping mall in the Balkans, and a Dubai-style 200-meter tower. The Belgrade Waterfront project wants to impose a new face on a city whose identity has been evolving continuously through the centuries. This program was promoted as a ticket out of the crisis, to a country in which thousands of

people are without a permanent housing solution, where the number of people below the poverty line is increasing, and on a city with numerous empty shops, including the city centre, where entire buildings are vacant and decaying.

### Project concerns

Behind the 2-million square meter area called Master Plan is the Abu Dhabi-based investor Eagle Hills Company, a real estate firm established recently. Eagle Hills Company’s main projects are in low and middle-income countries. The financial plan is based on equity and debt financing and therefore without assets that could serve as a collateral. When Eagle Hills Company announced that it will invest \$3.5b in the Master Plan, the obligation of the corporate partner was to build commercial and housing objects, but no guarantees were provided in return. The Serbian government promised to provide infrastructural support to begin the constructions, as well as to lease more than 100 hectares of the most valuable buildable land in Belgrade to the private investor. As the proposed

solution was impossible under Belgrade’s urban planning policies, the Serbian government declared the project to be of “National Significance”. Although the nature of this significance was never explained to the public, the project was legalized to go on the fast line. Instead of changing the investor’s proposal to comply with the city’s recognized needs and the long-term development planning, urban policies were rapidly changed. The city of Belgrade has amended its Urban plan to suit the needs of the corporate partner from United Arab Emirates (UAE), breaching dozens of its own laws and regulations. Belgrade’s Master Plan and its accompanying clauses were amended to deregulate the urban plans of the designated project area, suspending regulations on maximum height limits and incorporating the private firm’s Master Plan into the city documents.

The Serbian government amended the “Law on Urban Planning and Construction” to legalize the breaches of the Master Plan, and declaring investments from UAE to be exempt from regulations on public procurement or public-private partnerships. The supposed urgency to sign the



deal with the investor was given as an excuse to implement the *Lex Specialis* – the exceptional law, thus evicting hundreds of families living on the site, leaving many of them without a permanent housing solution. The government managed the Waterfront issue without any obtained permissions and paperwork (or obtained *a posteriori*) and without a single signed agreement between the legal parties.

The contract between the Serbian state and the Abu Dhabi-based company was eventually signed more than a year after the project began. Although the details of the contract were unknown at that moment, it became obvious that the extensive promotional campaign was a bluff. The information available from the contract revealed that the previously announced four years to finish the Project was stretched to 30, enabling Eagle Hills to speculate with land value. In addition, the \$3.5b were announced to be only €150m, while the public investment of clearing and preparing the land equalled \$1b, and for which the Serbian government took a €280 million loan from the investor.

The full content of the contract was revealed to the public only a week before the first foundation stone had to be laid. The authorities signed the contract behind closed doors arguing that the land had to be prepared first, in order for the investor to start the operation. The contract also states that profit will be divided into two parts, 68% to the private investor and 32% to the public. The result is that one of the most valuable pieces of land in Serbia was given under the lease of 99 years for only €150m, with the lessee becoming the landholder.

Meanwhile, the implementation of the project was followed from the beginning by a strong PR campaign, which included billboards and flags occupying public spaces illegally, promotional TV shows, unregulated refurbishment of the most prominent heritage building for promotional purposes, as well as a temporary exhibition space turned to be an exclusive, privately owned restaurant and bar. These elements of the show represent on a smaller scale the big image of the project: a rise of private businesses and profit through the appropriation of public space and funds.

Few months after the contract was signed, the field works have started. More than 200 hundred families were removed or evicted from their houses, parts of the area were demolished, and the massive riverside development began. On the night of the parliamentary elections, the 25th of April 2016, about 30 masked men and bulldozers tore down part of the Savamala district, including half of the Hercegovačka street, and destroyed structures on the proposed site of the Belgrade’s Waterfront. Night guards and random passers-by were tied down and harassed by the masked group of people. Although the citizens called the police and reported the entire case, the police did not react ultimately and redirected all calls to the municipal police, who also refused to intervene. State officials and media have been silent about the incident for days.

Some days later, the public advocate ombudsman published a report about the destruction in Savamala. According to the report, an organized, well equipped and motorized group of people took control of a street in the neighbourhood of Savamala. People



were deprived of liberty and personal belongings, including mobile phones. In two hours, the entire street was torn down. Examined audio recordings have indicated that the citizens have undoubtedly reported the case to the police. On the same night, after the departure of masked people, it was reported that witnesses and victims spoke to the police. After a conversation with superiors, a police telephone operator told one citizen that an order "from the top ranks of the police" informed to redirect all calls to the municipal police. However, the municipal police sent requests for help back to the state police and officials were not seen at the scene. The Ombudsman concluded that this was not an individual mistake, but, on the contrary, the result of a plan. The report assesses that "it was an organized violation of citizens' rights, coordinated on multiple levels and between more state and non-state actors." The government initially denied any involvement by city or state institutions, but none the less the Serbian Prime Minister told that the mystery was solved: top city offi-

cials gave the orders, but they did so out of "personal motives". The case is still ongoing.

