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CHILDREN'S URBAN EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on children's urban experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically examining how public spaces in the city were used in the first months that followed the lifting of the state of emergency. Declared in the Republic of Serbia on March 15, 2020, it was imposed in response to the outbreak of the infectious respiratory disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The use of public space was observed in the broadest possible sense – as the sum of activities in the „shared" urban space – without a particular focus on some of the key aspects of children's urban experiences, such as children's mobility, their spatial autonomy, institutionalization of free time, etc. In this context, the focus of the research is on children's daily life, specifically *their everyday activities in the public space of the city* during the period of the so-called „new normal". Methodologically, the paper relies on the results of field research conducted in September 2024, involving 10 elder school-age children (7th grade), aged 12 and 13, of both genders, living in the urban neighbourhood of New Belgrade (Block 62).

Keywords: children, children's urban experiences, COVID-19 pandemic, Belgrade

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Introduction: Children's Urban Experiences as a Research Topic

Given that the number of children growing up in urban environments has rapidly increased in recent decades, children's urban experiences have become an increasingly significant field of study. This area encompasses a wide range of topics, from the physical environment in which children grow up to their social and emotional experiences in urban spaces. Some key areas of study within children's urban experiences include: urban planning and design of spaces for children, children's social experiences in urban settings, children and spatial perception, children's health in urban environments, children and mobility in cities, etc. These and other similar topics are explored by sociologists, psychologists, urban planners, doctors, educators, and others. Within domestic humanities, „studies that examine certain aspects of childhood in the context of urban space are primarily the result of research in the fields of urban sociology or sociology of childhood" (Bogdanović 2022: 105). Some recent examples of research on growing up in the city include: examining spatial opportunities for implementing children's daily practices and how children respond to the macrostructures embedded in urban spaces (Radović 2014); mapping „places for children" or „children's spaces" in the context of broader social processes of urban space production and structural processes shaping contemporary childhood (Radović 2015); observing playgrounds as spatial resources for structured and controlled play (Radović 2016); considering the pedagogical implications of the commercialization of playgrounds for young children in the city (Malović 2019), and others. In domestic anthropology, the number of works produced at the intersection of two subdisciplines – *urban anthropology* and *anthropology of children/childhood* – is still modest. So far, studies have explored children's birthday parties in urban green spaces (see Đorđević Crnobrnja & Krel 2023), children's perception of the city's visual identity (see Bogdanović 2022), children's urban symbolic maps (see Bogdanović 2023), etc. However, despite the limited scope of anthropological research on children's urban experiences, it still contributes significantly to the overall picture of growing up in the city.

It seems that the topic of *childhood and/in the city* gains particular significance at a time when society as a whole is facing numerous (post-transitional, economic, technological, social, ecological, and health) challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic is certainly one of the moments that implies (re)imagining areas and research topics even in scientific fields belonging to the domain of social sciences and humanities. Although considerable scientific attention has been devoted to this crisis moment within Serbian anthropology (Žikić, Stajić & Pišev 2020; Trifunović & Đorđević 2021; Mitrović 2021; Milenković 2021; Banić Grubišić 2021; Ćuković 2021, etc.[1]),

[1] At this point, two publications focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic should be highlighted: the first is the thematic issue published in the Bulletin of The Institute of Ethnography of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts titled „Culture of the 'New Normal'. Local and Global Perspectives", edited by Vesna Trifunović and Ivan Đorđević (Trifunović & Đorđević 2021), while the sec-

children's urban experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic have once again remained on the margins of interest for domestic researchers. An exception is the paper by anthropologists Biljana Anđelković and Saša Nedeljković, „The Epidemic as a Regulator of Interpersonal Relationships: The Impact of Combined Teaching on the Relationship among Primary School Students" (Anđelković & Nedeljković 2021). This paper analyses the modification of friendships among students in a fifth-grade class of a Belgrade primary school during the period of combined teaching in the 2020/2021 school year. Additionally, it is necessary to mention two more studies in which researchers from the Institute of Ethnography of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Đorđina Trubarac Matić and Aleksandar Krel, analyse the children's „*corona game*," played in the yards of certain Belgrade primary schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. This specific play practice was observed in the first case as a sociocultural construct (Krel & Trubarac Matić 2022), and in the second as a form of folkloric communication (Trubarac Matić & Krel 2022). All three papers make a significant contribution to the study of social and cultural practices related to childhood in changed social conditions, both from the aspect of methodology and from the perspective of the issues addressed in these studies.[2]

