



## Public Spaces in a Pandemic. Peripheral Danubian Cities

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Peter Petrov

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## **PUBLIC SPACES IN A PANDEMIC. PERIPHERAL DANUBIAN CITIES**

**Peter Petrov**

Assistant, Architect, PhD; New Bulgarian University, Address: Sofia 1618, 21 Montevideo Str., building 2, 5th floor, office 508; e-mail: pppetrov@nbu.bg

**THEMATIC AREA:** Healthy spatial planning | Healthy urban and architectural design

**TPOLOGY OF THE CONTRIBUTION:** A- Experience in the field of teaching

### **ABSTRACT**

The "emergency epidemiological situation" has fundamentally changed the concept of free movement and the sense of security of the urban man. It is increasingly likely that such restrictions will be possible in the future in cases of epidemics. The public spaces of the Danube cities are among the most negatively affected due to the challenges of overcoming peripherality, population aging, depopulation, urban decline, collapse of tourism, transboundary pollution.

In this text I'm looking for answers to questions of an urban and architectural point of view, attracting attention more sharply than ever. These are issues common to the cities, but also with specifics for the declining Danube cities. Are there well-developed and attractive healthy public and green areas, evenly distributed throughout the cities and accessible on foot to the entire urban structure? Is the Danube River fully used as a spatial, aesthetic, cultural and ecological phenomenon in the riparian zones? Are the streets and boulevards comfortable and healthy for people and cars? Are the bike lanes safe? How home and living environment can be easily transformed into an "arena" not only for living, but also for work at home, for education, for contacts with relatives and friends? Alienation or empathy grows between people and how does this affect the urban space? What is the behaviour of the traveling person in the new reality? Is protecting of the European heritage an outstanding opportunity to improve the quality of public spaces?

In my doctoral thesis I pointed out 5 principles of urban planning, that continue to meet the public interest and a concept of a healthy city: nobility and humanism; effective system of pedestrian spaces, public transport and bicycle access network; nature in the urban environment; economic aspects of the quality of life; unique sites and urban spaces with their own economy.

**Keywords:** urban, design, pandemic, healthy, Danube.

### **INTRODUCTION**

As in many other Danube cities, in the history the Danube was a connecting rather than a dividing river. Borders after World War II greatly enhance the process of separation. Remarkably developed, economically and culturally, connected directly with the Danube cities of the Middle Danube in the second half of the XIX and the first half of the XX century, today towns of Vidin, Lom, Svishtov, Rousse, Silistra ranks last in terms of GDP in the EU. They are among the fastest melting municipalities in the country. The reasons for this are complex - on the one hand, common problems for the whole country - aging population, depopulation of small settlements, low standard of living, lack of sufficient funds in municipalities to maintain public works, social policies, health, high unemployment, monocentric spatial development on the territory of the country with unbalanced development of the capital at the expense of other regions, on the other hand - peripheral border location, poor

communication links - unfinished highways and transport corridors to allow fast connections with the capital and other larger settlements places, as well as cross-border connections, lack of significant investments in the economy or failed major infrastructure energy projects, transboundary pollution, insufficiently developed network of higher and special education.

## Legislation In Spatial Planning and Danube Cities

According to the current legislation, general development plans have been developed or are being finalized for all municipalities in Bulgaria in recent years. For the programming period 2021-2027, plans for integrated urban development are being developed, which will focus the efforts of cities to partially solve problems of public services, the development of economic zones and the attraction of investments and areas with pronounced social challenges. But in the analyzes of the National Concept for Spatial Development - NCPD one can see the alarming trends for the melting of cities on the outskirts of the country, including the Danube cities. The demographic forecast for Bulgaria is negative. The assessment today is that the demographic potential of the villages has already been exhausted. Now migration processes are moving from small towns to larger and even larger ones, as a result of which the peripheries are becoming increasingly depopulated. Thus, the Danube cities with a remarkable cultural and natural heritage, with a developed spatial structure and a relatively well-developed cultural and social infrastructure are losing their population. And the forecast analyzes show that this lasting trend will continue<sup>1</sup>.

Demographic statistics	Years		
	2020	2050	2080
Region of Vidin	82 065	46 948	28 124
Region of Ruse	215 806	165 521	129 887
Region of Silistra	107 055	74 623	55 540

The National Concept for Spatial Development proposes a variant for the development of the so-called "highly developed polycentrism", a moderately optimistic variant for spatial development as opposed to the clearly expressed monocentrism.

