Imagineining and Remembering City: Memory, Space and Symbolism of Belgrade

Ljiljana Rogač Mijatović
Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Belgrade, Serbia

Abstract: In contemporary “runaway world”, cities are becoming the main reference point of social life, change and development. The author discusses the complex process of articulating city identity and memory, as well as the meanings that arise in the interaction of memory, space and symbols of the city, within urban symbolism and cultural memory approach. What are the strategies of activating the cultural memory through multiple symbol bearers of the city, both tangible and intangible? The case study of the city of Belgrade indicates how the narratives related to memory and symbol bearers can be used in fostering culturally sustainable development of the city.

Keywords: cultural memory, urban symbolism, city, identity, Belgrade

I. INTRODUCTION

“Environments change. A sudden disaster may destroy a city, farms will be made from wilderness, a loved place is abandoned, or a new settlement is built on an obscure frontier. Slower natural processes may transform an ancient landscape, or social shifts cause bizarre dislocations. In the midst of these events, people remember the past and imagine the future” (Lynch, 1972: 3)[1].

The city is a compound of states of mind / emotions, mentalities, collective memory, traditions, and all of these are interweaving in the past and the present of the city, and its future development.

The starting point in this paper is that cities are constituted of multiple, urban and memory symbol bearers. Using the categorical framework of urban symbolism and cultural memory symbol bearers, the research develops a more complex insight into present and past meanings attached to the city spaces and places. The examination is put on urban and memory symbolic patterns, related to the layout of the city, its neighbourhoods and surroundings, the architecture, monuments, myths, icons, legends, etc. through the content analysis of books, newspaper articles, blogs, films, literary works, etc. This encompasses the historical facts and the collective memory topi, as well as the urban myths and personal memories that all together produce the narratives that identify the city. The paper is based on the thesis that the cultural dimension of the city as a whole, including memory, space and symbols is
an important asset for the city identity as well as for the culturally sustainable development of the city.

The core body of research is the case study of the city of Belgrade, with a regard to the following: What are the main symbol bearers of the city? What are the main strategies of activating the cultural memory through multiple symbol bearers of the city? The aim of the research is to investigate the complex process of articulating city identity and memory, as well as the meanings that arise in the interaction of memory, space and symbols of the city. The relevance of this kind of research is in the need to facilitate better understanding of the connections between different layers of memory and identity of Belgrade, in the quest for culturally sustainable development of the city.

II. Theoretical Overview: Urban Symbolism and Cultural Memory

The past has become a part of the present as a result of the changing relationship towards the history and memory, in a way that changes the whole perception of time and space. The new concern for the past, the "memory boom", is deeply rooted in the social and political transitions that are occurring globally. Within these trends, a different approach towards the history and memory is suggested, contrasting thus the dominant paradigms of modernity (Connerton, 2009)[2].

The memory is nowadays being renegotiated through the battle of globalization forces and practices of local cultures, in the manner of "memory without borders" rather than national histories within borders. In the contemporary "runaway world" (Giddens, 2003) cities are becoming the main reference point of social life, change and development, but also major interest points of transnational economies and globalization processes[3]. As a specific form of investigating the past in the global age, cultural memory is being produced and reflected through objects, images and representations, thus differentiating from collective and social memory practices. Through the institutions, a society or a nation produces shared sites, lieux de mémoire (Nora, 1989) both material, symbolic and functional[4].

Cultural memory, as agreed by many authors, relates to the interplay of memory, culture and society, in the process of creating and reconstructing identity, transmitting institutionalized heritage of a society and thus reconstructing the past in the present (Assmann, 2006; Kuljić, 2006; Đerić, 2010)[5]. The experiences of the present are largely based on specific knowledge of the past - thus the ways of experiencing the present are influenced by various perceptions of the past with which it can be connected. The work on cultural memory is an important investigation prerequisite of "mental images" of the past which plays an important role for the community in creating and shaping its identity. Collective identities, as part of the imaginary field (Anderson, 1991), are being shaped in a constant battle of discourses, including memory battles[6]. The identity reflects the living processes in a society, creation and change of social and cultural forms and contents, as well as the condition of absence of these changes.

