

CLEVER Cities Podcast

Greening in Belgrade through co-creation. **Local Voices for Sustainability.**

Introduction

What is urban greening? In a nutshell, some may say, it's "nice to look at, and nice for our environment". It's so much more than that though, as we learn from our guest Ana Mitic-Radulovic from the Centre for Experiments in Urban Studies (CEUS), based in Belgrade, Serbia. In this episode, we hear how projects like are fueling Belgrade's green space advocates with insight from other European cities, and how the planning of a major park is shaking things up locally..

Podcast Transcript English

Hello and welcome to local voices for sustainability, the ICLEI Europe podcast. I'm your host Laura Schubert. Each episode we explore the sustainability transformations taking place in our member cities across Europe. Today, we're headed to a Balkan capital city perched on the banks of where two major rivers meet the Danube and the Sava. It is one of the longest continuously inhabited cities in continental Europe, a blend of architectural styles reflective of its complex history, recognised as having a particularly vibrant nightlife, as well as a friendly and hospitable population. This city also has some notable sustainability goals, like reducing its carbon dioxide emissions by 40% by 2030. I'm talking about the Serbian City of Belgrade. In this episode, we'll be diving into the topic of urban greening, what is it? And how does it impact the sustainability of a city? Find yourself a shady tree to sit under or a sunny spot in the grass while we explore this topic with today's guest. Here with me today is Ana Mitic-Radulovic, an urban planner and resilient development consultant working in Belgrade, Serbia, and as a founder of the Centre for Experiments and Urban Studies, which is a partner in a number of projects that are furthering co-creation and nature-based solutions. One of which is Clever Cities, Clever Cities uses nature-based solutions to address urban regeneration challenges and promote social inclusion in cities. Anna is also a part of the city of Belgrade's urban greening plan team, and has been a vital resource for city officials as they have worked to integrate co-creative processes and existing infrastructure into their sustainability plans. Anna, we're delighted to have you here, welcome to the show.

Thank you very much, Laura. I'm really glad for your invitation. And I'm really excited about our conversation today.

Wonderful. So urban greening, I thought we could ease into our conversation with the simple introduction to the topic. I have a feeling it's more multifaceted than it sounds. So if you had to describe urban greening to a child, what would you tell them?

To be honest with children, I think it is much better to actually experience than to talk because I think that they learn much better through demonstration and experience than storytelling. So with children, actually, we practice actual work on urban greening of our city. With children, we actually plant trees, we try to exercise urban agriculture and to thrive in demonstrating community gardens in schools and kindergartens. So for them, it's really exciting to see the life growing, and to really experience the joy of experiencing nature in their regular, everyday urban environment.

So at least for our listeners of this show, I think it's useful to try and build that link between our topic today, urban greening, and the sustainability focus of this podcast. So can you tell us a little bit more about the link between the two? Can there be urban sustainability without urban greening?

I strongly believe no, because we really need to bring nature back to the cities, we over exploited our urban areas, we really exaggerated with new construction and new real estate development and city like that is not sustainable from many aspects. urban greening is actually the paradigm shift in urban planning and urban development. There are a lot of reasons for drying and working very hard on having more green areas but not only green for beautifying the urban landscape, but also multifunctional and an ecologically valuable green areas. Because quality planned and designed and implemented green areas can significantly reduce urban heat island effects help in reduction of Urban floods. urban greening reduces pollution and helps in co2 emissions reduction. When it is integrated in buildings. It can also help in thermal and acoustic insulation, and it can increase the durability and lifecycle of materials implemented. It can also boost social cohesion and opportunities for interaction with the neighbourhood and it can really create urban communities. And of course, it's strongly influences on biodiversity and that is why we really need to focus on quality and well designed and well implemented green areas, which are not just crime So not just one type of trees, but the variety of species, which provide also shelter and food for various animals.

It really sounds like urban greening sustainability, you know, social inclusion, these things really all go hand in hand like, you can't have one without the other essentially. So in Belgrade, you know, you were giving some some local examples there. And that's what I'd like to touch on in my next question here. So you've been doing some activities and initiatives of your own in the city. And I've heard that you've developed something called a linear park. Can you tell us a little bit about that and how you were involved in its development?

