COMMONING BELGRADE
SPACES OF EVERYDAY RESISTANCE

Research Plan
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MSc3/MSc4 Graduation Studio: Positions in Practice
Chair of Methods of Analysis & Imagination

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COMMONING BELGRADE : SPACES OF EVERYDAY RESISTANCE

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BACKGROUND

Throughout my studies, I have been fascinated with public spaces, and particularly spaces of encounters. Whether they are public squares, buildings, or anything in-between, these spaces represent to me the visible action of people on the environment, the part of ourselves we feel comfortable to show to the world. In a world where inequality prevails, providing equal access to public spaces becomes a necessity, and in my opinion, a duty of governments and local authorities. Whether impacting the greater context of a city or a single building, this topic has become been a recurring theme of my studies.

In the MSc 2, Transdisciplinary encounters, I had the opportunity to explore architecture and literature with Klaske Havik, which reanimated an old passion of mine: writing. Through this study, I developed an interest in the link between storytelling, space and people, and explored methods of design based on literature.
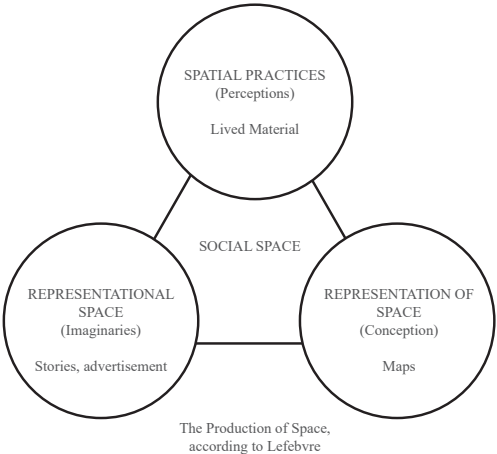
In the development of this graduation project, I wish to intersect these two interests of mine: storytelling and public spaces.

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement and Research Question

The striking debate surrounding the Old Sava Bridge and its preservation triggered the 10 week group research conducted by Matteo, Sara, Ana-Maria and myself. It highlighted how the appropriation and adaptation of the bridge are the key elements that allowed for the continuity of the bridge as a physical object. Although its materiality and form were key elements of this process, the research also underlined the influence of social practices and the imaginary created by these practices on the built environment, turning a temporary structure into a permanent object which removal is worthy of dispute. This research wishes to extend this interest for the link between form and social space. Indeed, if space is social, like Lefebvre describes it (1), then we can and should consider how different social practices retrospectively influence the shape and meaning of architecture. The idea of temporality and process of space creation rather than final product will also be central to the discussion I wish to start with this research plan.

1. Lefebvre, Henri. (1991). The production of space. In *Space and Culture* (Issue 1). Blackwell.

SPATIAL PRACTICES
(Perceptions)

Lived Material

SOCIAL SPACE

REPRESENTATIONAL
SPACE
(Imaginaries)

Stories, advertisement

REPRESENTATION OF
SPACE
(Conception)

Maps

The Production of Space,
according to Lefebvre

Map of Identified Commons in Belgrade

Dubravaka Sekulic describes how Yugoslavian socialism promoted new political forms of participation, which hinged on self-management principles.(2) She explains how this process encouraged the emergence of many self-built projects, mainly houses and housing extensions which are to this day visibly present in the city. On a more global scale, they encouraged actions of the citizens on their environment, creating a culture of urban actions. This activeness of Belgrade inhabitants was also highlighted by the research of Raluca and Sem, and inspired me to search further into this culture of active adaptation of the city by its inhabitants.

