



Emergence of brownfields awareness in Serbia

This paper is based on a Serbia facts finding trip which took place in spring 2006

June 2006

Authors: Gabrielle Hermann, Jirina Bergatt Jackson

(Gabrielle Hermann, Institute for Transportation and Development Policy Europe, Franziskanergasse 3, 73728 Esslingen, Hermann@itdp-europe.org)

(Jirina Bergatt Jackson, Institute for Sustainable Development of Settlements (IURS), Minska 6, Praha 10, jjackson@volny.cz.)

Serbia emergence

As Serbia emerges from state socialism and war, policy makers are faced with the enormous task of getting its economic and political house in order. Although major recent political developments (the succession of Montenegro, turning over suspected war criminals, etc) seem to be overshadowing the uptake of political and economic reforms, there is a pressing need for Serbia to think strategically about reforming its legal and legislative structure to conform to the EU's *acquis communautaire*. In that respect, the pursuit of sustainable urban development is the key to

making Serbia an economically, socially, and environmentally productive member of the European and world community.

Therefore Serbia needs also to address an increase of sustainable urban development through the promotion of brownfield reuse in Serbia. By targeting brownfield issues the heart of sustainable urban development in Eastern Europe today is addressed. Deindustrialization of Eastern Europe resulting from economic collapse after the fall of the Berlin Wall left cities with tracks of dilapidated industrial sites. On top of this the Serbian cities experienced civil war and substantial refugees and population shifts. This and the remittance of socialist planning have left a good part of cities like Belgrade either completely or partially unused. A process for bringing vacant and underused land back into use needs to be put into place if a sustainable urban development is to happen on any sizeable scale.

Even though so many international and governmental aid agencies are pouring money into Serbia, we are concerned that there is inadequate attention being paid to sustainable land use practices. Experience has shown that one of the most effective ways to prevent sprawl and improve city land use economy is to increase the reuse of derelict lands--which are in abundance in Serbia--and to decrease greenfield development. Maintaining greenfields is vital for the creation of livable and sustainable cities since greenfields endow a city with important recreational and environmental space. The technical and political capacity of planners, policymakers and NGOs who care about sustainable land use practices need to be improved in order to disseminate important policy and spatial planning tools that encourage the reuse of brownfields. Armed with these tools and an increased awareness, Serbian policymakers and stakeholders will be well prepared for the fight against irresponsible land use practices that inevitably lead to sprawl and/or urban dilapidation.

Background and research to Serbian initiative

With the support of the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, ITDP led a three-year campaign (from the end of 1999 to the end of 2002) to raise awareness that would help eradicate sprawl in Poland, Hungary, and Czech Republic. ITDP's work in Czech Republic

led to the development of technical assistance tools that addressed everything from institutional barriers to the actual inventorying of brownfields. Jirina Bergatt Jackson—ITDP’s local staff person spearheading most of the Czech work and, currently, director of the NGO Institute of Sustainable Urban Development (IURS)—has helped to sufficiently educate government officials so that they could access EU succession funds and, later, structural funds to address the brownfields problem. As a direct result of ITDP and IURS’s activities, brownfields were clearly placed in the structural funding priorities of the 2003-2006 National Development Plan. Since 2002, brownfields have been mentioned as a strategic priority in a number of city strategic planning documents (in stark contrast to Slovakia where such a campaign has not occurred). These policy successes were achieved only after an adequate amount of awareness and educational tools were developed and disseminated.

Our interest in Serbia was spawned by a desire to spread the knowledge and tools developed in the Czech Republic to other countries undergoing economic and social transformation. ITDP Europe and IURS o.s. took a reconnaissance trip to Belgrade in February 2006 to assess how problems like urban sprawl, rapid motorization, deteriorated neighborhoods, and dilapidated industrial sites were affecting sustainable development. As expected, we saw evidence of all these problems, however, we found that since land privatization is still in the planning stages, there currently exists a strategic opportunity to help Belgrade and other smaller cities undergo this transformation in a manner that makes urban revitalization and sustainable land policies possible. While in Belgrade, we conducted approximately a dozen interviews with various city officials and planners, stakeholders, and NGO staff. Specifically, several interviews were conducted with planners and managers at the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade and the Agency for Building Land and Construction, which manages all state-owned land in Belgrade.

