

FROM ONLINE PLATFORMS TO ON-GROUND ACTIONS: SYNERGIES OF DIGITAL AND ANALOG CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN NON-INCLUSIVE NEW BELGRADE'S URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the institutional and spatial changes in New Belgrade's blocks and waterfront development, focusing on the roles of civil society and local communities in these processes. It highlights non-transparent redevelopment plans and persistent community opposition. By combining document analysis, internet content analysis, and qualitative methods, the study underscores the importance of social media and online platforms in fostering social cohesion, interaction, and engagement.

The Sava Quay is one of 25 urban units that, due to its architectural, urban, and technical-technological significance, holds great importance in the history of modern architecture in Serbia. However, it is not formally protected by the state and has suffered significant degradation due to neglect and illegal development. The new redevelopment plans, promising economic growth and progress, are being developed through opaque and non-inclusive processes. As a result, these plans have faced sustained resistance from local communities. These communities have organized numerous participatory actions to protect their spaces and advocate for more transparent and inclusive institutional and spatial redesign processes.

The primary aim of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of these participatory processes, addressing questions about how, where, and under what conditions collective practices and actions occur. It also examines the roles of social media and online platforms in fostering social cohesion and encouraging community participation.

In addition to document analysis and data obtained through interviews and focus group discussions, the research relies on online content from the social network profiles of citizen groups that initiated, organized, and implemented significant participatory activities. Their websites and social media profiles have been, and remain, vital tools for community information dissemination and

participant mobilization, serving as key sources of documentary material.

This study sheds light on the complex power dynamics within specific socio-spatial transformations, emphasizing the need for transparent, inclusive, just and accountable planning and governance practices.

KEYWORDS _ *Institutional Change, Participatory Processes, Social Media, Urban Redevelopment, Community Engagement*

INTRODUCTION

Civic activism in contemporary urban contexts increasingly encompasses interwoven practices of digital and analog engagement, particularly in settings where formal institutions fail to adequately respond to the needs of local communities. In New Belgrade—a district shaped by modernist planning rationality, yet increasingly subjected to contemporary pressures of privatization and commodification—this interplay is manifest in long-standing, hybrid forms of community resistance. This paper focuses on participatory actions carried out by citizens over the past decade in the area of the Sava Quay and surrounding housing blocks, as a paradigmatic case of the convergence of digital mobilization and physical presence in urban space.

The Sava Quay, as part of the urban fabric of New Belgrade, holds multilayered significance: beyond its functional and aesthetic dimensions, it represents one of the few remaining public riverfront spaces that has not yet been fully commercialized. Situated at the intersection of the natural and the urban, between the 'planned' and the 'peripheral,' it has become a site of both symbolic and practical struggle for the right to the city. Historically, New Belgrade was envisioned as a rationally structured modernist city, with clearly defined zones of housing, work, and recreation (Jovanović, 2018). However, in the post-socialist context, the planning framework has increasingly lost its coherence under the influence of neoliberal interests, resulting in spatial fragmentation and the erosion of institutional control over urban transformation. Planning decisions that significantly alter the character of space are often made without timely public consultation, while formal presentations are frequently reduced to procedural formalities, serving as justification for already determined outcomes. This practice effectively denies local residents the opportunity to influence decisions that shape their immediate environment, generating a sense of political disempowerment, yet simultaneously producing energy for collective mobilization outside institutional channels (Maruna, Teofilović & Milovanović Rodić, 2023).

The central research question posed by this study is: how, and under what conditions, do digital and on-the-ground actions complement each other in the struggle for public space and urban rights? The research is grounded in theoretical concepts developed by Henri Lefebvre (1996), Manuel Castells (2012), Paolo Gerbaudo (2012), Emiliano Treré (2019), Stefania Milan (2015), Jeffrey Juris (2012), and Aikaterini Kavada (2015), in order to understand how digital networks, social media, and algorithmic systems shape contemporary forms of collective urban action.