The perspective for Vidin and Silistra is to develop sustainably as cities of the 3rd, with a tendency to the 2nd hierarchical level, and Ruse to remain at level 2. In their agglomeration areas, which are in a state of contraction and disintegration, the functional connections between settlements and centers to begin to recover and intensify. The NCS has specific goals and priorities - territorial cohesion through integration into the European space, polycentric territorial development, preserved natural and cultural heritage; economic and social cohesion.

Transport and communication systems between the Danube Bulgarian and Romanian cities on both sides of the border to increase their capacity. Improving transport connectivity would have a tangible positive economic effect. The construction of three more bridges across the Danube (Svishtov-Zimnich, Silistra-Calarasi and Nikopol-Turnu Magurele), as well as a second bridge Ruse-Giurgiu, part of the main TEN-T network would be a solution to the problem of "narrow sections". Certainly, these

<sup>1</sup> HCM <https://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/2996/%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%BF%D0%BE-%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8-%D0%B8-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB>

connections would give a new breath of air to Svishtov, Nikopol and Belene, which is located between these two cities, and certainly to Silistra.

Against the background of spatial development, design within the urbanized area of Danube cities also has its major challenges. The general development plans in principle create the territorial basis for long-term sustainable development of urbanization without harming the environment, further technical equipment of the living environment while preserving the uniqueness of the territories and full inclusion of natural and cultural heritage.

The specific guidelines for the design of Danube cities focus on improving the quality of the environment - reconstruction of public areas and communication spaces, increasing green spaces, opening of central urban areas to the Danube, reconstruction and reconstruction of abandoned and unusable industrial areas along the coast and their transformation into attractive and attractive areas with mixed purpose, completion and renovation of the technical infrastructure in the Danube region. Another important focus are the areas for business development, education and social services, the areas with mixed functions - living, work, service, sports, especially attractive with short communication links and key factors for retaining and attracting young people.

Overcoming the negative consequences of the failed major economic projects, such as the Belene example, remains an open challenge and will seek positive solutions in the near future.

However, the financial security for the implementation of the policies of the plans that are developed is uncertain, often minimal. Planning relies on optimal or optimistic scenarios, which are largely not implemented or are implemented very slowly. In addition to the mentioned project for a second nuclear power plant in the town of Belene, such infrastructure projects as "Modernization of the railway line Vidin - Sofia" and "Road E-79 Vidin - Montana" are delayed.<sup>2</sup>, Hemus motorway, officially started in 1974, part of the European road network from the connection with Corridor IV to the west to Corridor IX near Veliko Tarnovo<sup>3</sup>.

## **Development Of The Internal Potential Of The Danube Cities**

Against the background of the demographic picture illustrated above, the sustainable development of cities can be realized on the basis of the internal development of cities, their potential and the energy of the citizens. There are numerous examples of active actions of citizens who have the opportunity and join the process of creative planning. This localized community approach to urban renewal, established by Finnish architect Marco Casagrande (the father of urban acupuncture)<sup>4</sup>, allows for a lot of creativity and freedom of ideas. "In urban acupuncture, citizens have the opportunity and are encouraged to join the process of creative planning and through their

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<sup>2</sup> Обсъждаха скоростната жп - линия София – Видин <https://dariknews.bg/regioni/vraca/obszhdaha-skorostnata-zhp-liniq-sofiq-vidin-917010>

<sup>3</sup> Източник: Национална компания "Стратегически инфраструктурни проекти" <http://www.ncsip.bg/index.php?id=39>

<sup>4</sup> Can Urban Acupuncture Really Heal Cities? <https://parcitypatory.org/2021/01/12/urban-acupuncture/>

participation to develop their environment according to their preferences. Therefore, this concept is closely linked to the law of the city."

The COVID 19 pandemic has radically changed the sense of free movement and the sense of security of the urban man. The public spaces of the Danube cities are among the most negatively affected due to the challenges of overcoming peripherality, population aging, depopulation, urban decline, collapse of tourism, transboundary pollution. Public spaces were deserted, and citizen participation in urban planning became impossible.

We have the opportunity to observe very directly the course of the pandemic and its impact on the behavior of citizens and urban areas. After the second wave, there is a marked interest of people thirsty for social contacts in public spaces and a return to public outdoor events that give new life to urban spaces.

Thus, we return more and more argumentatively to the questions posed from an urban and architectural point of view, which attract attention more sharply than ever. These are issues common to cities, but also specific to the declining cities of the Danube.