Serbia findings

The growth of sprawling shopping and residential centers has primarily been somehow held in check by a low economic growth rate in Serbia. Serbia’s biggest economic growth impediment is political instability, which makes the country unattractive to investors. A

symptom of Serbia’s instability is the government’s inability (or unwillingness) to sell the land that it owns, which is almost all of the building land in Serbian cities. The government is in the process of selling 99-year land leases to private investors. However, investor uptake has been minimal since investors are nervous that once privatization is put in place, they will lose their leases. Furthermore, since the war, incomes have been depressed, further discouraging investment. Another factor limiting sprawl is an unreformed banking system resulted in prohibitively expensive house financing. The residents have no abilities or tools to manage their housing stock and as a result, the housing stock remains in a state of disrepair and market lacks mobility. Only families with a large amount of cash on hand can afford to buy residential property.

The only land that lies in private hands is the historical housing land. During the Balkan war, the government sold residents their flats to gain liquidity. There were no condominium arrangements made with the sale, and since investment into the property was very low, owners are not encouraged to do regular maintenance. This, and the unreformed banking system, is causing rapid housing deterioration. Owners are turning to the City for funds for maintenance, when what they really should be doing is organizing themselves into associations. Such associations help to maintain the upkeep of residential areas.

The German Technical Assistance agency (GTZ), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and US Agency for International Development (USAID) are providing technical assistance to Serbia with the end goal being land privatization. A drive for sustainable land use would compliment the land privatization process by providing legal and technical tools for inventorying and developing vacant and underused land. By the time land is privatized, the planning and financial regulatory system should be encouraged to recycle economically viable land. As long as Serbia’s economy and banking system stay depressed and unreformed it is unlikely that Serbia will experience much sprawl or rapid motorization. Urban dilapidation, however, will continue so long as residents have little access to credit for repairs. When Serbia’s economy improves, only a strong planning and financial regulatory system will prevent unsustainable growth from turning Serbian cities into sprawling metropolises.

A look at an English, abbreviated version of Belgrade’s Master Plan offers startling insight into how planners are neglecting to take brownfields into account.

Perhaps one of the Master Plan's biggest flaws is a plan to rezone large tracts of land for industrial use, when there isn't even demand for existing industrial land. This will ensure that new factories will be sited in green fields and residential areas, rather than encouraging investors to clean up and re-use existing industrial estates. In addition, there is no mention of reducing pressure on greenfield development and increasing the reuse of already developed land. The Master Plan fails to mention a plan for the large tracts of military land, which are prominently placed on high quality real estate sites. As demilitarization accelerates, this land will become vacant, with a potential source of military income being brownfield redevelopment. The Master Plan also fails to outline a plan to increase recreational access to Belgrade's two rivers.

Certain analyses are missing from the Master Plan. There is no analysis of land to identify incorrectly used land, and no analysis of the hotel and tourism market. Priorities for the city do not mention high-tech, research, or education, which are all industries of the future. In short, we fear that, focused on other pressing issues, Belgrade's leaders have not had time to develop a vision of how to achieve a human-scale city, where principles of sustainability are prioritized. Therefore, the Master Plan is more of a zoning or land-use plan and contains little strategic or master planning.

As mentioned above, the municipalities—which are responsible for zoning regulation, the granting of building permits, and the development of master development plans—are also presently the largest land “beneficiaries”. This means that although the State owns the land, the municipalities have rights to use the land. If a municipality wants to sell or lease land or buildings, they must get permission from a state agency. As both the user and regulator of land use, district governments find themselves with conflicting interests. On the one hand, as regulators, it is a municipality's role to ensure that land is used in ways that most benefit society's long-term development and sustainability. However, as land users who have to get permission from the national government to sell/lease land, district governments have a high incentive to sell/lease land to the highest bidder, regardless of how the buyer wants to develop the land. Unfortunately, experiences in other countries have shown that unless strong legal and legislative frameworks are in place, a municipality will sell or lease land to the highest bidder, neglecting its role as regulator. With so much land in the government's

hands, irresponsible policies and policymakers poses a real threat to sustainable development in Serbia.