"The city speaks – buildings are its words and streets its sentences. This is the language in which the community cherishes its hopes and memories" (Norris, 2009: 1)[7].

The city is a complex dynamic structure of different phenomena; it an urban space, a space of diversity and
individuality, a place of development and place of remembrance, a symbol of the past, of the present and of the future. Famous Lefebvre was exploring the city also in terms of reconciliation between mental space and real space, from ideological meaning of space to its experience in the everyday life of home and city, articulating and expressing the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1991)[8].

The shift from the challenges to history and tradition posed by modernism to what Lash and Urry have termed the radical exaggeration of ‘postmodern’ theorizations of the city and the urban, has disrupted the discourses on order and privileged those on chaos and the unintelligibility of the city as an organic form (Lash and Urry, 1994: 3)[9]. In fact, current theorizing about the city tends to celebrate the quixotic and the flux of the urban world, and the diversity of the cityscape. This means that city spaces cannot restore the lost certainties of identity centre because they, themselves, are produced in the multiple discourses of urban spatiality. The urban image becomes an icon with a vigorous expressive meaning. Close to every single real city, there is an imaginary, remembered, narrated or even "hyper-real" city (Nas, 1993)[10]. The urban space becomes a symbolic space, the space of imagination, which is being sustained and produced through the imaginative cityscapes. Thus the narrated or imagined cities acquire a powerful symbolic value and make an influence on the real one. In this sense, understanding the city means reading its "contextual realities" (Pušić, 1995)[11]. Imagining cities in terms of getting sense of the combination of information and affects as uniquely urban, is actually mediated through a powerful set of political, sociological, and cultural associations (Donald, 2005: 179)[12].

Urban symbolism reflects the historically forms socio-cultural state of the urban community and functions as her common memory. City urban is compounded of not only material tangible expressions, but also of intangible, discursive, as well as emotional expressions. Material signifiers include both artificial and natural landscapes, such as architecture and monuments. Iconic symbol signifiers are the people either individuals or groups, who are representatives of a certain city. Behavioural signifiers relate to rituals, festivals and ceremonies. On the other side, the intangible symbol signifiers include urban narratives and images, the interpretation of a city in movies, novels, urban legends, etc. (Nas, Jaffe and Samuels, 2006, in: Nas, 2011: 3)[13]. The challenge of the urban symbolism lies in between the production and consumption of symbols. In relation to this, as Till perceives, "places are not only continuously interpreted, they are haunted by past structures of meaning and material presences from other times and lives" (Till, 2005: 9)[14]. The importance of symbolism is in "the signifier – the signified" relationship out of which the identity, the structure and the meaning of the city are being produced.

The symbolic structure of a city relates to its identity, through the processes of imagining and remembering that are interconnected and in a way overlapped. As a kind of mise-en-scene of the past, the urban space has been for long overloaded with buildings, monuments and public spaces, and moreover with meanings and strong narratives of historical time. Cities are developing multiple identities in the unfolding of the history, both in relation to the geographical position and human resources (Dragićević Šešić, 2007: 39-54)[15]. The past exists as the projection backwards of present concerns. “The desire for a good city
in the future already exists in the imagination of the past" (Donald, 2005: 182). Thus city appears as a fragmented landscape with all discontinuities, all historical and ideological breaks being visible, in a historically tired symbolic system.