Theoretical Framework

In theoretical terms, this paper draws on some of the previous anthropological conceptualizations of the situation caused by the emergence of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). This event is considered in anthropology as *critical* – it is „an unprecedented event that requires and shapes new forms of historical action, previously unknown in a given context" (Žikić, Stajić & Pišev 2020: 950). It can cause radical turns and transformations of the entire social structure or leave noticeable changes within the existing, unchanged structure (see Trifunović & Đorđević 2021: 522). „A critical event serves as a strong value and emotional landmark in the cultural cognition of any environment, and based on it, the meaning is determined in relation to other events, both those whose historical sequence led to it and those seen as its consequences" (Das 1996: 5 as cited in Žikić, Stajić & Pišev 2020: 950). In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic is an event with significant transformative potential that divides time into *before* and *after* – in the

ond is the collection of papers „COVID-19 in Serbia '20", edited by Bojan Žikić and published by the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Belgrade (Žikić 2021). Both publications represent valuable contributions to the study of various segments of social life during the crisis.

[2] Other Serbian anthropologists also address children in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, though more briefly, primarily in relation to media discourses/public narratives. For example, Aleksandar Bošković discusses the transformation of children's social status in discourses associated with COVID-19 in the context of the culture of fear (Bošković 2021). Marko Pišev, Bojan Žikić, and Mladen Stajić highlight how, under the altered social circumstances, children have become a „negatively connoted social category" (Pišev, Žikić & Stajić 2020: 847–848).

specific case, the time *before* the introduction of the state of emergency in the Republic of Serbia, which was in effect from March 15 to May 6 2020, and the time *after* its termination, which, in colloquial as well as in academic discourse, became known as the „new normal“ (Žikić, Stajić & Pišev 2020; Trifunović & Đorđević 2021). The concept of „the new normal" in Serbian anthropology is generally discussed as „something that comes after reaching a point beyond which there is no return to what was before" (Trifunović & Đorđević 2021: 521). It („the new normal“) is also conceptualized as „an inevitability that implies the need for unconditional adaptation to the newly created circumstances" (Trifunović & Đorđević 2021: 522). However, „the new normal" does not necessarily imply radical and comprehensive transformations of the entire social structure. Pivotal events – whether revolutionary or less dramatic – can also have implications within the framework of the existing (unchanged) structure, affecting one or more social spheres. Serbian anthropologists also note that when discussing life before, during, and after a transitional event, the reference point for „normality" is actually our daily life – the life that consists of work or study, use of free time, socializing, etc. (see Žikić, Stajić & Pišev 2020: 951). Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic can be viewed as a kind of *rite of passage* (*rites du passage*), both on a global and individual levels, but in an unconventional sense, as it is not a formally structured ritual, but rather a complex event that brought profound transformations in society and people's lives. Applying Arnold van Gennep's (Van Gennep 2005) framework of separation, liminality, and aggregation, the final phase – aggregation – emerges as the period of „the new normal“, during which new habits and values were adopted, such as greater awareness of health, remote work/online education models, changes in the concept of community and global solidarity, etc.

Since this paper discusses children's everyday activities in the „shared“ urban space during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary to clarify the concept of *public urban space* in the theoretical part of the work. In the broadest sense, urban or city space is a very complex physical structure made up of subsystems that form this structure. Urban space consists of complex combinations of built elements, spaces, and environments, units and complexes that, when collectively integrated into an urban system, create the atmosphere and surroundings for the complex processes of urban life (Radović 2003: 16). City space can be divided into public space (streets, squares, public parks, the interior of public buildings such as theatres, museums, schools, etc.) and private space (apartments, houses, living space) (see Bogdanović 2019: 34). *Public space* is a space that, by its nature and function, serves a public purpose, enables social communication, and is accessible and open to all, regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, national, or socio-economic-political affiliation. Public urban spaces can be categorized as either *open* or *closed*. Open public spaces include streets, squares, parks, and bridges – areas that are accessible without any kind of barriers. Closed public spaces encompass buildings such as schools, theaters, hospitals, and libraries, which, while serving public functions, are enclosed and may have specific access conditions.

