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Children's Perception of the Visual Identity of Belgrade*

The focus of this paper is a research field that has (until now) remained outside the main academic theoretical frameworks – the question of the visual identity of Belgrade seen (and experienced) from the perspective of children. In methodological terms, the paper relies on the results of field research conducted in March 2021 at the Kneginja Milica (Princess Milica) Primary School in New Belgrade, which included a sample of 60 children from Years 1 to 4. The aim of the paper is to discuss from an anthropological perspective some of the key issues of perceiving the appearance of the capital as a visual entity per se: 1) Which visual markers of Belgrade, in the opinion of children, are key to its visual identity and what are the central points on the symbolic map of the capital?; 2) What is the main symbol of Belgrade and what criteria guide the participating children when selecting this central visual marker?; 3) (To what extent) are individual children's perceptions of the panorama of the capital compatible with each other and what are the characteristics of the general children's image of the capital?; 4) (In what way) Is the children's image of the city in harmony with the 'official' image of Belgrade? and 5) Is the child's perception of the visual identity of the capital the result of direct or indirect urban experience?

Key words: children, Belgrade, visual identity of the city

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Дечја перцепција визуелног идентитета Београда

У фокусу овог рада налази се истраживачко поље које је (за сада) остало ван главних академских теоријских оквира – у питању је визуелни идентитет Београда виђен (и доживљен) из перспективе деце. Рад се у методолошком смислу ослања на резултате теренског истраживања које је марта 2021. године спроведено у просторијама ОШ „Кнегиња Милица“ на Новом Београду и којим је обухваћен узорак од шездесеторо деце узраста од 1. до 4. разреда. Циљ рада је да из антрополошке перспективе продискутује нека од кључних питања сагледавања појавности главног града као визуелног ентитета *per se* и то: 1) који су визуелни маркери Београда, према мишљењу деце, кључни за његов визуелни идентитет и које су централне тачке на симболичкој мапи главног града?; 2) који је главни симбол Београда и којим се критеријумима анкетирани деца руководе приликом селекције централног визуелног маркера?; 3) да ли су (и у којој мери) појединачне дечје перцепције визуре главног града међусобно компатибилне и које су карактеристике опште дечје слике главног града?; 4) да ли је (и на који начин) дечја слика града усклађена са „званичном“ сликом Београда? и 5) да ли је дечја перцепција визуелног идентитета главног града резултат непосредног или пак посредног урбаног искуства?

Кључне речи: деца, Београд, визуелни идентитет града, урбано искуство деце

INTRODUCTION

The contours of everyday life and the experiences of millions of children are shaped by the urban environment (Radović 2014, 1)

Despite the fact that, according to official data, children make up a significant proportion of the urban population of Serbia, the relationship between urban space and childhood, as a research topic, is not sufficiently represented in Serbian ethnology and anthropology. A cursory glance at the bibliography of published works in this social science shows that the point of their intersection is almost non-existent. In other words, on the one hand there are numerous studies on the social and cultural practices characteristic of childhood, which Serbian ethnologists / anthropologists approach from various thematic, methodological and theoretical positions. On this occasion, only some of the topics of previous studies on the position

of children in society and various aspects of their upbringing will be listed: children's games; children in traditional culture; children's daily lives; children's rights; children's economic situation, education, inclusion, etc. (see Đorđević 1941; Marjanović 2005; Krel 2005; Đorđević 2018; Mitrović & Brujić 2021). On the other hand, there is a continuously increasing number of urban anthropological works dealing with the most significant theoretical problems that define the city as a spatial and cultural entity per se, as well as the peculiarities of urban life (see Vučinić 1995, Vučinić-Nešković & Miloradović, 2006; Radović 2013; Dražeta 2018; Bogdanović 2019, 2020; Nikolić & Vujović 2020; Blagojević 2020; Jakovljević Šević 2020). The available studies in which some of the aspects of childhood are considered in the context of urban space are the result primarily of research in the fields of the sociology of the city, i.e. the sociology of childhood. However, their number is minimal, which allows some of them to be named even in the work of this length. So, one of the (newer) examples of research on the relationship between urban space and childhood – specifically the urban dimension of children's everyday life – is the doctoral thesis *Urban Space as a Frame of Children's Everyday Life based on the Study of the Specific Urban Areas of Novi Sad*, defended in 2014 in the Department of Sociology of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade (see Radović 2014). In the article *The City: a Place for a Child or a Child's Place – Spatial Aspects of the Institutionalisation of Childhood from the Perspective of Children*, 'places for children' or 'children's places' are considered in the context of broader social processes of urban space production and the structural processes of shaping modern childhood (Radović 2015). Also worth mentioning are two other works – *Playgrounds: Spatial Resources of Structured and Controlled Play* and *The Pedagogical Implications of the Commercialisation of Playgrounds for Young Children in the City* – in which institutionalised urban play spaces are seen as places whose physical, symbolic, social and discursive dimensions shape the conditions and characteristics of children's growth, their identity and ways of participating in the community (Radović 2016; Malović 2019). Although not numerous, these works with their thematic, methodological and theoretical concepts show that *childhood and / in the city(s)* is fully relevant as an independent subject of research.¹

¹ On this occasion, due to constraints on the work, limited reference will be made to studies by foreign authors which, in thematic terms, are a counterpart to the above works by Serbian authors: Lukashok & Lynch 1956; Behera & Trawick 2001; Churchman 2003; Spencer & Blades 2006; Liu 2022.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF RESEARCH

The city, as an extremely complex spatial, cultural, social, economic and demographic phenomenon, has over time become a place of general interest to both professionals and the general public, and thus urban issues are considered and analysed at various levels (see Radović 2013, 9). The history of urban settlements, urban development, urban structures, spatial patterns and urban policies and problems are just some of the topics that touch many disciplinary approaches and paradigms (political economy, theories of architecture and planning, ethno-anthropological studies, urban sociology, cultural geography...). However, the focus of this paper is a research field which, it seems, has so far remained outside the main academic theoretical frameworks – the visual identity of Belgrade seen (and experienced) from a child's perspective. Given that the basis of the defined topics of the paper are extremely complex concepts, it is necessary to begin by clarifying them in more detail.

