

Public space transformation in the case of “Skopje 2014.”

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: July 10, 2021	The politics of the post-socialist era, during the transitional period in the Republic of North Macedonia, left dark marks in the city morphology and deeply influenced urban planning. This paper explores the most notable example of this particular trend - the project named “Skopje 2014”. The paper analyses the project’s underlying feature, which can be described as an attempt to recast a national profile, affecting public space and built heritage, without any awareness of the gap between nationalistic theory and the desperate economic realities. In hindsight, the paper argues that, unfortunately, this project was brought to life without any public participation or by taking into consideration the expert-based evaluation. Therefore, many new buildings were built and much more covered in new architectural styles, which led to uncontrolled city growth and a vague makeover of the city.
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Introduction

In the period of the past 60 years, Skopje has had the two most extensive city makeovers. The first one is the modernization of Skopje in Socialist Yugoslavia in the mid-20th century, while the other one comes 50 years later in the post-socialist society - the Project "Skopje 2014", a free-styled makeover of Skopje urban genesis. Both of these projects had international affection - the first one supported and funded by the UN and many other international contributions, donation, and expertise help; while the second one got worldwide attention in a very unpleasant way of mocking, where Skopje was ridiculed as the "Capital of the kitsch." What was common for both projects was the inseparable political connection with the political system at the time. The Socialist political connotation of Skopje modernization was toward creating a symbol of international cooperation to ease the strained relations during the Cold War. On the other hand, the nationalistic government politics in Post-Socialist Skopje was toward an illiberal transformation of the society and freeing the historical memory of "communism" (Kulić, 2017).

This paper will raise and discuss the questions of Skopje's public space in its histories of urbanism, especially in the context of "Skopje 2014". It will be done throughout several discourses by observing the public space in different scenarios. The paper will start the analysis with a survey of the urban transformation and mapping the changing urban morphology, alongside stating the controversial urban planning processes. Furthermore, the paper closely explores the architectural heritage, its modification as well the loss of its relationship with the public space, shifting into a discourse of written public opinions and the role of public space in the oppositional stances throughout the resistance. The paper argues that the "Skopje 2014" project, by using highly illegal actions and without any public transparency, has led to new architectural concepts and corresponding planning techniques that are less rooted in overarching cultural frameworks, affecting the public space and the architectural heritage as well.

The paper starts with exploring the public space transformation in the time of Skopje's modernization in the mid – 20th century during Socialist Yugoslavia, which is outlined throughout Kenzo Tange's idea and the Master Plan realization. The Master Plan follows the modernist concepts and the new principles in architectural and urban design, and it has left a monumental heritage and created an urban matrix that becomes a new urban planning methodology. With the Kenzo Tange idea, Skopje has developed a successful planning system that could have been an example of the future urban shaping of the public space. However, the idea was never completed, and instead, the city was moving toward an unfinished utopia (Mrduljaš, 2012). The concept for Modern Skopje that has lasted for 30 years, according to Kenzo Tange Master Plan, made a unified environment in the building process and established a unique style. These aesthetic components become very significant for the social and cultural identities of the city.

Afterward, the paper will focus on the changes and the breakup of Yugoslavia at the beginning of the '90s, which brought a gap in the urban city development, leaving too much free space. These are grey areas, which quickly became a tool for reinterpretation and creating a new collective memory of the city in the transition toward capitalism. These events led to the "Skopje 2014" project, where an opposite planning scenario was developed. In the "Skopje 2014" case, the "modernization" was replaced with "baroquesation," which contributes towards the change of the city look, but it also affected the public space and led towards its constant shrinking. "Skopje 2014" is the project that, unfortunately, will create a new identity of the country and recast the national profile.

The first section of the paper gives a general urban outline of Skopje's urban transformation analyzing the aspects of Socialist architecture in the city during former Yugoslavia, which was integrated as a style in the region after the Second World War. It focuses

on rebuilding and modernizing the city of Skopje after the devastating earthquake in 1963. The section also examines the undergoing process of Skopje's political transition, which started with the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early '90s. As an independent country, the need for defining a national identity was growing. The transitional period from one to another political system was a perfect opportunity for starting the new visions for the capital city of the Republic of North Macedonia. The following section explores creating the "Skopje 2014" project, mainly focusing on observing the city's urban transformations. The third section compares the decision-making processes for the Master Plan in 1965 and the "Skopje 2014" Plan. It argues that these processes are done in different political frames that transformed and recreated the Skopje morphology on a larger scale. This comparison outlines the drastic differences in technicality and legal actions taken to deliver these plans while already familiar with their purpose as a common characteristic. In the fourth section, rapid urban scale evolution is mapped, where the public space becomes no longer "communicative" since being social life separated from the meaning of the local place, and the experience of living and working changed significantly. The following section explores the public space in micro-scale, through a building that represented a successful model of integrated public space into an architectural structure, and its struggle to contain its values through the aggressive period of Skopje 2014 "baroquesation," followed by the next section that describes the treatment of Yugoslav built heritage in the same time frame. In order to show the public discourse and opinions about the "Skopje 2014" project, written social activities and stances are screened throughout the book edition "The City" in the seventh section. Furthermore, the last section elaborates the resistance and the oppositional stances against the project while using the public space once again as a place for social activism in the desire for transparent policy, describing their outcome and contributions toward the process of ending it.

I. A general outline of Skopje urban transformation

In the case of Skopje, different examples of reshaping the urban morphology exist, affected by socio-political systems and different social and political factors in the past 60 years.