2. Sekulic, D. (2014). Don't Stare So Romantically: On Extralegal Space in Belgrade. *Archis* , 38. https://archis.org/volume/dont-stare-so-romantically-on-extralegal-space-in-belgrade/

The city of Belgrade, like many European capitals, has been the scene of the privatisation of many public amenities, and the disappearance of spaces of culture.(3) In this game of investments that is currently at play, the losers are arguably the citizens of Belgrade whose right to public spatial resources is reduced or removed. In this struggle, similarly to the production of illegal self-built houses, Belgrade has experienced the emergence of self-managed communal spaces that I will refer to as Commons.(4) Whether led by associations or privately managed, indoor or outdoor, my visit of Belgrade has highlighted the presence of many of these Commons throughout the city. Usually spaces of underground culture and marginalised identities, many Commons of Belgrade seem to have appeared as spaces of resistance against a system and often, are linked to activism activities.(5) However, more than against a government, or an institution, they also seem to act in an effort of bringing people together, and attempt to bridge the gap between this falsely established us and them. For instance, the Magacin cultural centre or the Zvezda Cinema (Novi Bioskop Zvezda) emerged in rebellious act against the privatisation and closure of art and cinema amenities, which can be linked to the lack of support and funding from governmental sources.

3. *Battle for Belgrade: why activists are pushing back against Serbia's loss of cultural space* — The Calvert Journal. (n.d.). Retrieved November 2, 2021, from https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/8148/battle-belgrade-activists-serbia-cultural-space

4. See in Framework of Research a more complete definition of the commons

5. Čukić, I., and othes (2020). S*paces of Commoning: Urban Commons in the Ex-Yu Region* (I. Čukić & J. Timotijević, Eds.). Ministry of Space / Institute for Urban Politics.

Photo of the courtyard of
Novi Bioskop Zvezda

Image of the co-working
space at the Magacin
Center
From *Magacin: A model
for a self-organised
cultural centre*

Nonetheless, at their core, they aim to promote art and culture for all; if this was made feasible through the rebelious action of illigal squatting of spaces, they have since their creation also been in close contact with institutions in order to bridge this illegality and become themselves institutions. On the other side of the spectrum, we have spaces like The DrugStore: installed in an old slaughter-house, which is now at the heart of the underground queer and club scene, we could argue that its original user base were widely part of groups marginalised by Serbian society. Though removed from any political debate, the emmergeance of this scene provided support to a group through the communal shaping of space, while also hosting a commercial venue.

I would argue that the act of resistance of commoning in Belgrade should therefore not be systematically considered targeted against any particular actor, but more as a resistance and support for the communal life of the city.

From the visit of these spaces, I have observed such architectural richness that I came to wonder whether an architect could be the producer of such space. Often utilising unused or abandoned spaces and usually modified through a slow process of participatory design, the commons and their sharing practices seem to harvest the potential of spaces in a different way than commonly explored by architects. Rather than a design, the commons emerge of a process.

This research proposal will focus on the architectural manifestations of these sharing practices and collaboration in the city of Belgrade. I will attempt to understand the process of shaping the Commons at work in Belgrade.

Why study the Commons? In the first instance, because of their democratic nature, and their ability to be a safe space for expression, and potentially a refuge for persecuted communities. This becomes particularly relevant at a time where Belgrade is host to many incontestably undemocratic developments, where the voices of many citizens are shut down for the greater good of the economic development of the city; for instance in the case of the Belgrade WaterFront Project(6).

6. Čukić, I., and othes (2020). *Spaces of Commoning: Urban Commons in the Ex-Yu Region* (I. Čukić & J. Timotijević, Eds.). Ministry of Space / Institute for Urban Politics, p66.

Similarely, if they promote community life, this idea of "*vivre ensemble*" while beeing open to anyone, it is often without at their core striving for user diversity and visibility. This fine line between privacy and openness makes Commons fascinating in-between spaces. Another aspect of these spaces I believe valuable to explore is their materiality and building technique. Indeed, in a world where scarcity of materials and funds dictates the evolution of the built environment, turning to commoning practices which are by essence much cheaper and focussing usually on sharp interventions could help us design more sustainable and approachable spaces, but also teach us to better read the potential of un(under)used space.

How does the commoning of the city takes place in Belgrade? What kind of spatial qualities allows for the commoning of the city? Which strategies are applied, and what are the resulting spaces of this process?

to the left:
Image of the stage created by the KPGT for the play "Strah i nada u SR Nemackoj" (Fear and hope in SR Germany) performed at the Sugar Factory in October and November 2021 (photo by author)

FRAMEWORK OF RESEARCH

Key Terms and References

To frame this research, I will utilise concepts and theories developed in the field of architecture and social sciences.