By combining document analysis, social media content analysis, and qualitative methods (interviews and focus groups), the research demonstrates how online spaces are used for organizing, mobilizing, and documenting, while offline spaces serve as arenas for resistance, negotiation, and symbolic appropriation. Special attention is paid to the moments in which these two modes of action not only coexist but generate a new synergistic infrastructure of participation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HYBRID FORMS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Contemporary challenges in the urban transformation of this area can also be understood through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's (1996) concept of the right to the city—not as a right to infrastructure and services, but as a right to participate in shaping space and everyday life. In this sense, the struggle of citizens to preserve the Sava Quay transcends the boundaries of a local conflict and becomes a symbolic manifestation of demands for greater democratization and social justice in urban planning processes.

In the contemporary urban context, civic activism operates at the intersection of digital and physical realms, forming a complex system of social action that unfolds simultaneously in virtual and tangible spaces. These two dimensions of civic participation are mutually constitutive, but differ in terms of accessibility, rhythm, and effect. Digital activism, according to Castells (2012), creates a space of autonomy in which resistance and hope are articulated, while physical presence remains essential for generating political impact. Gerbaudo (2012) introduces the notion of choreography of assembly, whereby digital tools are used to orchestrate physical protests. Treré (2019) advances this further with the concept of hybrid media activism, emphasizing that digital engagement does not replace but rather complements analog action.

On the other hand, Milan (2015) cautions that the algorithmic mechanisms of digital platforms may shape the scope and direction of collective action, while Kavada (2015) reminds us that networked collective identity cannot be fully realized without embodied encounters. Juris (2012) underscores the importance of the *logic of aggregation*, which facilitates rapid mobilization, albeit sometimes at the expense of deeper organization and lasting impact.

These theoretical insights form the basis for understanding the complex dynamics of civic engagement in the context of New Belgrade—a space shaped by modernist planning, now subjected to the pressures of neoliberal urban transformation, manifesting through illegal construction, commercialization of public goods, and the opacity of planning procedures.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The research was conducted in 2023, with a focus on the period from 2013 to 2023. It documents civic activities aimed at defending and enhancing the public space of the Sava Quay (Milovanović Rodić et al., 2025; Kočović De Santo et al., 2023). The study is grounded in a qualitative methodology, combining multiple data sources and research methods to develop a comprehensive understanding of participatory practices within the local communities of the Sava Blocks in New Belgrade:

- Internet content and document analysis: Digital traces of civic activities were identified, including official websites and social media profiles (Facebook, Instagram) of local communities and public institutions. These sources were used to construct a chronological map of activities and to thematize modes of civic engagement.
- Interviews and focus groups: Individual interviews and group discussions were conducted with participants and organizers of the activities. The interview protocol included questions on personal motivation, communication strategies, decision-making processes, and perceived outcomes of collective action.
- Direct field observation: Throughout 2023, fieldwork was carried out within the local community, enabling the collection of immediate insights into spatial dynamics, social relations, and informal strategies of civic engagement.

Based on the collected data, a chronological and typological analysis of 128 participatory activities was carried out. The activities were systematized by type, motivation, instruments, and outcomes. Interviews also provided insight into prevailing narratives, perspectives, and the internal dynamics of the community.

The aim of the methodology was to capture various modes of civic engagement and to understand the interplay between digital and analog activism. Limitations of the study include reliance on non-recorded interviews and the participants' requests for anonymity, reflecting the sensitivity of the topic and the asymmetrical power relations between citizens and institutions.

CASE STUDY: SAVA QUAY

The territory of the Sava Quay and the surrounding blocks (44, 45, 70, and 70a) in New Belgrade represents a paradigmatic case of conflict between official planning policies and the needs of local communities. Spatial planning in Belgrade—and particularly in New Belgrade—has in recent years been marked by a strong centralization of decision-making and a significant decline in transparency. In the case of the Sava Quay, citizens have most frequently opposed plans for the repurposing of public spaces, including the construction of residential complexes in areas previously designated as green belts, promenades, and sports fields. Particularly strong resistance was provoked by amendments to the General Regulation Plan for the Sava riverfront, as well as proposals for the regulation and legalization of illegally constructed floating structures and hospitality facilities.