During Real Socialism, new planning ideologies were established, new visions of social organization for communal living were developed, and new art styles were created. This way of thinking reflected the art and urban design of all communist countries, including former Yugoslavia (Mrduljaš, and Kulić, 2012). In the case of Skopje, it was the process that resulted in building a new socialist modernist city as one of the best examples of modernization in the Balkans.

The catastrophic collapse of approximately 80% of the city tissue due to the devastating earthquake in July 1963 created a chance for the first detailed modernization of Skopje. In the tragic story of the city, modernism finds its way to rise to its maximum in Skopje's architectural scene. The first phase of restoration of the destroyed city's morphology was the restoration of the existing built structures. It has been established that 85% of the residential buildings need demolishing, with 80% of the cultural-historic monuments in Skopje (Gelevski, 2014). The second phase of the restoration was to establish a new Master Plan of the city, considering the old town situation and need for restoration, where the Skopje Old Bazaar, despite the necessary actions for its complete rehabilitation, should not remain only as a museum shop for tourists. However, it should also provide space for further development and implementation of local traditions. The plan should also define the new residential zones as micro-centers, industrial and administrative zones, a zone for recreation, which excludes the riverbank of the river Vardar for its seismic insecurity, and especially having in mind the traffic connection between them (United Nations Development Programme, 1970).

A competition for proposals for the development of the Mater plan for Skopje was published, and a Council of consultants to decide on the competition was formed in 1964, mainly

comprised of international experts, supported by the United Nations. (Mijalkovic and Urbanek, 2011). It was decided that the process of reshaping the post-quake Skopje was according to the winning Master Plan proposal of the Japanese architect Kenzo Tange and the collaboration team from Yugoslavia (United Nations Development Programme, 1970). Kenzo Tange's winning proposal for the Master Plan diverse from the final project for the city center, affected by the more detailed approach and the switch of authorization. The Skopje City Hall became the principal planning body, and the plan was more adapted to the morphology and existing structure of the city. Nevertheless, the primary concepts of city development were successfully implemented, mainly in the west-east axis but with respect towards already existing areas and public spaces (Tange, 1971). The plan followed the parameters given in the competition call that were mostly toward developing the public space with integrated pedestrian paths and integrating the free circulation of people. The Plan solution stands out and emphasize the local development, embraces the natural features and topography of the city, and increases green areas, all with emphasis on public spaces and increased frequency of pedestrian zones with consideration toward further development and expansion in the city (United Nation Development Programme, 1970).

The infrastructure was another significant part of this stage. Two main roads were developed in circles, known as Small and Big rings, where the formation of a transportation system simulates the building groups. The plan was to develop the west-east axis alongside the river Vardar, where main centers were developed such as transportation center and the new railway, the center of the Republic consisted of public and institutional buildings, and the cultural center on the north bank of River Vardar, with the Trade center in the middle together with the residential blocs. These programs create new public spaces, where the focus of this linear development of the city was two main focal points – the Republican plaza and already existing public spaces on the Old Axis (north-east axis). The concept of communal places was also integrated into the residential areas, with defined centers for socialization inside the residential blocks, as semi-public spaces. New terminology was given in order to elaborate and reference the new zones. The already mentioned Old Axis contains the old town structure connecting to the new part of the city through the Old Stone Bridge in a north-south direction. The New Axis which are the newly developed centers alongside the river Vardar, beginning with the City Gate in the west end of the axis, that refers to the entrance of the city symbolized by the new train station, and ending in the east with the City Wall – a circle bloc around the city center defined by residential buildings and the road structure (Tange, 1971). (Figure 1).

The Master Plan expresses Kenzo Tange's belief in integrating contemporary architecture and urban design methods and converting them into spatial structures, designed as a flexible bridge between the growing technology at the time and its inflexible elements (United Nation Development Programme 1970).



Figure 1: Skopje Mater Plan 1965. Illustration: Jana Brsakoska

The city's construction was rapid, resulting in many modern buildings designed by local and international architects. The City wall alongside the train station was the first to be built, as the most needed at the beginning of the plan's realization. The outstanding architectural achievements can be recognized in many individual buildings in Skopje as a testimony of an era that successfully implemented new principles in the existing system. One of the marks of the modernization of Skopje is the City Trade Center (GTC), a building integrated into the Master Plan concept for the Trade center, along the west-east axis, very close to the city square. The Trade Center was designed by the architect Zivko Popovski and built in 1973, developed as a linear horizontal five-level composition around the already existing residential towers, and as an open structure that is easily approachable by pedestrian paths that flow into the main pedestrian street on the first floor. The architectural design enables free circulation inside the building, simulating a public area divided into zones where the trade units are accommodated. This building represents functionality, integrated with the city morphology and connected with the pedestrian and traffic infrastructure. This open urban structure will successfully contribute to the city economy and become a landmark for people's encounters in the next 30 years (Arsovski, 1980). (Figure 2).



Figure 2: City Trade Center (GTC), 2021. Photo: Jana Brsakoska

Unfortunately, the Master Plan was not completed in its total capacity. That has left the city layering in fragments, which later will become empty – gray spaces (Janev, 2017) suitable for further interventions.

After the breakup of Yugoslavia, Skopje has undergone several phases of radical, social, political, and economic transformations, processes that have had a major effect on the planning system and further influenced the city's built environment. Skopje's morphology has developed for 30 years accordingly to the Master Plan, and in the first years of transition, the city planning was in stagnation. Numerous factors in this period contributed towards creating a gap in the planning system (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Skopje center – Macedonia square, urban context 1997.

