

**Local Community Centre as Utilitarian, Governing and Social Space  
The Case of New Belgrade CMZ**

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**Publication date**

2022

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Modern Design. Social Commitment and Quality of Life

**Citation (APA)**

Dragutinovic, A., Pottgiesser, U., & Quist, W. (2022). Local Community Centre as Utilitarian, Governing and Social Space: The Case of New Belgrade CMZ. In C. Jordá Such, M. Palomares Figueres, A. Tostões, & U. Pottgiesser (Eds.), *Modern Design. Social Commitment and Quality of Life: Proceedings of the 17th International docomomo Conference* (pp. 329-337). DOCOMOMO.

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Docomomo Conference  
Valencia / Spain

Modern Design:  
Social Commitment  
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**Proceedings**

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# Modern Design: Social Commitment & Quality of Life

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17th International Docomomo Conference

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## Credits

### **Title**

Modern Design.  
Social Commitment and Quality of Life

### **Publisher**

docomomo international  
tirant lo blanch

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### **Design**

Innovatext (Valencia)

### **Printing**

**ISBN** 978-84-19286-59-8

**Legal deposit** V-1642-2022

**Valencia, 2022**

Indexed by SCOPUS

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Proceedings of the 17th International docomomo Conference

6-9 September 2022

Universitat Politècnica de València, Valencia

# Local Community Centre as Utilitarian, Governing and Social Space: The Case of New Belgrade CMZ

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The paper studies *local community centres* (Serbian: *centar mesne zajednice – CMZ*) of post-war mass housing neighbourhoods in New Belgrade. Those were designed and built in 1970s as multifunctional centres with facilities and programmes complementary to the housing blocks: socio-cultural, commercial (grocery stores), daily services (post office, bank, crafts, etc.) spaces for socio-political activities and office spaces for the local community. The local community centres significantly increased quality of life of the residents, liveability and socialisation in the neighbourhoods. Furthermore, one of the main aims of these spaces was to enable actual realisation of the self-management in local communities. This paper reflects on the ideological and theoretical basis for their conceptualisation, referring to Edvard Kardelj, one of the main ideologues of self-management and originator of the local community concept in Yugoslavia. Moreover, the paper investigates: how the local community centres were planned, designed and programmed, and how they were spatially integrated in the existing residential blocks; how their organisational and governing role has been neglected over time, and their main purpose altered; and what are potentials and socio-spatial capacities for their future reuse. Reaffirmation of local community centres as utilitarian, governing and social space is recognized as key for promoting participation and collaborative governance in New Belgrade blocks, as well as for improving social connections, solidarity and sense of belonging in these neighbourhoods. As such, the local community centres could be one of the main factors of revitalisation of the blocks, increasing vitality and improving quality of life of the residents. Furthermore, the local community centres could have a major role in unlocking the potential of institutions and individuals towards new effective urban governance structures, as well as institutionalising citizens' participation and bottom-up governance as direct democracy in the city today.

## **1. Introduction**

The paper's subject matter is twofold: (1) It explores how the local community centres were conceptualised, designed and programmed, as well as how they were spatially integrated in the existing residential blocks in New Belgrade;

(2) It investigates dichotomies (both historically and nowadays) between its two main purposes (a) the community mission and (b) the consumption – and how these could meet, emphasizing the socio–spatial capacities of the centres for integrated reuse.

This study on local community centres in post–war mass housing neighbourhoods is of particular importance for integrated revitalization of these neighbourhoods. As a novel type of urban spaces that facilitated collective values and common interest, but also domestic services, they represent an important legacy of Yugoslav planning and have both a symbolic and practical role in initiating community–driven approaches and practices.

## 2. Conceptualisation and initial use of local community centres in new Belgrade

Local community centres (Serbian: *centar mesne zajednice* – CMZ) in New Belgrade blocks were designed and mainly built in 1970s as multifunctional centres with facilities and programmes complementary to the housing blocks: socio–cultural, commercial (grocery stores), daily services (post office, bank, crafts, etc.), spaces for socio–political activities and office spaces for the local community.

As Aleksic (1980) argues, “local community centres are emerging as coordinators of living in the blocks – in physical and social sense; they are a basis for solidarity and sense of belonging to the community”<sup>1</sup>. The first CMZ in Yugoslavia was the one in Block 1 in New Belgrade, built in the period 1963–1967<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Uros Martinovic, CMZ in Block 1, New Belgrade. Photography source: Muzej grada Beograda, Zbirka za arhitekturu i urbanizam, Ur 13223. [“Belgrade City Museum, The collection for architecture and urbanism”]. Published with permission of the Belgrade City Museum.