### **Are There Well-Developed And Attractive Healthy Public Spaces And Green Areas?**

Are there well-developed and attractive healthy public spaces and green areas, evenly distributed in cities and accessible on foot for the entire urban structure. Can they be a kind of stage of urban communication - between people, with the arts - music, theater, plastic and fine arts, street arts, literature, etc.? The answers to these questions are in the affirmative, although there is also the potential for the development and expansion of the connection of public spaces.

In the context of the pandemic, many of the arts have sought a way to go out into the open public spaces to meet their audiences in compliance with anti-epidemic measures. Many retail spaces, restaurants and cafes have also looked for ways to go outdoors, which helps businesses in these industries to tolerate the restrictions of gathering people indoors more sparingly.

Precisely because of this, and because of policies to reduce carbon emissions, open and green spaces are becoming an even more important part of urban spaces and the urban economy. In Vidin the pedestrian zone was mainly reconstructed (2020), in Silistra, the central part of the city was renovated (2013) under the Project "Green and accessible urban environment - Silistra", implemented with the financial support of the Operational Program "Regional Development" 2007-2013 , while in Kozloduy it is necessary to urgently replace the pavements and urban furniture.



Fig. 1. Vidin, view of the pedestrian zone (Source: MAIN RECONSTRUCTION OF THE CENTRAL PEDESTRIAN ZONE, VIDIN. 2020. <https://www.buildingoftheyear.bg/bg/buildings/view/1187/Osnovna-rekonstrukcija-na-tzentralna-peshehodna-zona-gr-Vidin.html>) (buildingoftheyear.bg, 2021)



Fig. 2. Kozloduy (2018). (Source: Kozloduy residents: "We have umbrellas, we do not have a pedestrian zone" <https://kozloduy-bg.info/76582/kozlodujchani-chadari-imame-peshehodna-zona-nyamame/>) (kozloduy-bg, 2021)



Fig.3. Lom, Central part of town. (Source: Problems in Photos.Website: <https://www.facebook.com/signaliLOM/>) (SignalilOM, 2021)



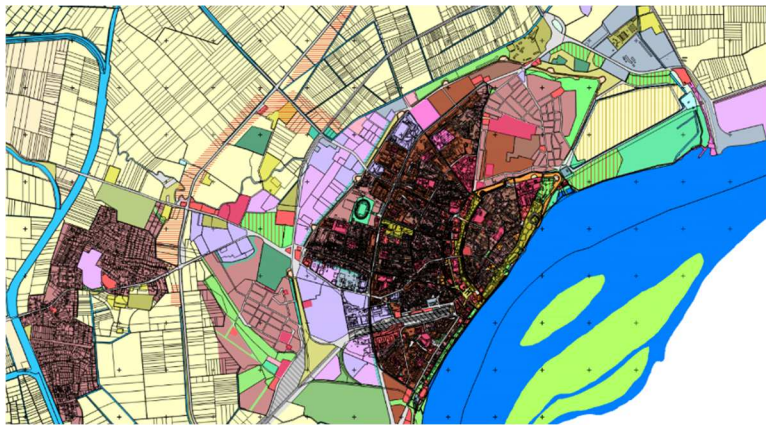


Fig. 4. Silistra, central part of the city (Source: Project "Green and accessible urban environment - the city of Silistra", which is implemented with the financial support of the Operational Program Regional Development 2007-2013, co-financed by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund .

<http://stroitelstvoimoti.com/%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B6%D0%B1%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%85%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%82%D1%83%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D1%88%D0%B5%D0%B4%D1%8C/> ) (http://stroitelstvoimoti.com, 2021)