III. MEMORY, SPACE AND SYMBOLISM OF BELGRADE

Belgrade is a city at the crossroads of Eastern and Western Europe, a gateway to the Balkans. It has been the site of wars, conquests and rapidly changing fortunes for much of its thousands-years long history. Throughout the turbulent times, the city was also named by other names like The House of Wars, The Hill of Struggle and Glory, Meditation Hill, The House of Freedom, etc. It is the only European capital to be bombed at the end of the 20th century. All the way from the ancient, medieval, Ottoman, early modern, communist, transitional, and contemporary, the whole history of Belgrade has been marked by abrupt shifts in political status. All of these shifts deeply affected multiple layers of Belgrade identity. Belgrade is the capital city of Serbia, hosting major government and national institutions and foreign representatives. It is considered a centre of the South East Europe / Western Balkans region. It is a university city, a historical city important for its strategic position in the history, a cultural capital, a sacral city, etc. In the language of symbolic geography, it is a crossroad - frontier - border city. Finally, Belgrade is the city of spectacle (Dragićević Šešić, 2009: 26). It is through these various city identity types that the complex mosaic of a multilayered identity of Belgrade is being created. This multi-centred character of Belgrade can be seen as the consequence of geographic position of the city, the morphology of the terrain and the confluence of rivers Sava and Danube. It is best seen in the relationship of the old city core and other parts, like Zemun, Novi Beograd, or some suburban areas. Nevertheless, Belgrade is marked only by few signifiers of the past in the comparison to its thousand year long history, so that a huge part of the city identity can be traced only in memoirs and oral history.

This is an indication that Belgrade is in certain sense a dematerialized city of non-linear history, where each social and political system caused drastic changes in the city appearance a blend of historically tired symbols and a spot of the eternal beginning.

A. MATERIAL SYMBOLISM

The continuously changing architecture and historical bounds of the city lie at the core of the material symbolism of Belgrade.

The symbolism of Belgrade as the bridge between the East and the West shows its presence at Kalemegdan, the leading city image, most prominent cultural-historical complex and park. Literally meaning the city-field Kalemegdan has for long held a strategic significance, both in real and symbolic geography terms. The Belgrade Fortress dates back to the prehistoric times, presumably the Celts being the first to build there a fortification. During the time, up to the XV century the Fortress identity and outlooks changed together with its owners - the Byzantines, the Bulgarians, the Hungarians and the Serbs. The contested logic of space and time of the East and the West in the material symbolism is shown in the latter periods of Turkish and Austrian rule over the Belgrade Fortress. The Turkish asymmetrical and the Austrian symmetrical
approach in construction building are best represented at the Inner Stambol Gate. These traces indicate the deep layers of history and contribute to the story of sense of the place of Belgrade.

The buildings and monuments that dominate the city skyline, as the main symbolic layers, show how in different periods specific visions of the city image and identity emanated from certain social, political and urbanity policies. Among the most prominent Belgrade landmarks are Statue of the Victor, Cathedral of Saint Sava, Belgrade Palace, The Avala Tower and the Bridge on Ada.

1) Statue of the Victor (Pobednik): a monument at the highest spot of the Belgrade fortress, to commemorate the Kingdom of Serbia’s war victories over the Ottoman Empire (First Balkan War) and Austria-Hungary (World War I). This triumphal monument was erected in 1928, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the breakthrough of the Salonika front and victory of the wars of Serbia in 1912 until 1918. The statue was originally supposed to be placed on the Terazije square, but ended up at the Belgrade Fortress after people complained about its nudity. This monument symbolizes liberty as the key value of the city. One of the names for the monument in the construction phase were the Allegory and the Herald, because it symbolized liberation from centuries of slavery, the end of the old empires that ceased to exist after World War I, and an introduction to the new era of peace and liberty. It was done by the famous sculptor Ivan Meštrović.

2) The Avala Tower (Avalski toranj): a 204.5 m tall telecommunication tower located on Avala Mountain in the periphery of Belgrade. The first tower of smaller size was erected in 1965, and destroyed in NATO bombardment of Serbia in 1999. It was the fifth tallest self-supporting construction in the world, after Empire State Building, La Tour Eiffel, Chrysler Building and Grande Dixence Dam. After the reconstruction, it was reopened in 2010, once again becoming the tallest tower in Serbia and the Balkan region. It was the only tower in the world to have an equilateral triangle as its cross section, standing on its legs and thus formed a tripod, the symbol of Serbian tripod chair. The Avala Tower as a symbol carrier has been oriented towards the present, the modern expressions of the city from the time of its creation.

