

Teaching-Learning-Research

Design and Environments

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Teaching-Learning-Research: Design and Environments



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INTRODUCTION

Teaching-Learning-Research: Design and Environments

This is Manchester: We do things differently here

Manchester, once the 'Industrial Capital' of the world, has long been a test bed for architectural and urban experimentation. From the early settlements that challenged the resilience of the Romans, and then the Vikings, through the massive boom of the industrial period, when such was the frenzy in the city that it earned the sobriquet Cottonopolis, beyond the economic melancholia of the late 20th century, to the unbridled optimism of the 21st. As a progressive city, Manchester has continually reinvented itself. The present reincarnation was led through cultural regeneration facilitated by the adaptive reuse of those great redundant industrial structures, it is a city that encourages smart technologies and embraces a community of 24 Hour Party People.

Where better then to hold a conference that explores progressive architectural pedagogy – especially a virtual one!

The architectural, landscape, and design studio is a laboratory for experimentation where students are encouraged and expected to question and disrupt the status quo, to explore possible different futures, and to propose radical solutions to unsolvable problems. The need to fuel this move away from more traditional tabular rasa education is the responsibility of academics, and this conference was a wonderful vehicle to explore, expound, discuss, and debate the future of architectural education.

During the pandemic we have had to learn to do things differently, not to be down heartened by the difficulty of interacting solely through the computer, but to embrace the nearness that digital communication provides. We have adapted methods of teaching and learning to accommodate this extraordinary situation, we have creatively responded to the pandemic and developed strategies that encourage endeavour, promote wellbeing, and support scholarship. Extraordinary strategies are needed for an extraordinary situation.

It was a great pleasure to be able to host the AMPS Teaching – Learning – Research: Design and Environments conference at the Manchester School of Architecture. It was lovely to welcome so many virtual guests to the city. The great success of the online event was the demonstrated by the enthusiasm with which speakers engaged with the conference, the quality of the post-session debate combined with the international dialogue and collaboration, (especially in this time of uncertainty) created by such global citizens. It is an honour to introduce the conference proceedings, presented here as collection of well argued, forward thinking, deliberately controversial, and valuable papers.

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EDUCATING FOR A DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE OF ARCHITECTURE

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INTRODUCTION

Educating future architects for a democratic practice of their profession requires, on the one hand, theories that guide students in their efforts towards the promotion and preservation of democratic values in the environments they will affect with their work. On the other hand, it requires methods that incite them to contribute to architecture as independent thinkers, and that enable them to establish distinct architectural positions while engaging productively with others.¹ The first requirement deals with setting theoretical goals for architecture and the city (e.g., what would a democratic architecture be like?), the second deals with the role of architects in practice: how they do their work, position themselves and collaborate with others in the production of the built environment. In the academic year 2019 – 2020, two European graduation studios developed a shared pedagogical approach to foster democratic architectural practice, in a joint project for the city of Skopje, North Macedonia.

In the following pages we will lay out the general and specific considerations that led us, as researchers and educators, to orient both studios towards democratic practice using this approach.² We will describe how the context in which we chose to intervene, the city of Skopje and the many tensions that define it, offered fertile grounds for the exploration, examination and discovery of architecture as a democratic practice. Further, we will advance three theoretical goals for its development, in the belief that they constitute key democratic purposes for the city, addressing the potential urban environments should offer to citizens: the possibility to find meaning, the possibility to appropriate space as something for which they care, and finally, the potential for different individuals to integrate in this environment. An account of the pedagogic approach utilized by our collaboration will be followed by salient examples of the outcomes, which – as we hope to make clear in our closing remarks – suggest simple and clear strategies to promote open and productive relations among architects, as well as to develop open built environments that encourage fruitful cohabitation among citizens.