### The resistance - Initiative "Ne da(vi)mo Beograd"

The citizens' initiative Ne da(vi)mo Beograd<sup>1</sup> (*Don't let Belgrade d(r)own*) was formed in reaction to the imposition of the project Belgrade Waterfront. Today, this informal group comprises of people of different profiles, professions, and beliefs, who share the responsibility for taking care of the city, its processes and problems, its present and future. Their activities have one common objective: stopping the degradation and the depletion of the city space in the name of ostentatious urban and architectural mega-projects in Belgrade and in other Serbian cities. They aim is to promote policies for the sustainable development of cities and argue for a more just dis-

<sup>1</sup> The name is an untranslatable play on certain Serbian words, the closest translation would be Don't let Belgrade d(r)own. The brackets suggest two sentences, one meaning "We're not giving Belgrade away" and the other "Do not sink Belgrade".

tribution of common resources while enabling the inclusion of citizens in the development of their environment.

The first public action of the Initiative was to submit objections regarding the changes in the Master Plan of Belgrade. To this purpose, members of the collective "Ministarstvo Prostora" [Ministry of Space] invited the citizens of Belgrade to a workshop analysing the details of the project. Based on the ensuing discussion, the participants wrote a text and, as a result, the citizens of Belgrade filed over 2000 complaints to the proposed changes. During the public hearing, over 200 people discussed these complaints with the representatives of the city authorities and professional institutions. The session lasted for more than six hours and all the complaints were rejected or only superficially taken into consideration, thus giving the citizens a valuable lesson on existing democratic participatory tools that proved to be only a simulation without any effective power.

Several months later, the activists of the Ne da(vi)mo Beograd Initiative

opted for different tactics to oppose the new Plan for the Sava Amphitheatre area. Proposed by the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade, the new Spatial plan stood in opposition to the current policies. The Plan was based on the renderings previously presented to the public across newspapers, television screens, billboards and trams, which also aimed to legalize the design shown on the model of "Belgrade on Water", uncovered at a ceremony held several months earlier to portray the direction of the new identity of Belgrade. This new identity was envisioned by an anonymous author, without prior consultation with professional organizations or the citizens of Belgrade.

The activists of Ne da(vi)mo Beograd have chosen not to give legitimacy to a process that was itself illegal. In one of their acts called "Operation Lifebelt", activists were equipped with inflatable armbands and lifebelts, threw beach balls to each other, and sang songs about Belgrade, all in order to interrupt the illegal Public Hearing session. Contrary to their expectations, and despite the noise, the interruption didn't occur.

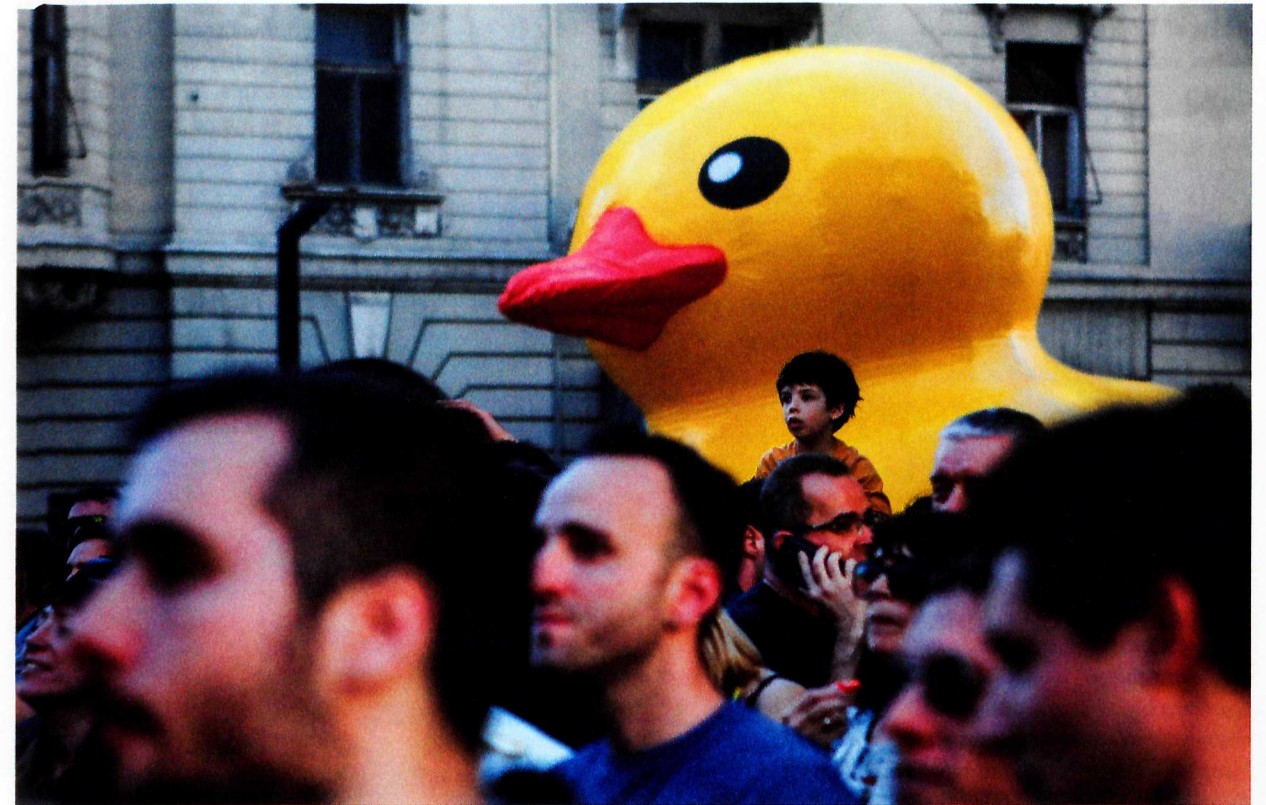
Instead, the members continued their work, complaints were again rejected, and the session was deemed successful. Once again, this has proven the non-permeability of the stakeholders to open forms of public debate.