Methodological Framework

The field research on *children's urban experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic* was conducted in September 2024. The sample included 10 children of advanced school age (7th grade), specifically children aged 12 and 13, of both genders, living in New Belgrade neighbourhood (Block 62). At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the respondents were 8 or 9 years old and attended the 2nd or 3rd grade at Primary School „Kneginja Milica". To obtain data that would be as comparable as possible during the analysis of the field material, I used a *questionnaire* while conducting semi-structured interviews. In designing the questionnaire, I ensured that the children could easily and clearly recall their memories of the COVID-19 period about the way they used the urban space in which they lived. Thematically, the questionnaire was divided into two parts – one focused on children's urban experiences before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the other concerned the use of public urban space during the pandemic. Specifically, the research time frame included the period before the declaration of the state of emergency in the Republic of Serbia (March 15, 2020), as well as the first months after its ended on May 6 of the same year (approximately until the end of the first semester of the 2020/2021 school year). I also used the opportunity to discuss with the children the period when the most restrictive measures (the introduction of curfews and online learning) were implemented, during which the use of public city spaces was either prohibited or reduced to a minimum.

Given that this is the first research on children's urban experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic within domestic anthropology, *the use of public urban space* was observed in the broadest possible sense – as a collection of activities in the „shared" urban space – without a particular focus on key aspects of the formation of children's urban experiences, such as their mobility, spatial autonomy, institutionalization of free time, etc. Accordingly, the focus of the research was on children's everyday life, i.e., their *daily activities in the public urban space of the city* during the two specified periods. Most of the children easily recalled how they spent their time „outside the house" before and during the pandemic. The conversations with the children were recorded, with the consent of their parents, in the form of audio recordings. Although the recordings varied in length and quality, they collectively represent sufficient field material from which a preliminary overview of children's urban experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in the *micro-locational spatial context* of Block 62 in the municipality of New Belgrade can be developed. Block 62 is an area bounded by the streets Nehruova, Jurija Gagarina, Dušana Vukasovića, and Vojvođanska. It consists of 14 residential buildings arranged in the form of large stairs, with seven buildings in the southern part and seven in the northern part of the block. The complex was built in the late 1970s in line with the principles of modernism.[3] Urbanistic and ambient values represent a distinctive quality of

[3] https://www.docomomo-serbia.org/atlas/stambeni-kompleks-u-blokovima-61-62-63-64-na-novom-beogradu/

this residential complex. There are green spaces and recreational areas among the residential buildings. The central green strip that divides the northern and southern parts of Block 62 further enhances the residential function of this micro-location. Such quality and advantage are rarely found in densely populated parts of the city or urban zones with higher building density indexes.[4] However, the green spaces between the northern and southern parts of the block have lost their original purpose in recent years due to the construction of buildings of both permanent and temporary character (residential buildings, self-service shops, as well as commercial facilities with accompanying services). Block 62 also houses the Primary School „Kneginja Milica."

Children's Urban Experiences before the COVID-19 Pandemic

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants attended the 2nd grade of primary school, and according to their statements, they mostly used urban spaces with the assistance of their parents. However, three children mentioned that they 'went outside on their own', but were required to contact their parents by phone or smart watch. In cases where they used the city space without direct adult supervision, they moved within a small radius, which usually included the area in front of the residential building where they lived. In addition, the time spent in public urban spaces was regulated and limited by their parents, based on other activities, most often school-related, but also extracurricular activities (e.g., sports training, private foreign language lessons, etc.).

„I preferred going to the morning shift because I had time to play after school. Sometimes, I went outside on my own, my mom let me. I had a smart watch, so I would call her. We played in front of my building, on the part where the basketball hoops were. M. and M. came there too. We didn't go further than that. I didn't stay outside for long, I don't know how long exactly. However, in the evening, I had English lessons, so I had to come home on time. [] When I went to school in the afternoon, I didn't go out in the morning because I had to study. Maybe we stayed for a while after school, I don't remember." (a girl, 13 years old)

The children who participated in the study agreed that they used the public space of the city more in the afternoon and/or evening hours, depending on their school obligations and weather conditions, with more intensive use during weekends and/or school breaks. The urban points where the children spent most of their free time or extracurricular activities were: the basketball court in front of Primary School „Kneginja Milica" (Block 62), the playground of Primary School „Kneginja Milica" (Block 62), the space in front of entrance 92 in Jurija Gagarina Street (Block 62), the space in front of entrance 130 in Jurija Gagarina Street (Block 62), the basketball court in front of the „Roštiljko" bakery (Block 62), the space in front

[4] Ibid.

of entrance 62 in Nehruova Street (Block 62), Kalemegdan, Ada, the Sava Promenade, and Delta City. The majority of activities the children were engaged in at these urban locations were rule-based games, i.e. games with predefined rules and limitations (see Duran 2003).