SKOPJE AND THE CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY

Our collaboration focused on Skopje, a city conquered by the Ottoman Empire, inscribed within a kingdom after World War I, within a socialist republic after World War II, and currently tense between global economic interests and regional power struggles. Skopje exhibits the scars of a

massive earthquake, and continuously fluctuates between conflictive ethnic condition and unifying efforts in multiculturalism, both being influenced by the rise of divisive and dissociative political initiatives as well as fragile economic situation.³ As elsewhere, the recent rise of these initiatives has quickly eroded fundamental democratic values among the inhabitants of this capital.⁴ Individual freedom and collective solidarity, for example, have been threatened by dogmatism and animosity between identitary factions.⁵ As a historical crossroads, Skopje is no stranger to attempts to segregate rather than unite society, and can therefore provide us with both testimony and warning of the challenges faced by intrinsically diverse societies.⁶

Simultaneously, the city's architecture has been shaped largely by historicist and utopian projects (i.e., idealized visions of past and future) that tried to impose a unitary model for the city. After the 1963 earthquake, for instance, a modernist utopia was envisioned as a new backbone for the city. Like other radical architectures of its time, the so-called "metabolist" project entailed a deterministic vision of progress that introduced an unfamiliar urban structure, as well as unprecedented configurations and scales on the existing urban fabric.⁷ The more recent *Skopje 2014* initiative to redesign the city's center, on the other hand, tried to homogenize buildings and spaces under a unitary aesthetic.⁸ While the modernist masterplan presumed that the city and its inhabitants shared the singular ideal of progress projected by a team of Japanese architects; the 2014 facelift pretends that North Macedonians agree on a simplistic reading of the past, expressible in faux neoclassic decoration, taken for local.

But to what extent can such attempts for uniformity respond to the real possibilities and needs of the many individuals that jointly use and produce this environment? Is it desirable or feasible to simplify the ambitions and perceptions of a society under a single, prevalent architecture? In the face of these questions, it would seem that rather than utopian masterplans or nostalgic renovations, piecemeal action and open negotiation among individuals are able to generate more resilient social artefacts – be they laws, institutions or cities; artefacts which are open to new and unforeseen possibilities, and consequently able to adapt and change.⁹

AN EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR DEMOCRATIC ARCHITECTURE

Based on this premise we invited our students to explore, evaluate and discover three concrete qualities that characterize built environments in which citizens have historically thrived, not despite but precisely because of their diversity.¹⁰ We see these qualities as theoretical goals, in the sense that they not only define a notion but also strive for a conceptual envisioning of what a democratic city should be like.¹¹ Firstly, citizens should be able to establish *meaningful* relations with the spaces they use and inhabit. This means both being able to identify meaning in those spaces, but also being able to endow them with new and useful meanings. Secondly, citizens should be able to *appropriate* those spaces, by being able to project their hopes and feelings onto them, empathically. Finally, citizens should be able to *integrate* with each other through their use of built space, based on their ability to consensually imagine and execute joint visions of possible futures for the city in which they all live.¹² These three qualities – meaningfulness, appropriation and integration – are essential to democracy, in the sense that they ensure genuine, productive participation from citizens in the construction of their everyday reality. Individuals who cannot identify any familiar message or any recognizable pattern in the spaces and buildings that surround them are by necessity excluded, not only from the use of their environment, but also from its development. Those who are unable to envision a future for themselves in a particular place, or feel unable to transform even minute aspects of their immediate surroundings, will hardly recognize themselves as citizens. In both cases, the inability to truly and actively participate – a sine qua non of any functional democracy – corrodes an integrated society, understood

as one that is coordinated and open to transformation in order to benefit its associates. As concrete goals for the built environment, the qualities of meaningfulness, appropriation and integration are intrinsic to the democratic practice of cities, because they entail citizens' right and duty to produce and claim their built environment according to their own interests, and in consensus with the interests of others.

