

P4 Reflection

Domesticating the Urban: The Redevelopment of the Slab Type
Building in Block 23, New Belgrade

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Methods of Analysis & Imagination Graduation Studio: Positions is Practice

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Introduction

The present paper aims to highlight and assess the research methods employed throughout the graduation process and their impact on the preliminary design submitted at the P4 review stage as part of the graduation studio offered by the Methods of Analysis and Imagination chair. The paper addresses and evaluates three main points: the methodological approach that formed the basis of the studio's research element, the impact on the design process, and the project's relevance in the context of the graduation studio and the wider architectural field.

Method (How):

The project emerged from the aim to revitalise the community spaces of Block 23, New Belgrade, an area representative of the social disconnection resultant from the transition from Market Socialism to Neo-liberalism throughout Belgrade and the entirety of Serbia. While the initial interventions proposed on-site were relatively low-impact, broadly implying the return to the original community function of privatised spaces (Fig.1.), subsequent research into the demographic makeup of New Belgrade and Serbia highlighted the necessity for a more radical approach. As such, The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia and The World Bank approximate that the national population will drop by more than 2 million (from 7.9 million to 5.79 million) between the years 1990 and 2050 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2011; *Population, total - Serbia, n.d.*).

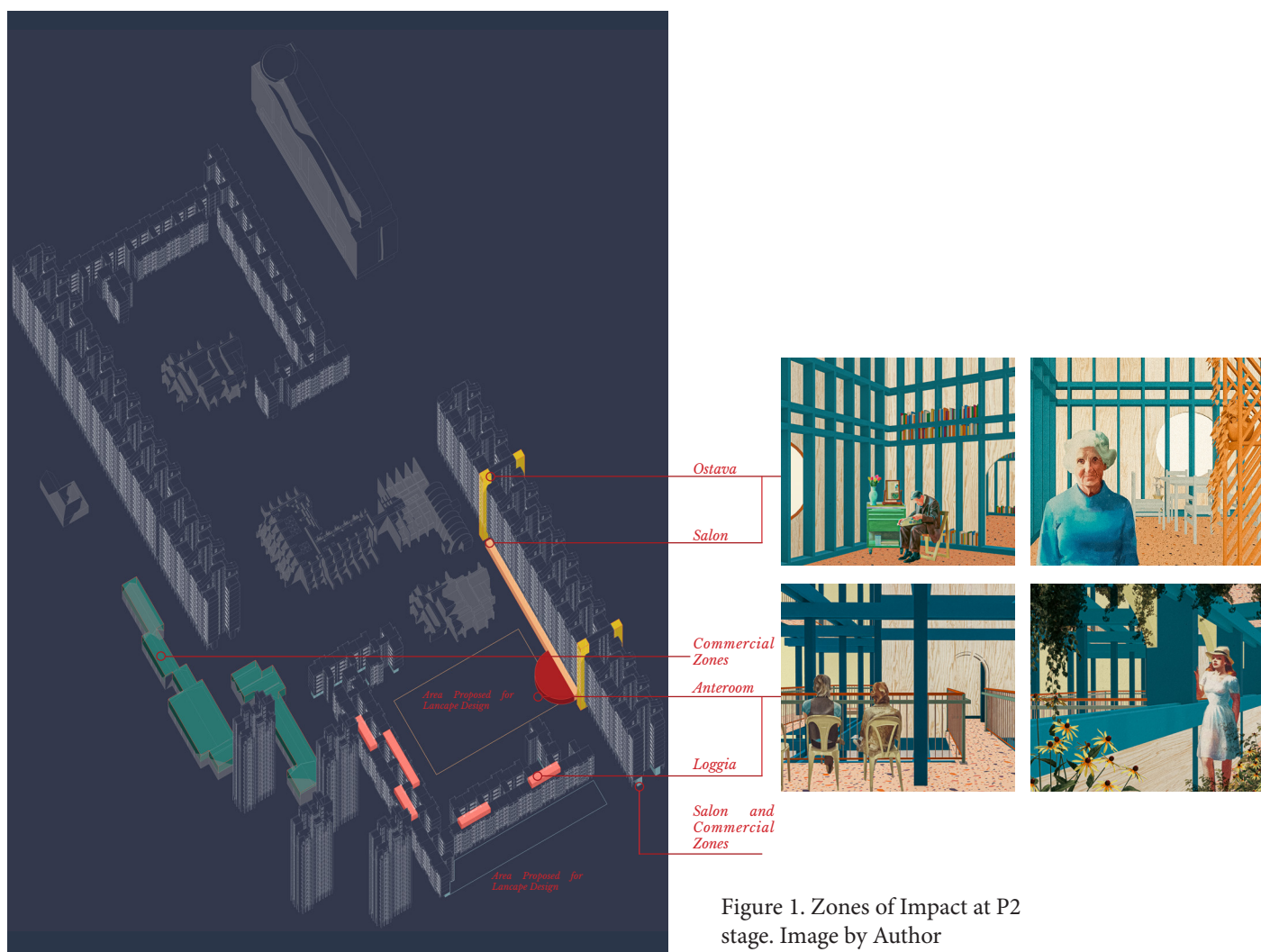


Figure 1. Zones of Impact at P2 stage. Image by Author

Therefore, the project takes a three-step approach to revitalising the community of Block 23, specifically focussing on the nature and development of the Slab Type Residential Building. The first step implies a conventional maintenance approach, aiming to reunify the existing facade in a manner that is respectful of the existing aesthetics and redeveloping the circulation routes to the dwelling units, allowing for increased social interaction inside existing courtyards. Developments imply minimal impact on the dwelling situations of the existing residents, thus allowing for a live-in construction process. The second step is concerned with the redevelopment of the communal ground floor facilities to allow for increased diversity of use and materiality. Finally, the third step assumes a long term approach. Considering the projected drop in demographics, the increasingly elderly population and the residents' migration to the periphery of Belgrade, the project assumes that an unknown number of dwelling units may become disused and pass into government custody. These dwellings will be stripped down to their structural and technical cores and redeveloped into open-air community spaces that break the existing building's rhythm, monotony, and mass (Fig.2).

