

BODY AND DISTANCE

Learning Connectedness and Belonging from Modern Movement – Case Study New Belgrade

Milena Kordić, Ana Zorić, Dejan Todorović and Rade Mrlješ

ABSTRACT: The boundaries between the private, shared, and public spheres are challenged in completely new ways in times of pandemics, and we need new strategies to redefine them. During pandemics, prevailing requests for physical distancing in the urban space eliminated the programs from everyday lives that all have included social interaction, exchange, and connectedness. So, the request for physical distance caused actual social distance, which further brought new problems of solitude and isolation to the individual in the urban environment. How can architecture and design help to provide physical distance while maintaining social closeness, empathy, and solidarity in cities?

Modern Movement heritage, especially in the countries that were under socialist political regimes, teaches us that shared spaces, collective spaces as part of public spaces, are places in which community is being formed and strengthened, where new forms of affiliation and belonging arise. The socialist paradigm emphasizes the importance of open public spaces within the residential zone as places for maintaining physical activity and health, as well as social interaction. By examining the modernist development of New Belgrade through a comparative analysis of two case studies focusing on the same area—specifically, the blocks known as Blok 22—we can reinvigorate the concept of the connection between the interior and shared spaces.

The specific values of open spaces within the residential modernist block have proven to be particularly important during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, especially regarding the degree of connectedness or separation between private and public spaces. During the pandemic, a student workshop was organized, resulting in projects that offered new architectural scenarios and models for using shared spaces in a residential block. These models allowed for the preservation of physical distance among individuals while enabling social interactions and even the emergence of new programs as an extension of housing. The workshop highlighted the importance of this concept not only during crises but also in contemporary living conditions in large cities, which struggle with issues of alienation and loneliness.

KEYWORDS: Times of pandemic, shared space, solitude, solidarity, social connectedness, modern interiors

INTRODUCTION: The architecture of Yugoslav Modernism emerged and evolved during a period of economic prosperity following the crisis caused by World War II and the crises resulting from Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Informbiro in 1948. The years after World War II marked paradigmatic changes in Yugoslav society, accompanied by changes in both architecture and urban development, effecting changes in everyday life and its framework, the modern interior (Mrlješ, 2022).

The period from 1948 to 1950 is recognized chronologically as a turning point in social development and is characterized by the transformation of the country from agrarian and rural to industrial and urban. In line with

this, the role of the architect was established as a socially responsible task. The profession was consolidated in state institutions, urban planning institutes, and ministries. During this period, generations of architects operated and matured, contributing to the development of the so-called Belgrade School of Modern Architecture (Kulić, 2009).

To understand the modernistic urban development and the transformation of the dwelling conditions of former Yugoslav cities, especially Belgrade in the 20th century, it is essential to comprehend the significance of its specific geostrategic and geopolitical position between the East and the West, whose influence has been decisive on all levels from urban and architectural development to the

modern interiors design. The political and cultural influences of the East and the West, alternating throughout the history of former territories of Yugoslavia until the end of the 20th century, are fundamental elements of its modern identity. This identity is significantly expressed in the constant struggle between Traditionalism and Modernism, Conservatism and Progressivism. Within this dialectical range, a heterogeneous structure of former Yugoslav cities developed and emerged (Mrlješ, 2022, p. 34).

The first Congress of Yugoslav Architects, held in Dubrovnik from November 23 to 25, 1950, represents a pivotal moment in rethinking architecture and shifting the focus of interest towards Western architectural models and higher construction standards that affected everyday life and modern interior design.

CONCEPT OF NEW BELGRADE DEVELOPMENT

After the liberation of the country, the 1950 General Urban Plan of Belgrade returned to the idea of expanding Belgrade across the Sava River. The regulation of the swampy soil of the Sava river bank was the first major challenge for Yugoslav architects and the then-country government headed by Josip Broz Tito, who saw the New Belgrade terrain, which had no inherited urban layers, as an ideal space for the formation of a new state and administrative center of Belgrade.

From today's perspective, after World War II, the area of New Belgrade became a training ground for experimental architecture and construction as "the city of sun, space and greenery" in terms of CIAM ideology and Le Corbusier's 1943 Athens Charter. From an ideological point of view, it was the largest state project of that time, created as the result of long-term systemic planning, institutionally, procedurally, and economically supported by the state (Blagojević, 2007). The enduring legacy of

CIAM's modernist vision highlights how coherent urban and architectural design, coupled with social integration, contributes to long-term success. Representation of CIAM's principles was practiced through minimum apartments, scientifically grounded urban planning, adequate sunlight and ventilation in every unit, walkable neighborhoods, and the four essential functions of the city (Vais, 2023).

