

Brankica Milojević, University of Banja Luka, brankica.milojevic@aggf.unibl.org

THE ROLE OF URBAN PLANNING IN THE URBAN TRANSFORMATION OF BANJA LUKA: FROM STRATEGIC TO INVESTOR-DRIVEN PLANNING- A GENERAL REVIEW

Abstract:

The urban transformation of Banja Luka, which during the final period of socialism (1975–1990), was guided by the City's Urban Plan, has proceeded without a clear strategic vision of urban development since the late 1990s. During this period, the city developed according to detailed regulatory plans and was strongly influenced by neoliberal socio-economic processes at both regional and local levels. This paper highlights the role of urban planning, the broader socio-economic and legislative context of urban transformation in post-socialist cities, the negative consequences of investor-driven planning, and the challenges of implementing integrated planning in practice, illustrated by the example of Banja Luka.

Keywords: urban transformation, post-socialist transition, impacts, planning

УЛОГА УРБАНИСТИЧКОГ ПЛАНИРАЊА У УРБАНОЈ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЈИ БАЊЕ ЛУКЕ: ОД СТРАТЕШКОГ ДО ИНВЕСТИТОРСКОГ ПЛАНИРАЊА-ОПШТИ ОСВРТ

Анстракт:

Урбана трансформација Бањалуке, која се у посљедњем периоду социјализма (1975–1990) одвијала на основу Урбанистичког плана града, од краја деведесетих година XX вијека до данас одвија се без јасне стратешке визије урбаног развоја. Град се у овом периоду развија на основу регулационих планова, под снажним утицајем неолибералних друштвено-економских процеса на регионалном и локалном нивоу. Рад освјетљава улогу урбанистичког планирања, као и општег друштвено-економског и законодавног контекста у урбаној трансформацији постсоцијалистичких градова, негативне посљедице инвеститорског планирања и проблеме примјене интегралног планирања у пракси, на примјеру града Бањалуке.

Кључне ријечи: урбана трансформација, пост-социјалистичка транзиција, утицаји, планирање

1. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of urban planning—from strategic, centralized planning under socialism to market-oriented, investor-driven approaches—is crucial for understanding post-socialist urban transformations in cities of the former Yugoslavia, including Banja Luka. To comprehend this process in terms of the nature of planning and its impact on urban space, it is necessary to consider the broader socio-economic context that has shaped urban form, whereby the spatial and physical aspects directly reflect the systemic problems of transitional societies.

The dominant pattern of development has been driven by neoliberal urban development processes, characterized by openness to capitalism and the relaxation of consumption restrictions [1]. Post-socialist cities have been shaped by neoliberal restructuring processes characterized by privatization, deregulation, and increasing exposure to global market forces. As emphasized by Kiril Stanilov, post-socialist urban transformation is defined by rapid institutional change in planning systems and the emergence of market-oriented urban governance, often resulting in fragmented spatial development and uneven urban growth [2]. In a similar vein, Sonia Hirt argues that the transition from centralized to market-led planning has weakened the regulatory capacity of planning institutions, allowing private actors to play a dominant role in shaping urban space [3].

In contrast to Western neoliberal cities, where market-oriented planning evolved gradually within relatively stable institutional frameworks, post-socialist cities experienced a rapid and often institutionally unregulated transition. According to Mina Petrović, this transformation generated hybrid urban conditions characterized by the coexistence of formal planning systems and informal or semi-formal development practices, particularly evident in housing production and socio-spatial differentiation [4].

In the context of the Western Balkans, Dragutin Tošić highlights that the post-socialist transformation of urban space has been strongly influenced by the weakening of strategic planning frameworks and the increasing dominance of regulatory and investor-driven planning instruments. This shift has contributed to spatial fragmentation, the erosion of public interest in planning, and the reduction of urban space to a commodity shaped primarily by market logic rather than long-term spatial strategy [5].

The urban landscapes shaped during the second half of the 20th century under the socialist state system gradually faded due to the complex interplay of numerous factors of varying nature and intensity [6]. In contrast to cities in Western neoliberal societies, post-socialist cities of the former Yugoslavia during the early transition period were more heavily influenced by socio-political processes than by economic ones. These processes led to the collapse of socialism, the emergence of new state entities, large-scale population migrations, national homogenization, and the reinforcement of religious markers in urban environments, all of which impacted population size, urban form, functions, and urban culture, often manifesting through informal construction [7].

The neoliberal economy, grounded in the logic of global finance and exerting significant influence on urban transformations worldwide at the end of the 20th century [8], took on a distinctive form in post-socialist cities. The privatization of state capital and housing stock, together with the denationalization of urban land at the beginning of the 21st century, provided the framework for transitioning from a socialist to a neoliberal economic model and for reallocating urban land [9]. These reforms not only strengthened the private sector, particularly in housing construction, but also weakened the role of the state and local authorities, often to the detriment of public interest and strategic urban development. Consequently, a trend toward more intensive utilization of urban construction land emerged across all transition cities, leading to increased densification and the occupation of virtually every available site [6].

Parallel to these processes, strategic planning—initially grounded in the principles of rational planning from the socialist period—evolved into a model aimed at establishing sustainable and integrated planning principles. However, these principles were for a long time difficult to implement consistently in practice [10], [11].

In Banja Luka, this has manifested in the erosion of professional authority in urban planning, the largely formal application of participatory processes, and the predominance of investor-driven urbanism, often reinforced by local decision-makers. Complicating matters further, the city has been developing throughout the transition period without an urban plan serving as a strategic guiding document, despite significant transformations across all aspects of urban life over the past thirty years.