Illustration: Brsakoska Jana "The disappearing of a public man" exhibition, AKTO Festival, Skopje

During the socialist period, the concept of law for regulating the urban planning process was considered a not much-needed tool in shaping the cities since the decision-making process was on a central level, devised by the urban authorities administrated by the state. Unlike in the

previous period, in the transition period, the need for this kind of regulation has increased instantly, and many decisions had to be made to reform the system and make it more appropriate for the new market economies (Stanilov, 2007). At the beginning of the 1990s, new regulations such as the regulation for privatization of state property and the regulations for decentralization of the management, contributed toward municipalities gaining more power, independence, and financial autonomy to manage funds and coordinate local programs related to culture, education, health, public services and gain greater control over urban planning (Stefanovska, Kozelj, 2012). The struggle to put these changes into motion in a short time frame has resulted in many difficulties and complications in the law system. This process was used afterward by the new groups of political and capital holders who quickly learned how to take advantage of the shabby regulations (Stanilov, 2007). (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Skopje center – Macedonia square, urban context 2009.
Illustration: Brsakoska Jana “The disappearing of a public man” exhibition, AKTO Festival, Skopje

Therefore, the process of so-called privatization affected the “fragile” condition of the city, leaving the “grey spaces” into the hand of private capital holders, making them available for capitalist appropriation (Janev, 2017). In the meantime, the new political system did not look at socialist realism positively, and the Socialist heritage is mostly labeled as unwanted, grey, and soul-less, very often neglected and put aside, but already in a great need of maintenance and put in a position of governmental interventions and reinterpretation. It became a period where the sense of collectivity is already lost, where privacy and ownership of space, land, buildings, enterprises, and even ethnicity are emphasized through the architectural expression on a micro-level. Later on, the nationalist political party in Macedonia did see this as one of the tools in establishing a new national identity, putting the two largest ethnicities in Macedonia – Macedonian and Albanian, in a position of separation of their historical narratives which led to even bigger geographic separation (Janev, 2017)

In this transition, many other city transformation tactics were used to define the “true” identity of the newborn country. Skopje has a long history of transformative urban morphology, developing the city structure in different periods, and those transformations got deeply connected with people’s memory. In a constant fight with the process of keeping the memories of a city, comes along a process of inverse reading of the meaning of that memory, and quickly this transformation of the urban artifact can be used as a tactic of creating new physical marks, where

the new morphology can be interpreted throughout the vanishing memory of the previous one (Bakalčev and Tasić, 2014).

II." Skopje 2014" Project

In 2010, the project "Skopje 2014" was presented to the public for the first time, promoted by the then-ruling coalition led by VMRO - DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) and was consisted of defined plans and designed projects, primarily only known to the government, and out of any logical discourse for the city concept. The project was presented via the Macedonian Timeless Capital Skopje 2014 video. The video is a montage throughout a walking experience and shows Skopje's Small Ring area's new planned facilities (*Macedonia Timeless Capital Skopje 2014, 2010*).

The intention for a national recast of the Macedonian history, driven by the political influences of the ruling party at the beginning of 2010, brings the question of how a country liberated from the need for national acknowledgment that successfully got its independence without conflict in the breakup times of Yugoslavia, to become a country that will loudly bold its history and its independence twenty years later in times of aspiration toward European integrations (Kubiena, 2012). Skoulariki, in her paper "Skopje 2014: Antiquisation, urban identity and the rejection of Balkan otherness," will point out that the "Skopje 2014" project had a twofold purpose: "Antiquisation" and "Europeanisation" (Skoulariki, 2020).

The "antiquisation" was established to illustrate the historical identity by accommodating sculptures in the narrow city center area, presenting selected figures from Macedonian past, most of them dating thousands of years back, with an exception toward recent socialist history and the heroes from National Liberation Struggle during the Second World War. This way, the public space itself narrated the history. Considering that most of the historical figures had a disputed identity, this process of "antiquisation" further worsens the bilateral relation with Greece and Bulgaria, negatively affecting the country's EU integration process.

The "Europeanisation," on the other hand, can be defined as an attempt to give the city a more European look to reach European standards, get closer to the elite, and become a European country. For this concept to be satisfied, the best approach for this purpose was the city's facelift, targeting the layers of what before was an identity of a former Yugoslav Republic, alongside everything associated with oriental – Balkan characteristics (Skoulariki, 2020).

These changes were directed mainly towards the city center, divided into many phases, including rebuilding the old national monumental buildings lost in the earthquake, building new architectural structures in some strange and undefined style (mixture of baroque, neoclassicism, and romanticism), getting close to a time that was never relevant and popular at the territory of the today's Republic of North Macedonia. It was a mission developed by few planners and never publicly discussed nor developed, calling into question its background motives and the transparency of the quick approval by the officials. The project was developed according to the Urban Plan for the city center of Skopje (Small Ring), adopted in 2012 under very suspicious circumstances, and previously changing and adapting most of the legislation to continue its process without any obstructions.¹

This urban transformation's mission began three years before the project was officially presented to the public and five years before the final Urban Plan for Small Ring was brought. The first significant changes began in 2007 with the first Urban plan for Skopje 2014, and in a continuous process of five years, this plan has had nine modifications and adaptations, with radical changes in the design, numerical data, and program. Most of these changes went unnoticed, undertaken indiscretion, and were not correctly conducted (Grčeva, 2013).

¹ See more in section III of this paper.

Despite all the controversy and dissatisfaction among the public, the official 2012 Urban Plan for the city center of Skopje (Small Ring) continued its realization. The construction went beyond the referral year – 2014 and continued to develop in the years later, adding more new projects for buildings that were never officially presented to the public and were mostly constructed overnight (Figure 5). Namely, in 2010, 40 buildings were presented as part of “Skopje 2014”, and by 2017, 137 buildings and other categories were built in total (Prizma, 2018). According to the digital database of structures that make up the new face of Skopje - “Skopje 2014 undercover”, 28 new buildings, six multistory garages, 34 monuments, five squares, six facade covers, one panoramic wheel, four bridges, 39 sculptures, one triumph arch and many other buildings in many other categories were accomplished, all financed by public funds of approximately 684 million euros (Prizma, 2018). (Figure 6 and 7).