Many researchers have dealt with *the identities of cities*, directly or indirectly, in multiple disciplines, approaching the topic from different directions and with different focuses and goals (Spasić & Backović 2017, 16). Given that this is a multifaceted phenomenon that has given rise to many different theoretical concepts and systems (mutually consistent or completely opposed), it is important to point out that in this work the term city identity is used in the same sense as by sociologists Vera Backović and Ivana Spasić: “the identity of a city is a set of unique features and characteristics that ensure its permanent recognisability in comparison with other cities, by which it differs from them and is recognised as special” (Spasić & Backović 2017, 16).² Following Edward Relph, the authors state that the identity of the city consists of physical-material and immaterial features, i.e. that its basic components are physical appearance, i.e. the environment (built and natural), activities that take place in that environment, and the meanings that people attribute to both (see Spasić & Backović 2017, 16). On this occasion, the defined theme of the paper directs attention to the basic (but of course not the only) ‘means’ of perception of an urban whole as an entity per se – *the visual appearance of the city*.

Although the space of the city is perceived on the basis of the synthesis of information that we receive by different senses, for the formation of the

² For more information on the history of the topic and existing approaches, see Spasić & Backović 2017, 17–21.

sense of space, the sense of sight is basic.³ Numerous studies (primarily in the field of psychology) have shown that the visual perception of space is a very complex cognitive process that involves extracting and organising impressions from the environment received by the sense of sight. According to psychologists, this process comprises several stages, starting from receiving information, through its processing, to integration with pre-existing knowledge and storage in the long-term memory. The end result is observation, i.e. the identification of information that arrives with the sense of sight and its subsequent filling with meaning based on previous experiences and stored knowledge (Grbović 2017, 41).⁴ In the context of this anthropological research, visual perception of the city space means an active process of *receiving*, *selecting* and *interpreting* visual information obtained by perceiving a certain urban environment. Bearing in mind that the visual appearance of the city is constructed from numerous elements of urban structure (squares, streets, houses, bridges, monumental heritage, sacral buildings . . .) and the natural environment (rivers, lakes, hills...), the city space captured in a single glance contains a theoretically unlimited number of visual stimuli. The amount of (potential) visual information obtained (*received*) in optical 'contact' with the urban environment is therefore infinite. However, it seems that *visual markers* are the first to be noticed in the city panorama – those built / natural elements of urban structure that have such aesthetic, monumental and / or positional properties that they can most likely make a strong impression on any observer (see Linč 1974, 13). Institutions of public importance, places that have historical, cultural and / or architectural value, spatial landmarks, etc., are most often visually marked in the city space. However, not all the building blocks of the city's visual appearance have the 'power' to overcome their initial function and become *a symbol(s) of the city*. The human mind will not (and cannot) uncontrollably add *meaning* to every visual stimulus. Therefore, the *interpretation* of the urban environment is crucial for understanding the process of the visual perception of the city space. In other words, the visual identity of the city cannot be discussed at the level of the mere visual observation (perception) only of the material dimensions

³ Visual information is complemented by information received by other senses with which they integrate and thus make a more complete experience of space (Todić, Jakšić & Tošković 2017, 228).

⁴ Primarily due to constraints on the work, it is not currently possible to explore in more detail research on the visual perception of space in the field of the psychology of perception, but it is necessary to focus on parameters relevant in the field of urban anthropology.

of the urban landscape. When considering the visual “representability”⁵ of one city as special in relation to others, it is necessary to keep two facts in mind: the first is that it is the appearance *of the public open space of the city* which is a product of the common assumptions, values and beliefs of members of one group,⁶ while the other is that the observer “with great adaptability and in the light of his own goals and intentions – chooses, organises and attaches a certain importance to what he sees” (Linč 1974, 8).⁷ In other words, this work distinguishes between two aspects of *the visual identity of the city*, i.e. *the totality of those visible elements of urban structure that unite and communicate symbolic meanings that cannot be expressed in words and that distinguish the appearance of one city from others*: ‘official’ – within which the visual appearance of the city is clear, limited and precise – and ‘individual’ – within which the visual appearance of the city is not necessarily precise, unified or properly arranged.

With the approval of the Belgrade School Administration, the field research on *children’s perception of Belgrade’s visual identity* was conducted in March 2021 at the Kneginja Milica Primary School in Block 62, New Belgrade.⁸ The research included a sample of 60 children drawn from Years 1 to 4 of the primary school.⁹ Bearing in mind the cognitive

⁵ This term is used by sociologists Vera Backović and Ivana Spasić in the context of shaping the identity of the city through the visual, through what is seen (see Spasić & Backović 2017, 64).

⁶ The appearance of a city is most often a consequence of the political instrumentalisation of its physical urban structure (see Bobić 2003; Pušić 1997; Bogdanović 2019).