## Local Community Centre: Ideological and Theoretical Basis

The *local community* (Serbian: *mesna zajednica – MZ*) was – in socio-political sense – the main ideological instrument and official organisational mechanism for realisation of the self-management rights of residents in Yugoslavia.<sup>3,4</sup>

As defined by Edvard Kardelj, one of the main ideologues of self-management and originator of the local community concept in Yugoslavia, *local community* has three main functions: (1) it is the main unit of urban plans, (2) it is a unit and model of self-management in a commune, (3) it represents extended material-technical basis for daily life of a family or individual.<sup>5</sup> Spatially, the local community was the main territorial unit, and the local community centres were the focal points within them. The local community centres had a major role in implementation of utilitarian, but also social aspects and self-management in local communities, as indicated in the General Urban Plan of Belgrade from 1972.<sup>6</sup> These socio-spatial concepts brought the questions of common interest, social commitment and engagement into the urban discourse and urban development.

## Programming of Local Community Centres

The construction of local community centres was crucial for actual realisation of the idea of neighbourhood, and in particular in case of New Belgrade blocks. As New Belgrade blocks initially lacked facilities and programmes other than residential, the construction of local community centres was a “necessary intervention”<sup>7</sup>.

In 1975 the city of Belgrade adopted a program for construction of 37 local community centres (out of which 14 in New Belgrade) in the period 1975–1980. Detailed studies of the program, considering the number of residents, needs and existing capacities, were conducted (see **Table 1**).

Program of local community centres				
	S	M	L	XL
	3–4.000 residents	6–7.000 residents	8–10.000 residents	up to 16.000 residents
<b>I. Social part</b>	390 m <sup>2</sup>	440 m <sup>2</sup>	500 m <sup>2</sup>	640 m <sup>2</sup>
	3–4.000 residents	6–7.000 residents	8–10.000 residents	up to 16.000 residents
<b>II. Supply and retail</b>	950 m <sup>2</sup>	1.190 m <sup>2</sup>	1.440 m <sup>2</sup>	1.440 m <sup>2</sup>
<b>III. Crafts and services</b>	290 m <sup>2</sup>	350 m <sup>2</sup>	430 m <sup>2</sup>	450 m <sup>2</sup>

	S	M	L	XL
<b>IV. Offices and administration</b>	700 m <sup>2</sup>	720 m <sup>2</sup>	1.060 m <sup>2</sup>	1.070 m <sup>2</sup>
<b>V. Restaurants</b>	300 m <sup>2</sup>	300 m <sup>2</sup>	320 m <sup>2</sup>	350 m <sup>2</sup>
<b>In total</b>	2.630 m <sup>2</sup>	3.000 m <sup>2</sup>	3.770 m <sup>2</sup>	3.850 m <sup>2</sup>

Compiled: Direkcija, SO N. Beograd, Urb. Zavod, Inpros

Table 1. Program of local community centres: minimal area of each part. Table © Anica Dragutinovic, according to the original table published in: Mileta Radosavljevic, "Projektovanje i izgradnja centara mesnih zajednica u Beogradu", *Arhitektura Urbanizam 85*, 1980, 13–20. ["Designing and constructing the local community centres in Belgrade"]

The approach enabled simplified construction through typification and prefabrication. As Radosavljevic (1980) explains, the main functional parts of the typical CMZ were defined: (Object A) Offices and administrative spaces, post and bank; (Object B) Space for socio-political organisations, culture and other activities of the residents (youth clubs, elderly clubs, etc.); (Objects C1 and C2) Space for supermarkets and restaurants; (Object D) Space for crafts, services and retail.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, the typical layout followed (see Fig. 2).