The urban concept of the newly planned city on the left bank of the river Sava was based on the New Belgrade Central Zone Plan, prepared by the working group of the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade (Đorđević, 1960; Mišković, 1969). The area was conceived as a rectangular space. This plan envisions a central zone containing public spaces for gathering flanked by stately public buildings (ministries, courts, theatres, cinemas, culture centers, etc.). However, the post-war economic crisis, the unstable economic situation, and international political circumstances brought to the fore the need for rapid construction and rational construction solutions. The central zone was turned into a predominantly residential area (Vesković and Jovanović, 2018) [FIGURE 01, FIGURE 02].

Urban plans for the residential blocks in the New Belgrade Central Zone were developed between 1961 and 1979, with architectural solutions chosen from various Yugoslav competitions, all aiming to create a new residential environment that would ensure quality of life through mass housing construction in line with the modernist paradigm of sunlight, greenery, and air. The blocks were organized in an orthogonal grid and designated by numbers. Each block was designed as an authorial interpretation of this modernist ideology, selected through open Yugoslav competitions.

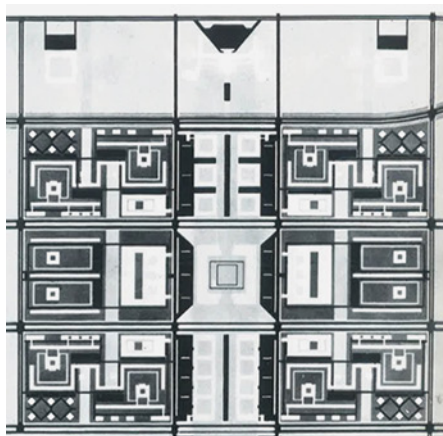
The New Belgrade Central Zone is a representative example of post-war Yugoslav architecture [FIGURE 03, FIGURE 04, FIGURE 05]. Thanks to the specific prefabricated systems



01 New Belgrade viewed from the Genex Tower © Dejan Todorović, 2013.



02 Axonometric drawing from the Competition for Urban Conceptual Design of New Belgrade 1948, by Nikola Dobrović and Milorad Macura © Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade.



03 The New Belgrade Central Zone plan from 1960, by Uroš Martinović, Leonid Lenarčić, Milutin Glavički, Milosav Matic, Dušan Milenković © Arhitektura Urbanizam, no. 2, 1960, p. 4.

New Belgrade Central Zone



04 The New Belgrade Central Zone area protected as a spatial, cultural, historical site. © Belgrade City Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments, 2021.



05 The New Belgrade Central Zone satellite view. © Google Earth, 2023.

regarded as prototypes, these buildings are still recognizable as the original work, even taken out of their surroundings and context.

The architectural and spatial value of the New Belgrade Central Zone lies in its urban settings based on standards of international architecture, as well as in the aforementioned consistency of the realization of buildings according to the original solutions that won the competitions. Innovations in civil engineering opened up tremendous opportunities. New construction systems, such as prefabricated concrete slabs and new materials, led to modern housing concepts grounded in the modernist paradigm. These advancements prompted changes in the organization of interior spaces within residential units, aiming for maximum rationalization and minimal dimensions for infrastructural nodes. This compact organization minimized the sizes of service areas, such as kitchens, bathrooms, toilets, and built-in wardrobes/storage spaces. These elements show how architectural composition and interior design evolved simultaneously, with equal importance given to the organization and design of both interior and exterior spaces within the residential block. Daily family life unfolded between these spaces, encompassing them both equally.

SHARED SPACES AS A PRIMARY VALUE OF NEW BELGRADE BLOCKS

This paper aims to draw attention to a particular resource of the Modern Movement legacy that can be valuable today—the space between outside and inside, the transitional space between the interior of the housing unit and the public space of the city. This space simultaneously represents the interior of the large modernistic open housing block and the exterior of the apartment but is a direct extension of both: the private and the public sphere. We are examining two case studies; two projects for the same area—specifically, the block known as Block 22. The first is the original project for Housing Block 22, by Božidar Janković, Branislav Karadžić, Aleksandar Stjepanović, and Milutin Glavički that was developed at IMS Institute

and Osnova Atelier in 1968. We focus on the values of establishing a connection between the modernist interior and the open shared space of the subject block.