The Right to the City

As described by Lefebvre in 1968's *Le Droit à la ville*, exercising a 'right to the city' defines the right of citizens, regardless of citizenship, ethnicity, ability, gender and so forth, to participate in shaping the city and adapting it to their need`(7). In his definition, it is the mark of a revolutionary struggle against capitalism and ultimately the state, in a reaction against the purely functional approach of certain modernist architects and town planners.

Although very present in the 60s and 70s this concept has been recently reinvested and redefined by actors like UNESCO and UN-habitat in an effort to de-politicise what is at its core a radical call to change existing social, political and economical construct.

Commons/Commoning

From the Latin *communis* - 'of the community', commons is a term initially used in economic and monetary discourse, to describe land or objects which property is shared by multiple actors. Popularised in the late 1960s by Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic winner Elinor Ostrom (8), the term of Commons as an architectural concept emerges alongside the development of a multidisciplinary architecture which look at social sciences and economics, and is often referred to in the context of right to the city discourses; in this context, the Commons is understood as a tangible space, but also as a civic economy and a process.

7. Lefebvre, H. (2009). *Le droit à la ville.*

8. Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action.* Cambridge University Press.

In his book *Common Space, the City as Commons,* Stravos Stavrides defines the Commons as "distinct from public as well as from private spaces, 'common spaces' emerge in the contemporary metropolis as sites open to public use in which, however, rules and forms of use do not depend upon and are not controlled by a prevailing authority."(9) In his analysis, he highlights two ways in which commoning practices can be established: either "organized in a closed system which explicitly defines shared space within a definite perimeter and which corresponds to a specific community of commoners, or they may take the form of an open network of passages through which emerging and always-open communities of commoners communicate and exchange goods and ideas."(9) My research will attempt to look at both scenarios and understand why a common space might become one or the other.

In the context of Serbia and Ex-Yugoslavia, the idea of the Commons has been explored by architects in *Space of Commoning:Urban commons in Ex-YU Regions*, presenting the legacy of self-management socialism in the particular context that shaped the political and economic realities to better understand and interpret the contemporary commons in the regions. (10) My research will use their finding as a basis to understand the particularity of Serbian Commons.

One could argue from those definitions that the right to the city and the principles of commoning are at their core rebellions, individual actions, and therefore cannot be a creation of architectural production or institutions. I would like to propose that there is an architecture at the boundary of the two, one which is influenced by practices of commoning and takes into account the struggles, while taking advantages of the system in order to improve it. Indeed, if the benefice of the Commons to individuals and communities is undeniable, the architecture profession should not dismiss them as simply individualistic approaches, but study them in order to extract

9. Stavrides, S. (2016). *Common space : the city as common*s. Zed Books Ltd

10. Čukić, I. and other (2020). *Spaces of Commoning: Urban Commons in the Ex-Yu Region* (I. Čukić & J. Timotijević, Eds.). Ministry of Space / Institute for Urban Politics.

Cover of the
*Compendium for the
Civic Economy* by
Architecture 00.

Photo of the JC Walks
Pedestrian Enhancement
Plan in Jersey City, NJ.
By Streets Plan

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principles of space creation applicable to any project. This approach to commoning the city can be found in the work of Atelier Bow-Wow (11) or 00 Architecture (12); architecture practices which study the Commons and more particularly their economy in order to produce more viable and approachable buildings.

Tactical / Impact Urbanism

In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* 1984, Michel de Certeau introduce the term tactical urbanism.(13) Popularised in the 2010s through experiments in many capital cities like Paris, New-York or Madrid, Tactical Urbanism is an approach to urbanism which focusses on deliberate yet phased approach to instigating change within the city. It usually looks at local solutions for local planning challenges, and focus on short-term commitments as a process towards a greater change, implying that a small change with low risk could potentially result in a wider and more durable change and reward.
The study of the commons highlight an approach to the creation of space which can be compared to Tactical Urbanism. Using the principles established by companies like *Street Plans* (14), to frame the commoning of spaces will help me understand how small changes create a wider impact.