Among the recreational activities characterized by: 1) organized play, 2) competition, 3) two or more parties in the game, 4) criteria for determining the winner, and 5) agreed-upon rules (Roberts et al. 1959, 597 according to Banović 2022: 112), the following ones stand out: hide-and-seek[5], tag[6], password game[7], skeleton[8], donkey[9], elastics[10], etc. It is noticeable that the children draw a distinction between games for boys and girls, with most of them emphasizing that they „played separately" – boys with boys, and girls with girls[11]. In this sense, they noted a dichotomy in the space divided into „male" and „female" areas.

> „If we come and take the basketball court, the girls move away – they either play elsewhere or sit on the bench." (a boy, 13 years old)

[5] The participants choose someone to be the „seeker". While that person counts to a predetermined number, standing in place, eyes closed, the others search for a suitable hiding spot. Once the counting is finished, the search begins. The game continues until the last participant is found and tagged. The player who is found last becomes the seeker in the next round.

[6] One player is chosen to chase, while the others run away, trying not to get caught. The running is limited to an agreed-upon area, and when the chaser touches one of the runners and says „tag", that player takes over the role of the chaser, and the game continues.

[7] The participants are divided into two teams (usually boys versus girls). The first team closes their eyes, while the second team, which is running away, comes up with a word with as many letters as there are team members. Each member of the team is assigned one letter. When the first team catches someone from the second team, they learn the letter assigned to that person and gain the right to guess the chosen word. This process continues until all members of the second team are caught, revealing the secret word.

[8] The participants stand in a circle and throw a ball to each other. If a player fails to catch or drops the ball, the other team members „take away" a part of their body. The player continues the game without using that part of the body (e.g., their right hand, left leg, etc.) until they are eliminated. This game is played exclusively by boys.

[9] The participants line up in front of a wall with a marked goal. The first player kicks the ball. When the ball bounces and stops, the next player shoots at the goal from that distance. If they miss, they receive the letter „M" but get another chance to shoot. If they miss again, they receive the letter „A", and so on, until they spell the word „MAGARAC" (donkey). At that point, the player is eliminated from the game.

[10] The only required item for this game is an elastic band, typically a tailor's elastic. The ends of the elastic are tied together to form a loop. Two players step into the loop and move apart, stretching the elastic so that it reaches knee height and forms a rectangle instead of a circle. The players face each other. The third player plays by jumping over the elastic lines positioned in the middle between the players holding the elastic tight. Playing with the elastic involves various ways of jumping, stretching, and pulling the two elastic lines. The sequence of movements is usually predetermined.

[11] Few children's games involved both boys and girls (e.g., „password game").

Other recreational activities practiced by the children were those without a structured game format, but classified as leisure activities, such as riding bicycles/scooters, rollerblading and walking. In most cases, these recreational activities were practiced in the presence of parents or other older family members, and at the mapped locations that are spatially (in kilometres) distant from Block 62 (Kalemegdan, Ada, the Sava Promenade). Delta City is the only mapped spatial point where there is an overlap of activities on the relation between children–children and children–family. The first relation occurred during birthday celebrations (most often at the Cineplexx cinema or McDonald's restaurant[12]), while the second relation was established during shopping, which parents did at this shopping mall with children and/or family visits to the Cineplexx cinema.

