Post-Socialistic Shopping Malls as New Gathering Places: Case Study Belgrade

Marija Cvetković[1*], Nikola Dinkić[2], Aleksandra Djukić[1], Jugoslav Joković[3]

Abstract

This paper explores the built environment of a shopping mall and considers the perceptions of its users, measuring the intensity of users both in open public spaces and shopping malls. This paper aims to compare the concentration of users in the selected shopping malls built in New Belgrade and open public spaces in the city centre. It considers the preferences consumers have towards shopping malls and public spaces, by determining their opinion on the (dis)advantages of the shopping malls over features of the city centre. The methodological frameworks of the research are questionnaires, surveys and a method of mapping users on social maps (via social networks). The identity of shopping malls versus public places in Belgrade is observed through technical analyses and qualitative surveys using online and on-site questionnaires, as well as the study of social media (twitter). A structured questionnaire was developed to measure customers' shopping motivation, preferences, as well as the demographic information of respondents, questions about the identity of the shopping mall and the city centre, and the connection between them. The research also used the newly developed software application - Twitter search engine. The aim was tracking and measuring the intensity of users in the monitored territory, and testing their latest behavioural patterns. Summarizing and interpreting the collected data provided three groups of results: competitiveness of the shopping mall with open public space with the focus on the main qualities; measuring the concentration of users both in shopping malls and open public spaces, and suggestions for improvement of open public spaces.

[1] Department of Urban Planning, Faculty of Architecture, University of Belgrade, Serbia

[2] Department of Computer Science, Faculty of Electronic Engineering, University of Nis, Serbia

[3] Department of Telecommunications, Faculty of Electronic Engineering, University of Nis, Serbia

* Corresponding author, e-mail: marija.cvetk1@gmail.com

1 Introduction

The dominance of city streets and squares (markets), as primary retail agglomeration, is greatly reduced by the construction of shopping malls[1]. The numerous contents of the city centre are disappearing along with the opening of the new shopping malls, which are taking the role of open public spaces. Furthermore, cities and their open public spaces are reflections of users changing needs.

Creating a place for public, political, cultural and recreational events, and above all, places of leisure and socialisation, shopping malls have become more than a "commercial city," rather an alternative centre of the city. In a simulation of the city centre, mall space contains elements such as urban street with benches with elements of nature, square with catering facilities and a fountain. Similar to the real heart of the city, street and square have the function of walking, window sightseeing and socialising. Reproducing the city within its walls, it states that experience of the city that is safer and cleaner in the climate-controlled and secure conditions than on the real streets outside by simulatingcity streets with shops and small squares, which takes over the role that downtown had, until recently (Crawford, 1992). To understand why we shall oppose the city square as a meeting point with the modern shopping malls as a new "gathering point" (Horvat, 2007).

With the evolution of the shopping centre, the mall space becomes a meeting place and place of leisure activities, which is justifiably touted as a social place.[2] The disappearance of public space and the emergence of pseudo-public[3] spaces with limited

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1 Whilst *mall* is more broadly a North American term for the European *shopping centre* or *shopping precinct*, it has been retained for clarity over the significant use of centre elsewhere in the text.

2 Besides shopping, numerous services and catering, malls offer a culture, entertainment, educational services, conference spaces, recreational and sport facilities, hotels, and more.

3 Among the first, notion of pseudo-public space was introduced by Mike Davis, who explained them as a special kind of public space where the admission and behaviour of people are strongly constrained by a strong security system. Davis, explaining the fear of the crowds, explained that the designers of malls and pseudo-public space attack the crowd by homogenising it.

access occur simultaneously with the aggression of commercial culture and emergence of cultural spectacle. "The difference between the public and pseudo-public space is that the pseudo-public space represents a privatised public sphere. It, however, seems like a public sphere, but the rules of the game are defined in a way that there are not many 'public potentials'" (Horvat, 2007). Mike Davis noted that by enclosing the mass that is desirable in such places, "designers are directing their circulation with behaviourist ferocity. It is lured by visual stimuli of all kinds, dulled by muzak[4], sometimes even scented by invisible aromatisers" (Davis, 1992). Unlike the public space, malls do not have dark, unsafe and narrow streets. Plants[5] are put to refresh the interior, reminiscent of nature, while on the other hand, nature in an unnatural environment has another role, "the presence of nature, albeit tamed in a garden setting, naturalises consumption, and mitigates the alienation inherent in commodity production and consumption" (Goss, 1993). Significant development strategy is invested in the development of shopping malls in the form of public spaces, but this creates only an illusion of "openness". Shopping malls are largely private, closed and guarded premises: pseudo-public spaces.