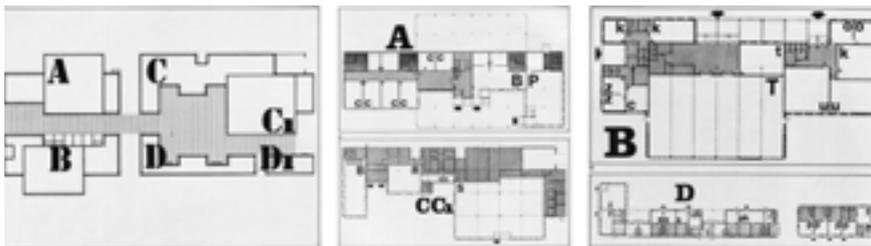


Figure 2. Layout of a typical CMZ and plans of its functional parts. Illustration source: Mileta Radosavljevic, "Projektovanje i izgradnja centara mesnih zajednica u Beogradu", *Arhitektura Urbanizam 85*, 1980, 13–20. ["Designing and constructing the local community centres in Belgrade"]

### Spatial Integration: The Case of CMZ in Block 23

According to Aleksic (1980), the local community centre in Block 23 was "organically integrated in the residential block and its vital flows".<sup>9</sup> It was positioned in the densest zone of the block (see Fig. 3) – "the zone of high frequencies and flows"<sup>10</sup>.

The composition of the four functional parts of the CMZ and the way they are spatially integrated in the existing tissue of the block defined it as "an attractive confluence, cumulative backbone and exchange place"<sup>11</sup>.

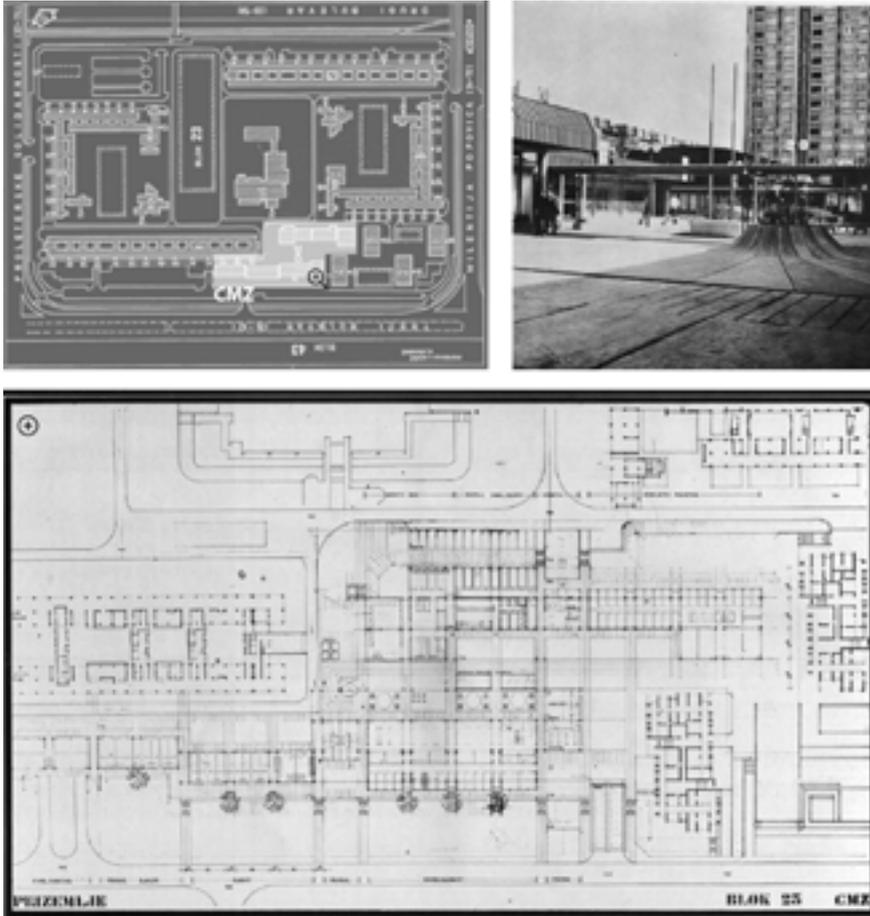


Figure 3. Position, photo and layout of CMZ in Block 23. Illustration © Anica Dragutinovic, according to the original images published in: Branko Aleksic, "Centar mesne zajednice u bloku 23 u Novom Beogradu", *Arhitektura Urbanizam* 85, 1980, 28–32. ["Local community centre in block 23 in New Belgrade"]

As Aleksic explains, it follows the flow in-between the four high-rises and merges with the porch of the linear building. In addition to this main longitudinal flow, there are several transverse flows – integrating it with the other parts and program of the block. As Martinovic (2020) argues, the local community centre in Block 23 was the first attempt to re-interpret the traditional city street in New Belgrade Central zone<sup>12</sup>. It was not planned as an enclosed building but as a porous structure with many open spaces. As a generic structure, made of prefabricated modules, it reflected self-management in spatial planning<sup>13</sup>.

**Table 2** shows sizes of each functional part in m<sup>2</sup> as it was implemented in the case of the local community centre in Block 23.