Children's Urban Experiences in the Period of the So-Called „New Normal"

The use of open and closed public urban spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic was regulated by numerous legal regulations, and those directly impacting children's urban experiences will be mentioned here. Specifically, from the moment the first case of COVID-19 was registered in the Republic of Serbia (March 6, 2020), a series of decrees, decisions, orders, and resolutions were adopted to regulate the emerging situation, including the use of primarily public urban spaces.[13] In accordance with the *Decision on the Declaration of a State of Emergency* („Official Gazette of the RS", No. 29/20) and the *Regulation on Measures During the State of Emergency* („Official Gazette of the RS", No. 31/20), adopted on March 15, 2020, the work of preschool, school, and higher education institutions was completely suspended, a work-from-home model was introduced, mass gatherings were banned, a curfew was imposed, and some public buildings were repurposed (e.g., the Belgrade Fair was turned into a temporary COVID hospital). From March 17 to June 15, 2020, based on the *Decision on the Suspension of Teaching in Higher Education Institutions, Secondary and Primary Schools, and Regular Work in Preschool Institutions* („Official Gazette of the RS", No. 30/20), classes were organized remotely through television channels RTS 2 and RTS 3, the RTS Planet platform (https://mojaskola.rtsplaneta.rs/), as well as via online learning platforms. After the state of emergency was lifted and in preparation for the new school year

[12] Three out of ten interviewed children celebrated their birthdays at Delta City. These birthday celebrations typically followed one of two formats: in the first, after receiving gifts, the candles are blown out, and cake is served in the cinema lobby, followed by all guests attending the screening of a selected movie (usually an animated one). In the second, gifts are received first, followed by the movie screening, and then a meal is served at a McDonald's restaurant.

[13] All regulations enacted by the Republic of Serbia to prevent the spread of the infectious disease COVID-19 are available at the following link: https://www.paragraf.rs/svi-propisi-uputstva-za-sprecavanje-sirenja-korona-virusa-covid-19.html

(2020/2021), *Professional Guidelines for Organizing and Implementing Educational and Pedagogical Work in Primary Schools during the 2020/2021 School Year* was issued. This legal regulation more closely defined the methods for planning, organizing, and carrying out educational work, including remote teaching, as well as the education models to be applied in the upcoming school year.[14] For students in the first cycle of education (grades 1 to 4)[15], teaching was organized daily in school through direct educational work, with students divided into two groups per class and attending lessons in two shifts (at 8:00 AM and 10:45 AM).

After the state of emergency ended on May 6, 2020[16], a period of „new normal" followed, during which the children who participated in the study used the public space of the city in a somewhat different way. For almost all of the children, the first thought about this period was that they had to wear masks in public spaces. Initially, the masks were perceived as an unnatural element that (physically) interfered with their socializing and attending school. As they mentioned, „at first they bothered them a lot because they couldn't breathe properly." What particularly „annoyed" them was that they had to wear them during school breaks (when they spent time playing and socializing with peers), when entering school, and in school halls. Of course, there were also children for whom this change „wasn't that bothersome." As one boy stated, „it wasn't hard to take a mask with me when leaving the house and wear it when entering school".

> „We didn't wear them in the classroom anyway. When we had to wear them, I would put it under my nose, then take it off a little from my mouth, and then put it back on. It was even a bit fun for me. They kind of hurt behind my ears, but it was okay. Sometimes we wore them like this on our

[14] *Professional guidelines for organizing and implementing educational and pedagogical work in primary schools during the 2020/2021 school year.* https://prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/strucno-uputstvo.pdf, p. 3.

[15] The emphasis here is placed on students from the first cycle of education, since the children who participated in this research were attending the 2nd and 3rd grades of primary school during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[16] Although children's urban experiences during the state of emergency were not the primary focus of this research (due to the introduction of curfews and online schooling, which significantly limited the use of public urban spaces), the opportunity was taken to discuss this period with the children who participated in the study. Generally speaking, children did not have nice memories of the time when emergency measures were implemented in the Republic of Serbia. Out of the ten children interviewed, four spent this period outside the city (in rural areas or in the country), while six remained in Belgrade throughout the state of emergency. As they recounted, the most difficult aspects were the inability to go outdoors, especially „when the weather turned nice", and the lack of interaction with peers, both in school and outside it. The time they were allowed outside the home was mostly spent on brief walks with family members or trips outside the city to the country, where contact with other people was minimized. During these outings, they engaged in recreational activities such as walking, cycling, riding scooters, or rollerblading.
The use of private urban spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic will be the subject of a separate study.

heads (like hats, note by the author), and sometimes we would toss them to each other." (a boy, 13 years old)

