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FORMING URBAN IDENTITIES BY REINTERPRETING HERITAGE: THE CASE OF POST-SOCIALIST VELENJE

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ABSTRACT

Post-socialist cities in Central and Eastern Europe are shaping their new identities amidst processes of transformation, internationalisation and globalisation. Discourses about post-socialist urban identity today have frequently attempted to disown the 'unwanted socialist past'. However, elements of those pasts can return to influence principal narratives of post-socialist urban identity. A relatively neglected aspect of these changes is legacies of old economies and communal ways of life. The objective of this paper is to explore the role of heritage in a city's identity and how it can be used in the construction of a rejuvenated identity shaping urban regeneration, by focusing on the city of Velenje in Slovenia. Because socialist heritage – both tangible and intangible – continues to shape Central European urbanity, we begin with an exploration of the role of heritage in forming urban identities in the Socialist city in order to establish some historical context and identify what legacies persist, with a particular focus on the City of Velenje's identity and type. Following this review of the literature, we move on to describe the post-socialist city of Velenje and its founding aspirations to become a "city in the park" that provides for quality of life for the locals and the visitors alike. We then go further to discuss if the post-socialist Velenje is able to become 'modern' by preserving only its physical legacy (tangible heritage) and disregarding the guiding principles and underlying motivations embedded in its original design and in its methods of construction (in its intangible heritage), as well as in its resulting form. As the post-socialist city's identity and type have important implications for urban regeneration needs and potential in Central Europe, we then offer a set of propositions about the future of socialist urban heritage. The article concludes by outlining the broader implications of the case-study for the understanding of post socialist urban identity formation.