Local Community (MZ): "Milentije Popovic"  
 Location of Local Community Centre (CMZ): Block 23  
 Office/Architect: "Osnova", A. Stepanovic  
 Constructor: GRO "Ratko Mitrovic"

FUNCTIONAL PART:	OBJECT A (M2)	OBJECT B (M2)	OBJECT C1 (M2)	OBJECT C2 (M2)	OBJECT D (M2)	SUM (M2)
<b>Size:</b>	1.671,16 m <sup>2</sup>	509,97 m <sup>2</sup>	966,21 m <sup>2</sup>	179,33 m <sup>2</sup>	794,58 m <sup>2</sup>	4.121,25 m <sup>2</sup>

Table 2. CMZ in Block 23: area of each functional part. Table © Anica Dragutinovic, according to the original table published in: Mileta Radosavljevic, "Projektovanje i izgradnja centara mesnih zajednica u Beogradu", *Arhitektura Urbanizam* 85, 1980, 13–20. ["Designing and constructing the local community centres in Belgrade"]

### 3. CMZ: Community or commercial entity

The local community centres significantly increased quality of life of the residents, liveability and socialisation in the neighbourhoods. As a modern interpretation of the traditional city street<sup>14</sup>, or "modern bazar"<sup>15</sup>, they introduced consumerist dynamics dispersed within the inner space of the block. In addition to their utilitarian role, the local community centres were imagined as very important in socio-political sense. Already in the program for construction of 37 local community centres in the period 1975–1980, two groups of issues were defined as the main reasons for initiation of their construction: (1) the lack of retail, crafts and services, and (2) "the lack of technical conditions and insufficiency of space that would enable self-managing life of communities in new neighbourhoods"<sup>16</sup>. The construction of the centres was supposed to initiate interaction of neighbours and enable a socialist self-managing community. However, there were many deficiencies in realisation of the main ideas.

One of the main dilemmas, or rather critiques of the CMZs in Belgrade, expressed already in 1978 by Dimitrije Mladenovic was if the CMZ was eventually "a centre of consumption or a social space"<sup>17</sup>. A similar remark is made by Siupsinskas and Lankots (2019), writing about Lithuanian and Estonian mikrorayon centres. They argue that "the theoretical model of multistage domestic services, as well the ideological and communal mission of the centres, was quickly reworked into a type of space that embraced consumption and individual behaviour within the framework of collectivism"<sup>18</sup>. Martinovic (2020) argues that one of the reasons for the contested socio-political role of the CMZs was spatial scarcity reserved for the socio-political and cultural activities. In case of the CMZ in Block 23 Object B (dedicated to socio-political and cultural activities) occupied 509,97 m<sup>2</sup> – around 12% of the total area of the CMZ (see **Table 2**). And the average size of this functional

part for all CMZs in Belgrade was 110 m<sup>2</sup>, while 30% of all CMZs had less than 100 m<sup>2</sup> reserved for this purpose, as indicated in the *Conception of socio-economic and spatial development and construction of Belgrade for the period 1976–1985* from 1977. As Martinovic (2020) explains, this document rated spatial conditions for work of socio-spatial organisations in local communities as very modest.<sup>19</sup>

The key goals, that were to be achieved with the construction of CMZs in Belgrade according to the General Urban Plan from 1972, such as talks about common interest of the residents, firstly, or sense of belonging, secondary, were under-researched.<sup>20</sup> Mladenovic (1978) refers to similar Centres in Netherlands from the same period, in particular the ones designed by Frank van Klingeren (e.g. *Karregat* in Eindhoven). The construction of an ‘imperfect centre’, as Klingeren described it, invited the community to bring in own ideas in defining functions and aims of the centre. As Mladenovic (1978) notes, their DIY conception invited for engaged community and their collective commitment. At the same time, Mladenovic is criticising typification of architecture of CMZs in Belgrade, and more important, standardisation of their program. Instead, he is arguing that CMZs should become “Agoras of our time”<sup>21</sup>. This statement emphasizes the under-developed role of the *open* (outdoor) common spaces within the centres – which remained under-developed until nowadays – both physically and functionally. As highlighted previously, the CMZ in Block 23 was built as a porose structure with many open spaces integrating vital flows of the neighbourhood. Although consumption – which further increased with commercialisation of the CMZs within post-socialist transformation – became the dominant program of the centres, the CMZs remain vital spaces in the blocks, spaces of socialisation and exchange. Open (outdoor) common spaces, although physically deteriorated and under-maintained, are nowadays overtaking the social role of the local community centres, absorbing informal program and exchange, and allowing for participatory practices (Fig. 4).