Figure 5: Skopje center – Macedonia square, urban context 2017.

Illustration: Brsakoska Jana “The disappearing of a public man” exhibition, AKTO Festival, Skopje

Consequently, the urban space in Skopje was altered to become a space for demonstrating an attitude where urban patterns are in continuous change in these times of economic, social, political, and ideological turmoil in the country. The urban gaps in the city morphology, inherited from the unfinished modernization of Skopje during Yugoslavia, primarily due to their privatization after the 90s, became a target to urban crimes such as “Skopje 2014” (Velevski and Mano Velevska, 2018).

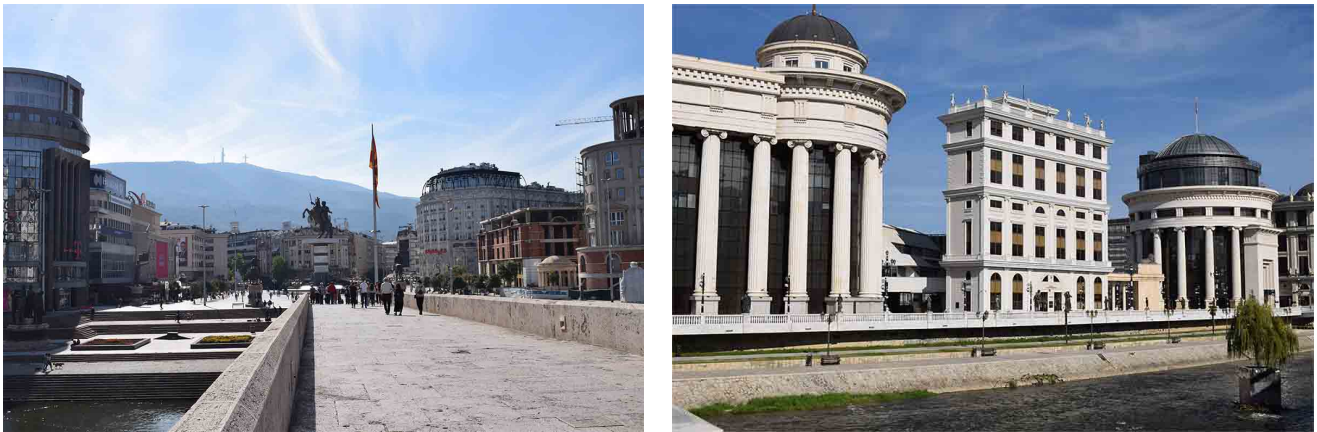


Figure 6 and 7: Skopje center after “Skopje 2014” project, 2021. Photo: Jana Brsakoska

Instead of proper accommodation of free public program, open spaces, and more greenery, new buildings and sculptures were erected, suffocating the urban tissue and, unfortunately, slowly becoming the city's new silhouette. The many changes that occurred in a short period failed to respond to the city's social, economic, and urban segments. This mission targeted a significant part of Yugoslav-built heritage as well. With the changes that have been made, many Socialist buildings' architectural styles were hidden behind and covered with neo-classical facades in a radical makeover.

Preserving the built heritage from Socialist Yugoslavia that represented not only itself but also a collective memory of post-quake Skopje was not considered. Socialist architecture reflected a time of different social-political practices and did not fit into the government nationalist politics and the newly established visions for the city. Therefore, the built heritage accommodated different realities, covering the very well-known buildings, causing persistent loss of previous memory and creating a new one. These actions did not consider any rational or empirical model in approaching the values of the building and its sociological importance in the environment (Zinoski and Djidrova, 2019).

III. The decision-making process 1965 vs. 2014.

In order to understand the process of decision making that was supposed to contribute towards the fast development of the project “Skopje 2014” and also to establish why its purposes and planning process was not a good example of urban transformation and public space development, a comparison is made with the decision-making process of the Master Plan in 1965. Even as vastly opposing political ideologies, the planning decision process in both cases had to follow specific rules and parameters to deliver the best in the planning process.

In mid-1964, The Special Fund phase of the United Nations operation in Skopje began, where Mr. Adolf Cibrowski was appointed as Project Manager. He has been experienced on the matter as a previous supervisor of the Warsaw planning team. A great organization in the preparation and the execution of the Plan of Operation was needed, and Mr. Cibrowski had plenty of responsibilities during his term. The Plan of Operation was a tool to assist in preparing the final urban plan for Skopje, for which purpose the Special Fund contributed to the financial cost of 1 529 900 dollars, and the Yugoslav counterpart contributed an amount of 171 600 dollars. Preparing the Skopje Master Plan was not easy, followed by many surveys, economic analyses, planning operations, important decision-making in evaluating the damages, and selecting and defining the new urban context in the city. All the decisions were the outcome of the firstly informal gatherings of the concerned departments that later turned out to be very

positive practices in problem-resolving processes that allowed great flexibility in the decision-making progress. Even so, the problems were solved with speed in action. With the newly established working ethics and habits, the outcome of the Professional working committee was a new methodology of planning (United Nation Development Programme, 1970).