11. Atelier Bow-Wow – Constructing the Commons. (n.d.). Retrieved November 2, 2021, from http://constructingthecommons.com/person/atelier-bow-wow/

12. Architecture 00. (2011). *Compendium for the Civic Economy*. 00:/ . https://www.architecture00.net/00projects/compendium-for-the-civic-economy

13. de Certeau, M. (1984). The Practice of Everyday Life. University of California Press.

14. Tactical Urbanism. (n.d.). Retrieved November 2, 2021, from http://tacticalurbanismguide.com/about/

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

How and why?

In order to understand the process of commoning, I will use methodologies which belongs to ethnographic research and praxeology, which will be coupled with a material culture approach. Indeed, the social nature of the commons renders its study futile without the study of its users. Understanding the action and reaction of the users to the spaces will therefore have to be at the core of this research. Retroactively, my observation on the specific process of space making of the Commons asks for an evaluation of the impact of the social activities and their economies on the materiality and technique of the Commons.

The methods of analysis will mainly be based on observation and data collection, but also spatial analysis, and literature review. To develop a complete understanding the process of commoning Belgrade, I will first conduct some historical research through literature study, but also contact with local association, newspaper etc.

Case Studies - Ministry of Space, Magacin and the KPGT

One of the principal actors of commoning the city in Belgrade is the Ministry of Space (Ministarstvo prostora). The collective aims at the democratization of public spatial resources and the development of participatory actions in city development. (14) Created by Serbian architects, they support local groups and their actions, like the Magacin cultural centre, and promote a more bottom-up approach to design and city management. Focussing on the process of space creation rather than the final product, they have developed, over the past 10 years, a model of democratic management of the Commons. Because of their many actions, and the research aspect of their work, I will use the Ministry of Space, their actions and methods at the Magacin cultural Centre, as a case study to the commoning process of Belgrade.

14. *MINISTARSTVO PROSTORA*. (n.d.). Retrieved November 2, 2021, from https://ministarstvoprostora.org/

Similarly, the Sugar Factory, and its appropriation by the KPGT group into a theatre will be studied as a case study. Contrary to the Magacin Centre, it is a more secluded and distanced cultural centre from the city centre. Its form, partially in ruin will also give insight on a less complete way that commoning can take place.

Through architectural drawing and model making of these two case studies, I will attempt to understand the successive steps to the creation of the current space, and the different ways this action can be embodied within a building form. This will provide insight on the types and typologies of spaces that have allowed the commoning process to develop its urban presence. Mapping exercise, and the representation of the interaction between the building and its users will give me more insight on the qualities of these spaces that allowed it to become communal as well as the successive steps of this process.

Interviews

I will also conduct interviews on individuals that are actively involved in the commoning process (to complete the case studies), but also not part of these associations or groups. The topic of discussion will revolve around understanding the process of using, and creating the Commons, and to what extend the individual is involved/desires to be involved in the design of the space. Other topics of discussion will be the subject of public and private communal spaces.

In order for these interviews to be successful, I will have create a system which is ethical and respectful of all the respondent. I will record the discussions live, to make sure that none of the outcomes of the interviews result from my own interpretation, and will create a written transcript for reference. The wish of anonymity of the respondent will be known and respected.

TO CONCLUDE...

Preliminary findings and speculations

Although the research has not been fully conducted, and many of the spatial study yet to be carried, from my visits of the case studies and literature review, I can start to speculate on the result of this research.

One of the aspect that I noted of the commoning of Belgrade is the importance of institutionalisation of the space in the persistence of the Commons over time. However, and this is the most notable in Belgrade, this institutionalisation does not prevent the persistence of individual actions onto the space, but rather provides a safe space for the appropriation. The prevalence of participatory design and/or construction of the Commons of Belgrade also confirms this point. However, this participation seem to not be applied in similar fashion throughout.