Under these conditions, Banja Luka experienced a strategically uncontrolled urban transformation beginning in the early 21st century, following the privatization of industry, which led to the closure

of production activities in industrial zones and their subsequent conversion into residential and mixed-use residential-commercial areas. Housing development, driven primarily by market demand and lacking a foundation in demographic projections, resulted in overcapacity within residential zones, reduced residential quality, and a shortage of supporting urban amenities. Simultaneously, the Vrbas riverbanks—a central feature of the city's green urban identity—came under increasing threat, while infrastructural congestion, particularly in transportation, emerged as one of the most pressing urban problems.

In order to better understand the process of urban transformation, the development of Banja Luka can be observed through several distinct chronological phases reflecting changes in both the socio-economic context and planning practice. The period from 1975 to 1990 represents the final phase of socialist urban development, characterized by the implementation of the Urban Plan of Banja Luka and a strong role of strategic planning. The following decade (1990–2000) was marked by major socio-political changes and the absence of a clear strategic framework, although the previous urban plan still partially guided development.

From 2000 to 2010, urban development increasingly reflected investor influence in the absence of a new strategic document, accompanied by the expansion of regulatory planning. The most recent period (2010–2025) is characterized by intensive, market-driven urbanization based predominantly on regulatory plans that lack a foundation in a comprehensive strategic vision. These phases illustrate the gradual shift from strategically guided to predominantly investor-driven urban development, providing a basis for analyzing the role of planning in the transformation of urban space.

The central hypothesis of this study is that the absence of a strategic vision for urban development has been a decisive factor in the negative effects of Banja Luka's post-socialist urban transformation. The city's development, guided by lower-level plans aimed primarily at satisfying specific investor demands, led to the abandonment of earlier strategic concepts and the adoption of ad hoc urban solutions. This study aims to examine the role of urban planning in the process of urban transformation of Banja Luka, with particular emphasis on the shift from strategic to investor-driven planning. The study seeks to identify the key factors that have influenced changes in urban space, as well as to assess the extent to which planning practices have contributed to the quality of urban development during different periods. Special attention is given to the relationship between planning mechanisms and the broader socio-economic context, in order to highlight the challenges and limitations in achieving sustainable and integrated urban development [10], [12].

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research applies a qualitative and analytical methodological approach based on examining the relationship between urban transformation, urban planning, and the socio-economic context. The study relies on the use of selected indicators of urban space quality, comparative analysis across defined chronological phases, and the evaluation of planning and socio-economic influences. Additionally, the methodology includes a review of planning documents and an interpretative assessment of their impact on urban development. Urban transformation is analyzed using a set of indicators relevant to the quality of urban space and the improvement of urban standards. These indicators include: the harmonious development of urban functions, the efficiency of infrastructure systems, public spaces, social facilities, urban greenery, sports and recreation, residential standards achieved within neighborhoods, as well as the quality of the housing stock and the overall living environment. The selected indicators of urban transformation quality are evaluated through a combined quantitative and qualitative approach. Quantitative assessment is based on the analysis of data from relevant planning documents, including the Banja Luka Urban Plan 1975–1990 and subsequent draft urban plans, through which parameters such as housing standards, infrastructure capacities, and the provision of green and public spaces are examined. At the same time, certain indicators are assessed qualitatively, particularly those related to the organization of urban functions, the quality of public space, and the application of planning principles, relying on expert interpretation within the defined analytical framework. Additionally, the indicators encompass the extent of illegal construction, which negatively impacts urban space quality, as well as the intensity and dynamics of urban transformation, which reflect the influence of specific indicators.

Within the defined chronological phases, the fundamental characteristics of planning practice are identified and systematically analyzed. These include the application of strategic planning guidelines, primarily in the form of the city's urban plan as the key overarching planning document, as well as the implementation of detailed regulatory plans, which are required to be aligned with this

strategic framework. The analysis further encompasses another methodological approaches of integrated planning (participation, flexibility, adaptability, comprehensive and multidisciplinary of planning process) as well as the professional and educational capacities of planners. The primary aim of defining these characteristics is to determine the respective roles of strategic and regulatory planning in shaping the nature and outcomes of urban transformation, as well as to assess the extent to which aspects of integrated planning approaches are implemented in practice. Planning influences are further evaluated through the lens of the professional and educational capacities of the planning field, including staffing structure, levels of educational attainment, formal and informal training programs, and the application of urban standards and regulatory frameworks.

The influences on the quality of urban transformation extend into the socio-economic sphere, enabling the intensity of socio-political, urban economic, and investor-driven factors to be assessed across defined periods. Given their varying intensity during different periods, these influences demonstrate a direct relationship with the quality of urban transformation. Urban legislation also represents a significant influence on urban transformation and can be analyzed through the defined periods, as reflected in the adequacy of legal provisions in spatial planning to achieve the principles of sustainable urban development. This includes considerations of the types of planning documents, the definition of planning principles, planning methodology, plan preparation procedures, the responsibilities of all participants, and the professional and institutional capacities involved in the spatial planning process. Deficiencies in this legislation may reflect systemic problems that hinder the comprehensive application of integrated planning.