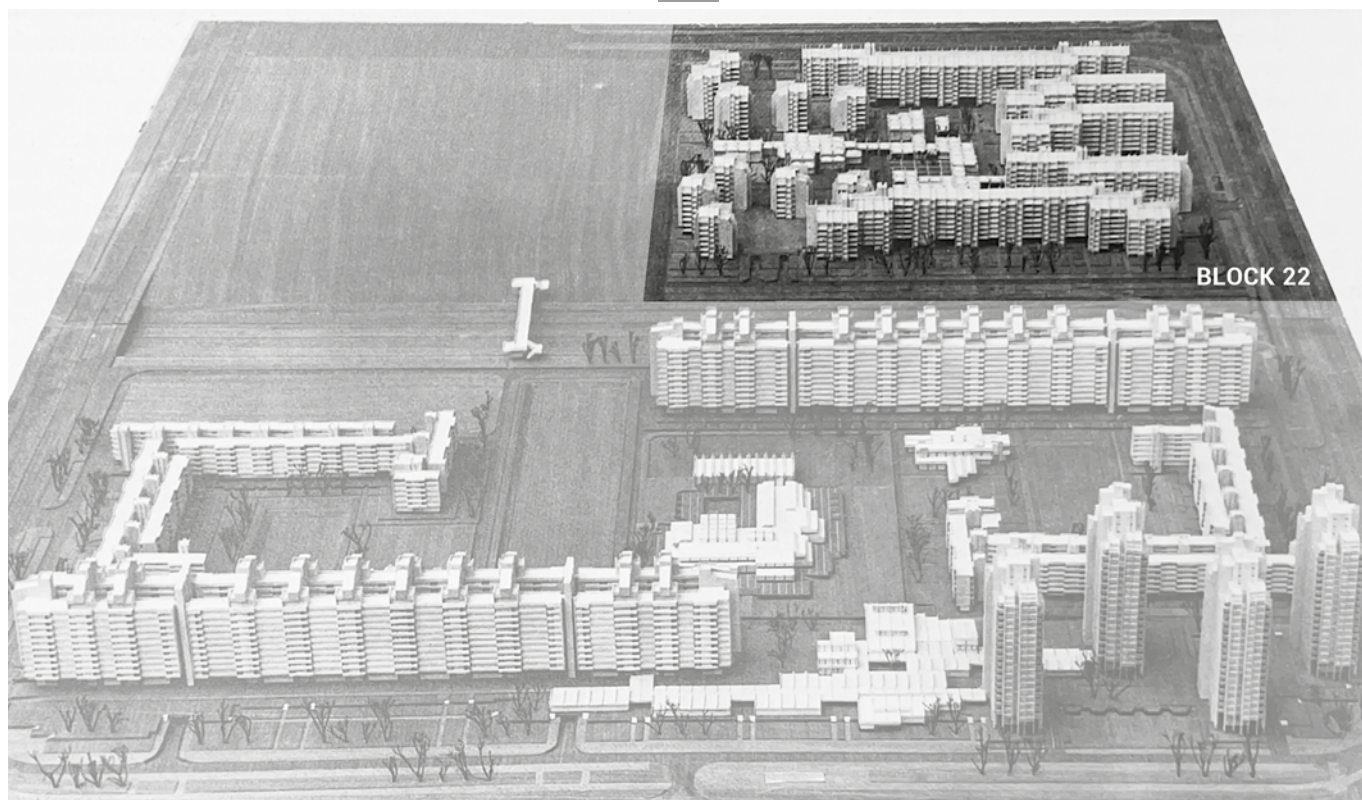
During the second half of the 20th century, Yugoslavia had a highly productive tradition of organizing architectural competitions, led by state institutions, to design housing complexes funded by the state. The highest intensity of residential construction was perceived in large cities, especially in the country's capital, where innovative architectural and urban design of spatial organization contributed to the improvement of housing comfort and quality of life of their residents.

The architectural designs for residential blocks in the central zone of Belgrade's borough of Novi Beograd stand out as examples of excellent organization of semi-private and private living spaces. They have grown to become a significant heritage of the modern period in Serbia. These common areas (indoor and outdoor) offered the potential for expanding collective functions outside the apartments and provided additional space for the activities of residents (Brankov and Manić, 2021, p. 96; Hirt, 2012) [FIGURE 06].

