

Belgrade





Root-and-Branch Transformation

By Côme Bastin and Fleur Weinberg

Belgrade Design Week has brought together public, private and civic actors to promote design thinking as a tool for solving some of the country's most pressing problems. This led

to the launching of an innovative public space programme in 2014, and three new “creative playgrounds” have now been built in the cities of Belgrade and Kragujevac.

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Belgrade Design Week

Belgrade Design Week was founded in 2005 by global entrepreneur Jovan Jelovac. It was established as a non-profit NGO in the tradition of private endowment foundations that fostered culture and education in Serbia in the first half of the 20th century. For 10 years, Belgrade Design Week organised an annual festival of

creative industries in Serbia and the South East European region, covering a geographical area that is home to more than 100 million. For many international participants, Belgrade Design Week provided their first opportunity to visit Belgrade, Serbia and the wider region. It also enabled local and regional creatives and professionals

to come together and share ideas. Belgrade Design Week has always viewed design as a special methodology for introducing and realising new ideas in society. Despite the success of the festival, Belgrade Design Week decided to transform the event to focus on another challenge.



The design of the playground was based on extensive consultation with Kragujevac residents. © Belgrade Design Week

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A boy tries the new playground equipment in Belgrade's Kalemegdan fortress. © Belgrade Design Week

For the inhabitants of Kragujevac, the fourth largest city in Serbia, the Grand City Park has always been a favourite place for a stroll. With its paths, benches, sports grounds and canopy of century-old trees, the Grand City Park has been a haven of relaxation in the city since it was built in 1898. *“Unfortunately, the park shared the inevitable fate of the city and deteriorated,”* says Jovan Jelovac, the founder of Belgrade Design Week. Serbia has endured many trials and tribulations in the last few decades—the Balkan Wars, the break-up of Yugoslavia, the global financial crisis—and Kragujevac hasn’t been spared. Throughout this time, the Grand City Park suffered from a lack of attention and investment.

But in 2017, the park recovered some of its former lustre. For a period of several months, designers, urbanists, architects and construction companies joined forces to restore a neglected area between the public swimming pool and the Faculty of Engineering Sciences. Renamed the “Creative Grand Park of Kragujevac”, this 10,000 square metre section of the park now hosts a state-of-

the-art designed children’s playground, a modern exercise unit for young people, and motoric training equipment for older people. All these components are connected through biomorphic gravel paths and green areas. New park furniture and a fountain have also been built.

The new Creative Grand Park is the result of a complex process involving multiple stakeholders. *“The work was planned and managed by Belgrade Design Week,”* explains Vesna Jelovac, the CEO of Belgrade Design Week, *“but we had key financial and operational support from the Dragica Nikolić Foundation (the charity set up by the former First Lady of Serbia). We also cooperated with the city of Kragujevac, invited some of the best Serbian creatives to work on the design of the park, hired local construction companies, and received support from leading manufacturers of playground equipment.”* In fact, Kragujevac was not the first but the third creative playground built by Belgrade Design Week, which has pioneered a unique approach to urban regeneration in Serbia.



Children enjoying the newly constructed playground. © Belgrade Design Week

An emerging design culture

The roots of the Kragujevac project stretch back several years. From 2005 to 2014, Jovan Jelovac organised Belgrade Design Week, a unique annual design event in Serbia. But eventually he and his team wanted to work on something more permanent. *“We were disappointed that we couldn’t extend a seven-day festival into an ongoing project,”* Jovan Jelovac says. *“We were also frustrated by Serbia’s inability to create design institutions that work all year round.”* In 2014, the organisation joined the Human Cities network. It was an interesting opportunity for a country that was still outside the European Union and didn’t have a well-established design sector.

“We hoped the Human Cities project would give people in Serbia a greater understanding of the value of design,” Jovan Jelovac explains. *“That’s why we decided to transform our festival and explore opportunities to influence life in Serbia 52 weeks a year.”* The organisation kept its original name, but shifted to a more hands-on approach and decided to use its design methodology

to *“help the weakest members of society: children, young people and older people, who can’t improve their situation on their own.”* After investigating a range of public spaces that would benefit from interventions, the team decided to focus on playgrounds for children and exercise areas for older people.

Public-private partnership

Belgrade Design Week launched a non-profit campaign with an ambitious objective: to build 100 creative playgrounds across Serbia. The aim was to collaborate with local municipalities and private businesses to identify and develop appropriate sites on public land. *“We also wanted the playgrounds to meet the European Union’s highest environmental and sustainability standards,”* Vesna Jelovac says. *“And we collaborated with leading Serbian creative professionals as well as international partners.”* In 2014, Belgrade Design Week started on the State of the Art phase of the Human Cities project. The team carried out in-depth analysis of the desolate state of playgrounds and public spaces in Belgrade. It also conducted numerous interviews with key stake-

“We wanted these special sites to reflect the European Union’s best environmental and sustainability standards, and we collaborated with leading Serbian creative professionals as well as international partners.”