⁷ Although the impression is that daily contacts with the urban environment are performed immediately, reflexively and routinely because, in the visual sense, the urban environment is relatively constant and stable, the observer is not a passive recipient of stimuli and information coming from the external (urban) environment. On the contrary, everything that comes ‘from outside’ passes through the observer’s prism of expectations, interpretations and experiences. The meaning that will be added to the offered (already selected and marked) components of the physical appearance of the city depends on a number of subjective factors: the observer’s age, education, social environment, previous experiences, mood and many others. Hence the large number of different ‘experiences’ (of the same) visual appearance of the urban landscape.

⁸ The research was conducted on a random sample of primary school pupils.

⁹ The original idea was for this research to include pupils from Years 1 to 8 (7–14 years of age). However, bearing in mind the current pandemic situation (caused by COVID-19) which conditioned altered teaching in all educational institutions, the research was physically possible only in the lower primary groups where the model of regular attendance was maintained; in the upper primary groups, research was not feasible due to the extraordinary model of combined teaching, and older pupils’ views of the capital (fifth to eighth grade) will be the subject of special research and a separate paper.

and expressive abilities of children aged 7–8, it was decided that Year 1 and 2 pupils should express themselves artistically about the symbols of Belgrade. The task of *drawing (and colouring)*¹⁰ what makes the city in which they live recognizable in the visual sense, was set before 17 children who normally attended childcare out of school hours.¹¹ The children were asked to write their name on the back of the paper, along with their age and, in case the art presentation was not sufficiently 'readable', the name of the symbol they chose. At the same time, 43 third and Year 4 pupils filled out a *questionnaire*¹² during regular classes, which took into account that children aged 9–11 can express their own vision of the capital city in which they live in a simple and clear way. Special attention was paid to ensuring that the questions were easy to understand in the first place, had a logical order and were not too numerous.¹³ Bearing in mind that children in this school age group are already familiar with the meaning and characteristics of certain visual markers of the capital through the

¹⁰ After consultations with lower primary teachers at the Kneginja Milica Primary School on the abilities of children's creative expression in art activities, a technique was chosen that gives children the opportunity to easily, simply and spontaneously express and show all their feelings and the way they see the world around them (drawing); its basic means of expression – line – can be used to show shape, direction and movement, texture, space, proportion and size (everything except colour).

¹¹ In this way, in already difficult conditions, regular classes were not 'burdened', so the children had enough time to artistically shape their thoughts about the appearance of the city in which they live.

¹² A number of factors influenced the selection of the questionnaire as a method of data collection: since this is the first research on children's perceptions of Belgrade's visual identity within Serbian ethnology and anthropology, the primary goal was to include as many children as possible, to 'hear' as many authentic children's 'statements' as possible; secondly, survey-type research enables the collection of comparable data suitable for further analysis and last, but not least, is the specific public health situation during which the research was conducted – the written survey, or 'paper-pencil' questionnaires were assessed in accordance with the prescribed measures, as the most suitable / safest during the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹³ Given that this is the first research on this topic in Serbian ethnology and anthropology and that there are, therefore, no research experiences that could serve as indicators when designing the questionnaire, Lynch's concept proved to be useful in the selection and formulation of survey questions. Images of the city, coupled with our idea of urban symbols as well as the experiences of local urban sociologists in the field of empirical research on the identity of cities (Linč 1974; Radović 2014; Spasić & Backović 2017). It should also be emphasised that the field research in all its phases was conducted in full accordance with the Ethical Code of the Institute of Ethnography SASA (Article 9) based on international legal acts protecting human rights, including, inter alia, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (available at https://etno-institut.co.rs/storage/635/61c36ce7bde09_5f33deefc1cef_eticki-kodeks-srpski-SKENIRANO.pdf).

curriculum, the subject of the research was completely clear to them, and there was no need for a more detailed explanation of the phenomenon. Building on the pupils' experiences of testing knowledge by completing control exercises in regular classes, on this occasion the methodology of the questionnaire was presented as a way of recording their views of Belgrade through answers to pre-formulated questions, noting that there were no correct or incorrect responses. In order to get as wide and interesting a range of information as possible through longer answers, most of the questions were open-ended (six out of ten); however, in order that filling out the questionnaire after attending regular daily classes for children in the lower primary school would not be too tedious, the remaining four questions gave the opportunity to circle / rank the suggested answers. One lesson period was made available for children to fill in the questionnaire.¹⁴

PRESENTATION OF FIELDWORK MATERIALS

Art works

The topic of the research defined for the Year 1 and 2 pupils was approached by an imaginary 'walk' through the capital of the Republic of Serbia during which children were asked to 'stop' and 'photograph' those places that they found beautiful, interesting and / or special; in the continuation of the conversation, the fact that there are no two identical 'photo albums' of the city that was 'toured' was discussed. Based on this conversation, children aged 7–8 were given the task of drawing on paper the place that, during the imaginary 'walk', made a particular impression on them. The 17 children singled out St Sava's Temple (10), the Avala Tower (3), the Sava Quay (3) and the Kneginja Milica Primary School (1) as the central visual markers of the city in which they live. It seems that on this occasion, the children

¹⁴ I would first like to thank Darko Eger, head teacher of the Kneginja Milica Primary School in New Belgrade, for his help in conducting the field research: he undertook the task of obtaining all the necessary permits to conduct field research on the premises of the school he manages, corresponding with the professional school staff and providing the technical conditions for the realisation of the research. I would like to express my gratitude to the primary school teachers who supervised the process of making art works / filling out questionnaires and patiently answered all the children's additional questions. I would also like to thank Bogdan (10 years old) and Ana (9 years old) who participated in the 'trial examination', after which the form of certain questions was corrected and adjusted to the age of the children participating in the research. Finally, many thanks to my 'small' respondents who helped to collect data that I hope will have wider academic application.

