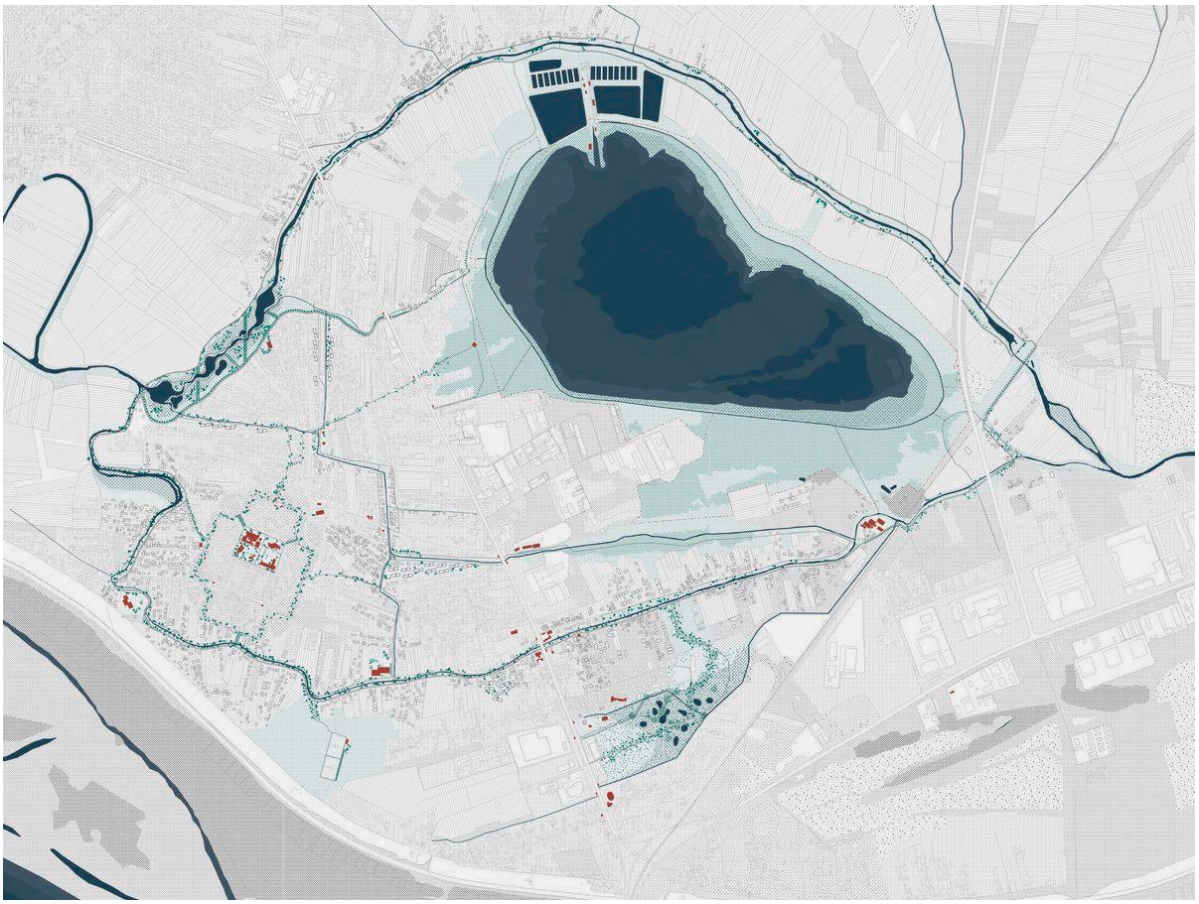
ETH Zurich Department of Architecture
ARCHITECTURE OF TERRITORY
Chair of Architecture
and Territorial Planning
Professor Milica Topalović