Vesna Jelovac, Belgrade Design Week.

The playground was furnished with equipment from leading international manufacturers.
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Belgrade Design Week aims to develop 100 creative playgrounds across Serbia.
© Belgrade Design Week

Serbia's former capital

Kragujevac was Serbia's first capital, where its first constitution was proclaimed, and the first secondary school, university, printing press and pharmacy were established. In the 19th century it became an important centre of military production. In World War II it was the site of a mass ex-

ecution of civilians by German occupation forces, which led to the establishment of a large memorial park in the city. Kragujevac today is best known for its weapons and automobile industries—represented by brands like Zastava and Fiat—and is also a regional university hub with 20,000

students. Belgrade Design Week chose Kragujevac as its Human Cities focus because of the city's important civic, urban planning and industrial heritage in the heartland of Serbia—and its post-industrial challenges.

“We hoped the Human Cities project would contribute to a greater understanding of the value of ‘design thinking’ inside Serbia—especially with the public, its institutions and media. We shifted to offering a more hands-on experience grounded in improving the quality of daily life in Serbia.”

Jovan Jelovac, Belgrade Design Week.

holders: officials from the city of Belgrade, potential investors, and partners from academia, media and related citizens’ initiatives. To engage the people of Belgrade in an original way, Belgrade Design Week partnered with Dr. Nataša Čiča of Kapacity.org to deploy her innovative THINKtent methodology. Dr Čiča hosted a series of conversations about the project in a portable 5 x 5 metre canvas bell tent with up to fifteen people per session.

Thanks to this extensive process, Belgrade Design Week managed to build an extremely successful public-private partnership. Partners and donors included the city of Belgrade, the NIS energy company, and the Lamda development group. In cooperation with the Embassy of Finland, Belgrade Design Week also invited the Finnish company Lappset to contribute its sector-leading playground equipment. As a result, two creative playgrounds were opened in the Kalemegdan fortress area in the centre of Belgrade in 2014 and 2015.

It may be common in other European countries, but a partnership like this between the public, private and civic sectors was quite new in Serbia. *“It allowed us to improve one of the most important leisure destinations in Belgrade and create a new, inspiring and safe place for children to play—a place which leading European cities would be proud of,”* Jovan Jelovac emphasises. His view was shared by the Mayor of Belgrade, Siniša Mali, who said at the project’s inauguration: *“Too often, we have tried to do everything alone. But as we don’t have enough money or knowledge, relying on the civil and private sectors is the solution.”*

Post-industrial city

Belgrade Design Week subsequently decided to create a new playground specifically for the Human Cities project. Located in central Serbia, the city of Kragujevac faces complex post-industrial challenges similar to those in Saint-Étienne in France, which also used to be the *“weapons foundry of the nation”*. *“The location in Kragujevac offered very exciting opportunities, partly because of its size and partly because of the multiple ways it is used,”* Vesna Jelovac says. An innovative public-private partnership was again set up and substantial support was received from the Dragica Nikolić Foundation, established by the then First Lady of Serbia. *“It was not by accident that Kragujevac became the host of the Human Cities project,”* she said at the opening of the first phase of the Creative Grand Park project in Kragujevac. *“The choice wasn’t only determined by theoretical considerations, but also inspired by the challenge of redeveloping our city for our citizens.”*

Belgrade Design Week implemented the project in partnership with Professor Aleksandru Vuja and his team of students from the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Belgrade. The project helped spark a discussion about the future planning of green areas in Kragujevac. This included exploring their connection with Šumarice Memorial Park, where many citizens of Kragujevac were murdered by the Nazis in World War II. Belgrade Design Week again engaged local people through participatory urbanism, based on analysis and consultations combining the

methodologies of IDEO.org and Jan Gehl. *“In a short period of time, we did a lot of surveys and interviews with local people to understand their needs,”* Professor Vuja remembers. He hopes that the project will encourage the inhabitants of Kragujevac to take part in the ongoing development of their city.

In February 2017, Belgrade Design Week organised an international creative conference in Kragujevac to celebrate the opening of the new playground. “HUMAN CITIES/SHARING CLOUD Kragujevac 2017” welcomed local residents, civic activists from Serbia, and partners from all over Europe for a series of public talks and workshops. The THINKtent was once again used as a unique way to engage people in participatory urbanism. *“These collaborative models really helped us improve the Grand City Park,”* Jovan Jelovac says. *“But they do much more than that. They also set new standards for regenerating other parts of the urban fabric.”*

And not just in Kragujevac. After all, there are still 97 more creative playgrounds to be built across Serbia.