

Urban Incubator: Belgrade

The Goethe-Institut is the cultural institute of the Federal Republic of Germany operating globally. It promotes knowledge of the German language abroad and foster international cultural cooperation. It faces the cultural policy challenges of globalization and develop innovative concepts for a world in which cultural diversity is recognized as an asset. The Goethe-Institut has been represented since 1970 in Belgrade and it is responsible for the German cultural exchange with Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo.

We were truly honoured to speak with Dr Matthias Müller-Wieferig, director of the Goethe-Institut Belgrade.

Having in mind that you have worked globally with the Goethe-Institut since 1992, what, in your opinion, distinguishes the work of the Goethe-Institut Belgrade from the other institutes around the world?

Wherever I was with the Goethe-Institut, I always met with established partners and friends of the Goethe-Institut, with appreciation for the independent support and interesting co-operation that the Institute provides and a great openness for establishing new contacts in the youth scenes for cultural dialogue. In Belgrade, I always felt the same appreciation and openness, but a rather heightened necessity for co-operation and a more urgent need to establish trust not only on an institutional, but also on a personal basis.

In Belgrade, my predecessors and the permanent local staff of the Goethe-Institut have earned respect and recognition for being a reliable partner even in times of war, transformation, and sometimes crisis.

The institute has been continuously present in Belgrade for more than forty years; our library, classroom, auditorium and office space have offered prime access to everything about Germany for over 30 years at 50 Knez Mihailova street. Now, in all those years, the building was closed only for three months before and during the NATO bombing when Milosevic expelled all foreigners. And even then, the caretaker of 50 Knez Mihailova, somehow even managed to keep the Goethe-Institut basement open as a bomb shelter for the neighbourhoods.

I feel that this high esteem is very special, and that especially in times of difficult transformation, a cul-

tural, multifaceted connection both ways between Serbia and Germany is more than welcome.

We continuously contribute to the vibrant cultural calendars of Belgrade and many other cities, cultural festivals, cultural centres and cultural events all over the country with partnerships in the arts, film, dance, theatre, music and science.

We offer German language classes to an ever growing audience who need language skills and cultural information either for their professional careers or their personal development.

Operating globally, of course, is an interesting personal and cultural experience. All kinds of information and cultural trends today travel quickly over social media and other networks, and multi-cultural as well as multi-lingual careers are more and more part and parcel of our own biographies and personal careers. But, in essence, our world is a small one, and I very much appreciate that, for now, I am locally based in Belgrade from where I am working my professional network between the German central office and the regional institute offices in Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, Albania and Cyprus.

Recently, the Goethe-Institut Belgrade has achieved significant visibility among the Serbian public with its unique project Urban Incubator: Belgrade, which supports the re-vitalisation of the now neglected Savamala quarter of the city of Belgrade. Can you tell us why have you chosen Savamala for its basis?



Dr. Matthias Müller-Wieferig

Initially, the Goethe-Institut Belgrade approached Belgrade's Savski Venac municipality since we were looking for a temporary pavilion to house the Goethe-Institut while re-constructing the Knez Mihailova building. That was the beginning of a love affair, as Belgrade's Savamala quarter, located on the southern bank of the river Sava, for me represents, although very much neglected, a "jewel of a city quarter": just one kilometre from Belgrade city centre and graced with many of the city's most valuable historical buildings, Savamala is rich in both tradition and history. Today, the potential of the Savamala quarter has again been recognised, but Serbia's current economic and persistent structural challenges make development of the quarter unlikely in the foreseeable future. Thus, we felt Savamala today was the right time and the right place for a new initiative, joining some other cultural partners in town to inject new life and energy into Savamala and to try to contribute to a cultural



"critical mass" which might turn around a whole city quarter. We even hope that Savamala might serve as a role model for other neglected areas of Belgrade, Europe and on the larger map of urban redevelopment processes worldwide.