A general phenomenon is that the numerous contents of the city centre are disappearing along with the opening of the new shopping mall, and the people move from the city centre and promenades along the riverfronts to the shopping malls. The shopping mall is primarily a *non-place*.[6] Marc Augé, who defined this term, indicates that the super modernity is producing non-places, which are transit and anonymous spaces that allow the fast flow of a larger number of individuals. Since they are deprived of identity, history, and meaning as a social construct, non-spaces are not anthropological places. With the transition of functions primarily intended for an open public space, to pseudo premises of the malls, the purpose of the city square and promenades is lost. The indoor space of the shopping mall has been designed to create the impression that they are public spaces. However, it is a privately owned space with movement restrictions and controlled behaviour of consumers, with selective access and video surveillance.

During the last two decades in Serbia, shopping malls are beginning to dominate the city centre and its suburbs, as a

visual sign and place for socialisation and consumption. New Belgrade was built during the socialist period as a residential area as an opponent of the historic part of Belgrade. During the last two decades, New Belgrade has been transforming into a multifunctional settlement, and shopping malls have attracted more users to its part of the river. Almost all shopping malls in Belgrade are situated in the vicinity of rivers[7], next to the Danube, trying to replace the open public space.

2 Method and material

This paper explores the built environment of a shopping mall considering the perception of its users, and measures the intensity of users both in open public spaces and shopping malls. This paper aims to compare the concentration of users in the selected shopping malls built in New Belgrade and relevant open public spaces in the city centre. It also compares the preferences consumers have towards shopping malls and public spaces, by determining their opinion on the (dis)advantages of the shopping malls over features of the city centre. The research question is about the competitiveness of the shopping mall with open public space, with the focus on its main qualities.

The methodological frameworks of the research are questionnaires, surveys and a method of mapping users on social maps (via the social network Twitter). The identity of shopping malls versus public places in Belgrade is observed through technical analyses and qualitative surveys using online and on-site questionnaires, as well as the study of social media (twitter). The target population of this study consisted of mostly young people (15-35 years) with their families, given that they belong to the group of people who are active mall visitors, which was noted by observation in largest Belgrade shopping malls. This target population is also chosen for twitter based application as they are most active users of this application. Since the chosen target population for both questionnaire and application based surveys is the same, cross reference is applicable. A structured questionnaire was developed to measure the customers' shopping motivation, both in the shopping malls, squares and streets in Belgrade. The questionnaire consisted of questions concerning shopping motivation; preferences consumers have towards shopping malls and public spaces; demographic information of respondents; questions about the identity of the shopping mall and the identity of the city centre, and the connection between them. Relevant data was collected by online questionnaire during the end of 2016, and a site survey was conducted in spring 2017, on relevant streets and squares of Belgrade, as well as in the biggest shopping malls.

The research also used a newly developed software application, a Twitter search engine, at the University of Niš - Faculty

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4 Muzak is recorded music that is played quietly and continuously in public places, such as airports, hotels, and shops, to make people feel relaxed

5 In order to create a more natural environment in large shopping malls, designers are building spacious gardens with all the characteristics of a "real garden". Goss (1993: 44) gives an example of Tyson's Corner in Virginia, whose administration has selected 29 large palm trees that were excavated in Florida and kept for 18 months in the shade in order to acclimatize to the conditions inside, before they were placed in the interior of the shopping mall.

6 The author (Marc Augé) defines the non-space of the city as a space that unlike the city cannot be identified either as with identity, not as a relational, not as historical space. Non-spaces are places of alienation, spaces that occur as a result of post industrial and networked information society.

7 Such as Delta City (850m from Sava river), Ušće (600m from Sava river), in older part of Belgrade shopping mall Rajićeva (450m from Sava river) which is under construction now, and new shopping mall Big is situated 700m from Danube river.

of Electronic engineering. This was developed during the PhD course "Advanced topics in data and knowledge engineering" as another method. The aim was tracking and measuring the intensity of users in the monitored territory, testing the latest behavioural patterns of them. (Djukić et al., 2016). Twitter is one the most popular data sources for research (Pereira dos Santos et al., 2012; Mislove et al., 2010) because of its open network, allowing access to information published through the platform. The area of the research included parts of Belgrade city centre and selected main open public spaces: Kosancicev Venac, Republic Square, Sava Quay, Park near Vuk's Monument, and Slavija Square, as well as the two biggest shopping malls in Belgrade: Ušće and Delta City. The considered spaces are the most frequented and the most attractive open public spaces within walking distance, within the historic urban core of Belgrade.