Yes, the linear park is actually the big plan and development project of the City of Belgrade, which was initiated in 2018 in the former railway corridor in the length of 4.5 kilometres, and with the area of around 15 hectares, increasing to 22. And it hasn't happened for decades actually, that Belgrade devoted such a huge area to the new greening. But in that process, it was very important to keep the residents informed and involved. And that was the first example in which we piloted the co creation in urban planning in the City of Belgrade. Okay, nice. So Centre for experiments in urban studies, the association professional association that I lead was facilitating the co creation process from the very early very initial stage of this plan development until the plan adoption by the City Assembly. And we organised a lot of interactive workshops, we organised a lot of consultations during the COVID period, we transformed this process into an online arena. So we made an interactive map for mapping needs and ideas and possible NBS application in this area. And we try to provide the situation in which the residents of the neighbouring areas of the future linear park, and those areas were built in 70s and 80s. Were not be excluded or disadvantaged with the new development and the real estate prices increase.

And so it was the first time that citizens were really involved in the planning processes from the very initial stage. And were involved in a real process of changing of our city.

Did you find that the pandemic influenced urban greening at all in Belgrade?

Yes, it did. We ran some questionnaires. And it became obvious I guess, as globally that people appreciate open areas and green areas in the city much more after the pandemic than previously. And there was a rise of local initiatives of turning the construction land into green areas are protecting some green areas much more than then before the COVID pandemic. But unfortunately, I am not convinced that city officials use the crisis in the best possible way.

Okay. They are not capturing the the energy and the possibility behind the moment.

Yes, okay. Yes, unfortunately, yes, we could use it much better for real shifts and changes in the planning paradigm. But for now, it did not yet happen.

Okay, a work in progress at least. So bringing urban greening activities and initiatives to life in cities is perhaps easier said than done. cities need resources to help get them to that place as we know. And one such resource is the urban by nature programme. This is a global capacity building programme for nature based solutions and knowledge sharing, which really centres around this concept of co creation. I understand that you Anna lead the south eastern Europe hub for the urban by nature programme. Can you tell us how you see participation in the programmes like urban by nature, influencing how cities in south eastern Europe our approach at public green spaces?

Yes, urban by nature is a global programme. And we established the urban by nature southeastern Europe hub in May last year. And it was really a very precious resource of knowledge exchanging with our partners from clever Cities project from Hamburg, Milan and London and other experts from the consortium. It was very valuable for local officials and experts from Western Balkans and southeastern Europe, because we don't have a lot of opportunities to actually listen and learn about processes already being implemented in other European countries. Okay. It also brought a lot of energy and initiatives for future projects and it is really important to create that critical mass of like thinkers in the region because as I explained in the Western Balkans, it is more difficult to transfer those messages and the importance of urban greening than in the European Union.

Okay. So I have only one more official question for you. And then we're going to be moving into the last segment of our show. So my final question for you looks to the future. Imagine it is 2033 10 years from now, what would you love to see in Belgrade in terms of urban greening?

I would like to see a lot of urban gardens in the kindergartens. And in school yards, I would like to see linear park with providing a lot of biodiversity and small new pocket parks, all around Belgrade. And well maintained forests over forests in which a lot of citizens are actually enjoying regularly.

Hmm, very nice. What's a pocket park?

Pocket park is a very small park less than 50 square metres. I'd like whenever you can you make a small green area.

Oh, very nice. So so instead of a few parking spaces, maybe you can have a pocket park.

Yes exactly.

So this brings us to the lightning round of our conversation. This is also known as hot takes, and it works like this. I'm going to ask you a question or pose a statement. And I'm looking for a brief instinctual response. So we've got 10 of these ready for you. Okay, so true or false. Every city should plan for urban greening.

Yes, true.

My favourite public greening element is...?

Microforests!

Okay. An example of a European city that is doing great work, increasing local green space is...?