While the above-mentioned goals for the built environment are essentially theoretical, their pursuit demands that architects adopt a distinct position within their discipline. It does not seem feasible, for instance, to work towards citizens' empowerment on the basis of dogma. Simply mimicking architectural trends, on the other hand, might not be the best response to complex societal issues either. Instead, the collaboration between our two studios encouraged students to position their work methodologically, in relation to the mentioned theoretical goals and to the given context, understood as the result of the interwoven natural and cultural aspects that define Skopje's reality, including the formal and technical features of local architectures.

This positioning was complemented with the methodical imagination of projects, understood as visions of possible futures for the built environment together with the instruments and methods required to achieve them.¹³ With slight differences between the two courses, all students developed the analytical and projective phases of their studio around the framework described above, rather than on a predetermined brief or site. The freedom to define what specific aspects of this reality were worth interrogating and addressing, to define a situation or site where those aspects could be best developed, and to formulate projects based on those definitions, presented students with the need to act as independent thinkers.

Students from TU Delft engaged in a graduation studio, extended over a full year, while students from SS. Cyril and Methodius University developed their projects over the course of a single semester. Two joint moments happened: in Autumn 2019, the students and teachers from TU Delft visited Skopje for several weeks, living in apartments across the city and becoming part of urban and academic life in Skopje. With their Macedonian colleagues they visited a number of architectural landmarks and participated in an intensive workshop on 'Urban Narratives', addressing social-spatial practices in the city at several sites through the use of narratives. They observed human behavior in urban space and interviewed people about their experiences, memories and imaginations of their built environment. Early 2020, the students and tutors of both groups met again in Delft, where work from both studios was presented at an exhibition.

Narratives: fragments and wholes

Adjusting to available time, the group of North Macedonian students focused with special attention on narratives, understood as the stories crafted by individuals and groups to register and communicate their experience of the city – a fundamental source of knowledge for the architect.¹⁴ Defined in their plural form, narratives play a key role in the democratic practice of the built environment, as they acknowledge multiple and diverse experiences, as opposed to univocal, absolute and ubiquitous views or actions on the city. It was in this capacity that narratives were used as basis for the design of new spatial and programmatic performances for Skopje.

Concretely, the group studied and developed three existing narratives which have a strong conceptual and architectural presence in Skopje – brutalism, temporality and open-end-ness – and developed them into several new projects for a particular site in the city's center. Like their colleagues from Delft, they explored, evaluated and discovered the city as a complex system of values and information. In more practical terms, their research and design work was undertaken as a collective effort which developed, from the three initial narratives, five new urban proposals used to intervene in

the chosen site. As the students themselves could take position as actual citizens of Skopje, using both their individual and collective experience and analysis of the city as the basis to develop their visions, we could call these proposals new narratives – indeed stories to register and communicate their take on the city, as citizens and as architects. [Figure 1].

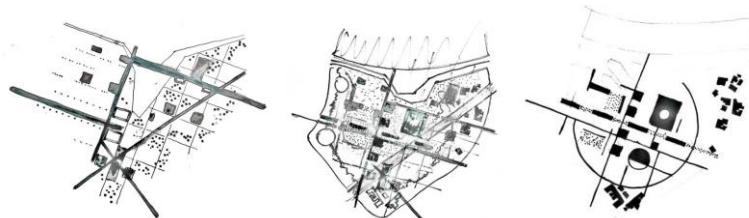


Figure 1. Different narratives for a single site: conceptual drawings / sketches / models.

Their collective effort did not aim to impose a single architecture on the city, but rather to develop several themes, reflecting different positions, simultaneously. Each of the five urban narratives developed by the group of North Macedonian students led to the conflation of different programs in a single final composition, given the limits imposed by operating on one site. Eventually, and through multiple iterations, connections, intersections, juxtapositions, and overlaps, the five new narratives converged in a complex project for this particular setting.