It was concluded that in order to determine the city growth, taking into consideration the seismic condition and also the demographic, economic and physical condition of the town could only be done by a development plan for the region as a whole, putting an accent on the economic potential, natural resources, and people's needs. Until this moment, no regional plans were made that could help and speed up the process toward determining the Master Plan of Skopje in less in a year. Following these events, the moment for organizing a worldwide design competition for The Master Plan of the Skopje city center has come. The UN sponsored the competition and was open to a limited number of international and Yugoslav entrants. Therefore the UN Special Fund and the Yugoslav government, together with the International Union of Architects, The Association of Yugoslav Town Planners, and The Association of Yugoslav Architects, invited four International and four Yugoslav firms to submit their designing projects that will be evaluated by an international jury commission under the chairmanship of Mr. Ernest Weissmann. The total amount of the award was 20 000 dollars (United Nation Development Programme, 1970).

After establishing the Mater Plan for Skopje, the City Council took over the responsibilities for the following planning procedure for the City Center Plan, decided that it is essential to import all the ideas from the other Master Plan proposals that had been recognized as valuable, putting an accent of the urgent need of a location for developing the public buildings. It was a process that should integrate the city center plan with the Master Plan quickly. In its final form, the City plan's basis was derived from the Kenzo Tange Master plan (United Nation Development Programme, 1970).

As the decision-making process in delivering the Master Plan for Skopje was in all its means transparent and public, involving not only international but also national experts, the example of the City Center Plan for "Skopje 2014" project, as a second biggest Plan with enormous national and international meaning for the city is opposite.

As already mentioned, for the "Skopje 2014" city plan between 2007 and 2012, nine modifications and adaptations of the plan have been made, developed by a few unknown planners at the time, under the authorization of the government in collaboration with the City institutions and municipalities, never publicly discussed nor developed. The declared shortened procedures for the implemented changes in several Urban Plans from 2007 until September 2010 are disputable. These procedures, according to the Law on Spatial and Urban Planning from 2005, Article 32 can be used only in: " case of emergency - military destruction, natural and other catastrophes and accidents with a greater scope of material damage, and only then the Government of Republic of Macedonia, the municipal council, the councils of the municipalities in the city of Skopje and the council of the city of Skopje, can adopt the plans in shortening procedure" (Law on Spatial and Urban Planning, 2005).

Since 2005, with constant amendments to the Law on Spatial and Urban Planning, more and more legal acts are being added, supporting the government's ambitions for constant changes and adjustments to the Urban plans to keep the construction process. The shortened procedure for plan adoption, since September 2010 is regulated with the new Law amendments that include the new Article- 24a, that states: "(1) Urban plans for which the Government of the Republic of Macedonia has adopted a program for priority development, shall be realized by shortening procedure, in which the urban plan is prepared and adopted as a proposal of the plan " (Law on Spatial and Urban Planning, 2010).

With continuous amendments to the legislation and the Detailed Urban Plans, in 2012,

the Final Detailed Urban Plan for Skopje city center - "Small Ring," planning period 2012-2017, is conducted. This plan unsuccessfully controls the dynamics of changes and needs for the city center area and especially neglects the necessary infrastructure to meet the capacity of newly planned buildings. No analytical approach was conducted, and in a few segments, the Urban Plan did not match the parameters of the General Urban Plan of Skopje, which is a procedure strictly defined within the Law of Spatial and Urban Planning, where lower-level plans should respect the conditions of the higher-level plans. The plan also does not follow the basic principles defined in the Law on Spatial and Urban Planning, such as: "balanced spatial development; rational arrangement and use of space; conditions for living and working of the citizens; overcoming urban barriers for people with disabilities; sustainable development; protection and promotion of the environment and nature; protection of the immovable cultural heritage; protection from military destruction, natural and technological disasters and accidents; transparency in the procedure for adoption and implementation of plans; and compliance with European norms and standards in spatial planning" (Pencic,2010). This planning process continues with unfavorable urban parameters, including unfinished traffic infrastructure, reduction of the pedestrian zone, and public communication space. Despite the increased percentage of the built environment and high coefficient of utilization, the problem of insufficient parking space remains.

The results of these two processes are visible in Skopje city morphology as traces in the public space. In both cases, the purpose of future city developments is common, establishing a new "style" and defining the city space on a bigger scale, but delivering those visions for the city is the opposite, drastically different in the way of criminal acts and high corruption. A planning process is a crucial tool in the decision-making process, and Skopje 2014 can be considered an example of using power and all the system resources, not considering the law, regulations, and parameters needed for better living conditions.

These activities, which have happened in a concise time frame, have affected the city development and have started the construction in the city center, followed by increased urbanization, where the empty urban spaces were filled with new buildings and other structures. The next part will give an overview of that urban evolution, considering a 20-year time frame, screening the city square condition after the modernization in 1997, and the period of Skopje 2014 project invasion from 2009 till 2017.

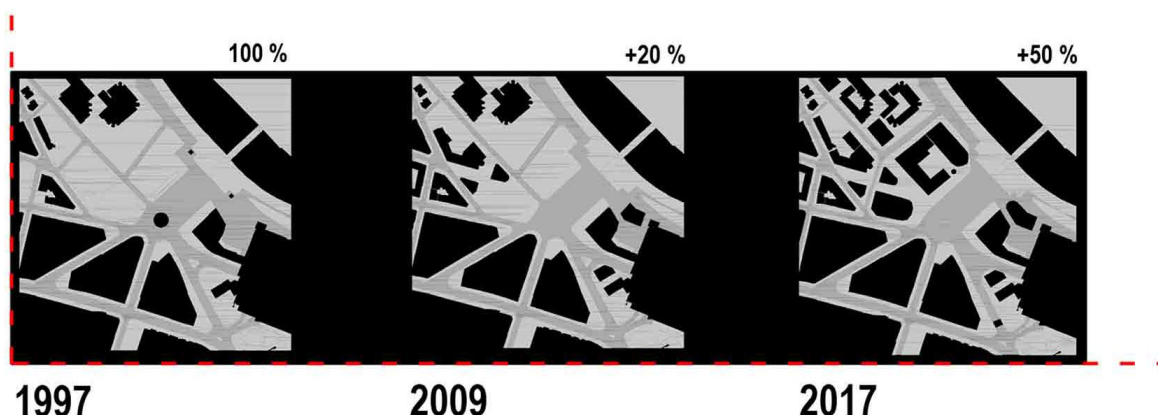


Figure 8: Skopje center – Macedonia square, urban evolution.