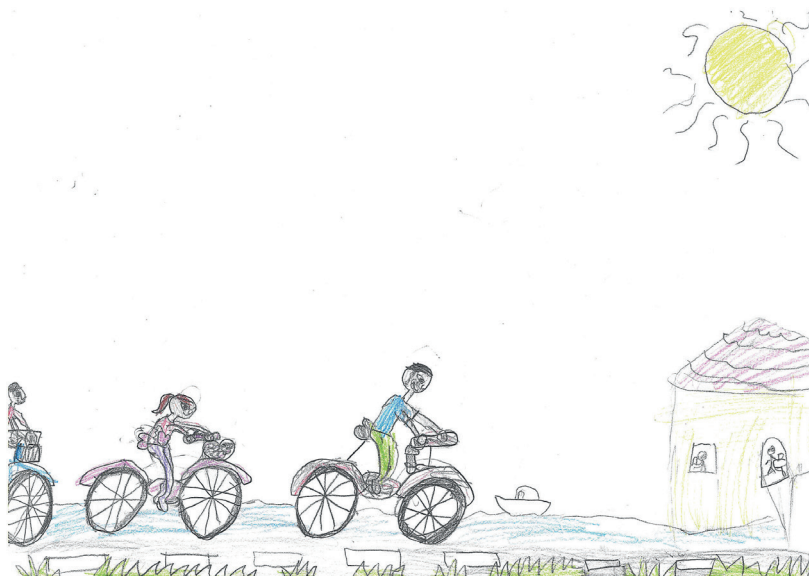
paid special attention to the nature of the shape of the visual marker – all works are clearly ‘readable’, i.e.) unequivocally associated with the subject of artistic expression. However, there was also interest in their individual parts, colour and details.



Picture 1. *St Sava's Temple*; Luna, 7 years old



Picture 2. *Avala Tower*; Bogdan, 8 years old



Picture 3. Sava Quay; Iva, 7 years old



Picture 4. Knejinja Milica Primary School; Isidora, 7 years old

QUESTIONNAIRE

Considering that visual perceptions of phenomena and objects are perceived primarily as a whole, and only later through parts and in parts,¹⁵ the *first question* in the questionnaire referred to the perception of Belgrade as a visual whole. In order to 'begin' the conversation with the children about the appearance of the city in which they live, the questionnaire started with an open-ended question, i.e. the participating pupils were given the opportunity to formulate their own answers. The answers to the question, "How would you describe the appearance of the city where you live to a friend who has never been to Belgrade?" are almost uniform – the children describe their city as beautiful, spacious and big: "I would say my city is the most beautiful in the world" (Marija, 9 years old); "Belgrade is a very beautiful city. I love it because there are many beautiful places and the Pobednik (The Victor) statue" (Hristina, 9 years old); "Belgrade is a very beautiful city: it has two rivers, lakes, forests and many other beautiful places" (Lena, 10 years old). Bearing in mind that the visual appearance of the city is constructed from numerous natural and built elements of the urban structure, the *second question* was related to their classification within the visual whole of Belgrade. This question was, for practical reasons, closed (so that the answers would be as comparable as possible), so the children were asked the following question: "How does the appearance of Belgrade compare with the appearance of other cities you have visited?" answers: a) natural features (two rivers and Mount Avala; b) monuments; c) museums, theatres and galleries; d) play areas (parks and playgrounds) and e) churches. Scoring the answers with numbers from 1 to 5 (where 1 is the lowest and 5 the highest grade), the children ranked the offered elements of the urban structure in the following order:¹⁶ the most important feature of the visual whole of Belgrade are churches (total score 126), followed by natural features (total score 125), a cultural institutions (111) and monuments (106), while play areas are the lowest ranked category (88). The *third question* was about the appearance of the part of the city where the children

¹⁵ According to the principles of gestalt psychology, the whole is always given before the parts – first of all the whole assembly is perceived before the details or constituent parts of that assembly are recognised. Only with subsequent analytical effort is it possible to observe details in the perceptual field (see Arnheim 1985).

¹⁶ Out of a total of 43 questionnaires, the second question was not adequately answered by 6 pupils (ranking several of the offered answers with the same grade, entering only the lowest and / or highest grade, completely skipped answer to this question, etc.), meaning that answers from 37 children are analysed here.

who participated in the research live – specifically, they were asked whether, in their opinion, the appearance of New Belgrade differs from other parts of the city, or whether, from their perspectives, it is (in a visual sense) more beautiful / interesting than other parts of the city? 23 children answered in the affirmative to the offered yes / no answer, while 20 pupils believe that in the visual whole New Belgrade does not stand out in relation to other parts of the city. The *fourth question* (“What makes the appearance of New Belgrade more beautiful / interesting than other parts of the city?”) was answered by children who answered yes to the previous question. Different elements of the urban structure of New Belgrade were recognised and cited by the children as key and distinctive categories, but the answers can still be divided into several basic subgroups: the most common special elements of the urban structure of New Belgrade are the river Sava and Sava Quay, followed by New Belgrade parks, then wide and flat streets, playgrounds, tall buildings and numerous shopping centres. There were also answers that cannot be categorised, such as: “New Belgrade differs from other parts of the city in that the night scene is beautiful” (Andrej, 10 years old); “New Belgrade is more beautiful because it is much bigger than other parts of the city” (Teodora, 9 years old); “New Belgrade has many bike paths” (Mina, 10 years old), etc. In order to ‘narrow’ the conversation about the appearance of the capital, and direct the attention of the participating pupils to specific visual markers of Belgrade, the *fifth question*, asked them to name at least three symbols of the city in which they live. The children singled out a total of 19 visual markers of Belgrade, as follows: the Avala Tower (22); Kalemegdan (14); St Sava’s Temple (13); the Sava (6); Pobednik (The Victor statue) (5); Belgrade Waterfront (5); Ada Ciganlija (4); Knez Mihailova (Prince Michael) Street (3); Beogradanka (sky scraper) (3); the National Assembly (2); the National Theatre (2); the Monument to Stefan Nemanja (2); Ušće (the Confluence of the rivers Sava and Danube) (2); the Museum of Illusions (2); St George’s Church (2); the Danube (2); the Nikola Tesla Museum (1); the Ada Bridge (1) and the Botanical Gardens (1).¹⁷ In the *sixth question*, the pupils were asked to single out (and write down) one – main – symbol of Belgrade. On this occasion, the children singled out the following visual markers as ‘trademarks’ of the capital: St Sava’s Temple (17), Kalemegdan (16), the Avala Tower (4), the National Theatre (1), St Nikola’s