Let us examine these new narratives:

- 1) *Streets do not have to remain attached to the ground.* The narrative developed by Ivana Kocevska and Angela Kuzmanovska envisions the idea of free movement and flow of people, through different paths at different levels, replicating the richness of street life beyond the limits of a singular level. As architectural outcome, this is materialized as a network of bridges, or elevated streets, which are able to embrace different programmatic and spatial additions that prompt unforeseeable human actions. Among these elevated streets, a series of scattered outdoor programs can emerge, resonating with the open-ended configuration of the existing City Trade Center (GTC), a historic landmark of modernist Skopje.
- 2) *The massive presence of brutalist architecture can be broken.* The narrative by Mariana Gileva and Martina Velkova explores and evaluates so-called brutalist architecture,¹⁵ suggesting its large masses or volumes can be ruptured. The resulting proposal which brings this narrative into architectural form offers increased connectivity between previously detached levels.
- 3) *New and more interconnected forms of dwelling are possible.* The increased connectivity observed in the above-mentioned challenge to brutalism was also taken as starting point to re-think the residential towers that dominate the site. Arrayed in a manner that continues and concludes the 1960's City Wall complex around the inner Skopje centre, this part of the project interrogated conventional housing prototypes visually, materially and functionally, by introducing common areas with activities that stimulate cooperation between residents.
- 4) *Open-ended public spaces foster appropriation or marginalized individuals.* The extension of the residential tissue just described in the abovementioned proposal (by Ljubica Bojadzieva, Jordan Lazorovski, Tijana Stankovska and Dimitar Stefanovski) opened space for the design of a floating square with modular pavilions and an open space underneath that can be appropriated by a multitude of individuals, via graffiti, music and sports activities.
- 5) *Together with multiplicity and complexity, there is also value for autonomous architectures.* Derived from their study of brutalism, students Angel Mladenovski and Tamara Stefanoska also recognized the distinctive and unique atmospheres offered by singular or monumental buildings. The

notion of atmosphere was taken as a generative point to defining a specific program for part of the project – a museum that houses different exhibitions, lectures and discussions. The formal appearance of this project – a circle – defines a complete and distinct entity, although programmatically it is capable to extend its content in the surrounding, and also invite the public-ness inside.

Jointly, these five new narratives for Skopje speak of architecture as a collective, cognitive practice [Figure 2], able to cater to the many narratives, individual socio-political desires and beliefs that constitute the experience of collective memory, as the city itself represents. Through extensive discussions and negotiations, these students were able to recognize values from their work in that of others, and vice versa, leading to a high level of coordination and integration among all team members, as well as in the final, joint result of their individual efforts. In semantic and compositional terms, this result is a complex project that is able to integrate urban fragments and performances in unprecedented ways.



Figure 2. Collaborative working and learning

Providing possibilities for action in public urban space

While the students from TU Delft also undertook the analytical stages of their work in small groups, the synthetic project phase was individual. After having compiled an extensive research book as a group, each student launched a proposition, and based on it developed a full-fledged intervention for a chosen site in the city which resulted in projects ranging from conventional buildings, urban designs, and public spaces, to interiors, micro-interventions on building elements and renovations of existing buildings. The students benefitted from the diversity of their individual ambitions and inclinations, and eventually recognized their own projects as parts of a richer whole. For this contribution, we will highlight three projects as part of this diverse take on the city. Together, they show how the definition of theoretical goals and methodologies aimed towards democratic practice generates rigorous architectural propositions, which respond to existing conditions and offer new knowledge of the built environment, simultaneously.

Holly Dale's project stemmed from the proposition that urban life could benefit from the insertion of domestic qualities and activities in public space. The process was undertaken partly via an open competition. Questioning the role of the architect, she deliberately developed a mixed approach in which the architect developed part of the project, and opened the development of other parts by others. The proposed cooperative scheme challenged the conventional alignment of formalized education and practice around the figure of the architect as an individual form-giver. [Figure 3]