3 Results of a questionnaire

The results are based on responses from 138 respondents in an online questionnaire, and 72 respondents in face-to-face interviews and on-site survey at relevant places in Belgrade, which were used in collecting data from the target population. Demographic information of the respondents, including gender, age, city, and employment status are collected in one part of the questionnaire, and issues concerning identity, preferences and choice of shopping space in another, on which this paper is focused. The results of the research are shown below:

The research sought to establish the length of time the respondents have been spending in the mall and how often they go to shopping malls. Findings indicate that most of the shoppers are spending 1-3h (77.4%) during one visit, while 12.1% spend less than an hour, and 104% of respondents spend 3-6h, which was confirmed with the on-site survey with similar results. Results indicate that more of the half of the respondents visits shopping malls once a month (42%) or even once a week (12.3%). However, half of the respondents go to shopping malls rarely; a few times a year (31.9%) or seasonally (8%). To assess why shoppers prefer shopping malls instead of public spaces and shopping streets, the respondents were presented with a list of seven statements and asked to rate how much they agreed with each of them.

The statements were measured on a five-point scale. Most of the respondents mentioned the positive aesthetics of malls, such as pleasing colours, attractive lighting, warmth, etc. The overall score for climate control is 3.38. Instead of a common opinion that shopping malls are more preferred than city streets because of their safety, the results indicate that this is not the reason why people are choosing to stay in a closed mall. The overall score for safety as a factor that makes a shopping mall a preferable choice is 2.22. Even 54% of respondents mentioned in a negative context "crowds" or "lots of people" in shopping malls. They strongly disagree that a large concentration of

people is a preferable in the choice of shopping place. They find the malls noisy, due to constant crowds. Only seven participants liked the large concentration of people in shopping malls. However, content concentration is important for the majority of the participants. The respondents agreed that shopping malls offer many choices through a wide variety of branded stores and food courts. Contrary to a common opinion that leisure activities are important when choosing a shopping place, 40% of participants strongly disagree with this opinion; only 8% of them find it very important. It is important to note that 65% of the respondents stated they do not prefer shopping malls to city streets. We asked respondents who agreed with the statement that opening new shopping malls will reduce visitors to shopping streets to provide a possible explanation:

- "Malls are always the same, generic in every country";
- "Malls are distracting people from places in the city where they can find all possibilities the mall offers plus cultural heritage, the city's identity, cultural events ...";
- "The city rejects its own tradition and heritage, and blindly throws us the Western model, without character and parameters appropriate for our sensibility";
- "A large concentration of people in the wrong place, sense of values is lost under the shadow of the goods";
- "Because shopping centres impose a certain system of values, but it is necessary to create a non-leading human interaction";
- "It emphasises consumerism, leads to alienation of people inside it";
- "Malls are not inherently bad, but the desire for capital, poor location, bad architecture, without a greater and more noble goal is bad";
- "It became a tourist destination."

Most of the respondents claim that they spend more time walking on city streets (91%) than in the closed shopping malls (9%). Nevertheless, more than half of them (54%) enjoy shopping in closed and guarded premises – the mall rather than open city streets. It can be seen from the results, from a sample survey, that 82.6% of people believe that shopping malls cannot successfully replace open public spaces, while 15.2% agree with that statement, and the remainder had not thought about the issue. In an on-site survey, we asked respondents what is specific about the place they are located at that moment:

- at squares and streets, the answers included "constant traffic of people, change of faces, a lot of new encounters"; "main characteristics of a city - monuments, theatres, museums"; "freedom of movement"; "recreational activities"; "greenery"; "fresh air"; "open space"; and "peace."
- in shopping malls the answers were "Lack of feeling the real time and space"; "artificial lighting"; "No matter how designers are trying to imitate ancient places,

city centres or even nature, a shopping mall remains a closed, controlled space"; " "The uniformity of visitors, mostly one and the same group of people are coming to the mall"; "no choice of movement" , "no observing the time of day, the openness of the view, which has been reduced substantially or exclusively to the sky or no view at all"; "in the mall you can avoid bad climatic conditions without staying at home"; "in the one place you can find a greater choice of goods adapted for different budget populations, you do not have to go throughout the city"; "Complexity"

4 Results of software application - Twitter search engine

The results of the software application Twitter search engine are shown below. For the first step of the analysis regarding geo-mapping, all geocoded tweets sent between September 1st, 2016 and March 31th, 2017 were collected. It is important to point out that tweets were collected in predefined places of interest determined by coordinates and radius. The data illustrates the attractiveness of places, based on activities of Twitter users at the Kosancicev Venac, Republic Square, Sava Quay, the park near Vuk's Monument, and Slavija Square, during the considered period are outlined in the tables. The results from shopping malls are shown below the results for public spaces in Table 1.

Table 1 The number of tweets by location

No.	Location	Number of Tweets	Percent	
1.	Republic Square	1572	66%	
2.	Kosancicev Venac	559	20%	
3.	Vuk`s Monument	224	8%	**Public space**
4.	Sava Quay	142	5%	
5.	Slavija Square	29	1%	
No.	Location	Number of Tweets	Percent	
1.	Ušće	467	77%	**Shopping malls**
2.	Delta City	137	23%	

The data regarding the number of geocoded tweets emanating from these locations is presented in Table 1. The most visited location was the Republic Square, whilst the least visited location was Slavija Square; Ušće shopping mall is more visited than Delta City.