Beograd Unbuilt (1/2)
Spring 2018

Beogradski Řit

Third Belgrade Waters: Steering Seasonal Public Space

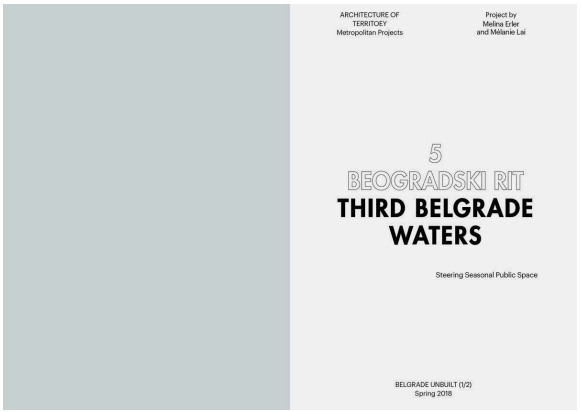
Melina Ehrler and Mélanie Lai

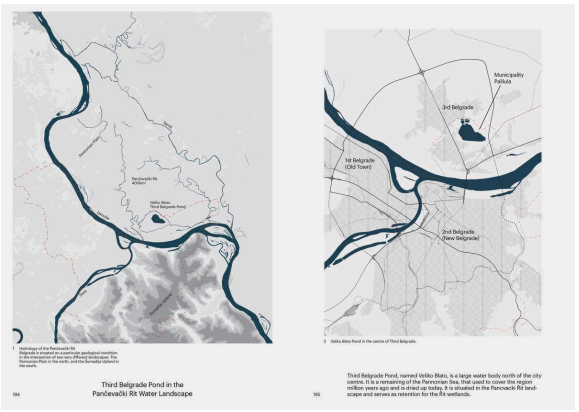


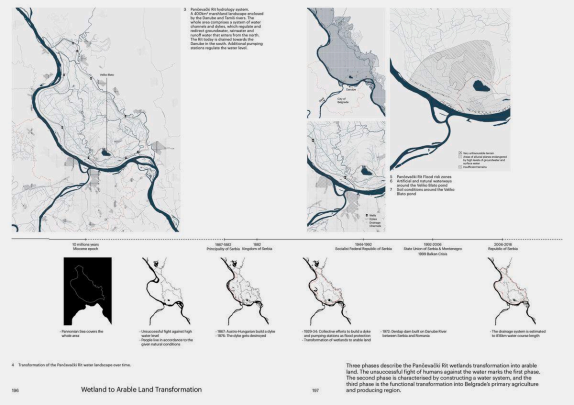
A large body of water in the north of Belgrade is all that remained of the Pannonian Sea, which used to cover the entire basin beyond the Danube River in prehistoric times. Since 1961, when the lake was populated with many fish species, four small basins in the north of the lake have been used to raise fish. During summer, they also serve as sport-fishing grounds, while Veliko Blato, the main lake, is used as a feedlot for the larger fish. After the fishing season, the smaller basins are being emptied every year. Inaccessible wetlands form a shallow pond used for carp-breeding by a private company. In the early 2010s, illegal dumping created a landfill south of the lake, polluting the water and hastening to protect the lake in 2017. Veliko Blato is still not suitable for swimming and bathing due to the large quantities of contaminated mud. Still, it has very high ecological value as a habitat for birds and fish.



The surrounding landscape is characterised by growing settlements developing along an agricultural grid with several large scale construction endeavours, starting to break with the informal pattern. Additionally, vital industrial facilities like the oil refinery and rail and highway transportation speed up the urbanisation processes of the Third Belgrade. The area is part of the municipality of Palilula, one of the biggest and fastest-growing in Belgrade, spreading all along the northern banks of the Danube. Two bridges connect it to the city (a third is in planning), making it increasingly attractive for commuters and businesses alike. As a city crossed by two rivers and many remaining wetlands, Belgrade arguably finds its greatest public asset in the form of water bodies. While some have been entirely urbanised, like the river embankments and leisure islands, the pond of Third Belgrade remains shrouded in private interests and hidden behind an impenetrable wall of greenery.