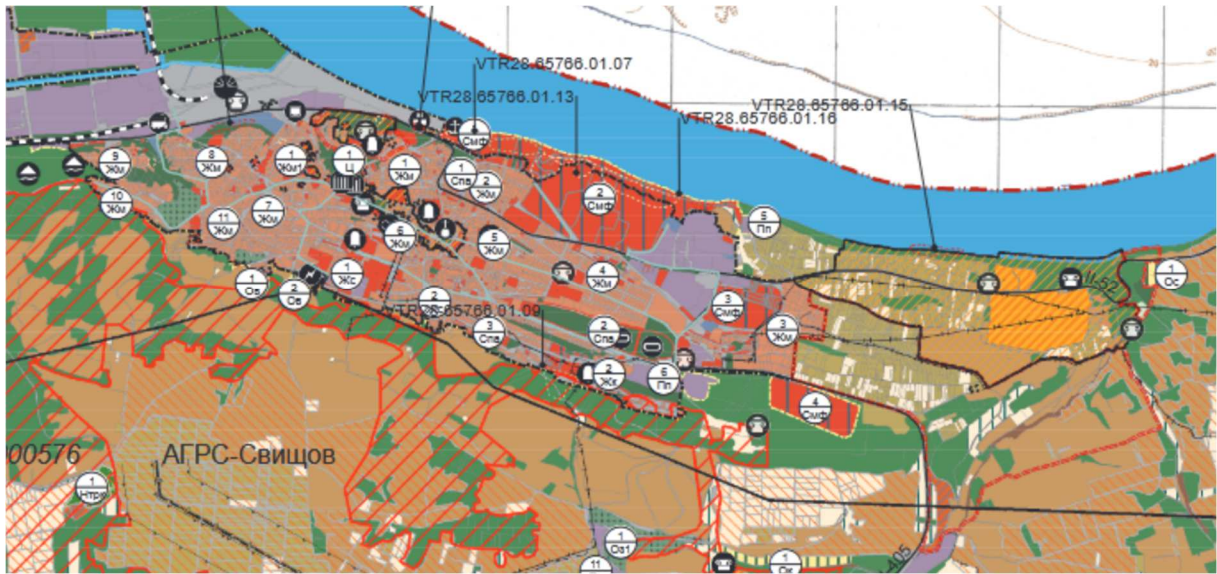
## Is The Danube River Used Entirely As A Spatial, Aesthetic, Cultural And Ecological Phenomenon In Riparian Zones?

This question that we ask ourselves in today's spatial design is very specific and the answer is different in different Danube cities. If we look at the general development plans, we will see that there is a different relationship between the river and the urban structure. Vidin with its coastal park, Kozloduy with the coastal memorial park "Botev" and the ship "Radetski" have unique connections with the river.



II. 5. General development plan, Vidin. The central part of the city is open to the Danube River. <https://vidin.bg/wps/portal/vidin/administration/architecture-building/ourmunicipality> (Община Видин, 2021)

This is not the case with the answers in the analysis of the plan of the town of Belene, and also with the town of Svishtov. The central parts of both cities, saturated with public functions, have no direct contact with the river. Despite the location of the reception center of the Persina Nature Park in Belene and the conservation and restoration works that socialized the archaeological remains of the ancient Roman fortress - castle "Dimum", the city still does not use the potential of the river to create its unique urban spaces. citizens and guests and representing potential for the economic development of the city - in all aspects - recreation and leisure, cognitive and cultural tourism, sailing on the river, fishing. There is great potential for the arrangement of green areas and their saturation with attractive to visitors sites - educational, commercial, traditional cuisine, hotel.



II. 6. General development plan, Svishtov. Authors: "VIDI ARCH"  
Ltd. [https://www.svishtov.bg/images/docs/docs\\_1698327013.pdf](https://www.svishtov.bg/images/docs/docs_1698327013.pdf) (svishtov.bg, 2021)



II. 7. Belene, Information Center of Persina Park, photo by P. Petrov (Petrov P. )



II. 8. The bank of the Danube river, Belene. Photo by P. Petrov (Petrov P. )



## **Are The Streets And Boulevards Comfortable And Healthy For People And Cars? Are Bike Lanes Safe?**

Regarding the transport infrastructure, it can be said that it is relatively well developed and built. The bicycle network has not been built, which is due to both the insufficient attention to this problem and the lack of expressed need on the part of the citizens. The aspiration for the removal of heavy goods and transit traffic from the city is expressed in the general development plans. For example, the Lom Master Plan offers a ring road to transport the transit traffic on the national road network from the directions Vidin, Montana, Kozloduy and others.<sup>5</sup>

## **How Can The Home And The Living Environment Be Easily Transformed Into An "Arena" Not Only For Living, But Also For Work At Home, For Education, For Contacts With Relatives And Friends?**

The tendency to transform the dwelling into a workplace, for education or social contacts is possible in dwellings designed with sufficient area for the development of these functions. According to data from 2018, about 40% of Bulgarians live in overcrowded housing<sup>6</sup>, at the same time, according to the statistics (NSI, 2011), the total inhabited dwellings for the country are 1 913 496, and the uninhabited ones 653 105<sup>7</sup> or, for cities other than Sofia, the share of unoccupied dwellings is over 30%. Such a huge percentage of unused housing stock is typical for the Danube region. With the advent of Industrial Revolution 4.0, fewer and fewer activities are done by hand and more and more by high-tech autonomous robotic machines. The share of people employed in the field of software engineering is increasing and they are interacting with the environment in which we live. This technological revolution creates opportunities for skilled people to choose to live everywhere and to choose their home not by proximity to the workplace, but by the opportunities provided by each settlement. Thus, they have the opportunity to choose and live in homes with a larger area at the same or lower value and use the difference to raise their standard or to visit other settlements for rest or with an interesting historical or cultural life.