Parallel to the institutional struggle, the Initiative organized events on the streets of Belgrade. Protests, constantly growing in size, have been organized to mark each stage of the pompous project. The visual emblem of the protests became a yellow duck (now the logo of the Initiative), representing what can float when everything else is sinking. Moreover, in Serbian slang, the word "duck" also denotes a trick or a deceit, as well as a male reproductive organ. A large yellow duck (2x3m) was positioned in front of the Serbian Parliament during the session in which the *Lex Specialis* was passed. This special law, which is not supported by the Constitution, gave for the first time the right to the state to expropriate private property in favour of a commercial project such as the Belgrade Waterfront. The duck was also the theme of the protest "Let's show them the duck", held in front of the

building where the contract for the Belgrade Waterfront was signed. During this protest, the city authorities ordered the operators of the public transport network to halt two trams, thus hiding from the view of the media and the officials the thousands of protesters gathered in front of the building.

Initiative Ne da(vi)mo Beograd once again organized a protest the first day of the construction works. Cordons of riot-gear police blocked the city centre preventing citizens from approaching the construction site where the prime minister and investors laid the foundation stone of two new residential towers. The protest was accompanied by chants and several architects and urban experts who participated gave speeches about the problems linked to the regeneration project. Soon, the very appearance of the yellow duck and the words "Ne da(vi)mo Beograd" became subject to repression.

Finally, the trigger for the series of massive protests in 2016 was the violent demolition of Hercegovačka street, two days after the Ombudsman published the report. Citizens came in great num-





bers and demanded the resignation of the people behind the demolition. With the Initiative announcing a series of actions if the Government kept ignoring the protesters, Ne da(vi)mo Beograd was able to gather more than 20,000 people on the streets of Belgrade, the biggest show up in a public political protest since the 1990s.

### Taking back the city

Over the past decades, professional politicians turned politics into a sludge that no one wants to enter. Attempts to challenge such politics have been dismissed and those who raised their voices against the regime have been accused of “practising politics”. In these circumstances, the Initiative decided to channel and intensify the voices and demands of the citizens and to put an end to the dominance of private and individual interests constantly overriding the public good. Ne da(vi)mo Beograd wants to end the system in which public resources are used for shady deals between investors and politicians, and in which the citizens always end up as a collateral damage.

Hence, inspired by different emerging municipalist platforms in Europe, such as Barcelona en Comú, and Zagreb je nas, the Initiative decided to take back the city and to make its first appearance at the municipal elections of March 2018 for the Assembly of the City of Belgrade. The Initiative wants to change the way in which we, as a society, pursue politics. The Initiative will serve as a platform that would enable democrat-

ic dialogue on the form and content of various city policies. Furthermore, it wishes to open a dialogue at the level of local communities, blocks and quarters, in order to define common priorities for policies that must result in a better life for all, and not only for some. Thus, Ne da(vi)mo Beograd is determined to fight against the appropriation of parts of the city for the private interests of non-transparent actors, for whose accounts, once again, the citizens of this state would have to pay vast amounts of money.

Finally, Belgrade is our home. But a home also for the ones to come: our children and their children too. The Initiative Ne da(vi)mo Beograd bears the responsibility for the present but also for the future. And for everything that we leave behind. Every decision made today will impact what happens tomorrow, and the decisions we denounce today are not in the interests of the citizens. The Initiative is the call to take back the city and an invitation for those who are interested in creating a better and just city to join.

# Eye to Eye with Freedom



“Eye to Eye with Freedom” enabled the citizens of Rijeka ...