Wetland to Arable Land Transformation

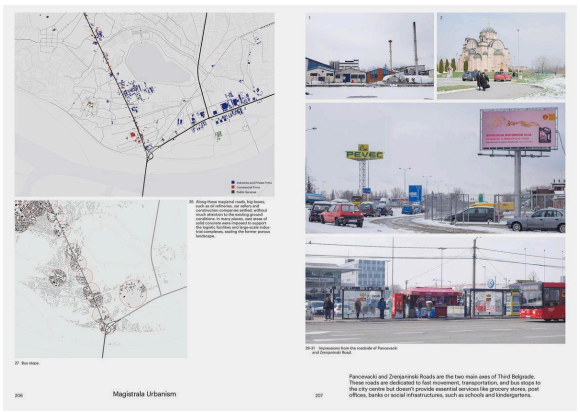
Three phases describe the Pančevački Rit wetlands transformation into arable land. The unsuccessful fight of humans against the water marks the first phase. The second phase is characterised by constructing a water system, and the third phase is the functional transformation into Belgrade's primary agriculture and producing region.



Veliki Blato Protected Habitat in Private Hands

In 2014, the pond and the surrounding buffer zone were placed under protection as the site has very high ecological value. The protected habitat creates also a fictive border to the illegal industries in the southern part of the pond, where in the past illegal landfills polluted the water.





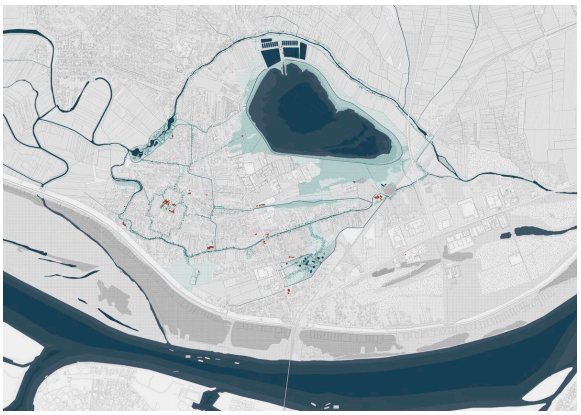
Magistrala Urbanism

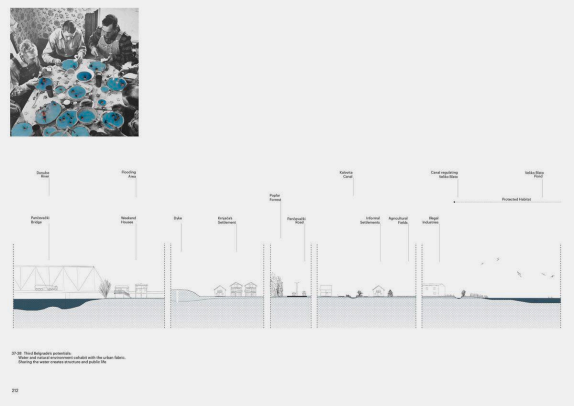
Pancevacki and Zrenjaninski Roads are the two main axes of Third Belgrade. These roads are dedicated to fast movement, transportation, and bus stops to the city centre but doesn't provide essential services like grocery stores, post offices, banks or social infrastructures, such as schools and kindergartens.



From Agriculture Fields to Building Plots

Agricultural fields structure the landscape around the pond. The private field plots are smaller than the large-scale plots owned by PKB, who owns 70% of Pančevački Rit, providing the main structure for the informal development of the former wetland area.