Anyway, when we started the **Urban Incubator: Belgrade** project, the curator of the project, Tim Rieniets, and the Goethe-Institut managed to hold on to the idea of a temporary pavilion, which we built this year – literally into an investor's ruin, the so-called "Spanish House" underneath Branko's Bridge. Together with the City of Belgrade and the municipality, we re-opened this seemingly useless, although beautiful, heritage protected building, and renovated another five spaces in Savamala. We identified and invited ten local and international artistic, architectural, or social initiatives to use the new spaces and the whole of the Savamala quarter to work out new ideas for a cultural re-vitalisation of the district.

Right now, the Urban Incubator: Belgrade is operational in Savamala until the end of 2013, and hopefully for another year to come, too.

What are the objectives of the Urban Incubator: Belgrade project?

The Goethe-Institut Belgrade can utilise its capacity as a cultural institution to provide artistic and cultural stimuli for the sustainable development of Savamala. The Urban Incubator: Belgrade aims to improve the quality of life of local residents, arguing strongly in favour of a city on a human scale, and aims to encourage the residents of Savamala to take charge of their quarter. It is the quarter's cultural and social values that should drive Savamala's re-vitalisation, rather than commercial and real estate business interests.

Therefore, we feel that the Urban Incubator: Belgrade can contribute to a culturally driven, participatory approach to urban development, a change from previous top-down to more bottom-up planning procedures. All our projects are devoted to the quarter; all our artistic and cultural initiatives are working in and for Savamala. As they are con-

tinuously active for at least one year they will better facilitate the transfer of knowledge between local and international participants in the project and between participants and residents.

At half-term of the 2013 programme year, we have already seen about 200 young people and students from Belgrade, Serbia, the region and international institutions join the project teams. The project authors and participants have found access to families, residents, and other local non-governmental organisations who find it more and more interesting to find their own ways of how to improve their own neighbourhood and communities. This process, obviously, needs time and a lot of trust. "No trust, no city", as one of the Urban Incubator projects in Savamala put it.

It is actually Urban Incubator projects like "Raumlabor" from Berlin, "Nextsavamala" from Hamburg and the "School of Urban Practices" from Belgrade who together work on new ideas of community life, of economic and culturally sustainable ways in which to use the traditions and the knowledge of the city quarter for future perspectives and a better life in an old quarter.

Therefore, it is the artists and activists and, indeed, the neighbours and the residents of Savamala and Belgrade who actually contribute to shaping the future of Savamala.

For two consecutive decades different government entities have been developing strategic plans for this neglected Belgrade quarter. Having in mind that Savski Venac municipality as well as the City of Belgrade are project partners, what kind of impact do you think that this project can have on further planning?

The Urban Incubator: Belgrade would like to support a long-term, sustainable regeneration process for Savamala. It is not another arts festival addressing a foreign audience or aiming for short-term effects. Instead, ideas, time and money will be invested in order to have a



long-term and equitable impact on Savamala's development. For this reason, the Urban Incubator: Belgrade includes as many local participants as possible. For example, the first architectural magazine for Savamala, "Kamenzind Beograd", has been edited by young people from Belgrade and abroad, and a local guest-editor has been established for an ongoing Savamala editorial office. In the same way, all the activities of the Urban Incubator projects are designed to share and exchange knowledge between international experts and local actors. We would like to make sure that once the Urban Incubator has come to an end the know-how, visions and ideas will remain in Savamala.

Therefore, we have already begun encouraging and supporting the Urban Incubator initiatives to stay on beyond the official project period. Most important for that, we have the option with the City of Belgrade and Savski Venac municipality to extend the project tenure for another year.

All the Urban Incubator projects actively inviting the public, all the cultural activities and new initiatives you find emerging in Savamala nearly every day, have made a huge difference already. With the help of the local, national and even international media and communication partners, we are trying to raise awareness of Savamala as a potential, high-quality cultural city quarter, rather than the neglected, "doomed" district it was only two or three years ago.