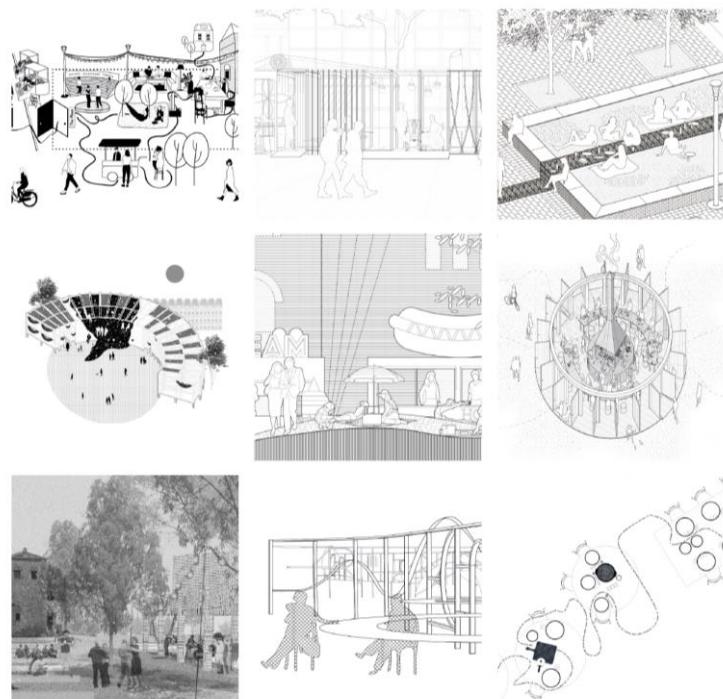


Figure 3. Participating entries in the competition.

Leonie Meisel proposed to refurbish the dilapidated post office, a remnant of the utopian, metabolist project for the city. Instead of assuming her work as a single, unitary project, her project was developed on the basis of micro-investigations into specific aspects of the existing architecture – a piecemeal approach to architecture. The project reused the situation, shape and material presence of the building, making it accessible, not only physically but also aesthetically to a diversity of citizens, as a playground that results from offering small solutions to specific problems, rather than defining a masterplan.

Also tapping into a latency, understood as unused potential left by deterministic projects for the city, Lucija Grofelnik chose to intervene in one of the most symbolically charged areas of Skopje's center. At the very point where historicist and utopian visions collide, a functional infrastructure – a parking lot under Mother Theresa square, circled by the incomplete modernist Cultural Center – was reinvigorated with a public use that refused to add to the chaos of the city, via the modest yet rigorous organization of space on the basis of modulation.

CONCLUSION

As we have shown, the city of Skopje and the many tensions that define it are fertile grounds for the exploration, examination and discovery of architecture as a democratic practice. The outcomes of our collaboration also shows that, when allowed to operate on the basis of openness, independence and rationality, both architects and their work benefit from the rich environment generated by open discussion. The projects we have described are certainly nuanced and complex, yet rigorous. In all cases, they represent some degree of progress, understood as the growth and development of knowledge. This progress, we trust, is a fundamental justification for democracy.

Aside from tangible improvements (i.e., more meaningful, appropriate and integrative buildings and spaces, able to recognize the needs, possibilities and hopes of more citizens) in the built environment, the group of students engaged in this collaboration was able to question their education, by recognizing it as a formative process, rather than as the simple or passive reception of information. The result of their efforts suggests new and exciting ways of practicing architecture, based on robust and reliable personal and professional skills, but also in genuine openness to competition and collaboration. We can conclude confidently by stating that this group of students have been able to acquire reliable skills as professionals, while gaining awareness of their duties as architects in a democratic society.

NOTES

¹ The value of understanding architecture as a conversation carried out by different individuals around a discernible topic, is suggested by: Sarah Williams Goldhagen, "Something To Talk About: Modernism, Discourse, Style," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (2005): 144 – 167

² This collaboration stems from and complements the efforts of EU funded COST Action 18126 "Writing Urban Places: New Narratives of the European City" in which all co-authors are involved. For more information on the action, see: writingurbanplaces.eu