3) Belgrade Palace (Beogradanka): literally the Belgrade Lady is a modern high-rise 101 m building in the city centre, stretching from Terazije to Slavija square. It was opened in 1974 with an emphasized aspiration to dominate with its high 24-story part as the city’s reference point. During the 80s, it was the symbol of the city modernist tendencies and progressiveness of the socialist country, a pattern following the previous example.

4) Cathedral of Saint Sava (Hram svetog Save): a Serbian Orthodox church located in Vračar, Belgrade. It is the largest Orthodox church in the world and ranks amongst the ten largest church buildings in the world. The church is dedicated to Saint Sava, the founder of the Serbian Orthodox Church and an important figure in medieval Serbia. It is built on the Vračar plateau, on the location where it is alleged that his remains were burned in 1595 by the Ottoman Empire’s Sinan Pasha. From its location, it dominates Belgrade’s cityscape, and is visible from all approaches to the city. This is a strong religious symbol bearer that gathers multilayered traces of history of this place.

5) The Bridge on Ada: opened in 2012 is the newest city landmark. This bridge is the world’s longest single-pylon cable-stayed bridge. It symbolizes the open-
ness and the (post)modern city identity. It is also interesting because of the naming process which gathered some 15000 proposals, among the most popular were "Ada Bridge", "Harp", "The bridge of Patriarch Pavle", "The Bridge of Zoran Đinđić", "Giraffe", "Andric's Bridge", etc. The geographical name The Bridge on Ada was chosen because of the existing, mainly ideological divisions in Serbia that put a shadow on its European path.

B. ICONIC SYMBOLISM

Iconic symbol carriers of Belgrade are the people – individuals and/or groups, who are considered to be the representatives of the city - these are heroes, saints or celebrities. Despite the fact that there are many important figures and individuals who have marked the history and identity of Belgrade, a personality of transnational significance that would make Belgrade a pilgrimage site can be hardly found yet. Among the most frequently cited personalities who could be considered iconic in the history of Belgrade are Despot Stefan Lazarević, Prince Mihailo Obrenović, as well as persons from a more recent history, like writers Branislav Nušić and Duško Radović, premier Zoran Đinđić, etc.

C. BEHAVIOURAL SYMBOLISM

Whether it is the traditional street celebrations, those related to the religious occasions (processions, carnivals, etc.) or those of modern date (cultural festivals, political manifestations, demonstrations and protests, etc.), this phenomena of city streets and squares as places of live cultural and political events, the stages of "urban spectacle" where the spontaneous and the planned meet are of great significance (Dragićević-Šešić and Šentevska, 2000)[18]. Belgrade is a city with strong symbolic power in terms of urban spectacles at various settings.

Protests against the political regime and antiwar protests in Belgrade in the 90s made the city streets, public squares and buildings become a stage and a battlefield of contested political, collective and individual standpoints that were sealed in the memory and identity of the city.

Belgrade has a great festival tradition, hosting almost 100 festivals yearly, being the birthplace of BITEF (Belgrade International Theater Festival), BEMUS (Belgrade Music Ceremonies), FEST (International Film Festival), BELEF (Belgrade Summer Festival) and many others.

The behavioural symbolism practices act also at the level of symbolic reality which emphasizes celebratory, as compared to the past and the identity of the city, underlaying Belgrade as the "city stage" of cultural memory and "city stage" of urban spectacle (Rogač Mijatović, 2012: 522) [19]. These protests and festivals as behavioural symbol and memory carriers are the terrain for interpreting and reinterpreting the past and the future of the city through arts. Through these artistic strategies the city creates a new image and gains new layers of identity.

D. DISCOURSE SYMBOLISM

In investigating the multilayered identity and symbolism of Belgrade, especially significant is the field of discursive symbolism. In the European travels from the 16th century to the beginning of the 19th century, Belgrade used to be described as a strategic point in the South-East Europe, the door of the Balkans. The
city was symbolized as a fortress that was to underline its strategic position. This picture of Belgrade in the accounts of travellers started to change from the first decades of the 19th century, when it began to urbanize following its European models, and thus being described as one of the most beautiful towns in these regions (Kostić, 2003)[20].