While in Belgrade, an assessment of the transportation system was conducted. A reasonable new light rail line is in the advanced stage of development, and some bypass road facilities for through truck traffic between Greece and the EU are probably necessary to get trucks out of the city streets. Parking encroachments on public space are endemic. The municipality has signaled its interest in expanding infrastructure for cyclists and pedestrians, a solid local bike advocacy organization exists, and a good foundation for improving non-motorized transport facilities exists, perhaps linked to the new light rail plans.

Since February 2006 in close contact have been made with two local NGOs, the Centre for Public Administration and Local Government (PALGO) and the Standing Conferences of Towns and Municipalities (SCTM), SCTM staff Mrs Klara Danilovic, who is an urban planner and heads the Urban Planning Policy Committee suggested that we make her Urban Planning Committee the main target of any educational campaign since the committee is made up of planners and politicians from towns and cities across Serbia. SCTM has offered to help organize all activities and events. They have also offered to advertise any events on their website, monthly magazine and legal bulletin.

The Centre for Public Administration and Local Government (PALGO) has the appropriate expertise and enthusiasm necessary for local campaign work. PALGO has ten years of experience in projects that aim to achieve public policy reform, such as the property devolution process, fiscal decentralization initiatives, and the law on local self-government. PALGO agrees that Belgrade's Master Plan inadequately addresses the brownfields issue in particular, and industry growth in general.

Recommendations

We believe that **brownfields** continue to **plague cities** primarily **because of a lack of knowledge and political will**. Therefore, efforts need to be made to develop a locally specific training package to disseminate to key policymakers and stakeholders. This set of educational tools ought to address

technical, political, social and economic issues related to land use planning.

Policymakers and civil society should be introduced to the topic at a national and also at local level. **A brownfield national and a follow-up regional seminar should be considered.** Experts in urban planning law and housing policy from the U.S., Serbia, and Western Europe are currently working in \Serbia and should be invited to be involved in promotion of brownfields reuse. In Serbia already worked the Social Actors in Transition (SAIT) team (project funded by RBF) who convert their studies on specific brownfield sites reuse in Belgrade. A broad networking and awareness campaign needs to take place in Serbia to disseminate information and available tools to municipalities. Members of parliament, political parties, representatives of local banks and real estate developers, local citizen groups need to be invited to participate as stakeholders.

Serbian-specific case studies should be collected and **brownfield literature in local language** needs to be provided in order to breach the knowledge gap and the language barrier.

'Brownfields-working group', should be created whose first task will be the creation of a specific list of recommendations to disseminate to the press and government officials. This working group work should include a diverse group of actors such as NGOs, policy makers, international financial institutions, EU institutions, and business people. They will also be given the task of identifying potential allies to build a political constituency around these policy measures. Ultimately, the Working Group should launch a campaign to involve other stakeholders and hold several press briefings to raise awareness.

Use international Technical assistance (TA) to boost the Serbian abilities to deal with their underused and vacant land

IURS

IURS is a non-profit advocacy, research and project implementation organization, working to forward sustainable development practices. IURS aims to foster broad coalitions that enhance the competitiveness of accessible city centre development and redevelopment (retail, residential, and other) relative to out-of-town "greenfield" developments, which

I U R S P A P E R S S E R I E S
2 0 0 6

tend to be sprawling, car-based, and wasteful of resources that undermine city centre vitality. The NGO is strongly focused on issues of underused urban land and the containment of sprawl in the Czech Republic and Poland. IURS members are

local and international experts in various fields touching upon the urban land reuse agenda.

www.brownfields.cz

[contact: info@iurs.cz](mailto:info@iurs.cz)