Illustration: Brsakoska Jana "The disappearing of a public man" exhibition, AKTO Festival, Skopje

IV. Urban scale evolution 1997-2017

As a result of the inherent planning process during the "Skopje 2014" project, the percentage of the built environment in the city center area was drastically increased by almost 100%. More

specifically, the built environment around the only functional public square in Skopje – Square Macedonia, since 1997 increased by 70%, continuously and inconsistently reducing the free public space (Figure 8). The new buildings took over what was once free space with greenery, pedestrian paths, and urban equipment, reducing the pedestrian zone and free circulation through that area. This way, the city's silhouette is wholly changed, where the attempt to recognize the new historical memories of the city center becomes a matter of division and separate opinions, a physical space that becomes mostly avoided for encounters. Bugarič, throughout the hypotheses of Auge (1999) and Bauman (2002) in his paper "Transformation of public space, from modernism to, consumerism" (Bugarič, 2006), refers to the public space in modernist frame as a "place," while today in a capital society transforms in "non-place," where space once used for creating relations of identity and social bond, in capitalism the physical space is only used for transit. These difficulties in creating relations with the public space that become a scene for implementing the new political ideologies were researched in a poll conducted by the ISSHS (Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities Skopje). The poll raised identity, history, and cultural heritage-related questions, on a sample of 1240 respondents and was conceptualized as demographically representative, taking into account ethnicity, gender, age, and education. In the report is established that: "not only the identity narrative itself but also the esthetic paradigm the project seeks to promote is perceived as culturally alien and alienating (rather than as something which would relate to the sense of cultural intimacy)," since only 22.6 % of the citizens responded they "somewhat like it, and 45% responded they "did not like the appearance of the new buildings and monuments" (Koložovska, Borovska, Lechevska, Sadiku, and Blazeva).² The case of "non-place" is best screened in the frame of Skopje 2014, where the city center becomes only a transit area for the locals since most of them find it difficult to identify with the new national recast.

The next part will elaborate on how the GTC's public space has evolved, using it as an example on a micro-scale of the process of usurping the public space in the case of Skopje developed.

V. Public space in the case of GTC

The City Trade Center (GTC) was the first concept in Socialist Yugoslavia to establish new economic policies and abandon the old-fashioned and inadequate norms. It did succeed in its intention to become a mark of the city's urban structure, integrating the public space within itself. GTC was a place for many encounters, and despite its outstanding architectural and structural accomplishment, it also became a building that was described deeply in people's memory because of its spatial features that encouraged social development. In its time, the building was designed according to Socialist standards of monocentric development of trade functions according to the demographic and city needs. In the transition period and with the privatization of many land properties and decentralization of the management power in the hands of the municipalities, the trade program spread all over the city, creating concentrated cores with big capacities. This development affected the monocentric system of planning, and it became discontinuous, a simulacrum repeating itself in various formations (Zinoski, 2011).

Therefore, the City Trade Center's popularity started to decline and the concern of the local authorities for its condition. With the lack of maintaining and the low circulation of people on the upper levels, many department stores were closing, and only the first floor of the building continued to function, mainly as a public transit zone. The citizens pointed out the building's poor condition several times, but it was never interest or part of any political program

² See the full report at: <https://www.isshs.edu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Who-owns-Alexander-the-Great-A-Question-Upon-Which-EU-Enlargement-Relies.pdf>.

until Skopje 2014 Project was born.

As part of the many ideas for covering the facades of buildings built during Yugoslavia in Modern style was also the City Trade Center in Skopje. A new design project for GTC aimed at a complete makeover of the building with a new "baroque" facade was put into motion. This plan never considered the already poor condition of the Trade Center and never considered a careful analytical approach toward the option of revival and keeping its most essential elements of architectural openness that invites the passersby and embraces the environment. The only solution considered was to cover the building with a new "baroque" facade, close it up, and adapt it into the new city visions and intentionally worsen its condition.

As a reaction to this new concept, the initiative "I love GTC" was formed, and thousands of citizens supported it. Many activities were organized to resist this idea of destroying the built heritage GTC represents as one of the marks of Skopje's architecture, which is deeply engraved in the city's collective memory. The public space of GTC was once more used to realize one of the most popular actions - hugging the GTC – an act of hundreds of people holding each other's hands and making a circle around the building as a synonym of hugging in order to defend it. These actions resulted in a referendum held on 26.04.2015. The referendum was for keeping the authenticity of GTC and preservation of its primary architectural characteristics. The right to vote at the referendum was provided only to the citizens of Center municipality. On the voting day, 17 655 people voted, out of which - 16 844 citizens voted FOR preservation of the GTC. After a hard struggle for acknowledging the referendum's success, which included the involvement of the Constitutional Court, the process of GTC makeover and several other buildings was stopped. GTC remains to be an architectural mark of an era, but the struggle for its revival continues.