Based on this methodological framework and the assessment of indicators for the quality of urban transformation, as well as planner and socio-economic influences graded across three levels of intensity, it is possible to analyze their interrelationships within a broader spectrum of mutual effects. From these analyses, regularities in the urban transformation process, as well as strengths and weaknesses, can be identified, with a particular focus on urban planning, its direct responsibility for problems arising in urban space, and other factors that need to be improved in the coming period in order to achieve higher-quality urban development of the city.

Although the identification of most indicators of the quality of urban transformation is based on the quantitative analysis of data from the Banja Luka Urban Plan 1975–1990, the draft Banja Luka Urban Plan 2008–2020, and the draft Banja Luka Urban Plan 2020–2040, the research methodology is generally grounded in an assessment that is not entirely precise but proves useful as a broader overview of the numerous factors influencing urban space. Within this methodological framework, urban planning is examined in a dual manner: on the one hand, as a significant factor in urban transformation, representing a mechanism of urban change that must maintain its professional integrity; and on the other hand, as an activity simultaneously subjected to the influence of numerous socio-economic factors that modify its outcomes.

3. URBAN TRANSFORMATION OF BANJA LUKA IN THE PERIOD 1975-2025

3.1. BANJA LUKA DURING THE PERIOD OF STRATEGIC URBAN DEVELOPMENT 1975-1990

Banja Luka is a city located in the central region of the Western Balkans, whose urban development from 1945 to 1991 took place within the framework of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and its constituent Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SR BiH). In 1975, the city had a population of approximately 103,000 inhabitants. The level of urban development at that time was considered unsatisfactory. There was a significant deficit in the housing stock, as well as in public and block greenery, although the city, including its urban periphery, had about 40% green coverage. In addition to industry, which was the primary driver of development, the intensive process of urbanization lacked sufficient social infrastructure facilities (schools, healthcare, and cultural institutions), as well as sports and recreational amenities.

The socialist model of societal development, accompanied by industrialization and the strengthening of collective social standards, guided the planned spatial-physical development of the city from 1975 onwards through the adoption of the first Banja Luka Urban Plan 1975–1990 (Urban Plan). This plan served as the foundation for the urban reconstruction of Banja Luka following the devastating earthquake in October 1969. The plan was developed by the Banja Luka Urban Institute, with support from the city and professional institutions both domestically and internationally. The Urban Plan outlined the development and construction of a modern city, with clear zoning of urban areas and spatial-physical definitions of urban functions, in accordance with the general societal

development plan. Residential zones were defined according to the planned population, maximum building heights, housing density, floor area ratios, and land occupancy coefficients, thereby establishing the typology of residential construction. The positioning of residential zones was compact, extending through the central part of the urban area toward the north, where collective (multi-family) housing was planned, while individual housing was located on the periphery, with clear measures to limit its expansion (Fig. 1).

The specificity of residential construction in socialist cities across the former Yugoslavia was reflected in the fact that most cities in the 1970s faced a housing deficit relative to the number of households, due to the dynamic process of urbanization. In Banja Luka, in 1973, the population was 100,979, residing in 31,000 households and 28,051 housing units. The average household size was 3.49 members, the average size of newly constructed apartments in the inner urban area was 56 m², and the average housing standard was 15.7 m² per household member [9]. Due to a deficit of 7.7% (including the replacement of obsolete apartments), there arose a need to overcome the housing shortage and improve the quality of housing within the planning period of the Urban Plan up to 1990. The demographic projection for 1990 estimated 206,951 inhabitants or 64,672 households, with an average household size of 3.2 members, in line with expected demographic trends. The Urban Plan stipulated that each household should have its own dwelling, that the average apartment size should be 64 m², and that the spatial housing standard should be 20 m² per resident, which was achieved by 1990. The planned spatial capacity, according to the Urban Plan, was 230,000 inhabitants and approximately 72,000 housing units, with all infrastructure system capacities dimensioned accordingly.

The planned capacities for residential construction were accompanied by economic facilities located in industrial zones in the eastern and northwestern parts of the urban area, as well as by social infrastructure facilities (schools, kindergartens, healthcare, cultural and sports facilities, city administration), recreational zones, the transportation system, and other communal and green infrastructure, all aligned with social standards and development trends at both the local and national levels. The definition and protection of the public interest were particularly emphasized, and during this period, based on the Urban Plan, Banja Luka received a significant number of facilities in the fields of education, healthcare, culture, sports, and recreation. The Urban Plan also included measures for environmental protection and safeguards against natural disasters and wartime destruction.

In the 1970s, Banja Luka had only 19.8 hectares of managed public greenery (city parks, tree-lined streets), which amounted to just 2 m² per inhabitant, and 52 hectares of restricted-use greenery (within schools, hospitals, enterprises, multi-family and individual housing, etc.). Of this, 9.6 hectares were designated as managed greenery adjacent to multi-family residential buildings, corresponding to merely 0.98 m² per inhabitant [13], [14]. According to the Urban Plan, a significant increase in managed green spaces within multi-family residential neighborhoods was planned by 1990. Each neighborhood or urban block was intended to have a park with a minimum area of 5 m² per resident. Overall, green space within multi-family residential blocks was planned to provide 15 m² per inhabitant, and up to 45 m² per inhabitant in individual housing areas. Together with forest parkland at the urban periphery, covering 1,860 hectares, Banja Luka had the capacity to achieve a total green coverage level of approximately 40% [9]. By 1991, the area of block greenery had increased to 57.9 hectares, equating to 3.87 m² per inhabitant [10], yet it still fell short of the planned standard for this category of urban space. At the same time, no new parks were constructed, so with the permanent increase in population, only 1.27 m² of park area per inhabitant was available.