¹⁷ Seven children did not answer the fifth question, while three answers were not adequate, as the pupils mentioned ‘symbols’ such as the coat of arms, anthem and flag of the Republic of Serbia.

Church (1), the Ada Bridge (1) and Belgrade Waterfront (1).¹⁸ In the *seventh question* (open type), the children were asked to explain their previous answer, i.e. to briefly explain why they singled out those particular visual markers from the visual whole of Belgrade.¹⁹ In order to further clarify the question, it was suggested to the children (within brackets) that the answers could potentially refer to the appearance of the visual marker, its position in the urban structure, name, etc. The most common criteria that children were guided by when choosing the main symbol of the city in which they live was appearance ("St. Sava's Temple looks very beautiful and interesting; it is also made of gold and I really like how it looks when the sun shines on it" [Andrija, 10 years old]); then the monumentality ("Saint Sava's Temple is the most important place in my opinion because it is the largest temple in the world" [Elena, 10 years old]) and the position in the urban structure ("Kalemegdan is located in the city centre. The view is very beautiful and you can see beautiful sunsets. You can also see the rivers and New Belgrade from there" [Ksenija, 9 years old]). There are several answers that cannot be classified into the above categories, such as: "Because Saint Sava's Temple is a holy place" (Peter, 10 years old); "I believe in God, and I pray to him here (*in Saint Sava's Temple, author's note.*)" (Andrija, 10 years old); "Kalemegdan stands out because it is very old" (Anastasia, 10 years old) and the like. Gaining an insight into whether the children perceive the selected symbols of the city as 'visual values in themselves' or observe them within the 'socio-historical context and knowledge of the origin and construction' provided the motivation for the *eighth question*. The children were asked to provide some (interesting) information about their chosen main symbol of the city. However, a total of 67.44% of the participating children (29 pupils) did not answer this open question. The 14 answers given mostly state the year of the beginning / end of construction ("The construction of Saint Sava's Temple began in 1935. Due to the bombing, it was stopped in 1945. Construction began again in 1985" [Marija, 9 years old]), founders ("Prince Mihailo Obrenović was responsible for the construction of the National Theatre" [Mina, 10 years old]) or the role and significance of the visual symbol in crucial historical moments ("The Avala Tower was destroyed in the NATO bombing in 1999" [Bogdan, 10 years old]; "Soldiers of the city of Belgrade were housed inside and they could see from there if

¹⁸ Out of a total of 43 questionnaires, two pupils did not answer the fifth question, meaning that answers from 41 children are analysed here.

¹⁹ Due to the fact that the answer to the previous question was not given by two children, once again the answers of 41 pupils are shown.

anyone would attack them” [Ana, 8 years old]; “Kalemegdan has always been used in wars” [Andrej, 10 years old]). The *ninth question* aimed to resolve the dilemma of whether the perception of Belgrade’s visual markers is a consequence of direct, or indirect, *children’s urban experience*²⁰ and the participating children were offered a yes / no answer to the question, “Have you visited this symbol of the city?” 81.40% (35 pupils) answered in the affirmative, while 18.60% (8 pupils) gave a negative answer to the question. Bearing in mind that in the *ninth question* the participating pupils could give a negative answer (which was confirmed by the survey result), the *tenth question* tried to define (and rank) the indirect ways in which the children had gained knowledge about the chosen symbol of Belgrade. With the possibility of circling one or more options, four potential answers were available: media (“I saw this in a video on TV / in a book / magazine”), then the immediate environment (“I heard about it from parents / friends / grandparents”) and / or school curriculum (“I read about it in the textbook / the teacher told me about it”), while the fourth option gave the children the opportunity to formulate their own answer (“something else: what?”). Of the eight pupils who stated that they had no direct urban experience related to the visual perception of the main visual symbol of the city in which they live, seven pupils answered that they noticed a separate visual marker of Belgrade in the public media space, six through communication with people in their immediate environment, while four children stated that they selected the city’s central visual marker thanks to the school curriculum. No child opted for the option of formulating their own answer. In the *last* (optional) question, children were given the opportunity to state what specifically they would change about the appearance of the city in which they live – in other words, the participating pupils could express their opinions on Belgrade’s appearance as a whole, point to deficiencies in the appearance of the city in which they live, or specifically propose new visual markers for the capital. While 19 pupils would not change anything about the appearance of Belgrade (“I like Belgrade just the way it is” [Bogdan, 10 years old]; “I wouldn’t change anything, because no other city in Serbia is as beautiful” [Nina, 9 years old]; “Belgrade is perfect, I don’t want to change anything in it” [Olivera, 10 years old]), 23 of them had objections to the

²⁰ The paper takes the term children’s urban experience from sociologist Svetlana Radović, who defines and analyses the term through spatial mobility, the degree of the institutionalisation of free time and the spatial autonomy of children (Radović 2014). This construct is used in this anthropological research in the broadest possible sense – it generally means (any kind of) interaction of children with their urban environment.

general appearance of the city in which they live ("I would very much like our city to be at least a little bit cleaner" [Hristina, 9 years old]; "There are too many shopping centres, buildings and asphalt" [Iva, 9 years old]; "The facades and tiles on the buildings are old" [Bogdan, 10 years old]), and the children took the opportunity to offer concrete solutions to improve the appearance of Belgrade ("I'd remove the building opposite the market in Block 44 because it stole the meadow where the amusement park used to be" [Masha, 10 years old]; "I'd like to renovate the parks and plant lots of plants" [Bogdan, 10 years old]; "I'd get rid of all the graffiti" [Milan, 10 years old]).