³ An overview on the diverse elements of urban design in Skopje, remnants of the past and current, is presented in "Skopje, a Modern City?", Unpublished Report of the Research project #3 by group of authors (Elisabeth Deipenbrock, Mendy Heid, Charlotte Herbst, Charlotte Kaulen, Luise Koehler, Magdalena Pudimat, Maria Rohde and Kevin Vincent) led by Maren Harnack at the HafenCity Universitaet Hamburg in 2010

For further information on Skopje's modernist history, in the period 1914-2014, see: J. Ivanovski et al., *Findings* (Skopje: Youth Cultural Center, 2014)

⁴ A critical review followed by projective ideas for restitution of the basic resource of democratic space, as recognized in the notion of 'freespace' is presented in: Slodoban Velevski and MArija Mano Velevska, M., eds., *Freeingspace* (Skopje: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2018)

⁵ The link between dogmatism and factionalism based on identities comes from Estanislao Zuleta, who defines dogma as any idea that is taken for inseparable from an identity, in Estanislao Zuleta. *Elogio de la Dificultad y Otros Ensayos* (Cali: Fundacion Estanislao Zuleta, 2001)

⁶ To explore the potential of crossroads beyond divisiveness see: Benedicte Zimmermann, "Histoire Croisee: A relational, process-based approach," *Footprint* 26 (2020), 7 – 14; and Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991), 33 – 40

⁷ The process of rebuilding Skopje after 1963 earthquake, greatly marked by world solidarity, is documented in Town Planning Project, *Skopje Resurgent: The story of a United Nations Special Fund* (New York: Stationery Office Books, 1970). In the last ten years a series of publications documenting projects of that period have emerged in the attempt to value the 'unfinished modernization' of architecture in the Balkan region, including: . M. Mrduljash and V. Kulich, *Unfinished Modernizations: Between Utopia and Pragmatism* (Zagreb: Croatian Architects' Association, 2012), and V. Kulic et al., *Modernism In-Between: The Mediatory Architectures of Socialist Yugoslavia* (Berlin:Jovis Verlag GmbH, 2012). This last book evolved into a remarkable exhibition in 2018 at the New York MoMA, entitled "Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia 1948-1980."

⁸ The recent phenomena of transformations in Skopje have been subject of numerous articles, research and academic discussions, including: Ivo Buleski, Tearing apart a city: architecture as a tool for social manipulations at the example of Skopje, Macedonia. (*Torino*: Politecnico di Torino, 2017)

⁹ Stanford Anderson, "Environment as Artifact: Methodological Considerations," *Casabella*, 359 – 360 (1971). 71 – 77

¹⁰ Stanford Anderson, "People in the Physical Environment: The Urban Ecology of Streets," in *On Streets*, ed. Stanford Anderson (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1986): 1 – 11

¹¹ According to definition of theory as the explanation of what architecture is, the definition of the principles that guide its practice, and the justification of a course of action for its development, in: Jorge Mejia Hernandez, Transactions; or Architecture as a System of Research Programs (PhD dissertation, Delft University of Technology, 2018) 15

¹² These are the goals for the built environment developed by the above-mentioned COST action, and recently developed in the online conference "Meaningfulness, Appropriation and Integration of/in City Narratives" (<https://writingurbanplaces.eu/wup-news/successful-online-conference-meaningfulness-appropriation-and-integration-of-in-city-narratives/>)

¹³ These qualities of the project are based on: Marx Wartofsky, "Telos and Technique: Models as Modes of Action," in *Planning for Diversity and Choice: Possible Futures and Their Relation to the Man Controlled Environment*, ed. Stanford Anderson (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1968). 259 – 268