In line with the Urban Plan, lower-level detailed plans (regulatory plans) were prepared for individual urban zones, following the rational planning model established by the principles of the Athens Charter. Although this planning model had already proven insufficiently flexible for the urban development of democratic and neoliberal, market-oriented cities by the mid-20th century, it remained adequate for socialist cities until the collapse of socialism and the establishment of new socio-economic relations. The same applies to legislation, which comprehensively defined the planning and spatial organization system until the disintegration of Yugoslavia [6].

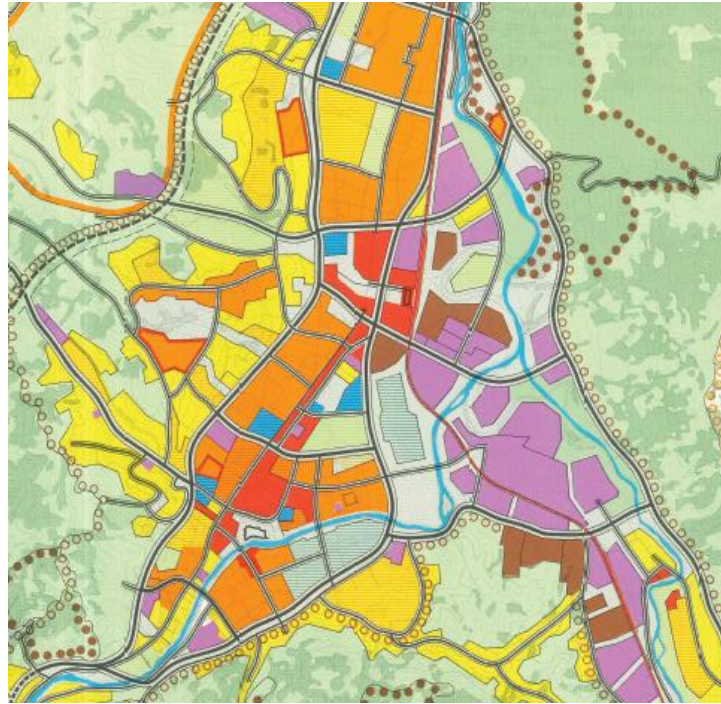


Figure 1. Banja Luka Urban Plan 1975-1990: Land Use Plan shows the coherent, functional, and socially sustainable urban spaces

During this period, there was no private ownership of urban building land, and citizen participation in the planning process was nonexistent. However, the public interest was safeguarded through the role and responsibility of the state to ensure it for all residents, including the allocation of tenancy rights. Based on a responsible social policy in which the state addressed the existential needs of all population groups, it can be argued that the period of socialist development, up until the 1980s, aimed to ensure collective social equity in urban space, in contrast to the later transition period, through the right to employment, access to housing, and the provision of all social infrastructure facilities (education, social and healthcare services, culture, and sports). The construction of new neighborhoods, following the open-block model, allowed for larger open spaces and green areas, accompanied by local amenities. Together with functional spatial solutions based on the principles of modern architecture and urbanism, this resulted in high-quality urban transformations.

Based on the Urban Plan, the city experienced intensive construction up to the early 1980s, when, following a dynamic phase of development, it entered a period of stagnation accompanied by an increasingly pronounced economic crisis. This crisis was, among other factors, caused by the inability of state-owned enterprises to keep pace with the development of new technologies in the global market, revealing the insufficient flexibility and adaptability of the socialist system to emerging processes that were inevitably oriented toward the development of the city in the post-industrial era and new forms of socio-political organization [15]. As a result, the societal economic crisis affected the non-implementation of many strategic elements of the Urban Plan, such as the construction of highways, completion of transit road routes, development of the bicycle network, construction of the main city sewer collector and wastewater treatment plant, and the establishment of certain educational, cultural, and sports facilities.

3.2. URBAN DEVELOPMENT OF BANJA LUKA IN THE FIRST PHASE OF TRANSITION (1990-2000)

Concurrent with the expiration of the planning horizon of the Banja Luka Urban Plan, the city experienced a major economic and political crisis that resulted in the disintegration of Yugoslavia. At the beginning of the 1990s, Banja Luka found itself amidst dramatic and significant changes, situated in a war environment, but without direct destruction of the urban territory. From 1995 onwards, the city existed within the newly established state of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the entity of the Republic of Srpska, as its largest city and political and administrative center. Until the end of 1995, when the war concluded, almost no construction activity occurred within the urban area. The Banja Luka Urban Institute, which had in the meantime become the Urban Institute of

the Republic of Srpska, began drafting a new urban plan for the city in the early 1990s. By the end of 1992, an analysis of the state of urban development and a preliminary draft plan had been completed (Fig. 2). Compared to the previous plan, the urban area was expanded from 12,400 ha to 15,406 ha, reflecting the process of urbanization during the preceding period. However, work on the plan was soon halted due to permanent changes in the cityscape caused by the dramatic events of the wartime environment.



Figure 2. Draft of the Banja Luka Urban Plan (1990–2005): Land Use Plan showing continuity of strategic planning.

During these years, significant population migrations occurred, influencing changes in the demographic structure of the urban area. This period marked the beginning of a new wave of informal construction in the form of individual residential buildings, and even entire neighborhoods, primarily at the urban periphery. Additionally, there was a deterioration of the housing stock and a decline in urban environmental quality due to poor maintenance and the inefficiency of infrastructure systems, particularly during the wartime period. Larger ecological problems were somewhat mitigated by the fact that most industrial capacities had ceased operations, although this simultaneously deepened the economic crisis.