The temporarily re-used Spanish House in Savamala, at night glowing from within, might even be the symbol for other cities in other countries. For a better future for our cities.

Therefore, in recent months, we have seen the Goethe-Institut Belgrade and yourself taking an active role in the now standard daily lectures, debates and panel discussions involving prominent individuals from various fields: architecture, urban planning, visual arts, design, environmental topics, tourism, economy, music industry and the media, whose different opinions and experiences contribute to elucidating the topic from different angles and in perspective lead to easier structural solutions for many of the outstanding issues.

Yes, indeed, an urban re-development initiative is a complex issue, and the Goethe-Institut's Urban Incubator project is very much in the centre of real life processes. Questions like how the future of a city can be designed when there are no financial means for investment, when some legal issues are not clarified and when at times institutional proce-

dures are slow are central to the Urban Incubator: Belgrade as well as to other stakeholders as they seem to be of utmost importance for the future of Savamala. The Urban Incubator: Belgrade seeks to address them by inviting new creative ideas and local and international "creative talents", enabling the local residents and other stakeholders in Savamala to participate and engage in the process.

One of the core questions for the future of Savamala and other city quarters is: Could this participatory approach create alternative options to the established procedures of city planning?

This, for example, is one of the guiding questions for students of the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade and their professor Mr Ivan Kucina. In their Urban Incubator project "School for Urban Practices" they research and test new forms of city quarter development, using Savamala as a laboratory for community-based, participatory methods of architectural planning and for methods on how to improve the environment and to engage the local residents more.

In one of the public lectures you gave recently, you also presented the Urban Incubator project "Model for Savamala" and its authors Ms Maja Popovic and Mr Boba Stanic who live and work in Belgrade and Amsterdam.

The starting point of this research and the physical model shaping project is that most of the knowledge about Savamala cannot be found in books or archives, rather it is barely accessible, in the memories of Savamala residents. To uncover this knowledge and make it public, visible, tangible is the objective of "A Model for Savamala". Together with their students and workshop participants, with a Japanese computer expert from Amsterdam and dedicated staff, they are researching and later this year they will physically build a 1:2000 model of the quarter. This model will not only represent a specific form of Savamala as a cityscape of buildings and houses, but also different cultural layers, stories and histories, previous city planning levels, and also a physical form of collecting, exhibiting, and publicly exposing local knowledge.

As "A Model for Savamala" simultaneously collects and stores local knowledge about the quarter, it contributes to future visions of Savamala in two ways: Firstly, this local knowledge is the necessary basis for planning the future of the quarter adequately. Secondly, this knowledge will constitute a new appreciation and create a new awareness of Savamala.



Matthias Müller-Wieferig, PhD in German and English literature, studied at Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster. From 1986-1990, he worked as a feature journalist for the German media, including the Westdeutscher Rundfunk Köln. After a lectureship at Reading University, Great Britain, from 1990 until 1992, he joined the Goethe-Institut. Placements include Bombay, Budapest, Munich, Dublin, Copenhagen and Belgrade (since July 2011)

I would like to ask you about your personal opinion on Serbia's future EU accession. How this will affect social and cultural development in general?

This progress towards full EU membership is really good news in the first place, as it allows Serbia to be part of the cultural project that Europe is in addition to being a political and economic one. It has provided peace and stability from which cultural dialogue and development can bloom and blossom. Europe's future is a cultural issue, too, as trust and empathy among the European people, among the citizens of the nations and the region, seems to be most important as a basis of true democracy, social welfare and cross-cultural dialogue.

That doesn't mean that EU membership would immediately solve all the problems of social and cultural development in Serbia, especially in times of crisis and an growing north-south divide in Europe. But using our own resources like knowledge, creativity, co-operation and virtual and physical mobility, Europe can develop in the best possible way. In joint cultural projects and activities, you can best find and build trust and co-operation, open dialogue and exchange between different cultural backgrounds, traditions and achievements with a common vision for a better future.▢

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