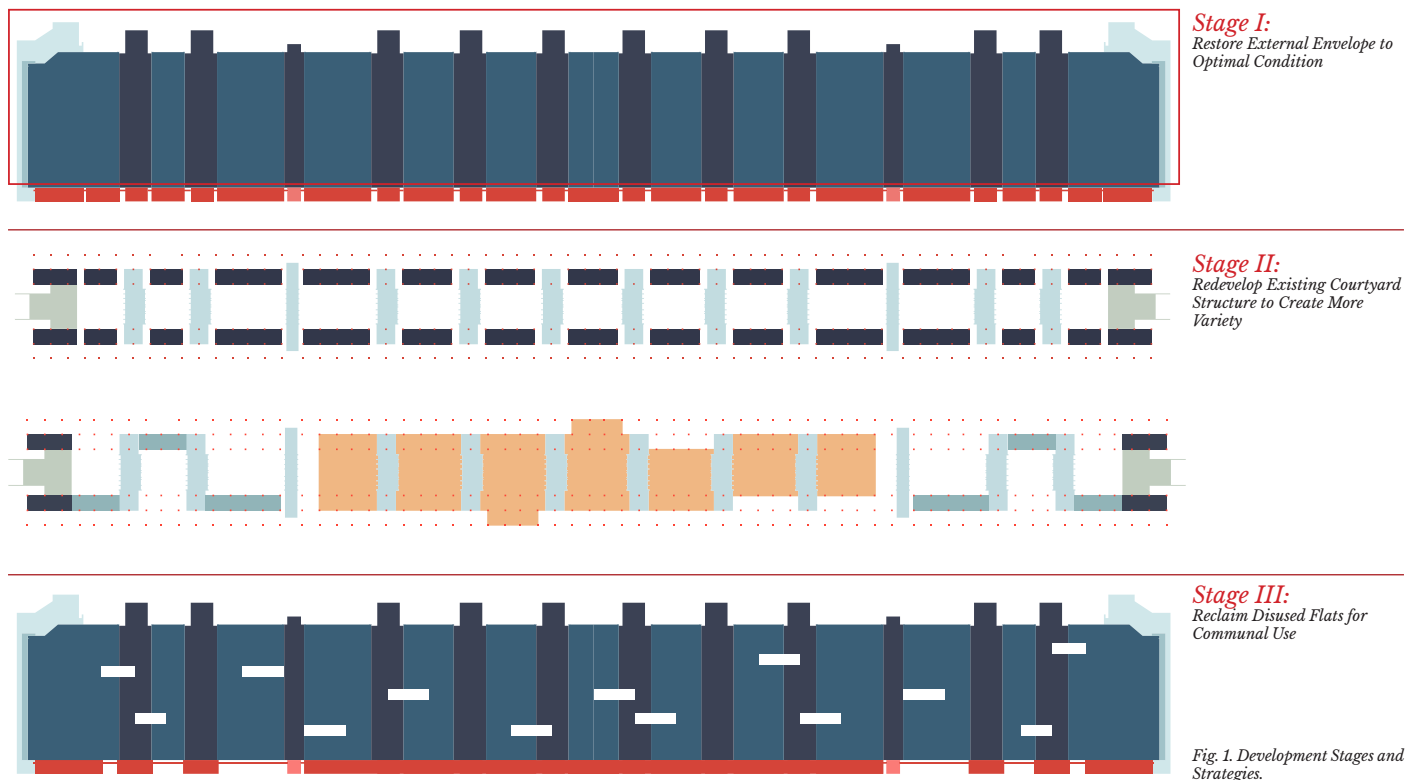


Figure 2. Project Phasing at P4 Stage. Image by Author.

Argumentation (Why):

Therefore, the project provides a vital and idiosyncratic approach to the redevelopment of mass housing blocks. On the one hand, as mentioned previously, the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia released projections highlighting a national drop in population of more than 2 million (from 7.9 million to 5.79 million) between 1990 and 2050. In turn, the Serbian Government has already started implementing strategies to mitigate the inhabitation vacuums present in rural communities (The National Programme for Revival of Serbian Villages). Despite this initiative, the projected population drop is also expected to affect urban areas severely. Concurrently, Western European countries have already seen a shift in interest from mass housing inhabitation to suburban low to middle-density living. The exact process is currently becoming visible in Belgrade, where middle-income residents are shifting to suburban living.

On the other hand, Block 23 was designed to include several communal facilities, either external to the housing blocks or at the ground levels of the latter. Therefore, the 1990s Privatisation process of the communal facilities secluded people in their homes and led to a widespread phenomenon of anomie (social disconnect). Thus, the phenomenon of anomie informs the scope of the project: that of reintroducing communal spaces back to Block 23.

Feedback and reflection:

The feedback provided by the tutors during the research and design process has not only helped further my work during the current graduation studio but has also helped me discover and interrogate my affinities and the future development of my architectural career. The feedback has helped shift the project's focus from a more research and conceptual based approach (one of my preferred working methods) to a more architectural and contextual one. The clash between my initial design direction and the expected outcome of the studio was clearly highlighted at the P2 moment, where the lack of a tangible approach to the site resulted in a retake. The result came due to my oscillation between extremely radical approaches to built environments (recounting Lebbeus Woods and Gordon Matta Clark) and wildly understated interventions with minimal real impact on the residents' livelihoods in Block 23. Following the P2 moment, the feedback received from the tutors helped further focalise the project, reducing the area of impact from the totality of Block 23 to one of the Slab Type Blocks present on site.

Consequently, with the help of the tutors and having studied several precedents dealing with mass housing redevelopment, I arrived at an approach that makes a visible difference to the built environment in a delicate manner while also allowing for unconventional approaches to built heritage. However, in merging the two design approaches, I began tackling the project from a functionalist point of view. The P3 review moment, therefore, was the point when, having studied the downfalls in New Belgrade of this design approach, I shifted my focus towards a more conceptual and experience-based method. Additionally, Pierre Jennen's feedback has been instrumental following the P3 review point in improving my construction knowledge of working with existing modernist heritage.