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF THE VISUAL IDENTITY OF BELGRADE

Taken as a whole, the results of this research provide answers to a number of questions that, in a broader sense, revise children's urban experiences and the visual appearances of cities (as unique combinations of natural and built elements of urban structures) and, more narrowly, children's perceptions of Belgrade as a visual entity per se. At this time, due to constraints on the work, only some of them will be discussed:

1) Which visual markers of Belgrade, in the opinion of children, are key to its visual identity and which are the central points on the symbolic map of the capital?

There are a total of 20 visual markers on the basis of which children aged 7–11 recognise the appearance of the city in which they live as special, i.e. by which pupils who participated in the research perceive the visual appearance of Belgrade as different from other cities. Seen from children's perspective, the appearance of Belgrade is dominated by built elements of the physical structure of the city – buildings (of various purposes), monuments and streets. This supports the opinion of those authors who believe that the appearance of symbols in urban space is primarily related to their application in architecture, and only then to other (and different) elements that build the urban space of a city (see Hegediš 2008, 81). The natural elements of the urban structure of the capital (two rivers and their confluence, the Ada Ciganlija peninsula and Mount Avala) also find their place in the children's overall image of Belgrade, but they are proportionally far less represented in relation to built elements.

By mapping the selected components of the visual appearance of the capital – from the Avala Tower located on the south side of Belgrade, through monuments, streets, public institutions and other visual land-

marks in the very centre of the city, to those visual markers located on the north side of the city in New Belgrade's Block 62 – it can be seen that, in the symbolic sense, the children's territorial coverage is significantly smaller in relation to the total area of the city in which they live. In other words, the children's symbolic map of Belgrade has three main units: *the central part of the city* within which the largest number of separate visual markers of Belgrade is mapped (Kalemegdan; St Sava's Temple; the Pobednik; Belgrade Waterfront; Knez Mihailova Street; Beogradanka; the House of the National Assembly; the National Theatre; the Monument to Stefan Nemanja; the Museum of Illusions; the Nikola Tesla Museum, the Botanical Gardens and Ada Ciganlija); *the New Belgrade side of the city* (the Sava / Sava Quay; Ušće; the Danube; St. George' Church; the Ada Bridge and the Kneginja Milica Primary School)²¹ and *an isolated point on the south side of the city* (the Avala Tower). The symbolic 'hub' of Belgrade is, conditionally speaking, a linear axis from Saint Sava's Temple to Kalemegdan, along which a total of 9 (out of 20) isolated structural elements of the visual appearance of the capital were concentrated.²²

2) *What is the main symbol of Belgrade and what criteria are the participating children guided by when selecting the central visual marker?*

According to the interviewed children, the central symbol of Belgrade is *St Sava's Temple*. This building stands out in the vista of the capital with its characteristic *appearance*, monumentality and specific position in the urban structure: the children understand the external aesthetics of the central visual marker – St Sava's Temple is a "very beautiful building" adorned with "beautiful domes" and "huge golden crosses"; during the selection of the main symbol of the city based on the criteria of *monumentality*, the participating children refer to the fact that St Sava's Temple is the largest Orthodox church in the world, not just a building that occupies a prominent place on the Belgrade skyline and is visible from all approaches; meanwhile, the *place* occupied by St Sava Square (upon which St. Sava's Temple stands) held a key positional point in the urban struc-

²¹ It is interesting to mention here that the participating children do not perceive the part of New Belgrade where they live as a separate visual whole, which is somewhat unexpected, given that New Belgrade's Blocks 62 and 63 are recognisable on a wider scale and visually / architecturally different from the rest of the city. This fact should certainly be examined in more detail in some future research.

²² According to Kevin Lynch, although in most cases 'hubs' are conceptually very small dots in the image of a city, in nature they can be very large, elongated or spread over the entire territory of a district (see Linč 1974, 91).

ture of the city for the participating children, because it is frequented by and easily accessible to a large number of people.²³ Apart from aesthetics, monumentality and positioning as physical predispositions that give Saint Sava's Temple the rank of the central visual marker of the capital, there is another (less represented) criterion that the participating children were guided by when choosing the main visual marker of Belgrade – that is the immeasurable significance that St Sava has for Serbian culture overall and, consequently, the extremely high position accorded the first Serbian archbishop, saint and educator in the general symbolic system of a given society. In other words, the surveyed children choose Saint Sava's Temple as the main symbol of the city in which they live because it was built for "our great saint, teacher and the son Stefan Nemanja", "a very good and important man who did so many things for Serbia." This illustrates that children aged 7–11 can connect, in a clear and unambiguous way, the bearer of symbols (the Temple as a monumental architectural work) with what it represents (one of the most important figures in the history of the Serbian people).