On the other side, the inner imaginary of Belgrade can be traced in a series of novels by domestic writers, such as “When gourds flourished” (“Kad su cvetale tikve”) by Dragošlav Mihajlović, “Friends from Kosančić wreath” (“Prijatelji sa Kosančićevog venca”) by Slobodan Selenić, “Fake people” (“Foliranti”) by Momo Kapor, etc. In the creation of the intimate projection of Belgrade spirit, domestic film narratives also have significance: “Love and Fashion” (“Ljubav i moda”) by Ljubomir Radičević (1960), “With Throat into Strawberries” (“Grlom u jagode”) by Srđan Karanović (1975), “National Class” (“Nacionalna klasa”) by Goran Marković (1979), “The Boy Who Promises” (“Dečko koji obećava”) by Miloš Radivojević (1980), etc. (Daković, 2008)[21].

E. EMOTIONAL SYMBOLISM

Emotional spectrum of Belgrade is structured in binary opposites, as positive – negative, beautiful – ugly, safe – unsafe, centre – periphery, natives – tourists. The emotional symbol bearers that speak about the reminiscent past are various: feelings of nostalgia, hate, pride, humiliation, hope, terror, conflict, etc. Belgrade is a city full of emotions, external - that are projected towards the city and internal - that emanate from the city. Being the political centre of the former country Yugoslavia, Belgrade has been claimed guilty for all the destructive decisions and events related to the wars on this territory. So at this national level, Belgrade is related to the conflicts in the whole ex Yugoslavia. The international representation of the city through top media has also contributed to the production of these negative emotions and images of Belgrade. On the local level, among its inhabitants, Belgrade is especially loved because of its openness, tolerance and the dynamic spirit. On the other hand, in the emotions about “the belonging to the city” emerge the discourse based on “us” vs. “others”, the exclusive Belgraders who are urban and the newcomers who are rural. These sentiments about the city as well as its particular parts show the more compartmentalized layers of the city identity and its inhabitants.

Skadarlija and its unique bohemian atmosphere of kafanas used to be a symbol of Belgrade spirit, which was created by hundreds of artists and poets. The remains of this bohemian spirit remained only in the old path and the names of the kafanas. The nostalgia as the main emotional feeling for this “lost spirit” of Belgrade is best expressed in the lyrics of a popular song “The Ballade of a Dissident” by Beogradski Sindikat (hip-hop band from Belgrade):

“I remember long ago, still in the Golden pitcher,
The first time I saw the microphone, it was on the table,
In the shadow of a cold chestnut, where did my dear disappear?
I carved the name, threw the first rhyme,
I grew up on the songs of urban bohemia,
And stories of fishermen who are now gone,
Forged with the best, in the smoky tavern,
Courting the ladies, gambled with Limpar,
Once I was home & happy, sometimes lost everything,
Once I hugged a woman, kissed the pavement once,
And I didn't judge to myself, wherever I would woke up, The pain was the same, with it I teamed up, So I collected memories, like the scars to remind, That it wasn't always cold and gray, That blood red like wine, was coloring the night, Through the reflections in the glass, there were your eyes, And I had to go away; the carriage was waiting for me, Belgrade farewell, many of these things I didn't said to you. Do you remember how it was before? After all, what else is left now, my Belgrade?”[22].

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper we investigated urban and memory symbolic patterns, and by applying to this work a few approaches, we conducted a focused exploration of the identity and collective memory of the city of Belgrade. The research showed that the practices related to memory and symbolic narratives are important for the culturally sustainable development of the city. Multiple layers of memory in the interplay with urban symbolism have a significant role in shaping city identity and its future. The appreciation of collective memory is a central aspect of urban planning practices and is of central importance to the constitution of identity. City public policies should be focused on redefining the city identity, based on the collective memories of people, cultural heritage and a common consented vision of future.

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