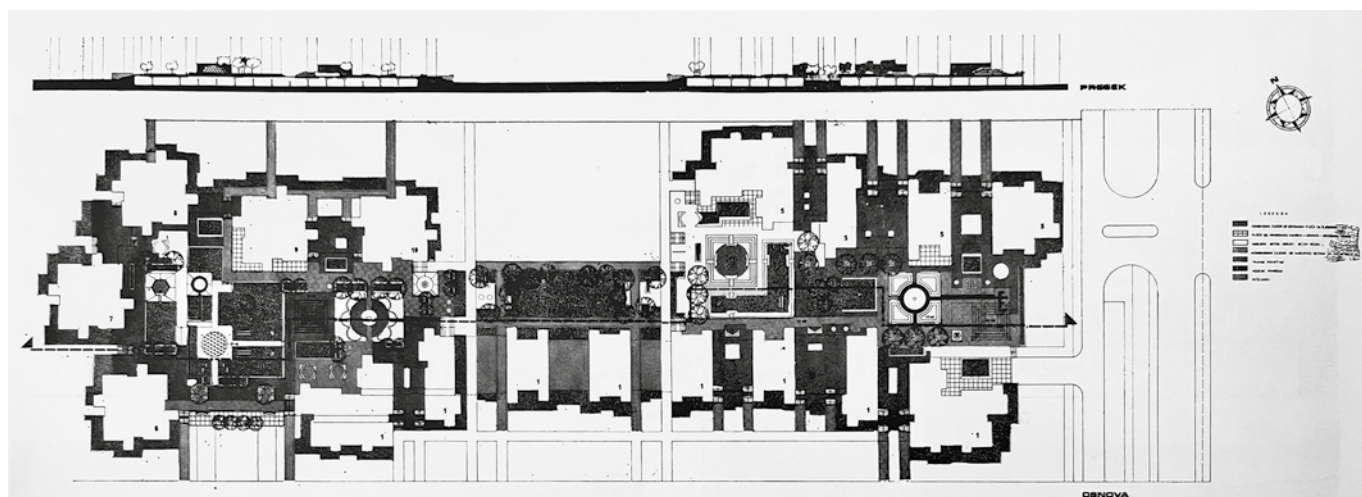
For the apartment's interior, openness to fresh air and light became an almost mandatory requirement. Walter Benjamin wrote in *The Arcades Project* about the nineteenth-century domestic interior mood, noting that "this mood involves, furthermore, an aversion to the open air" (Benjamin, 2002). Based on this, Ljiljana Blagojević raises the question:

Could this relation to the plain air be an essential parameter for distinguishing the mood of the century, or the mood of an architecture? Or was it the light, pouring into the mood of the twentieth century, that changed its identity completely?
(Blagojević, 2007, p. 144)

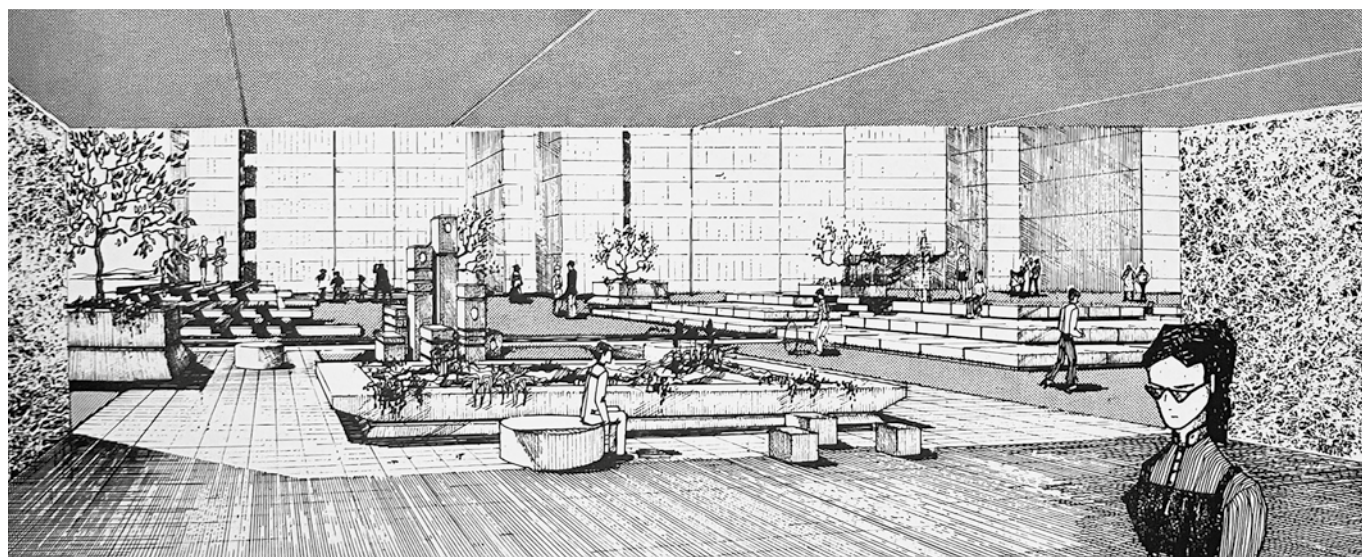
Blagojević further reminds us that: "Benjamin finds the 'threshold magic' as if, looked at from within, the outside becomes clearer" (Blagojević, 2007, p. 144). The



06 Photograph of a physical model of Housing Blocks 22 and 23, by Božidar Janković, Branislav Karadžić, Aleksandar Stjepanović, and Milutin Glavički for IMS Institute and Osnova Atelier. © Personal archive of Aleksandar Stjepanović, 1968 (published in *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia 1948-1980*, MoMA 2018.)