The activity of users on a monthly basis of tweets from public spaces is shown in Table 2. On average, 359 tweets per month were collected. The users of public spaces were most active during September, with 440 tweets, and the least active during January with 233 tweets. The users in shopping malls were most active during October, with 113 tweets, and the least

active during February with 60 tweets. According to the collected data, it can be concluded that the largest number of tweets was posted in Republic Square during September (314), with the second largest result posted in the same location during July (263). During August, there were no posted tweets on Slavija Square, which is, at the same time, the location with the least number of posted tweets during each month. It can be seen from Table 2, that regarding shopping malls, Ušće is more tweeted than Delta City. A significant difference in the number of tweets by month is noticed at the location of Vuk`s Monument. This can be connected with the classes during the winter semester and presence of the students, as the recorded number of tweets is two to five times higher during the semester.

Table 2 The number of tweets by location and by month.

No	Location	Number of Tweets by month							
		Sep. 2016	Oct. 2016	Nov. 2016	Dec. 2016	Jan. 2017	Feb. 2017	March 2017	
1.	Republic Square	314	206	217	213	147	212	263	
2.	Kosancicev Venac	69	85	98	73	66	102	66	**Public spaces**
3.	Vuk`s Monument	27	49	48	48	8	18	26	
4.	Sava Quay	26	30	16	27	10	21	12	
5.	Slavija Square	4	11	2	4	2	3	3	
	Total	440	381	381	365	233	356	370	

The tweeting activity of users on a monthly basis from shopping malls is shown in Table 3. It can be seen that during January, due to the vacation, people tend to send fewer tweets, while during the holiday season, at the end of the year, more tweets are posted. For shopping malls, it is important to see the interval of tweets by days and by hours, which can be seen in Table 4 and Table 5.

Table 3 The number of tweets by location and by month.

No	Location	Number of Tweets by month							
		Sep. 2016	Oct. 2016	Nov. 2016	Dec. 2016	Jan. 2017	Feb. 2017	March 2017	
1.	Ušće	66	89	84	84	44	41	59	Shopping malls
2.	Delta City	26	24	19	19	17	19	13	
	Total	92	113	103	103	61	60	72	

Table 4 and Table 5 show that most visits occur on Friday and Saturday, between 15h and 21h, while the least frequent times are Mondays, between 3h and 6h. The users posted 2,872 tweets at selected locations by 15 different applications. The distribution of tweets by applications that are used for

their sharing is not equal. The most popular social network is Instagram with 46% of tweets, following Foursquare with 42%, while other applications are represented with 12% tweets. The popularity of applications for sending tweets varies according to the location from which the tweets were posted.

Table 4 The Number of Tweets by Location and by Days.

Location	Tweets by days						
	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Ušće	41	59	64	54	70	119	60
Delta city	16	19	13	21	23	21	24

Table 5 The Number of Tweets by Location and by Hours.

Location	Tweets by hours							
	0-3	3-6	6-9	9-12	12-15	15-18	18-21	21-24
Ušće	5	1	14	55	85	136	136	35
Delta city	1	1	5	19	33	42	27	9

5 Conclusion

Summarizing and interpreting the collected data led to three groups of results: the competitiveness of shopping malls with open public spaces with the focus on the main qualities, measuring the concentration of users both in shopping malls and open public spaces and suggestions for improvement of open public spaces. The results of application research show that some open spaces are less used than shopping malls, such as Sava Quay and Slavija Square. The results of the questionnaire also showed that comfort is one of the most important qualities of public space required by users. During the last two decades, the main open public spaces in Belgrade and overall in Serbia have been losing their commercial function. Instead of the shops, now banks and business offices are located on the ground floors, which influences the number of users of open public space. This phenomenon is even more visible in the mid-sized towns and cities.

There is a need to understand shopping as a fundamental feature of modern society. The questionnaire surveys are based on the respondents' perceptions of the importance or ratings of attributes of shopping centres. It was also found that entertainment within the shopping malls is very important for the users and that they also insist on more activities and functions in the open public space. It can be noted from the results of a questionnaire that the majority of users believe that shopping malls cannot successfully replace open public spaces, while only one-sixth of them agree that they can. This conclusion is also supported by Twitter based applications, shown in Tables 2 and 3. Based on these results, it is clear that there are more tweets from public places than from shopping malls, which suggests that the chosen frequented public places are more popular than shopping malls. This initial research indicates that

understanding experiences of contemporary urban change in public space requires a broader performative understanding of users' needs and its qualities, with applications such as twitter providing another valuable metric.

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