Next part analyses the treatment of the Yugoslav-built heritage in the frame "Skopje 2014" project. An important aspect to describe at a continuous micro-level is how other buildings with great architectural values, designed by similar principles as GTC, were affected by the "Skopje 2014" project.

VI. The treatment of Yugoslav built heritage within "Skopje 2014."

The process of concealment of the Yugoslav built heritage was concentrated toward covering the built architecture - a monumental representation of a Socialist era, and toward complete assimilation and absorption of the implemented style that represents a new, non-existent national identity. In order to continue the ideology of "Skopje 2014", the main aim was to beautify the built heritage in neoclassical style, so-called "baroque," and make it likable in the eyes of the public, imposing it as a style that represents their valid historical values and nationality.

As one of the examples of this transformation that the establishment at that time preferred to call "reconstruction" was the building of the Communist League of Macedonia, later the building of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia (1970) designed by architect Petar Mulichkovski. Like many others from the period of Yugoslavia, this building had a remarkable concept of integrating the traditional elements of Macedonian architecture and interpreting them into a new context. The architect Mulichkovski precisely rewrites the spatial composition of the traditional city environment into horizontal segregation of cubic structures, using contemporary materials and detailed facade expression, highlighting the symbolism behind the historical tradition of building. The innovative technology used for the building structure was ahead of its time, representing modernist architectural achievement, and it was several times awarded.

Despite the strong opposition of "Skopje 2014" critiques, the government considered this "reconstruction" as the most important project within "Skopje 2014" that has to be realized to establish the reliability of the national recast of the country. Moreover, the government used

specific tools in order to accomplish the transformable process of the governmental building. For this specific matter, in 2012, an online pool was established as a selective process for the best new facade design, where the citizen got to choose one from five project proposals, the one that they consider as most appropriate (Prizma, 2018). In this manner, the government only allowed the people to choose by aesthetic appearance and beauty effect, without any previous revision and selection by qualified professionals. Without any previous evaluation of the buildings as an architectural heritage and ignoring many principles in this fast-track procedure, the focus was on citizens' choice as the only solution in justifying the radical transformation process.

Furthermore, these actions did not consider the architect Mulichkovski's statement in which he did not give consent to any changes of his work, whereas an author of the building had every right to do so. After the online pool, the building makeover was established, leaning on frail online support with only 32% of the votes for the winning proposal. The construction lasted for two years, and the total cost was 17 697 427 euros (Prizma, 2018).

As a result, the governmental building was covered with contemporary materials that imitate shapes and details of a neo-classical style. (Figure 8) A new exterior structure was built to support the newly added elements such as decorated columns, beams, capitals, tympanums. In order to keep the newly obscure facade rhythm, the new windows were put in a scheme that does not correspond with the background slabs and the previous facade openings, altogether creating a look with no aesthetic qualities or authentic form expression.

Unfortunately, many others of the inherited buildings from Yugoslavia had gone through the same process of radical makeover, where the new "baroquesation" did not consider the visions of social organization that were developed throughout Socialist Yugoslavia. Many inherited buildings remained under the mercy of the politics, not appropriately treated, punished to lose their actual value, and many more left to decay.

These phases of "Skopje 2014" illustrate that Skopje has undergone processes of radical transformation that are not only institutional, social or political, but ones that have been affecting the people and the built environment as well.

VII. The public discourse

During these turbulent years of radical changes, Skopje did not stay silent. Many activities and oppositional stances have occurred in many shapes and ways, but unfortunately not strong enough to stop the process of reshaping the city that was more powerful and had a strong political background. One of the ways the voices were channeled was through social media, a series of public discussions, academic events, and writings.

One of the projects aimed to open the debate for "Skopje 2014" are the book's edition "The City," an edition that is still ongoing and growing, beginning with its first edition in 2010, published mainly by "Templum" and partly with collaboration with "Plostad Sloboda." These books have strong narratives and bold titles written by many renowned authors, architects, artists, writers and critics, university academics, informal and formal organizations, discussing the project "Skopje 2014" and its consequences.

One of the most renowned 20th century's architects in Macedonia – Boris Čipani, in one of his interviews discussing the political state in Skopje, in the first edition of the book "The City" would state: "it is out of doubt that the cities are created by the politics and are affected by their ideology, but what is most important is the intellectual capacity of those politicians and the way they reshape the city" (Čipani, *Nered i groteska*, 2010, p.18).

Professor Jovan Ivanovski (Ivanovski, *Nered I groteska*, 2010, p.25) commenting the intellectual capacity of the "Skopje 2014" project, back in 2010 would name this massive invasion toward Yugoslavian built heritage as "Razubavizator" (eng. Beautifier), which

ironically refers toward an imaginary application, that enables different scenarios of building makeovers for those who cannot identify themselves with the city physical appearance. This notion simplifies and clarifies all incomprehensible actions during the realization of the "Skopje 2014" project. "Beautiflier" provides every childish imagination to come to live, without any obstructions or deep analytical approach toward the individual wish, that in the meantime affects the citizens of this particular urban area. The governmental ideology for "Skopje 2014" can be symbolically related with the possible city visions processed throughout "Beautiflier," both developing only towards reshaping the city's appearance in a striking, powerful quasi-historical manner, without any option for following the main principles for improving the city condition and preserving the built heritage (Ivanovski, Nered I groteska, 2010, p.25).

In this edition, Prof. Bakalčev will also add that the Skopje 2014 Project processes and methods affected the public space and the architecture, making it only available for preferred needs, spontaneously swallowing the architectural values of the built heritage from previous eras. (Bakalčev, Nered i groteska, 2010, p.41). He will emphasize the example of the City Trade Center (GTC), which was designed by Zivko Popovski and built in 1973, as one of the marks of an appropriate architectural concept behavior, adapted in an already existing architectural environment. This building follows the concept of Kenzo Tange's Master Plan and respects the built environment, and yet implements its individuality in the final product. According to him, this building can be considered a positive example of reinterpretation of the public space and built heritage in the period of post-quake Skopje.