07 Urban design masterplan of Housing Block 22. © Arhitektura Urbanizam, no. 56-57, 1969, p. 112.



08 Perspective drawing of Housing Block 22 shared space. © Arhitektura Urbanizam, no. 56-57, 1969, p. 112.

relationship of interior and exterior, by this threshold potential, would be flowing and dynamic. The interior reaches toward the outside—the exterior—freeing the space of division so that light and air can flow through the interior space. While the exterior space of the block is organized and designed as an extension of the living area of the apartment, in which materials, colors, and forms reference the elements of the interior and architecture of the residential unit, the aim was to invite the residents to go outside and spend their free time in nature, making relations and connections with other residents. In this way, both programmatic and spatial perspectives can enable us to see the designed interconnectedness and continuity [FIGURE 07, FIGURE 08].

Modern Movement legacy, especially in the countries that were under socialist political regimes, showed that shared spaces, as part of public spaces, are places in which community is being formed and strengthened, where new forms of affiliation and belonging were arising. The socialist paradigm emphasizes the importance of open public spaces within the residential zones as places for maintaining physical activity and health, as well as social interaction (Hirt, 2012).

Given that the apartments were small and designed nearly to the standards of existence minimum, extending the interior to the open space within the block became essential for fulfilling the functions of the living area. This architectural approach fostered community, unity, and equality. By creating new spaces and relationships, society established its own unique identity.

Accordingly, the architectural language of the inside and outside spaces was unison. The treatment of the facades with divisions into bay windows, parapets, and terraces, which were rhythmically repeated, and elements (handrails, shutters, window frames) that were painted in vivid Mondrian colors resonated in the urban design and landscape treatment of the block's open spaces (Vesković und Jovnanović, 2018).

The strong expression of form that characterizes the open space, along with the abundant use of concrete in the design of elements such as seating areas, planters, and playgrounds, as well as the orthogonal arrangement of surfaces alternating between grass and concrete, contributes to a cohesive connection with the building facades, which together function as a scenography. This combination characterizes the open space within the block as an



09 Housing Block 22 shared spaces. © Dejan Todorović, 2022.

outside interior. [FIGURE 09]. All the principles of architectural structure design have been applied consistently to the organization and design of outdoor space and its equipment—from composition through prefabricated production to the details of materialization—color and texture. This free (open) space of the modern housing block can be seen as a polygon for the reinvention of models of connectedness between the private and the public or between the built and the natural environment.

The models of connectedness between private and public can be traced through three aspects: structure, program, and design. The structure refers to the plan of organization of the relationship between the elements of the open plan (garden, communications, infrastructure elements), the program refers to gathering programs both within the modern interior and the open space within the block, and the design refers to the matching of interior and facade elements and elements in the open space (rhythm of openings, terraces, materials, colors, and details).

LEARNING FROM MODERNISM IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC—CASE STUDY NEW BELGRADE

The open space of the block that has marked the Yugoslav modern concept has become an integral part of the residential architecture through its design and function, representing a training ground for daily outdoor activities, which fulfills the daily need for an organized free space of nature in an urban environment (Maksimović, 1969). Conceived as a space that belongs to everyone, it becomes significant for the life routines of modern inhabitants. The shared space of the block's open space encouraged the daily socialization of the block's residents through leisure activities, providing the opportunity to spend time outdoors, spaces for various recreational activities, communication, entertainment, and ultimately, the community's responsibility for maintaining those spaces. "Free space near the apartment can become a functional, vital supplement to living in the natural environment." (Maksimović, 1969, p. 8).

Based on the prototype of the ideal socialist individual, as a strong, physically active, healthy individual who selflessly contributes to the community, the New Belgrade concept of housing in blocks advocated sun, nature (green), and air for each individual in the city. Maksimović mentions the physiological, psychological, and pedagogical aspects in which the functional values of the open space within the block can provide benefits for all genders, ages, and social groups. Ljiljana Blagojević notes in her book *Modernism in Serbia* the influence of air and light on stimulating the good mood of the inhabitants, but also the contribution of cheerfulness and transparency to the character of the interior, which establishes the

health-conscious atmosphere. In this way, appropriating the open becomes the embodiment of hygienic interiors as a modern housing concept, and sharing the open space the embodiment of a healthy community.