Institutionally, the main actors include the Directorate for Building Land and Construction of Belgrade, the Secretariat for Urbanism, and private investors who, through public-private partnerships, exert considerable influence over the formulation of plans. Citizens often receive formal responses that avoid genuine dialogue—such as references to expired deadlines for public comments, bureaucratic technicalities, or the shifting of responsibility between institutions.

Between 2013 and 2023, a total of 128 participatory activities were documented, which can be categorized into sixteen types, differentiated by their themes, motivations/triggers, instruments used, frequency, participants, and outcomes (see Table 1).

Table 1. Typology and Number of Participatory Activities Implemented in the Period 2013–2023

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	total
Formal requests to relevant institutions	1			2			3	10		7	9	32
Protest			1	1	1	1	2			6	14	26
Public forum				1			4		1	3	1	10
Volunteer work action								5	3		1	9
Sports events, educational and artistic participatory workshops								1		7	2	10
Neighborhood assembly					1				2	2	2	7
Participation in planning procedures								1		3	3	7
Petition							2	1		2	1	6
Communication channels		1					2	2				5
Community information campaigns											5	5
Survey								1			1	2
Collaboration with expert NGO							3					3
Fundraising campaign									2		1	3
Problem study&alternative proposals								1			1	2
Registration of citizens' associations									1			1
total	1	1	1	4	2	1	16	22	9	30	41	128

During the observed period, residents of the Sava Blocks submitted 32 formal requests to relevant institutions, organized 26 protests, held 10 public forums, and carried out 10 participatory sports, educational, and artistic workshops. They also conducted 9 volunteer work actions and 7 neighborhood assemblies, participated 7 times in formal urban planning procedures—through early public consultations and public review stages—organized 6 petitions, established 5 communication and mobilization channels, launched 5 information campaigns to raise awareness about local issues, conducted 3 surveys in cooperation with expert civil society organizations, carried out 2 fundraising campaigns, produced 2 problem studies and alternative development proposals, and registered one citizens' association (Table 1).

Information dissemination typically involved social media posts, leaflet distribution, and the organization of public forums. Mobilization was driven through Facebook events and Viber groups, but always with the aim of achieving physical assembly. Creative actions—such as performances and murals—functioned as bridges between physical space and digital narratives, while legal initiatives (requests, appeals) were amplified by digital visibility and public support.

Volunteer work actions, including collective clean-up efforts or tree planting, reinforced physical presence and shared care for the environment. At the same time, digital campaigns were used as frameworks for multi-week mobilizations that culminated in protests, petitions, and the spread of narratives through mainstream media.

Digital platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube) were used for informing the community, mobilizing participants, coordinating actions, and archiving evidence. For instance, through the *Za naš kej* (*For Our Quay*) page, petitions were launched and gathered thousands of signatures, while protests were coordinated through posts and shared visuals. Physical space remained essential for exerting political pressure: protest walks, forums, and work actions enabled gathering, trust-building, and the expression of collective will.

Participants frequently moved between digital and physical spheres. Some began as observers on social media and later became active participants in offline actions; others were initially engaged on the ground but eventually took on roles in maintaining digital archives and publishing updates. This two-way dynamic contributed to collective memory and the continuity of resistance.

DISCUSSION: SYNERGY BETWEEN DIGITAL AND ANALOG ACTION

An analysis of participatory practices along the Sava Quay reveals a clear interdependence and synergy between digital and analog forms of action. Digital campaigns, social media posts, petitions, and online coordination facilitated the rapid dissemination of information, mobilization of support, and networking among actors, while physical actions in space enabled the articulation of shared positions, the building of trust, and the establishment of a politically significant presence.

Participants frequently transitioned between the digital and physical spheres: residents who initially followed developments via social media began attending meetings and actions, while others who were active on the ground began contributing to online narratives and documentation. This two-way dynamic resulted in the formation of a kind of “collective memory” through digital archives of actions, comments, and visuals.

In conversations with participants, the importance of personal perception of change was often emphasized: “We live here. We walk by the river every day, and we know when something changes—even if it's just a new sign or a new fence.” Others highlighted the moment of shifting from digital to physical action: “At first, I liked and shared posts, but then I went to the protest because I realized that if I don't show up, nothing will change.” Some pointed to frustration with institutional disregard: “We submitted objections, but we never received a reply. Only when we went out onto the street did they finally notice us.” There were also examples of intergenerational exchange: older residents shared

local knowledge, while younger ones took on digital roles—managing accounts, designing graphics, and creating videos. “It’s like a microwave and an oven,” said one participant. “Digital is fast and easy, but analog is thorough and warm.”