In the early years, there was also a regulatory vacuum in the field of spatial planning, as the first Spatial Planning Law for the territory of the Republic of Srpska was enacted only in 1996. Between 1996 and 2000, sporadic construction took place alongside the drafting of several regulatory plans, predominantly following the strategic guidelines of the Banja Luka Urban Plan 1975–1990. Urban planning at that time maintained professional continuity based on the rational planning principles of the socialist period, with the gradual introduction of citizen participation.

3.3. URBAN DEVELOPMENT OF BANJA LUKA IN THE SECOND PHASE OF TRANSITION (2000-2010)

During this period, state-owned enterprises were privatized, initiating the process of converting industrial zones, predominantly brownfield sites, into areas for new business activities and functions. State ownership of large industrial complexes was replaced by a new, fragmented ownership structure, which determined the future uses of these spaces. Brownfield regeneration occurred partially, under the strong influence of the neoliberal market, ultimately leading to the closure of most production activities and the transformation of these areas into vacant business zones suitable for small enterprises, as well as commercial and administrative functions. The urban planning profession was not timely involved in this process, which negatively affected the urban transformation of these spaces [16].

By the end of this period, market-driven residential construction had become the most profitable form of brownfield land use, leading to increasing pressure from investors to convert brownfield sites into residential zones, which lacked a basis in strategic planning. Residential development

within existing residential and mixed-use zones also became the subject of numerous regulatory plans in both the inner and outer urban areas, with higher building densities planned, including new individual neighborhoods on the urban periphery to accommodate displaced populations.

Despite partial deviations from the Banja Luka Urban Plan 1975–1990, the regulatory plans prepared during this period did not exceed the residential and infrastructure capacities originally planned. According to the Draft Banja Luka Urban Plan 2008–2020 – Analysis of Urban Development, it was estimated that the city's urban area had approximately 186,000 residents in around 56,622 households in 2008, with an estimated 61,228 dwelling units. The document assumed that by around 2005, the housing deficit relative to the number of households had ceased, although the average net dwelling size had decreased to approximately 60 m² due to market influence and reduced purchasing power of the population.

Housing in the early years of the 21st century also faced a deficit in technical standards compared to the socialist period, as investors exerted significant influence not only on urban planning but also on architectural design and construction, seeking to maximize profit at the expense of building quality. The construction and development of block greenery steadily increased, reaching approximately 90 hectares in 2008, including other categories of restricted-use green spaces, which corresponded to 4.83 m² per inhabitant [14].

The introduction of investors, replacing the state in the field of residential and mixed-use construction, was not accompanied by the necessary investment from the city administration in the provision of infrastructure for urban blocks. When construction was initiated on individual parcels, prior infrastructure development was often lacking, leading to temporary solutions that negatively affected the quality of public space. This practice represented one of the key challenges in achieving a synchronized and harmonious urban development of the city during the transition period. For a long time, the city administration was also unable to establish fair compensation mechanisms for the development of urban land, forcing investors to construct certain elements of public infrastructure alongside their projects while simultaneously paying fees to the city for municipal servicing.

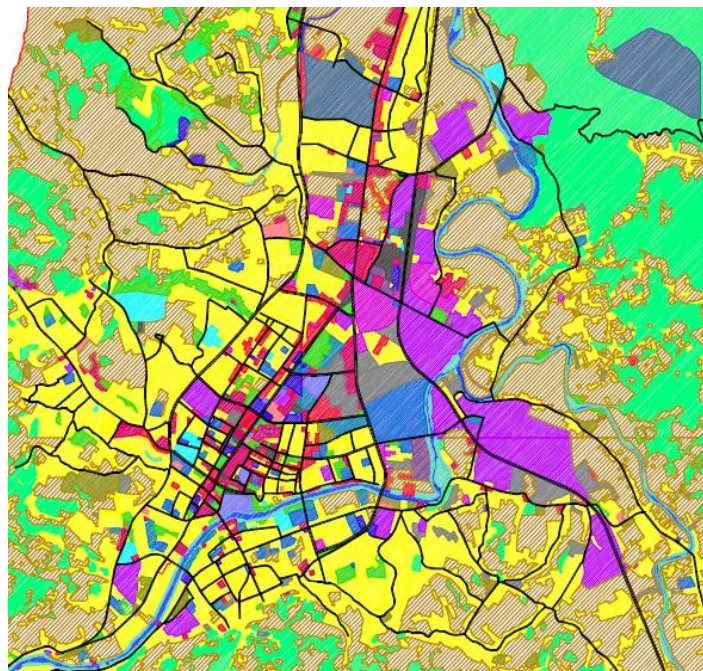


Figure 3. Draft of the Banja Luka Urban Plan (2008–2020): Land Use Plan – State of Development in 2008. The plan shows urban dispersion and an increase in housing, accompanied by a decline in central areas.

Between 2005 and 2009, the drafting of the Banja Luka Urban Plan 2008–2020 (Fig. 3) was carried out by the Urban Institute of the Republic of Srpska. Following a public consultation process and an extended period of coordination with various stakeholders, a final draft of the plan was prepared for submission to the City Assembly for adoption. However, due to inefficient management of the plan adoption procedure by the city authorities, the draft plan was never submitted to the Assembly. In January 2009, the Urban Institute, which had meanwhile been privatized, went into bankruptcy, resulting in the failure to adopt the Banja Luka Urban Plan 2008–2020.