3) *(To what extent) Are individual children's perceptions of the appearance of the capital compatible with each other and what are the characteristics of the general 'children's' image of the city?*

Images of one and the same city can vary greatly between different observers – urban reality (what is seen) is interpreted and connected to the whole by individuals in different ways (Linč 1974, 8; 169). In other words, next one – there are as many images of the city as there are people who perceive it – there are always many 'cities' that can be imagined and articulated as personifications of the "city itself" (Spasić & Backović 2017, 24). And indeed, there are no two identical children's depictions of Belgrade – each of them represents a unique combination of given urban shapes, sizes, colours, textures and details. There are even different ways of 'depicting' one and the same visual marker – in some cases its form is emphasised, in some its monumentality, while in some its disposition within a given physical structure of the city.

However, in the case of each city, individual images and impressions still establish certain patterns, with significant repetitions and overlaps in terms of major 'bright spots', i.e.) symbolically loaded locations, build-

²³ The above criteria that children are guided by when selecting the main visual marker of Belgrade almost completely correspond to those criteria that Maoz Azaryahu recognises as key in the interpretation of symbolic urban spaces (Azaryahu 1999).

ings, phenomena and concepts that serve as the backbone of its identity (Spasić & Backović 2017, 24). Comparing the individual children's images of Belgrade, the conclusion is that the structural elements of the visual appearance of the capital among children of younger school age are largely consistent, but that children connect them as a whole in different ways.²⁴ Therefore, conditionally speaking, we can talk about a monolithic children's image of the city, formed on the basis of roughly the same / similar generational urban memory and, consequently, the same / similar formative urban experience of children perceiving the city (see Spasić & Backović 2017, 104). Belgrade, seen through the eyes of children aged 7–11, is in the first place a *beautiful* and *colourful* city. Seen from their perspective, the capital has an exceptional aesthetic potential to leave a favourable visual impression on observers: its exterior is adorned with wide and beautiful streets, two rivers and Mount Avala, a large number of impressive buildings (museums, theatres, sacral buildings), bridges, monumental statues... Hence, the children's image of the city includes "only what is beautiful, pleasant and attractive, what can be easily transformed into a postcard or souvenir" (Spasić & Backović 2017, 23). The appearance of Belgrade is also *impressive* – the children's vision of the capital is dominated by visual markers of striking size and luxurious exterior, whose implementation in the urban structure of the capital was carried out through large urban interventions. Finally, Belgrade is a *dynamic* city: adapting their own images of the city in which they live "to secondary changes in the physical reality that surrounds them" (see Linč 1974, 109), the participating pupils, as observers, observe changes in the visual appearance of the capital in which they live and its visual markers. Belgrade Waterfront (at the time of writing the business-residential complex is still under construction) and the monument to Stefan Nemanja (whose unveiling ceremony was on St Sava's Day, January 27, 2021, just a month before the field research was conducted).

4) (*In what way*) *Does the children's image of the city harmonise with the 'official' image of Belgrade?*

²⁴ An indicator for this statement is the fact that the participating children were given the opportunity to name three visual markers within the questionnaire, which, in their opinion, are key to the visual identity of the city in which they live; given that 43 children completed the questionnaire, the fifth question could, in theory, result in a list of 129 potential visual markers of the capital. However, a total of 20 elements of the visual appearance of the capital were singled out, and the conclusion is that the constituent elements of each individual child's image of Belgrade are largely compatible with each other.

Bearing in mind the fact that no academic 'consensus' has as yet been reached on those elements of the urban structure that make Belgrade special and different from other cities,²⁵ the only relevant image of the city that can be used in this context for comparison with children is the image of the city which, as a state institution, is offered by the Belgrade Tourist Organisation. Therefore, at this point, we are actually discussing 'external' and 'internal' Belgrade, in the sense in which the above terms are used by Brian Graham (see Graham according to Spasić & Backović 2017, 22): *the first*, whose appearance consists of externally visible features and unique markers into which the capital can be 'summarised' for tourism and marketing purposes and primarily for external audiences and *the second*, whose mode of urban visual identity exists in the consciousness, habits and memories, in this case, of children aged 7–11 years. In that sense, the general conclusion is that the image of the city produced on the basis of children's statements largely corresponds to the 'official' image of Belgrade, which, as a representative, is placed on the tourist market.²⁶ In other words, the symbols through which children 'embody' the city in which they live are almost completely in line with the visual markers that institutionally "shape the city's identity in its most striking features" (Backović & Spasić 2016, 215): as many as 14 of the 20 elements of Belgrade's urban structure, which children aged 7–11 singled out as visual markers of the city in which they live, are also among the main tourist attractions of the City of Belgrade. The so-called 'children's places' are missing in the 'official' image of the city – those places with which children are physically connected, to which children are attached, which they point out and talk about, to which they attribute the meaning of *their* places (Rasmussen, 2004).²⁷ On the other hand, in the children's image of the city, those places which are part of the tourist guide to the capital intended for us-

²⁵ In this context, the article "The Urban Identity of Belgrade: Perfect Chaos, Imperfect Balance" is worth mentioning, in which sociologists Ivana Spasić and Vera Backović, speaking about the urban identity of Belgrade seen from the perspective of its inhabitants (locals and foreigners), consider material occurrence relying on qualitative empirical data collected during field research (see Spasić & Backović 2020).

