CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN RECLAIMING PUBLIC OPEN SPACE IN INHERITED MULTI-FAMILY HOUSING ESTATES IN SERBIA: PRACTICE, GAPS AND PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Public open spaces (POS) in Serbia's inherited multi-family housing estates, largely built during the socialist period, are often degraded and fail to meet residents' needs in the transformed urban environment of post-socialist cities. Although planning laws mandate public hearings, citizen participation remains largely procedural and limited to the planning stage. This study examines four examples from cities of varying sizes and institutional capacities - Belgrade, Niš, and Bor, to explore how citizen engagement affects the design, usability, and maintenance of POS. The study approaches citizen participation through a green and socially inclusive lens, emphasizing how community engagement contributes to the ecological and social regeneration of POS. Findings show that active involvement by residents, NGOs, and institutions leads to more vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable POS, while the absence of participation results in neglect and social exclusion. Comparative insights from other post-socialist contexts confirm that institutionalizing participation beyond plan adoption remains a common challenge. The study recommends legal and policy instruments to embed continuous citizen engagement throughout planning, implementation, and maintenance stages. Strengthening the role of NGOs and community initiatives, supported by municipal and legislative frameworks, is essential to ensure participatory practices evolve from isolated projects into systemic, resilient, socially inclusive and eco-friendly urban development.

Keywords: citizen participation, public open spaces, multi-family housing estates, urban planning, Serbia, post-socialist cities

INTRODUCTION

Public open spaces (POS) are essential components of urban life, providing opportunities for recreation, social interaction, urban greenery, and fostering community identity [1][2]. In Serbia, many inherited multi-family housing estates, largely built during the socialist period, face severe retrograde urban changes regarding POS: green areas and courtyards have deteriorated or disappeared due to densification, playgrounds are often unsafe or absent, and shared spaces are frequently poorly maintained [3][4].