During this period, there was a noticeable deficit in the development of public spaces, social facilities, and sports and recreational amenities that had been planned in the Urban Plan. The quality of the urban environment, despite the city's natural greenery, was compromised due to an inefficient district heating system, traffic problems, an outdated solid waste management model, and the absence of energy efficiency measures, which had not yet been incorporated into the legal framework. Informal construction, although of lower intensity, remained present, particularly on the urban periphery.

The urban planning profession monitored these processes and sought to uphold the principles of rational spatial planning while gradually introducing elements of sustainable, integrated planning. Nevertheless, the evaluation and implementation of urban planning were still hampered by an inadequate legal framework [10].

3.4. URBAN DEVELOPMENT OF BANJA LUKA IN THE PERIOD 2010-2025

In 2013, the first post-war census in Bosnia and Herzegovina recorded 157,926 residents and 73,759 dwellings in the urban area of Banja Luka, representing a housing surplus of approximately 30% relative to the number of households, with an average household size of 2.82 members. The average dwelling size was 66.97 m² of net usable area, equating to 23.75 m² per household member. Although an improvement in housing standards was observed, primarily in individual residential buildings, the newly constructed housing capacities were not supported by the city's infrastructure, which had been developed according to projections in the Urban Plan. This imbalance further increased in the following years.

By 2019, it was estimated that the urban area contained 175,496 residents and 100,580 dwellings, representing a surplus of approximately 50% relative to the number of households. It was also noted that the average dwelling in newly constructed multi-family residential buildings measured around 53 m² of net usable area, or roughly 19 m² per resident. This decline in housing standards reflects the limited purchasing power of the population [17].

This ad hoc urbanization occurred based on regulatory plans that lacked a foundation in a strategic urban development document, coupled with a concerning absence of professional and municipal responsibility for sustainable urban development. The preparation of plans not aligned with planning principles or legal regulations was primarily undertaken by small, newly established offices licensed to produce spatial planning documentation. These offices operated primarily to fulfill investor demands, frequently leading to modifications of already adopted regulatory plans to allow construction—often of 6–7-story residential buildings, and sometimes taller, on constrained parcels. According to estimates [18], the regulatory plans provided housing capacity for over 400,000 residents, which was not supported by the strategic vision for infrastructure development or demographic projections, which anticipate a population of only 175,560 in the urban area by 2040 [19].

Regulatory plans focus on detailed spatial planning, applying urban parameters at the parcel and building level with the aim of maximizing floor area ratios and site coverage, while minimizing the proportion of green space. They often disregard the organization of urban blocks and the provision of essential amenities such as schools, kindergartens, playgrounds, sports fields, parks, squares, and recreational or social facilities. Such planning results in a permanent loss of urban space intended for public use, transforming residential zones into uncomfortable environments for inhabitants due to high-density construction, insufficient greenery, and limited public spaces, while traffic networks become congested and parking spaces inadequate for both residents and commercial facilities.

During this period, additional problems arose from insufficient municipal investment in infrastructure, which is a prerequisite for the efficient and harmonious development of all urban functions. Even areas reserved for the construction of primary schools, as planned in the Urban Plan, were affected. The Banja Luka Urban Plan 2020–2040 (Fig. 4), which is still under development, has been practically obstructed by city authorities, who, by adopting regulatory plans aimed at integrating them into the new urban plan, compromise its strategic character.

In this campaign-style approach to urbanization, the city's green matrix becomes particularly vulnerable. City parks were reduced from 17.92 ha in 1975 to 12.92 ha in 2019. The greenery within urban blocks increased significantly, from 9.64 ha to 49.60 ha; however, it is internally differentiated into three categories: (a) old and well-preserved blocks, (b) old and degraded blocks, and (c) new blocks without green space. This clearly indicates the degradation of the green matrix that occurred in the latest period of urban development, with block greenery in areas of new residential construction being the most threatened category. The study shows that, on average, a block resident has access to only 3.14 m² of green space, which is well below the standard planned in 1975 [20].



Figure 4. Banja Luka Urban Plan (2020–2040) – Draft: Land Use Plan – State of Development in 2019. The tendency toward housing expansion is visible, with residential zones predominating over other land uses.

This final stage in the city's urban transformations, characterized by largely spontaneous urban development favoring primarily the private interests of residential investors, highlights numerous problems faced by society as a whole in the transitional process. A crisis in the functioning of the rule of law is evident, as politics directly influences urban space and urban planning practices. Public interest in the urban environment has become subordinate to private interests, while the responsibility of decision-makers and planners in this process has been largely absent. Citizen participation, which is largely formal in nature, lacks sufficient power to protect public space and ensure greater comfort in urban life.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the general overview of the periods of urban transformation in Banja Luka from 1975 to the present, observed through the lens of the role and influence of urban planning and the broader socio-economic context on the city's urban landscape, several observations can be made (Table 1). It is evident that the quality of the city's urban transformations was directly dependent on strategic planning, which was the main aim of the research. The highest quality period of urban transformation occurred during the socialist development era, when it was carried out according to the Banja Luka Urban Plan 1975–1990, as a strategic document guiding urban development. In subsequent periods, this quality gradually declined in line with the reduced presence of strategic urban planning, becoming particularly pronounced in the most recent period.