#### 4. Discussion

The conceptualisation of the local community centres addressed some important issues for urban development and urban governance of the post-war neighbourhoods. Although being an unfinished socialist and modernist project – with the organisational and governing role of CMZs, in particular, being under-developed in practice – it had a major impact on the daily life of the residents and on the quality of life in these neighbourhoods in general. Reaffirmation of the local community centres, not only as utilitarian spaces and spaces of consumption, but also as governing and social spaces, is recognized as key for promoting participation and collaborative governance in New Belgrade blocks, as well as for improving social connections, solidarity and sense of belonging in these neighbourhoods. But how do consumerism

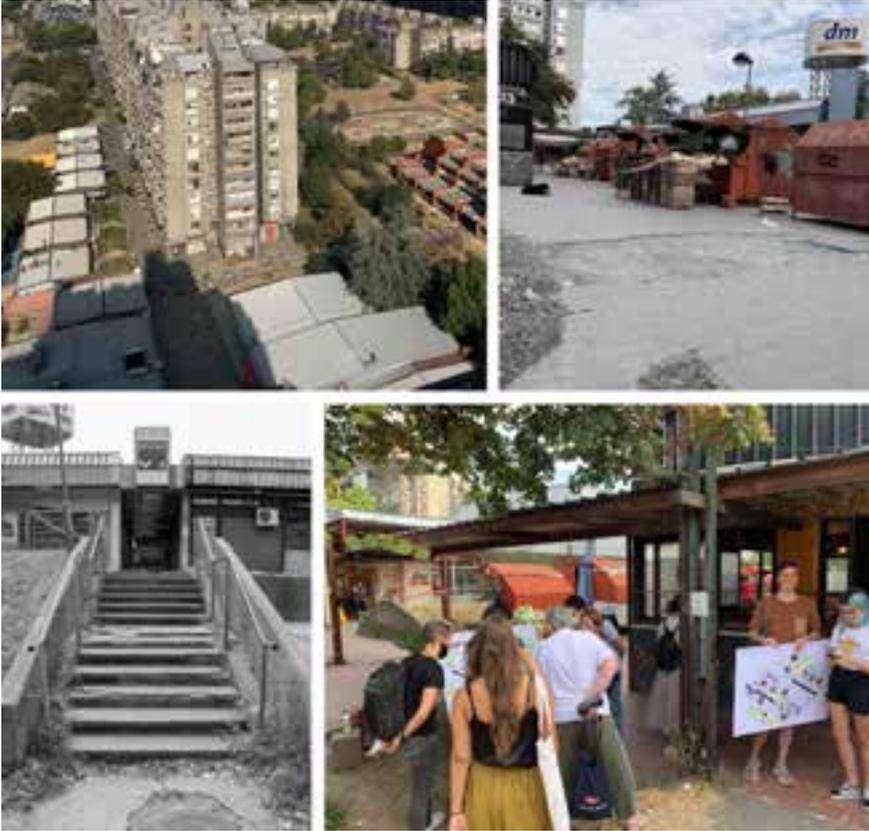


Figure 4. CMZ in Block 23, New Belgrade. Photography © Ivona Despotovic, Tamara Popovic, Zorana Jovic: Student Workshop, Belgrade, September 2020.

and community empowerment, as two main points of the CMZ concept, meet? An integrated perspective on production and consumption was in the core of the socialist idea of the local communities. The concept of *prosumers* is being re-discovered in recent urban studies. Thornham and Parry (2015) study this relation, and in particular in context of local community centres. They note that the local community centres are “emblematic of civic culture and community ‘empowerment’, through in particular a discourse of entrepreneurialism”<sup>22</sup>. A social enterprise model, applied in case of the Bread Houses Network, unites community-building, creativity and social entrepreneurship.<sup>23</sup> The local community centres in New Belgrade have a high-level potential to (re)affirm this idea of productive, proactive and creative communities and promote *integrated reuse*. Moreover, they have the socio-spatial capacity for promoting participation and bottom-up governance as direct democracy in the city, and thus, further empowerment of community, solidarity and sense of belonging. In this way, the local community centres, as condensed zones of common activities and proactive

engagement in local communities, can have a major impact by dispersing these socio-spatial practices into the blocks and eventually the whole city.

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## Notes

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