Following the above, in addition to the merits of the formation of a model of community and belonging, the concept of occupying and appropriating the open space as a polygon for connecting daily activities and needs highlights the importance of airiness, sunlight, and nature as the embodiment of healthy shared spaces through outdoor socialization activities: playgrounds for children, parks and paths for walking, sitting, resting, and talking, greenery for the effect of relaxation, training grounds for sports and recreation, etc. In addition to the above, connectedness was also stimulated through activities necessary for everyday coexistence—maintaining greenery, cooking preserves, cleaning the sidewalks, all the way to organizing joint actions and gatherings. Even after many decades of changing generations, political systems, and changes in the users' daily needs and expectations, this principle has remained a phenomenon today, which testifies to the quality of the housing model established during modernism. The importance of this concept was also recognized in the changed living conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The inevitability of maintaining physical distances to prevent the spread of the virus had a significant impact on the quality of life during the pandemic period and resulted in a reduction in communication and socialization for the sake of protection and a passive lifestyle due to confinement inside the living space. These living conditions have triggered a review of healthy spatial distances and adequate dimensioning of space to meet daily life needs, which is, first and foremost, an architectural issue. Accordingly, the possibility of staying outdoors is recognized as very important for general well-being.

The importance of preserving social interactions during a time when physical distance was required has been recognized as a valid point of discussion at the University of Belgrade - Faculty of Architecture during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was explored within the framework of the student workshop titled COVID-19 Challenges: Architecture of Pandemics. The workshop comprised four phases conducted via the Microsoft Teams platform as a digital communication forum for students, tutors, and critics. This action resulted in the development of 29 conceptual solutions and studies within six thematic frameworks: (1) Enhancing the functional performance of spaces, (2) Alternative space use patterns, (3) Urban furniture and public spaces, (4) Protective equipment design - prototypes, (5) Altered daily life, and (6) Models for accommodating the most vulnerable groups. The COVID-19 pandemic has

refocused research on transforming cities and adapting to the pandemic's reality, with a primary focus on public health and alternative scenarios for accommodating the sick while maintaining normal urban life for other residents. In the architectural discourse, the central research question revolved around reevaluating spatial distancing and its relationship to social solidarity, aligning spatial and sociological dimensions. Students' research on the workshop highlighted the great importance of the organization and design of interior living spaces, treated as multifunctional zones that connect both work and free time in new living conditions, where people spend most of their time. Recognizing the importance of available free open space for physical and mental health in newly created living conditions through the unification of the external common space of the residential block and the interior space of the residence, the concept of New Belgrade's block can be considered an exceptional contribution of the idea of the modernistic architecture of interior space.

Following the quest for spatial, but not social distancing, students proposed a reevaluation of open-air work and living spaces, mapping and adapting unused spaces for improved leisure, play spaces in public areas, and interventions in public spaces to ensure physical distancing, but also emphasized the importance of the open spaces of the residential block, primarily recognized in the concept of the New Belgrade's block as a shared space. The paper focuses on a comparative analysis of two case studies—two projects for the same area: the open space within residential Block 22 in New Belgrade. The first case study was presented above (competition entry and realization of Block 22), while the second case study represents a student project developed during the COVID-19 workshop. The students recognized the relevance and potential of integrating interior and exterior spaces in the residential block, which became essential in response to the changed living conditions brought about by the pandemic. This approach is also highly applicable in the broader context of solitude and isolation in today's residential routines. The remodeling of the modernist concept of connectedness proves to be innovative even in contemporary settings. The student case study—named Party, playroom, and sitting room—that examined the degree of connection or separation between private and public spaces during the pandemic offered new architectural scenarios and models for using shared spaces in New Belgrade's Block 22, where it is possible to maintain physical distancing while enabling social interactions and even the emergence of new programs as supplements to residential functions.