²⁶ See Belgrade Tourist Organization <https://www.tob.rs/sr>

²⁷ For example, the Kneginja Milica Primary School, which is attended by the children who participated in the research, St. George's Church – the central sacral institution located in the neighbourhood where the participating pupils live – or the Museum of Illusions that children – it can be assumed because of the content that this institution offers – recognise as one of the symbols of Belgrade.

ers of a different age profile are invisible.²⁸ The high level of coincidence between the two images of the city ('official' and children's) speaks of the fact that the visual appearance of Belgrade is clear, understandable and legible, i.e. that the capital has the visual quality that Kevin Lynch explains as "the ease with which its parts can be recognised and can be organised into a coherent pattern" (Linč 1974, 3), regardless of the perspective from which they are viewed. However, unlike public images that are created less on the basis of physiological similarities in the work of human senses, and much more as a communicative–interpretive construction that is formed gradually, through historically grounded and ingrained conversations about the past, tradition, specifics, present hopes and prospects, qualities and resources, as well as losses, falls and failures that mark 'our' city (Spasić & Backović 2017, 24–25), it seems that children's images of the capital are not the product of these (and such) processes. This is supported by the fact that for nearly 70% of the participating children, the main symbol of Belgrade is 'value in itself', while the answers about the origin and construction appear only enough to provide context, not to revise the past as such.

5) *Is the children's perception of the visual identity of the capital the result of direct or indirect urban experience?*

Considering the children's answers to the ninth and tenth questions in the survey, which were aimed at gaining insight into the ways in which children gain knowledge about the visual appearance of Belgrade, the general conclusion is that children's perception of the visual identity of the capital is, in most cases, the result of direct urban experience. Children identify, verify and place the visual appearance of the city in which they live in concrete material forms on the basis of a posteriori (co) knowledge. Over 80% of the children who participated in the research (re)construct their own image of Belgrade by direct observation of the given urban environment – in other words, the participating pupils selected visual markers of the city where they live which they had visited live and of which they had a direct 'experience of the place'.²⁹ This illustrates that children aged 7–11 are largely independent participants in urban processes, i.e. that children's perception of Belgrade's visual appearance does not necessarily have to be influenced by external factors (public

²⁸ For example, Skadarlija, Kosačićev Venac, Savamala and the like.

²⁹ The indicator for this statement is the affirmative answer of 81.40% of the surveyed children to the question "Have you visited this symbol of the city?"

media discourses, social environment or educational content). However, there are also children who establish a relationship with the observed elements of the urban structure of the city in which they live based on indirect experience gained by consuming media content, interacting with their immediate environment (family / peers) or adopting a school curriculum. More precisely, the information obtained through these communication channels (either horizontal or vertical) allows children to establish basic relationships with the space or area of the unexperienced and become operational in the process of receiving, selecting and interpreting visual information. It is also noticeable that the answers of children who do not have direct urban experiences are uniform – the central symbol of Belgrade is, without exception, St. Sava's Temple, which suggests that in all three information systems available to children there is a unique symbolic matrix through which the participating pupils profile their own images of the capital.

CONCLUSION

This paper indicates, although perhaps only in an elementary way, a potentially new approach to the study / perception of the mode of perceiving the visual dimension of the city as a structural context of children's urban experience. It seems that the initial steps have been taken when it comes to researching the visual appearance of Belgrade, seen (and experienced) from the perspective of children aged 7–11: those elements of urban structure that, according to the children who participated in the research, are the basis of the visual identity of Belgrade have been identified; its main symbol was marked with an explanation of the criteria on the basis of which the participating children singled out the central visual marker of the city in which they live; the visual whole of the capital has been considered, with the mapping of key points on the symbolic map of Belgrade, etc. Also, this research confirmed that children have a developed attitude towards the urban environment that surrounds them and that, in that sense, they are competent urban actors worth studying (see Radović 2014, 54). However, given that this is a new research topic (at least when it comes to Serbian ethnology and anthropology), there is an obligation to point out in the conclusion of the paper some of the difficulties that accompanied the process of the reconstruction of the children's image of the city, so that they may be avoided in future research. In fact, there are two main reasons why the research conceived in this way only partially clarified the attitude of children towards the visual

appearance of their environment. In the first place, the applied methodological procedure (which, given the emergency public health measures pertaining when the field research was conducted, was, in fact, the only one possible) and the fieldwork material obtained in accordance with it (which is not questionable in terms of quality), excluded certain aspects of the visual appearance of the city from further analytical procedure: for example, the way in which children perceive the exterior of the city in which they live in the context of broader social processes – primarily institutionalisation and ‘family-isation’ as “structural processes of shaping and expressing childhood in modern society” (Radović 2014, 29) – remained somewhat unclear. There are only indications that ‘children’s’ images of the city are shaped, in addition to the primary direct urban experience, by the media, educational institutions and / or the immediate social environment (family / peers). However, readers of the paper were deprived of additional clarifications, at least an overview of the ways and mechanisms by which public images of Belgrade are transposed to the level of children’s perceptions of the visual appearance of the capital. Also, on this occasion, one extremely important – according to some theorists – component of the (visual) appearance of the city was omitted: the significance and meaning that structural elements of the ‘image’ of the city have for observers, on a practical or emotional level (Linč 1974; Lefebvre 1991). Unlike the spatial and dispositional relations of visual markers that are easily and quickly noticed in the urban structure of Belgrade, the participating children do not give significance and meaning to the symbols of the city in which they live, at least not to the extent expected. Another reason for some ambiguities lies in the fact that, as emphasised in the introductory part of the paper, there is no realised qualitative research on children’s perception of Belgrade’s visual identity (even smaller ones) in other / different contexts that would (somewhat) enable comparative analysis, and thus allow the drawing of more general conclusions. So, there are many ways in which it is possible to continue, and more importantly, to deepen research in the field of children’s perception of the visual appearance of the capital. One of the goals of this paper is, therefore, to encourage further studies that will contribute to a more integrated view of children’s perception of the visual identity of Belgrade.

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