However, the impression is that the children quickly got used to wearing masks, to the point that they became part of *a gift exchange game*[17], which was (on several occasions) conducted within one class of a primary school in New Belgrade, whose 6 students participated in this research. Especially after masks in various colours and patterns (suitable for children) became available for sale, they somewhat (though not completely) ceased to be an inconvenience for them. Using masks in other indoor public spaces wasn't perceived as too much of a problem – as they said, they tried to spend as much time outside as possible, where wearing masks was not mandatory, while they 'quickly' entered stores and other indoor spaces just to make purchases. Most of the children did not feel fear regarding the use of public space in the city, but one girl (13 years old) stated that she „was afraid of getting infected when going to school" and that she „avoided being outside".[18]

Another issue that bothered the children who participated in the research was that their time spent in the public space of the city became limited and restructured. As they mentioned, they spent less time outside engaging in free play and socializing with peers, and this was most often during the afternoon hours. They were also particularly annoyed by the fact that sometimes older individuals would remind them to maintain physical distance from their friends, or „not to get too close to each other's faces" and „to step back a little", which interfered with certain games, as many of them require close contact among participants. They also mentioned that they often played in smaller groups, sometimes with a changed composition, and that some parents insisted on a model of spending free time with their children, most often by walking together or riding bikes/scooters, rollerblading.

„M.'s parents didn't let her go outside, and I was really good friends with her. [] I was bored without her outside, so I played a bit with other kids, mostly with S. and her sister, but they didn't want to play in front of my building, so I had to go to 'Roštiljko' and play there." (a girl, 12 years old)

„I often went for walks around the block with my parents and sister, or we went to the Sava River so that I wouldn't stay inside the house. Sometimes we rode bikes with dad along the promenade. We often went to Block 45 to the playground because there weren't many kids there. There were

[17] The names of all the students in a class are written on separate pieces of paper, which are then placed in a box and mixed. Each child draws one slip of paper. They are expected to give a small gift, preferably handmade, to the friend whose name they draw (to avoid financial costs for parents). A 13-year-old boy who participated in this game once gifted his friend „a beautifully decorated mask" purchased from a DM store.

[18] After children returned to school in September 2020, this respondent, at the insistence of her parents, continued attending online classes, which the school approved. Throughout the entire first semester of the 2020/2021 school year, she did not attend in-person classes because the household included an elderly, ill family member.

some kids we didn't know, so I played with my sister there." (a girl, 13 years old)

However, children who, in some situations, used public urban space with family members, reported that they „preferred" to spend their free time with peers in places where they typically socialized, as the time spent with them was „more fun" than the time spent with parents and/or siblings. The time with family was „okay", but „not nearly as interesting" as the time spent with friends.[19] In this context, children cited playing games and the autonomy (freedom) they felt when using „their places" as key factors in ranking the relationships (children–children / children–family) formed in public urban spaces.

Children who actively practiced sports before the Covid-19 pandemic mentioned that not being able to attend sport practice sessions was „really hard" for them because they really enjoyed it. One girl who practiced athletics noted that she was „really happy" when training sessions, instead of being held indoors, were organized outside (on the Sava Promenade).

The third most important change that occurred in the public urban space was that children stopped celebrating birthdays in playrooms. These venues were closed during the state of emergency, and after it was lifted, celebrating birthdays in an indoor space required a range of measures, such as a limited number of guests, wearing masks, hand sanitizing upon entry, frequent ventilation of the space, time slot intervals, etc. Therefore, children who participated in the study most often celebrated birthdays at home, in a small circle of family and friends, or in two cases, outdoors.[20]

„I celebrated my 9th birthday on Ada. We had a great time. I invited many friends and almost all of them came. We played football on the field, and the parents were sitting in the restaurant, on the terrace, not inside, watching us. We cut the cake there and drank juices. That day was a little chilly, but we had a really nice time." (a boy, 13 years old)

„I really wantested setting up snacks and balloons outside the building and celebrating the birthday there. We invited my friends, not all of them, just the ones I hang out with the most, and the neighbours, and my grandmother came too. Mom bought some pastries, juices, and a cake. That day, we went out a bit earlier to decorate the space. We put up a few balloons, and mom and the neighbour M. brought out a table from the entrance of the building. We put the snacks on it. I was really happy, but I was also thinking about how other people from the buildings might see us, and it felt a bit awkward. When my friends came, we played and stayed outside for a long

[19] Some of the reasons mentioned include, for example, the lack of adherence to or introduction of new game rules by parents, the unwillingness of family members (especially older ones) to participate in all children's games, restrictions on time spent playing, and similar factors.