The Party, playroom, and sitting room project interprets the implementation of recognized values of the New Belgrade block concept, which views open space as an

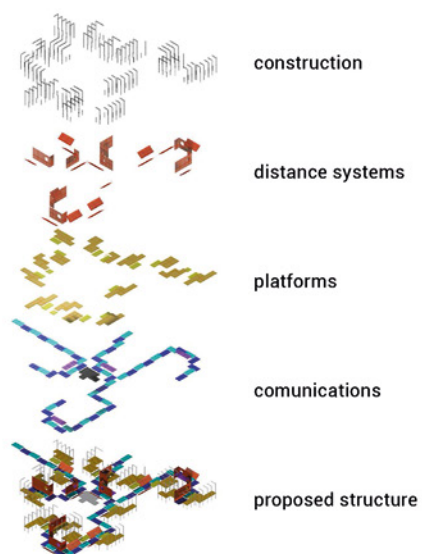
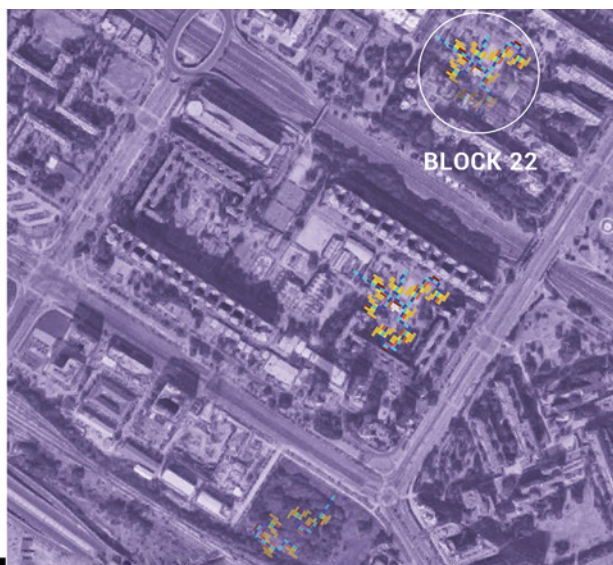
extension of interior space and program. The spatial-programmatic concept of the existing state was recognized as a model for further integrating outdoor spaces into residential living through recreational programs for all age groups.

The project was inspired by the successful socialization of all user age groups within the neighborhood during the pandemic. Concerns about the absence of essential gathering activities such as parties for young people, markets for older persons, and playgrounds for children motivated the concept of utilizing large areas within urban blocks through a system that safely organizes the rotation of these activities. Specifically, the structure of platforms and barriers at established safe distances, occupying space both horizontally and vertically, articulates the scheduling of various gathering activities: nightclubs in the evening, markets, and playgrounds during the day. Differently colored vertical barriers indicate the intended use and a woven mesh structure covering certain areas prevents access to places that have reached the maximum number of users who can occupy a single space (separate areas for larger groups in nightclubs).

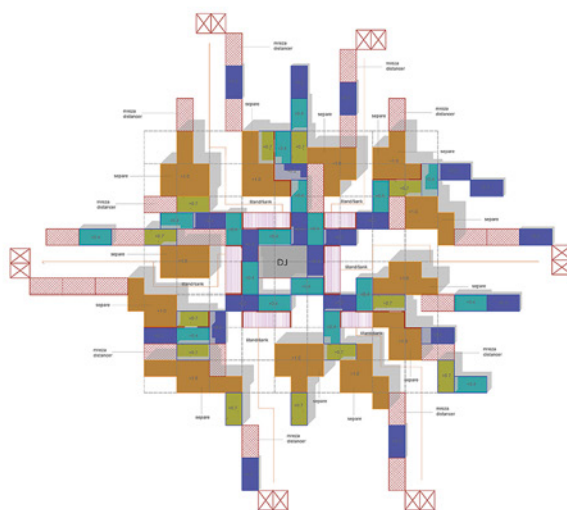
Inspired by the orthogonal structure of the urban composition of New Belgrade Blocks and the extensive outdoor spaces they encompass, the concept of the space is based on the articulation of an orthogonal network of open platforms. These elements clearly define the safe boundaries for different uses in various contexts. Based on 1x2 m flat elements, space is claimed by establishing horizontal communication and rest areas and vertical positioning of structures and distancing systems. Adding playfulness to the elements, not only horizontally but also vertically, activities can take place at multiple height levels, contributing to increased usable spatial capacity and enhanced safety. Furthermore, the playful structure, along with colors and materials that primarily indicate different space uses, stimulates recreational behavior and makes the outdoor space more attractive.