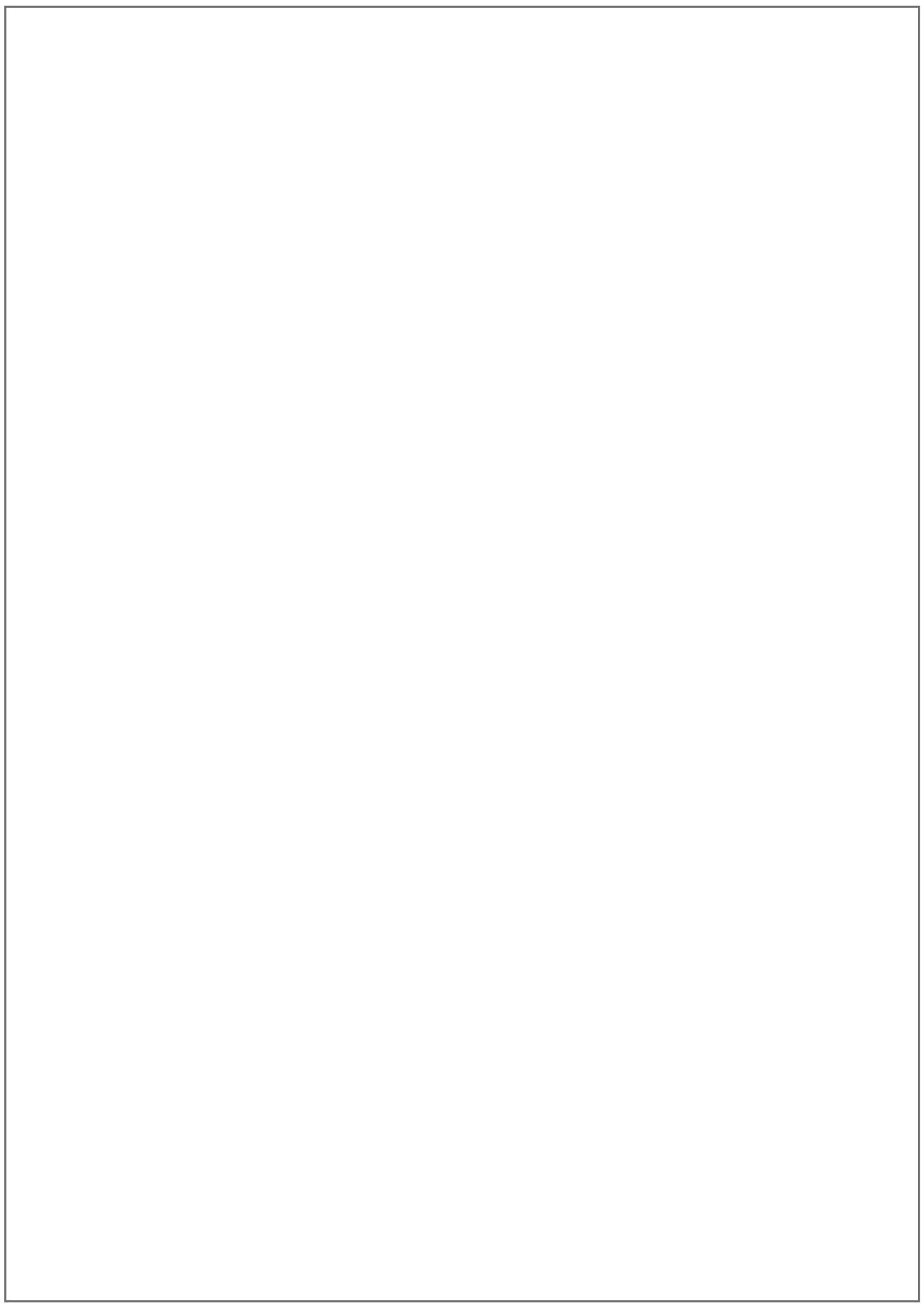
¹⁴ This proposition is thoroughly developed by Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* (Rotterdam: nai010 Publishers, 2014)

¹⁵ The definition of a "brutalist" style in architecture is usually ascribed to Reyner Banham, "The New Brutalism," *Architectural Review* (December, 1955): 354 – 361. However, it is habitual that Banham's definition is diluted and

expanded to classify buildings made mostly with reinforced concrete, used not only structurally but also in partitions and even minor elements, which therefore appear as massive and rough.

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