Aspect 1:

The relationship between research and design has proved meandering at points. Prior to the submission of the Graduation Plan, I established a conceptual triad between the area of interest (the blokovi of New Belgrade) and the notions of anomie - "social instability resulting from a breakdown of standards and values" (Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.) and nostalgia - "a yearning for a different time, a yearning for home" (Boym, 2011). This conceptual basis for the research evolved visibly prior to the P2 review point, resulting in in-depth investigations into a more focused site, Block 23, notions of local community management, both spatial and social and the impact of the political transition of Serbia on New Belgrade's built environment. From this point onward, the research focus shifted to investigations into the activity loci within the dwelling units of Block 23 and the bar type residential block, allowing to rewrite the conceptual framework from the perspective of the critical dwelling spaces in the residents' lives. Overall, the continued research process has allowed the conceptual framework of my project to evolve beyond sociological aspects into purely architectural frameworks. This transition translated into a more clearly focalised design of definitive architectural expressions.

Aspect 2:

The project provided a method of responding to societal issues that have been thoroughly researched and contextualised within the boundaries of Belgrade and Serbia. While the project approach can be expanded in the future to other blocks in Belgrade and Serbia, and other countries facing similar depopulation issues, the design generated has been thoroughly considered through the lens of the residents' lives and daily rituals. Therefore, the project achieves a detachment from the functionalist principles that dictated the design of New Belgrade, allowing for the emergence of phenomenologically driven spatial experiences. The project, therefore, responds to a clearly stated and contextualised societal need. At the same time, by providing a methodology of adaption for existing mass housing structures, the project is further integrated into the broader environmental ethos of the faculty and the Master Track.

Aspect 3:

The research methods have been thoroughly integrated within the contextual, conceptual and disciplinary studio framework (Fig.3). The contextual analysis has focused on the historical development of collective housing building in New Belgrade; the use and role of community spaces (mesna zajednica); daily life patterns and current sociological issues shifting how the housing stock is and will be used in the future. Therefore, the conceptual framework influenced the spatial distribution of the new community spaces created on-site with an interest in creating areas that can be used for various activities instead of concentrating on specific atmospheric elements that the current housing block does not have. Finally, the disciplinary analysis has been at the base of the initial proposals developed between the P2 and P3 period. Throughout this time, I explored and researched various methods of revitalising mass housing, arriving at a methodology that shows both awareness of important, relevant precedents and an idiosyncratic approach resulting from understanding the shortcomings of said precedents.

	Contextual	Conceptual	Disciplinary
Meaningfulness	Retention of social spaces necessary for the community	Providing a methodology for dealing with depopulation in mass housing	Methods of improving the architectural performance of mass housing
Appropriation	Provision of spaces of multiplicity	Designing spaces of multiple uses inspired by the residents' daily rituals	Improving on already existing methods of mass housing redevelopment
Integration	Integration within the mass housing grid of Block 23	Typological redevelopment of mass housing to respond to the current needs of the residents	Providing a new and unique methodology for mass housing remodelling that can be applied in any Post-socialist context and not only

Figure 3. The Integration of the Project in the Studio Framework. Image by Author.

Aspect 4:

As stated above, the proposed project responds to a current societal need in New Belgrade and shows awareness of the impact of future demographic changes on the housing stock. As such, while the design of individual spaces is keenly grounded in the local context of Block 23, the broader approach of generating sensorially driven subtractions in otherwise massive and monolithic housing blocks is an approach that can prove universal. As such, the project proposes a more radical alternative to the redevelopment of mass housing which can be applied in many post-socialist states and not only.

Aspect 5:

The project has tackled several ethical issues. Firstly, the project addresses the issues of working in a low to middle-income environment, therefore producing architectural remodelling methodologies that are relatively small while providing vast social improvements. Secondly, the population concerned is predominantly above the age of 55, thus reducing the possibility of relocating residents for extended periods. Thirdly, the project addresses the issue of transitioning from an urban methodology based on constant expansion to the realities of decreased inhabitation. As a result, the project achieves a spatial development that breathes dignity back into the use of the assigned Slab Type Building in Block 23. Lastly, the project addressed environmental concerns by providing better thermal conditions, sourcing construction materials locally, and reusing elements from Belgrade's demolition sites.

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