The analyzed project identifies the potential of the existing urban block structure as a model for designing outdoor recreational activities and socialization through three recognized aspects of the extension of the inner to the outer space of the block [FIGURE 10]. At the level of structure, students recognize the orthogonal matrix as a principle of handling and organizing space that is easier to control. At the program level, they are renewing the existing program of staying outdoors, movement, recreation, and playgrounds, supplementing it with new content that stimulates socialization and restores optimism during a pandemic. This enables a modular grid that clearly defines the fields of possible activities. At the design level, the use of modules recognized in the architecture of

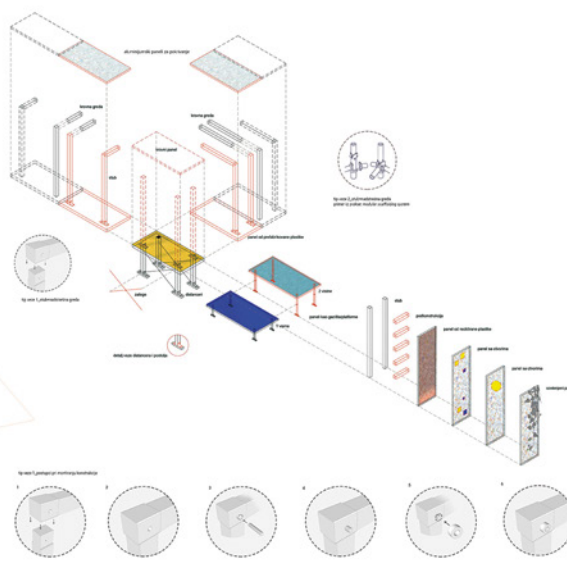
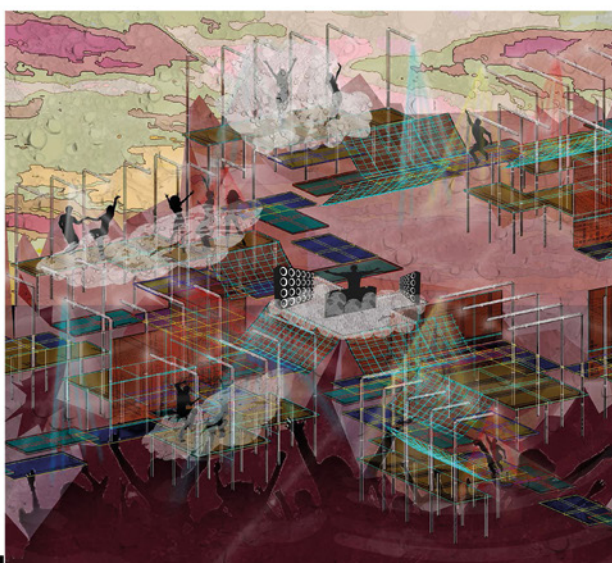
structure



program



design



the block represents a way to interpret the idea of shaping the external space as an integral part of the existing architecture, while the use of different materials and colors achieves the recognition of different roles in the space, but also the attractiveness and playfulness of the whole in a modern way.

On one hand, the idea is to adapt spaces for outdoor gatherings, socialization, and relaxation. On the other hand, by introducing attractive activities, it revives degraded urban spaces, stimulating the psycho-physical rejuvenation of users. This work explores the adaptability of the existing urban structure.

CONCLUSION

Restricting movement and physical activities during pandemic conditions of general isolation have a detrimental impact on the physical and mental well-being of individuals residing in urban settings. Such circumstances have prompted significant concern and a decisive shift towards genuine humanization of interior and urban spaces to facilitate and ensure recreation and connection to natural environments.

The connection between the interior and open shared spaces within the residential block can be established through shared functional, aesthetic, and ecological requirements. These principles can be applied across all levels, from interior design through the architectural framework and extending to morphology and urban planning, all while considering the same sociological, psychological, and ecological factors. In interior design, these requirements manifest through the careful selection of materials, spatial organization, and the integration of natural elements, ensuring a seamless transition between indoor and outdoor environments. By aligning interior layouts with the broader architectural and urban context, the design fosters a sense of continuity and cohesion, enhancing both functionality and the well-being of residents. The psychological impact of the interior space, such as the feeling of openness or intimacy, is directly influenced by its relationship with the shared outdoor areas, contributing to a balanced living experience.

The openness of modern interiors toward the exterior and modernist concepts emphasizing the connection between inside and outside, particularly in shared spaces within residential blocks, have proven to be highly beneficial and sustainable during the health crisis. The Modern Movement's thought and practice provide a foundation for developing more virus-resistant typologies that can flexibly adapt the boundaries between private, shared, and public spheres. This adaptability helps to mitigate issues of isolation and solitude while enhancing solidarity. Given the prevalence of spending both work and leisure

time in indoor environments, improving quality of life today requires a focus on interior designs that facilitate connections to the outside, both programmatically and aesthetically. Modern interiors remain a fertile ground for innovative approaches to creating new links between indoor and outdoor spaces.

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