London.

Why is that?

They have excellent policies and analytics. And they have been developed a lot of new tools, like a green space index has been developed in Berlin like 30 years ago, but they're introducing as well. But they also introduced the net biodiversity gain, which means it basically cannot construct anything new. If you don't allow the substitute for the green areas you're destroying within your construction. I think that is pretty innovative policy. It is actually quite interesting and very important shift.

Yeah, absolutely. That sounds very forward thinking. What community or group would you like to see better represented in Belgrade's urban planning process?

Local communities? For now, we have pretty much the opposition in local communities. In many parts of Belgrade, local community groups are rising, but very much as a reaction and actually not proactively. And I would really like that to change. It, of course, depends on the governance and the city administration a lot. But it is about dialogue and respect of each side. And that is a long term process. But I think that's the only constructive way we can really go further together.

Okay, okay. What is something Belgrade has learned from working with urban by nature?

I think that learn exactly that, and that we can actually work much better together than if we all stand in our old time old school positions. That's when we share the governance, we actually share the power, but also we share the responsibility. And that is a very constructive and fruitful process.

Yes, absolutely. About the linear part. Has it already been developed? Is it completed? Or is it still in the planning process?

It's still in the planning process. One of those 10 zones has been starting with implementation, but we expect that from summer this year, the real contract construction or implementation works will begin much more intensively.

Okay. So, I mean, if I was to if I was to ask you what has been the biggest challenge in CO creating the park? Is it something you could already have an answer for? Or is it still too early in the process?

I can say what was the challenge in in the planning? Because yes, it was the process on its own. From one side, it was the first time that we exercise this kind of process, the creative process. And the good thing was that it raised interest and brought a lot of citizens but on the other hand, it There was some criticism, which was not expressed early enough in the process, and it came after the plan was adopted. We need to, to try to find the intersection of interests and something which is, like socially acceptable. And that is something we need to negotiate about and work around.

So visitors to Belgrade in the future, when can they expect hopefully to find the linear park?

I like hoping next couple of years. Three would be very optimistic. Five bit more realistic. That is what they expect.

All right. Moving on then on our hot takes. So Belgrade is a member of the standing conference of towns and municipalities of Serbia, which is itself an ICLEI member. Has Belgrade's connection to both networks impacted its urban greening initiatives?

Yes, yes, of course, standing conference of towns and municipalities is an extremely important resource. And it's an important institution with which we collaborate a lot on various topics. Urban greening is a rising one, sustainable urban mobility, which is actually quite related with urban greening is another and they bring a lot of value of course.

I notice how green public spaces affect my emotions, true or false?

True, of course. My colleague says, yes, when we entered the green space, we feel how our shoulder relax, which is completely true.

What is a piece of advice you would give young people studying or training today to be urban planners?

I would advise them to open the boxes to try to collaborate with other professionals as much as possible, and to listen to their emotions when they are in urban space. And yes, and to plan what would they enjoy.

What is something cities should keep in mind when developing their own plans for urban greening?

I think what is in the core of the urban greening plans, methodology, being developed recently by the European Commission and supported by ICLEI is actually co-creation. And I think it's very grounded decisions, and very grounded advice. Yeah, I think the co-creation in urban greening plantings is inevitable elements.

So that's it, we've come to the end of our questions, the end of our conversation, and you've given us a glimpse into the world of urban greening and what role it plays in the development of sustainable cities. It's certainly far more than just planting a tree here or there. It sounds like it's a whole way of thinking about planning, or urban spaces in which a whole range of stakeholders and priorities and goals all have to be considered at once. And I would like to thank you so much for joining us on the show and shining a light on this topic. Thank you.

Thank you very much, Laura, for the invitation. And I really hope that this conversation will contribute to the shift towards understanding and valuing urban greening in urban planning.

Great, thank you. Thank you very much. If you would like to learn more about the urban by nature programme or the clever Cities project, check out the link in the episode description. If you're enjoying the show thus far, go on and subscribe, so you'll be the first to know about future episodes. Thanks for joining us, and until next time.