[20] In all three cases, the children had celebrated their birthdays in playrooms or at home up to that point.

time. [] The adults were talking among themselves." (a girl, 12 years old)

The fourth significant change in how children used public spaces in the city was about the modification of certain games, primarily in terms of participants. As the children who participated in the research (except for one girl who attended online classes) were split into two groups for in-person schooling, interpersonal relationships inevitably shifted.[21] Children, due to the circumstances, began to socialize more with peers in their assigned groups, which altered the participants in their games compared to the previous period. Additionally, some game rules were modified. For example, in the game „tag", the new rule was introduced – instead of saying „shuga" (a term said when one child tags another), the word „corona" was used (cf. Krel & Trubarac Matić 2022). However, this rule quickly phased out. There was also a case where a boy participated in a game of „hide-and-seek" from his terrace during a period of self-isolation (due to a close family member testing positive). His friends invited him to join the game by assisting the seeker from the terrace, which was on the second floor and gave him a good view of the area. The same boy mentioned that during this brief self-isolation period (at the beginning of the school year), he often observed socializing of his peers from the terrace, and he greatly missed being able to join them in their games.

What remained unchanged in relation to the use of the city's public spaces before the COVID-19 pandemic were the mapped points, or the „children's places", located within the radius of Block 62 (New Belgrade), where the children who participated in the research lived. These include the basketball court in front of Primary School „Kneginja Milica", the playground of the same school, the area in front of Entrance 92 in Jurija Gagarina Street, the area in front of Entrance 130 in the same street, the basketball court in front of the „Roštiljko" bakery, and the area in front of Entrance 62 in Nehruova Street. This reaffirms the importance of *neighbourhood space*[22] in shaping urban experiences for younger primary school children (aged 5–10) (Andel 1984 according to Radović 2015: 43). In addition, the emotional connection children had with the public space of the city remained unchanged. When talking about their urban experiences before and after the introduction of the state of emergency in Serbia, children frequently used terms such as „love", „miss", „annoy", „look forward to", and „be happy", indicating that the public space of the city had an emotional impact on them. For the children involved in the study, the city's public space was not just urban infrastructure or „built environment" – the playground in the block, the area around the school, the basketball court in front of their building, etc. It was a space where they established social relationships (most often with other children), and where they grew in the broadest sense of the

[21] For more on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on interpersonal relationships among children, see Anđelković & Nedeljković 2021.

[22] A *neighbuorhood* is a residential unit that represents an intermediate level between the city as a whole and the private space of a home (see Radović 2015: 42–47).

word – spending time outdoors independently, organizing their time and games, and choosing their „crew“ for socializing.

Towards the Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to discuss, at the level of a specific micro-location (Block 62, New Belgrade), how children used the city's public space in the first months after the state of emergency, declared in Serbia on March 15, 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was lifted. The analysis of children's daily activities in the „shared“ urban space during the period of the so-called „new normal“ once again confirmed some of the already established theoretical frameworks within the research topic of childhood and/in the city, as well as previous anthropological reflections on critical events.

Primarily, the research on children's urban experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic has once again confirmed the view of most theorists that the city's space is an irreplaceable experiential framework for growing up (cf. Radović 2014). This is perhaps best reflected in children's statements about the time spent during the most restrictive measures of the state of emergency (introduction of curfew, school closures, etc.) – they reluctantly remembered this period and mentioned that they greatly missed the public space of the city. Above all, they missed free play „in front of the building“, socializing with peers, and the time spent at school. Although transitioning to online socializing, schooling, and gaming wasn't challenging for them, they expressed missing „real“ physical interactions, which, at their age, primarily took place in the city's public spaces, both indoors and outdoors. This also confirms the second theoretical premise, according to which the physical space (of the city) is equated with the social space (cf. Lefebvre 1991; Simonsen 1996; Soja 1996).