Detailed planning (regulatory plans) played a varied role. In periods when it was fully aligned with strategic planning (1975–1990) or largely aligned with strategic planning (2000–2010), the quality of urban transformations, according to the established indicators, was higher. The most recent period, which recorded the greatest presence of regulatory plans not aligned with the strategic vision of urban development, shows the poorest results in terms of urban transformation quality. Since, according to the law [21] and the fundamental principles of integrated planning, lower-level plans must be aligned with higher-level plans, it is clear that the urban planning profession, operating in practice, bears significant responsibility for the negative consequences of urban transformations, particularly in the most recent period.

Regarding the professional capacities of planners, there is a noticeable lack of knowledge and competence in new processes of participatory and collaborative planning and their practical

application, as well as in applying professional standards and ensuring public interest in space. Curricula at faculties, which during the socialist period trained architects and urban planners for rational, expert planning, did not keep pace with the emerging changes in the early phases of transition, failing to adapt professional education to the principles of contemporary integrated planning [22].

Table 1. Banja Luka's Urban Transformation: Periodization and Impacts

	PHASES OF URBAN TRANSFORMATION			
	1975-1990	1990-2000	2000-2010	2010-2025
INDICATORS OF URBAN TRANSFORMATION QUALITY				
Harmonization of urban functions	+	+	+	+
Efficiency of infrastructure systems	+	+	+	+
Social facilities	+	+	+	+
Public spaces	+	+	+	+
Urban greenery	+	+	+	+
Sports and recreation	+		+	+
Housing standard – settlements	+	+	+	+
Housing standard – apartments	+	+	+	+
Environmental quality	+	+	+	+
Illegal construction	+	+	+	+
Intensity of urban changes	+		+	+
INFLUENCES				
Spatial-planning influences				
Strategic planning	+	+	+	+
Detailed planning	+	+	+	+
Participation		+	+	+
Flexibility and Adaptability			+	+
Comprehensive and multidisciplinary	+	+	+	+
Professional capacity	+	+	+	+
Educational capacity	+	+	+	+

Socio-economic influences				
Politics	++	++	++	+++
Quality of urban regulatory	+++	+	+	++
Institutional support	+++	++	++	+
Urban economics	+++		+	++
Private investors		+	++	+++
State/municipality as the investor	+++	+	+	+

Note: + indicate the smallest intensity, ++ medium and +++ the strongest intensity.

Across all phases of urban transformation, a significant influence of sociocultural factors that directly affected urban development was recorded. In the period 1975–1990, these factors created more favorable conditions for higher-quality and socially responsible urban development, which is confirmed by the adoption of the Urban Plan as a strategic document of urban development. The latest transition period, characterized by intensive urban development without a clear strategic vision and with the strong influence of local community actors, the profession, and the state, has resulted in numerous negative consequences for the quality of urban space and indicates a generally concerning situation in many segments of society, which are not conducive to the improvement of integrated planning.

In particular, the stronger influence of private investors on the urban environment during the transition highlights the necessity of limiting their negative impact, as well as that of the market, through the development of control mechanisms aimed at sustainable and responsible urban planning and management. Participation in urban planning and management, as a mechanism for protecting the rights of the majority, although continuously strengthening, still does not exert a substantial influence on urban transformation due to the strength and intensity of negative socio-economic impacts. The key to its improvement, and to achieving systemic change, lies in the combination of three dimensions: technological accessibility, communicative dialogue, and educational empowerment [23].

Urban legislation, through the enactment of the new Law on Spatial Planning and Construction in 2010 and 2013, as well as amendments in 2016 and 2019, has continuously sought to improve legal solutions in order to align them with development processes and EU directives in this field. The regulations also introduced energy efficiency in construction and partially enhanced the spatial planning system in line with the principles of integrated and sustainable development; however, optimal systemic conditions for the full implementation of these principles in practice have not yet been established [21, 24].

5. CONCLUSION

In relation to the defined research aim, the study confirms that urban planning has played a decisive role in shaping the process of urban transformation in Banja Luka, particularly through the shift from strategic to investor-driven planning. The analysis shows that periods characterized by the presence of a clear strategic framework resulted in higher-quality urban development, while the absence of such a framework, combined with strong investor and political influence, led to predominantly negative spatial outcomes. The practice of creating regulatory plans that are not based on a strategic document of urban development (urban plan), especially when this occurs over extended periods and under conditions of intensified construction, has long-term negative consequences for the quality of urban transformations. Such practices point to a weakening of professional ethics and the legal foundations of planning in post-socialist contexts.

Research on urban transformations in Banja Luka (1975–2025) demonstrates that the quality of urban development is closely linked to the interplay between urban planning and the socio-economic

context. Strategically guided planning (1975–1990) ensured more coherent, functional, and socially sustainable urban spaces, supported by a clear developmental vision, institutional backing, and planning continuity. In contrast, post-1990 transitional periods show weakened planning practices, increasing influence of private investors, and reduced protection of public interest. This has led to spatial fragmentation, increased pressure on infrastructure—especially transport—degradation of urban greenery, and a lack of social amenities, reflecting broader transitional societal challenges.

The study confirms that maintaining professional integrity in urban planning, strengthening institutional and regulatory frameworks, enhancing participatory mechanisms, and ensuring the continuous education of planners are essential for high-quality future urban development. Harmonizing socio-economic processes with planning practice is critical to prevent short-term, market-driven decisions from undermining the sustainability and identity of the city.