Assessments of success varied: while some pointed to tangible results (such as preserved green spaces), others emphasized the value of community-building: “Maybe we didn’t change the plan, but now we know each other, we collaborate, we have a group, and we share responsibility.” Moreover, certain digital materials (e.g., posts documenting illegalities) were used as “evidence” in formal processes—demonstrating the power of digital space to influence institutional domains.

Hybrid strategies proved especially important during moments of intensified conflict, when visibility (digital) and physical presence (analog) were simultaneously needed. For example, protests such as “Critical Mass” were organized entirely online but enacted physically with clear political demands, then documented and circulated back through social media.

Some of the key advantages of digital engagement include speed, flexibility, virality, and ease of coordination; however, these are limited by issues of access, algorithmic visibility, and short-term effects. Physical action carries greater political weight but requires more resources and personal involvement.

The function of “evidentiary material” is also notable—videos, photos, and comments were used in official complaints and served as the basis for media campaigns. In this way, the community built a parallel system of archiving, remembering, and legitimizing its own narratives, independently of official sources.

Despite the challenges, the study demonstrates that coordinating digital and physical activism not only increases reach but also enhances the legitimacy and sustainability of engagement. The Sava Quay, as a symbol of the struggle for public space, illustrates how a community can generate parallel, resilient modes of participation—equally reliant on technology and embodied human presence.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of civic participation in the Sava Blocks of New Belgrade demonstrates that digital and analog forms of engagement do not function as separate systems, but rather as interdependent components of a unified struggle for the public good—mutually reinforcing one another. Digital tools act as catalysts for disseminating information, mobilizing support, and coordinating action, while physical actions in space enable the direct articulation of demands, presence, and influence over decision-making.

Although operating in different spheres, both forms of activism share a common goal: empowering communities and creating spaces for participatory urban development. Their synergy is reflected in the capacity of digital tools to amplify the messages of analog actions and vice versa—where physical interventions gain visibility and broader support through online channels. The integration of digital and analog activism opens a space for the development of a new urban civic culture, grounded in solidarity, inclusion, and the defense of the common good. The experience of the Sava Quay may serve as an inspiration for other urban contexts facing similar challenges, as well as an argument in favor of more flexible, open, and transparent planning practices in contemporary cities.

Through digital channels, citizens have managed to inform, mobilize, and document; through physical actions, they have built solidarity, presence, and resilience. This synergy has enabled the emergence of hybrid forms of resistance that communicate both with local communities and with the broader public sphere.

The Sava Quay, as a case study, sheds light on the deep tensions between civic participation and institutional opacity. Yet it also offers models of action in which communities—drawing on the

strengths of both the digital and physical realms—manage to defend public space, strengthen social bonds, and apply pressure for more accountable and inclusive urban planning.

While formal changes were not always achieved, the contributions of these initiatives lie in the transformation of participatory cultural practices, increased visibility, and the growing confidence of citizens. The future of such initiatives depends on their ability to maintain a balance between the flexibility of digital mobilization and the stability of physical presence.

Ultimately, the synergy between digital and analog activism represents not only a tool for contesting urban injustice but also a foundation for redefining the relationship between citizens, space, and institutions. This study demonstrates that local communities, even under structurally unequal conditions, find ways to become politically visible and spatially active.

However, a potential divergence also exists between digital and analog activism. The digital sphere may be exclusionary due to issues of digital literacy or access to technology, while analog actions may remain localized and less visible without online support. Moreover, the pace of engagement differs—digital campaigns can be rapid and viral, while physical mobilization is often slower and more logistically demanding.

It is precisely in bridging these differences that the potential of synergy lies: digital tools as catalysts, and analog practices as the materialization of activist will. By integrating both approaches, activism in New Belgrade holds the potential to move beyond resistance and toward construction—not only of the city but of a democratic culture.

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