Looking at the case studies, both rely on the occupation of abandoned or disused spaces which the commoning process renovated. However, the specific requirement of the locations in the process of commoning are still unclear to me, although some particular legal and cultural conditions seem to foster these interventions.
Regarding the process of commoning and resulting spaces, a first examination of the case studies highlights, like Stavride's observation, two different approaches to commoning. On the one hand, the Magacin centre, is more outward reaching and attracts through their system more diverse actions. On the other hand, the KPGT occupation of the Sugar Factory seem to be more inward looking, focussing on one type of action.

We can observe that the approach to the commoning in term of its architectural expression is also divergent. The first one rely on a 'white canvas' approach, based on installations and ephemeral appropriations within one shared space. In this case, very little change was required for the space, and most
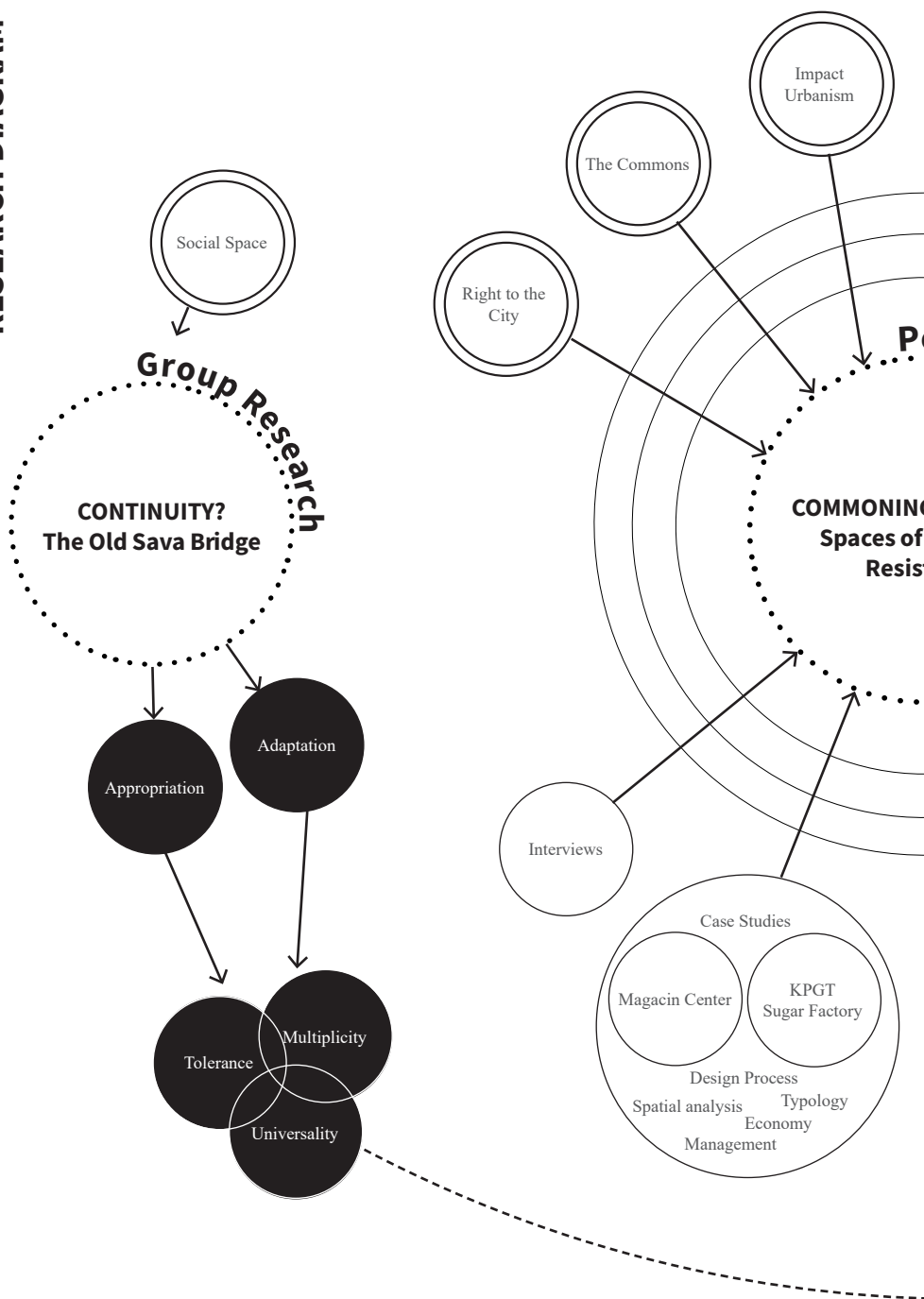