LITERATURE

- [1] R. A. Castanho, L. Loures, S. Lousada, J. M. Naranjo Gomez, and J. Cabesa, "Uncontrolled Urban Growth in Western Balkans Territories after the Communist Collapse—a Review from the Spatial Planning Perspective," *Journal of Urban Development and Management*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 76–86, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://doi.org/10.56578/judm010201>
- [2] K. Stanilov, Ed., *The Post-Socialist City: Urban Form and Space Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe after Socialism*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2007.
- [3] S. Hirt, *Zoned in the USA: The Origins and Implications of American Land-Use Regulation*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014.
- [4] M. Petrović, "Cities after socialism as a research issue," *Urban Studies*, vol. 42, no. 7, pp. 1025–1036, 2005.
- [5] D. Tošić, "Urbanističko planiranje u postsocijalističkoj tranziciji," in *Urbanizam i prostorno planiranje u Srbiji i regionu*, Belgrade, Serbia: Faculty of Geography, University of Belgrade, 2010.
- [6] B. Milojević, *Gradovi u promjenama – urbane forme, transformacije, uticaji*, Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina: Faculty of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, University of Banja Luka, 2015.
- [7] I. Kuvač, 'Kuća bez krova' – Obrasci neformalne izgradnje poslije rata 1992–1995. u Bosni i Hercegovini. Banja Luka: Univerzitet u Banjoj Luci, Arhitektonsko-građevinsko-geodetski fakultet; Istraživački centar za prostor, 2025. ISBN: 978-99976-82-14-7
- [8] G. Schwake and A. Staničić, "Post-Socialist Neoliberalism: Towards a New Theoretical Framework of Spatial Production," *Urban Planning*, vol. 9, 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/urbanplanning/issue/viewIssue/320/368>
- [9] B. Begović, *Ekonomika urbanog planiranja*. Beograd: Centar za ekonomske studije, 1995.
- [10] B. Milojević, "Integrated Planning as a Mechanism for Creating Sustainable and Resilient Settlements," in *Integrated Urban Planning – Directions, Resources and Territories*, E. Anguillari and B. Dimitrijević, Eds., TU Delft Open, 2018, pp. 37–63. [Online]. Available: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328913593_Integrated_Planning_as_a_Mechanism_for_Creating_Sustainable_and_Resilient_Settlements_Klabs_Brankica_Milojevic
- [11] B. Milojević and I. Kuvač, "Recognizing Principles of Integrated Urban Planning in Historical Development of the City: A Case Study of Banja Luka," *Journal of Urban History*, 2021. doi: 10.1177/00961442211030624. [Online]. Available: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00961442211030624>
- [12] A. Đukić, "Tensions of Urban Development in Post-Socialist Cities: The Case Study of Community-Based Initiative for Preservation and Transformation of Open Public Space in Banja Luka," in *Proc. 8th Int. Acad. Conf. Places and Technologies*, Belgrade, 2024.
- [13] *Banja Luka Urban Plan 1975-1990*, Urban Planning Institute of Banja Luka, 1975.
- [14] *Banja Luka Urban Plan 2008–2020 – Draft*, Urban Institute of Republic of Srpska, Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2008.
- [15] B. Milojević, *Grad i urbana ekonomija*, Arhitektonsko-građevinsko-geodetski fakultet Univerziteta u Banjoj Luci, 2020.
- [16] B. Milojević, "Brownfield Regeneration Problems in the Republic of Srpska and Guidelines for Their Overcoming – Case Study of the Industrial Complex Rudi Čajavec in Banja Luka," in *Proc. Int. Acad. Conf. Browninfo 2014*, Nov. 2014, pp. 129–137.

- [17] *Banja Luka Urban Plan 2020–2040 – State of Development*, Urbis Center Banja Luka, CEP Beograd, Institute for Protection and Ecology of the Republic of Srpska, Banja Luka, Republic of Srpska, 2021.
- [18] *Banjaluka Municipal Plan 2014–2030*, Project Banjaluka, Institute for Civil Engineering Banja Luka, Republic of Srpska, 2014.
- [19] *Banja Luka Urban Plan 2020–2040 – Draft*, Urbis Center Banja Luka, Belgrade, Institute for Protection and Ecology of the Republic of Srpska, Banja Luka, Republic of Srpska, 2025.
- [20] *Banja Luka -City of Greenery*, Urbis Centre Banja Luka, CEP Beograd, Institute for Protection and Ecology of The Republic of Srpska, Banjaluka, 2019.
- [21] B. Milojević, Regulations of Spatial Planning and Construction in the Republic of Srpska and Recommendations for Their Improvement, in A. Jevtić, Ed., *Proc. 21st Scientific-Professional Conference with International Participation "Urbanism and Sustainable Development"*, May 2025, pp. 183–187.
- [22] B. Milojević, „Urban Planning as a Framework of Sustainable Development in Light of Educational Process at Universities in Countries of Transition –an Example of Republic of Srpska", International Conference "The Role of Universities and their Contribution to Sustainable Development", STRAND, Belgrade, Serbia, 2012., pp. 75-84, Nov, 2012
- [23] I.Uletilović and D. Kabić, *Citizen Participation in Urban Planning in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Current Status and Opportunities*, Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina: Center for Environmental Studies, Aple, UNIBL, Faculty of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, University of Banja Luka, 2025.
- [24] B. Milojević, Integrated Urban Planning in Theory and Practice, in *Contemporary Theory and Practice in Construction XIII, Proc. Conf.*, May 2018, pp. 318–337