In a study of DEV.BG<sup>8</sup> for decentralization of the IT sector in Bulgaria there is an export of part or whole companies to the larger regional cities. This is a result not only of the constraints imposed by the Crown crisis, but also of the ever-increasing costs, both of renting offices and of renting or buying housing by employees. In fact, this crisis has accelerated the natural process for high-tech entities to enable their employees to work from anywhere in the world, a theory that seemed to be possible only for so-called freelancers. The cities on the Danube are an exceptional opportunity for modern technological nomads to find their choice of place to live.

As for the possibilities to turn the home into a center for training and education, the possibilities are more limited. Technology is not enough to make distance learning more successful than present, at

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<sup>5</sup> Общ устройствен план на община Лом – ОКОНЧАТЕЛЕН ПРОЕКТ. <https://lom.bg/currentNews-1866-newitem.html>

<sup>6</sup> DW - Коронавирус: Опасно е, че българите живеят толкова натясно - <https://p.dw.com/p/3acaF>

<sup>7</sup> Капитал - Жилищата в България: по-празни, но все по-скъпи [https://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/bulgaria/2017/11/05/3072234\\_jilishtata\\_v\\_bulgariia\\_po-prazni\\_no\\_vse\\_po-skupi/](https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2017/11/05/3072234_jilishtata_v_bulgariia_po-prazni_no_vse_po-skupi/)

<sup>8</sup> DEV.BG - Разпукването на софийския IT балон: Какви компании и позиции има в други градове в България [https://dev.bg/digest/it-jobs-cities-in-bulgaria/?utm\\_source=DEV.BG+FB+page&utm\\_medium=article&utm\\_campaign=FB+it+jobs+cities+in+bulgaria&fbclid=IwAR2sMDMceC52Tq1xM1TBn\\_1cj664ptTY5pD0T9XcXbzH7lyrSeMmDnwizE](https://dev.bg/digest/it-jobs-cities-in-bulgaria/?utm_source=DEV.BG+FB+page&utm_medium=article&utm_campaign=FB+it+jobs+cities+in+bulgaria&fbclid=IwAR2sMDMceC52Tq1xM1TBn_1cj664ptTY5pD0T9XcXbzH7lyrSeMmDnwizE)

least in some professional areas, as well as in primary and secondary education. There is an indisputable need for more space in the home in order to be able to provide all the current daily functions related to family life, work, daily activities with children and days outside working days and hours. The furniture, the flexible spatial organization, the multifunctional furniture are of key importance for the flexible and rational spatial organization of the home.

### **Alienation Or Empathy Grows Between People And How Does This Affect The Urban Space? What Is The Behavior Of The Traveling Person In The New Reality?**

Surely, we can say that empathy between people increased after this great ordeal COVID 19. This is seen in the rapid return to normalcy, and the various forms of communication, and the many forms of creative and artistic performances in urban spaces. The examples are numerous.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we believe that overcoming the great challenges facing the shrinking Danube cities and the lessons of the Covid 19 pandemic can be overcome by unleashing the inner potential of cities and skillfully using European policies and links, namely:

- Turning Danube cities more towards the river and connections with cross-border cities.
- Creation of joint business projects for development of high technologies and industry;
- Development of river civil transport along the river and the transport infrastructure - bridges, ferries;
- Construction of cultural routes along the Danube, in order to develop tourism and in particular cultural tourism;
- Changing the requirements for the urban environment, the culture of living and maintaining property with state preferences.
- Adaptation of industrial areas to the possibilities for long-term temporary residence for tourism (recreational, cognitive, cultural or sports)
- Unlocking the potential of "my new job in 1-3-6 months" for working nomads;
- Continuous development of public places cities. The distance from the office / workplace and its exclusion as a place for social contacts needs to be compensated. That is why it is necessary to transform public areas into more accessible for social contact or experience.

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