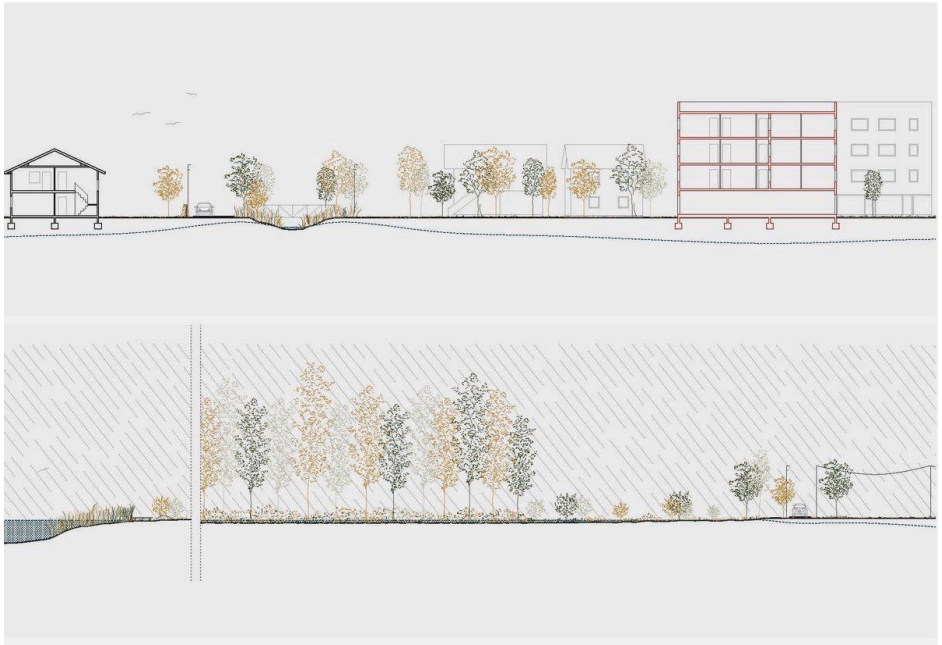


The project Third Belgrade Waters: Steering Seasonal Public Space explores how the qualities of a seasonal wetland landscape can be understood to steer needed public space for the rapidly expanding metropolis without falling victim to speculation or informal development. The heart of the new Beogradski Řit system is Veliko Blato, a defined unbuilt space dedicated to vital habitats for plants and animals. The central vein, the boulevard, is extended with ring pockets parks, used as retention areas, these buffer lands will protect the urban fabric of Third Belgrade from floods. The smaller capillaries, composed of small pockets and sub-paths, flow into the boulevard and provide seasonal public space to the area.





The new Beogradski Rit landscape is built on vacant agricultural land, expanding and retreating along the veins of water.



The new structure steers seasonal public space during dry season in winter and flooding season in spring.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank everyone who helped us in our project research. Thanks to Bojan Durdević (manager of Mika Alas) for the informative talk about Veliko Blato. Thanks to the students of the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Architecture Mackić, Bulajić and Marko for the company and explorations and translation. We would also like to thank Andreja Tutundžić from the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Forestry, for teaching us about the diversity of biotopes in the region. Thank you to Maike Gaertner from the Department of Urban Water Management and Sebastian Davidis from the Laboratory of Hydraulics at ETH Zurich for explaining to us the functionalities of territorial water systems.

SOURCES

- *Forever Until the End.* Photocollage by Heike Weber, 2018.
- “Pancevo Bridge in the period from 1927 to 1946.” Accessed May 2018. http://www.lobi-info.rs/galerija-pancevacki-most-u-periodu-od-1927-do-1946/

This work by Melina Ehrler and Mélanie Lai was created as part of the design studio Beograd Unbuilt (1/2) at ETH Zurich in Spring 2018. The PDF is intended for educational purposes only. Its commercial distribution is strictly forbidden.

© 2025, Architecture of Territory

Architecture of Territory
Professor Milica Topalović

TEACHING TEAM
Thais De Roquemaurel
Hans Hortig
Karoline Kostka
Metaxia Markaki
Ferdinand Rabe von Pappenheim
Milica Topalović
Adrianne Wilson

Prof. Milica Topalović
ETH Zurich
ONA G41
Neunbrunnenstrasse 50
8093 Zurich
Switzerland
+41 (0)44 633 86 88
www.topalovic.arch.ethz.ch