of it was carried within a limited time frame. While fostering diversity, the space remains in itself neutral. The second type revolves around an ad-hoc approach of layering of space and actions, and result in spaces with a strong visual and spatial identity. However, the Sugar Factory also presents spaces which we could think of as 'white' spaces or just renovated, for instance the open structure of the factory. Despite having a stronger visual identity (industrial structure, distinctive form and scale) than the Magacin centre, it possess this quality of neutral frame for the development of ephemeral activities.
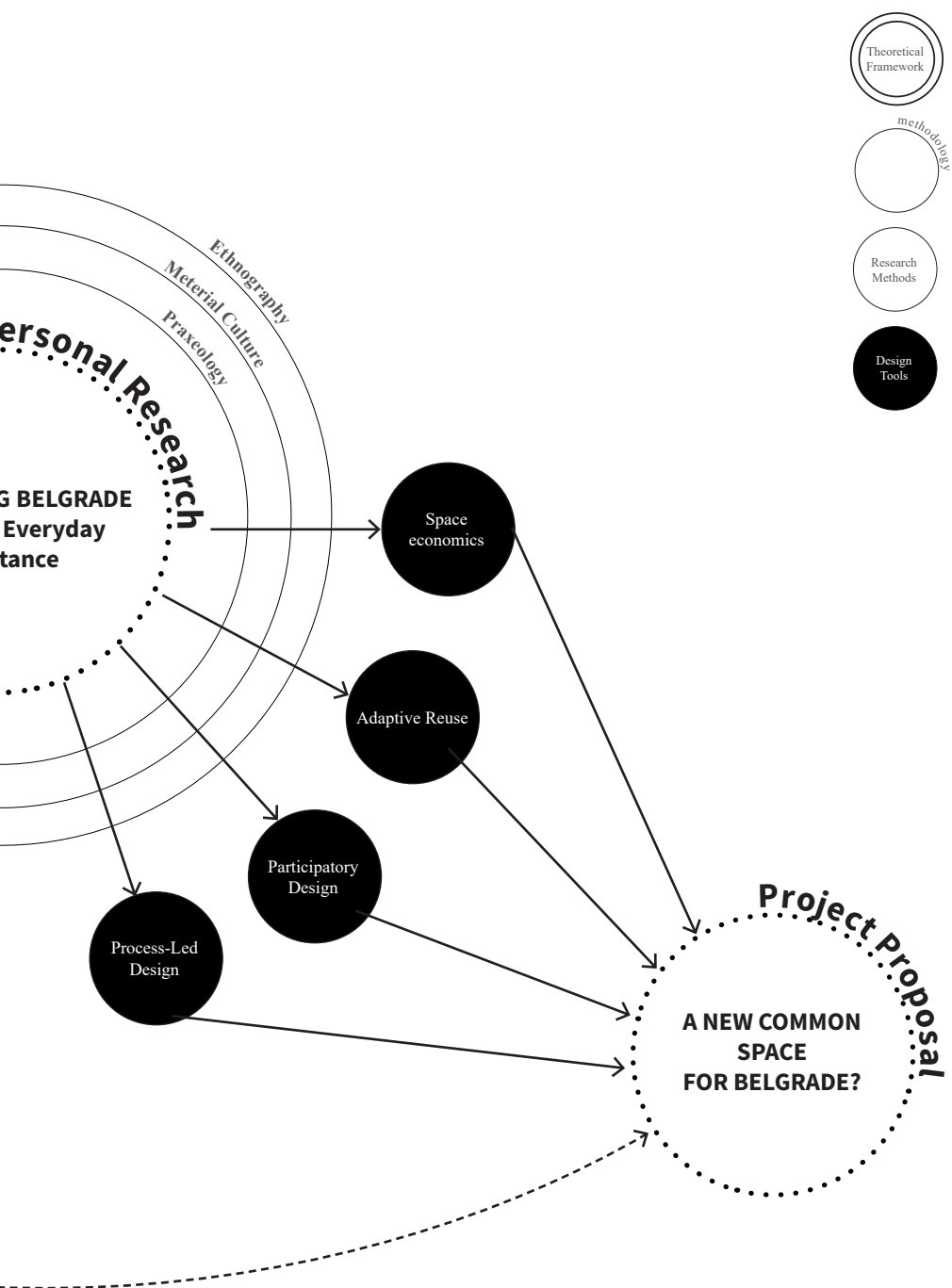
The link between the type of actions (open/close) and the type of commoning (white canvas/ad-hoc driven) is still unclear. However, I can speculate that the choice of site may have been a more important factor than the type of organisation in the type of the architectural interventions. The research needs to be developed in more detail, but I expect to find studying these spaces from a material culture point of view similar concepts to those developed during the group research: ideas of tolerance and multiplicity for instance seem to prevail in the Sugar Factory.