In other words, the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic did not lead to a separation of these two concepts; on the contrary, the (somewhat modified) way of using the public space of the city under the conditions of the „new normal“ has once again confirmed the thesis that the physical space of the city ensures the reproduction of social relations, meaning that society and space are integral to each other (Lefebvre 1991). This is best illustrated by examples of how children's games were modified to adapt to the altered social conditions, ensuring that this crucial form of social interaction remained accessible for primary school-aged children. These modifications included changes in participants, shorter game durations, and wearing masks. Thirdly, the spatial points that remained unchanged during the two observed periods – particularly those in Block 62, where the children involved in the research lived – support the ideas proposed in urban sociology and urban anthropology: it is argued that „children's places“ – the spaces children are physically connected to, form attachments to, highlight in their narratives, and assign meaning as their own (Rasmussen 2004) – are undeniably dominant in „children's intimate geographies“

(Philo 2000, as cited in Radović 2015: 82). In other words, these and such mapped spatial points were and remained (in the conditions of the „new normal“) places defined as the unity of *location* (an absolute point in space with specific coordinates and measurable distances in relation to other locations), *locality* (the material environment for social relations), and *meaning* (the feelings and emotions evoked by the place) (see Cresswell 2009; Agnew 2011; Radović 2015). In the context of altered social circumstances, „places for children“, i.e., places chosen for children by adults that reflected adult ideas on how children should use the city's public space during the COVID-19 pandemic (such as block streets, playgrounds in Block 45, the Sava Promenade, etc.), somewhat substituted „children's places“, primarily in terms of location and locality, but not in terms of the meaning attributed to them by children. Children used these spaces due to limited access to „their own places“, where the children-to-children relationship came to the forefront. This confirms the thesis that „the basic element for forming a 'children's place' is the possibility of peer interaction“ (Radović 2015: 180). Also, when examining the spatial distribution of „children's places“, or their grouping around Primary School „Kneginja Milica“, which was attended by the children who participated in the research, it can be concluded that even in the conditions of the „new normal“, the school remained „dominant in the representations of space for children in the modern city“ (Radović 2015: 37).

Given that, within the framework of anthropological studies of critical events and the „new normal“ as their implications for the reference point of „normality“, the „everyday life – life that consists of work or learning, using free time, socializing, etc. „is taken as the point of reference (Žikić, Stajić & Pišev 2020: 951), it would be interesting to comment on the reflection of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's everyday lives that took place in the public space of the city in the first months after the state of emergency was lifted. The results of the research show that children's everyday life in the public space of the city during the COVID-19 pandemic did not undergo a crucial transformation. In terms of its *structure*, it remained (almost) unchanged – children, even under the conditions of the „new normal“, continued to go to school, spent time outside (away from home), played, recreated, went shopping, etc. The main part of the day, even under changed social circumstances, remained *going to school*, which included learning, playing, and socializing with peers.[23] However, the *content* of activities was subject to change, shaped by the (current) epidemiological situation and the measures implemented accordingly. The daily activities of children were modified to ensure their safety and reduce the risk of virus transmission. The identified changes included modifications in the way children played, received education, and socialized, with an emphasis on adhering to epidemiological measures (wearing masks, walking in nature/places with fewer people, maintaining physical distance, etc.). In other words,

[23] An exception is the daily life of a girl who, due to a sick household member during the COVID-19 pandemic, attended online classes and avoided contact with peers – her daily activities in the public spaces of the city underwent a fundamental change.

from the perspective of the children involved in the research, the impression is that the COVID-19 pandemic has had the character of a „transitory event" (Trifunović & Đorđević 2021: 521), which did not imply radical or comprehensive transformations of the social structure, at least when it came to their everyday lives in the public space of the city they lived in (Block 62, New Belgrade).

It would be interesting and significant to continue exploring this topic, which combines two research fields – growing up in the city and the „corona crisis". As mentioned in the introduction of the paper, the sample is insufficient for drawing general conclusions, so expanding the scope of the research both geographically and in terms of the number of participants would be beneficial. Additionally, since a considerable amount of time has passed since the temporal framework of the study (a full 4 years), it would be fascinating to observe the daily life of children in the present moment and see if (and to what extent) the „corona crisis" has left permanent effects on the structure and content of children's everyday activities in public spaces of the city. Finally, observing children's daily life in the „shared" urban space during the „corona crisis" from the perspective of adults would be interesting, particularly in the context of a culture of fear (Bošković 2021). In short, there are numerous ways in which the research into children's urban experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic can be continued and deepened. Therefore, one of the objectives of this paper is to encourage further studies that would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the researched topic.

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