The fifth edition – "City and the future" by Bogdan Bogdanovic, offers a detailed description of why keeping the heritage values of the city are essential to collective memory (Bogdanović, 2011).

Something deep in me woke up, I could not accept the fact that the traditional image of the cities decayed one after the other, some irrevocably gone, and I, in reverse, symbolically tried in the fantasy to stop the damn process. Perhaps I already suppressed the secret fear in me, the fear of losing the city ...

The editions developed a series of significant discussions, but most of the oppositional stances were neglected or misinterpreted by the governmental elite in favor of the rapid implementation of the project "Skopje 2014".

VIII. The public space and the resistance

During the turbulent time of the "Skopje 2014" Project, the public space again became a place for expressing oppositional stances and resistance toward the rapid changes that were slowly changing the city silhouette and very vulgarly attacking the free space.

One of the first voices of disagreement was heard in 2009, when the collective "Prva Archi Brigada" (eng. First Arhi Brigade) was formed by a group of young students and other like-minded citizens, primarily pointing against the suggested Urban Plan for the city center (Small Ring) from 2007. More specifically, this was an oppositional stand against the plan and the location for the new orthodox church at the square "Macedonia," stating that it violates the public space, shrinks the pedestrian passes, and cuts the main axis of fluent connection from west to east. "First Archi Brigade," alongside other self-organized groups such as "Ploshtad Sloboda" (eng. Square Freedom) on 28.03.2009, have organized the "First Architectural Uprising" going under the parole "Do not rape Skopje." The protest had its scenario of expressing dissatisfaction over the usurpation of the public space by making a human shield over the church's location. This way, it is supposed to show the size of the taken free space, in reality, demonstrating the narrowed paths and the disabled circulation of passers. The protest lasted only a few hours when a contra protest group arrived after a short time. The contra protest group

consisted of religious believers and supporters, later named "crusaders," who violently ended the first architectural uprising (First Archi Brigade, 2009).

After the catastrophic end of the protest and the violent circumstances for its failure, which were never clarified, the voice of these groups continued throughout social media and other alternative channels.

As the list of protests continues, so did the rebellion of the citizens, including the initiative "I love GTC" described in this paper before, that later on in 2016 will join the most massive Macedonian protest known as "Sharena Revolucija" (eng. Colorful revolution). That way will continue the struggle against "Skopje 2014". These were also anti-governmental demonstrations, aiming at the political irregularities, including the wiretapping scandal and the abolition announced by the President at the time. The movement "Protestiram" (eng. I protest) initiated demonstrations, and many more citizens, students, artists, and activists have joined, expressing their dissatisfaction and resentment towards the elite's corruption. The revolution's most potent weapon was color, where throughout different techniques and tools, as well using the public space as a place for expressing free will and determination, the objects and the buildings of the project "Skopje 2014" were bombed with color, as a powerful and visual statement against the regime. "The colorful revolution" united the Macedonian citizens in the fight against criminal, corruption, and nepotism and finally stopped the process of "Skopje 2014". It is not sure if this revolution ultimately succeeded in its intentions, but it surely brought significant changes in the political system and left the city's urbanization open and unfinished again.

Once again, the public space has demonstrated its purpose, showing that it is not just a recipient of masses but also a generator of ideas. The public space was recreated in response to the much-needed effort to re-conquer public-urban space as a community resource. The protests mentioned before can be seen as an artistic performance in the public space that uses memory and hidden narratives related to the buildings and the urban context while looking critically at society and generating new associations and values (Uskoković, 2015).

Conclusion

Today, the "Skopje 2014" project is no longer a question of transition from one political system to another and is no longer a process for establishing a new city identity, but it is a topic that needs to be revisited over and over again in order to find a solution and a proper treatment of what is already done. Regrettably, "Skopje 2014" got trapped in the political turmoil of the country. Affected by the ongoing processes of many political spins that opened other architectural and urban issues, the "Skopje 2014" matter is put aside. All of the project implementations in the city structure are slowly becoming the new collective memory of the city.

As an example of modernism, Skopje's memory seems slowly vanishing in the process of what seems to be a backward flux of its urban development. Public space transformation in the case of "Skopje 2014" can be described as an attempt to recast a national profile, affecting public space, built heritage, social and cultural life, without any awareness of the gap between nationalistic theory and the desperate economic realities.

Skopje needs to learn from these mistakes, considering the good examples and positive experiences from the previous planning periods. It is hard to erase what has already been done, and it is getting even more complicated as time passes, and the new Skopje look becomes part of people's collective memory. Nevertheless, there is always a chance to get better in the next steps of the Skopje healing process, which this time was caused not by a natural hazard but by a human factor. The little that is left as a testimony of the complex Skopje morphology and diverse architectural cultures can very soon disappear (Jovanovic Weiss, 2010). The international influence in Skopje during the reconstruction was not the only reason why the Master Plan was successful, but also were the good structural organization within the departments, the motivation

to go forward in a contemporary manner, the transparency of the motive, the planning process and high expertise in the field.

Therefore, Skopje does need to be open up again toward the international community for its redevelopment (Jovanovic Weiss, 2010), but also has the capacity of national expertise and professional community, now even more experienced after learning from the bold history of urbanization in different contexts, professionals and young enthusiast that can contribute to a fresh start, but only if that chance is given.

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