Towards a design proposal

From this research, I hope to apply the participatory design approach of the commons to my own design proposal for the creation of a new common space. I wish to apply the ideas of process and temporality of design to create a project which while being site specific is applicable to many situations. The idea of a struggle as the basis of a design also inspired me and will be a key element of my proposal. I would like to learn from the attitude towards reuse of the space of the Commons, as well as their economics in order to guide my proposal; one which I hope will be realistic and economically driven.

Social Space

Group Research

CONTINUITY?
The Old Sava Bridge

Appropriation

Adaptation

Tolerance

Multiplicity

Universality

Right to the
City

The Commons

Impact
Urbanism

P...

COMMONING
Spaces of
Resist...

Interviews

Case Studies

Magacin Center

KPGT
Sugar Factory

Design Process

Spatial analysis

Typology

Economy

Management

Theoretical
Framework

methodology

Research
Methods

Design
Tools

Ethnography

Meterial Culture

Praxeology

ersonal Research

G BELGRADE
Everyday
tance

Space
economics

Adaptive Reuse

Participatory
Design

Process-Led
Design

Project Proposal

A NEW COMMON
SPACE
FOR BELGRADE?

REFLECTION

As I am finishing, admittedly in a rush, this research plan, and trying to reflect on the process of its creation, I am finding myself wishing I had more time. Perhaps it is my strive to do many things at the same time that resulted in this situation, perhaps it is simply the nature of research to always feel unfinished and rushed, either way... more time.

I started with a very different topic, one focussing on queer spaces and how they manifest themselves in Belgrade. Suddenly, I find myself wondering, why did I change? I guess the reason I was fascinated by these queer spaces is the exact same reason I am fascinated by this idea of Commons, no architect. So far removed from what we do here, in the academic context, where we spend so much time thinking about how and why, there was a need, and this need was so essential that it resulted in a space. To be honest, the idea of approaching sexuality and gender in architecture also made me nervous in many ways, and perhaps I should have gone against this internal feeling and pushed more, because in the process of scaring away from this topic, I feel to have also re-framed my topic in a more broad way, arguably too broad to constitute a precise and focussed research.

I also wish I could have already presented some outcome of the research, perhaps the interviews, or simply the start of some analysis. Unfortunately, the communication with the Magacin centre and the Ministry of Space is taking more time than I had expected it.

Nonetheless, I am very glad for the opportunity of producing this research plan, as I believe it has pushed me to rethink what kind of architecture I wish to be part of, what is truly important to me about architecture, and most imporantly how I use the tools that I have been taught throughout my studies to guide my design and the way I look at the built environment.

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