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Whatever happened to Skopje?

Mariotti, J. (2016). Whatever happened to Skopje? *MONU :Magazine on Urbanism*, (25), 4-7.

Published in:
MONU :Magazine on Urbanism

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
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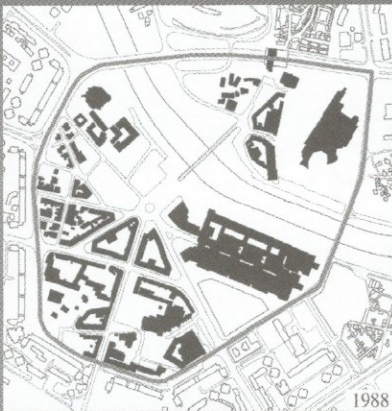
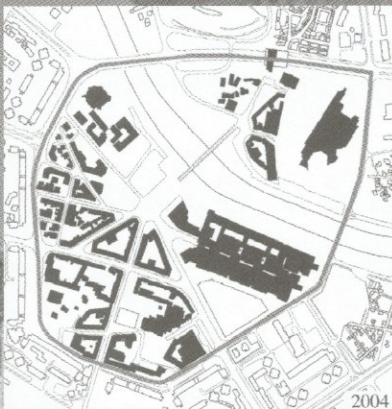


Fig. 1: Site plans of the central city area of Skopje from 1988, (and below) 2004, 2016



What Ever Happened to Skopje?

By Jasna Mariotti

Skopje, a capital city of a country that gained independence after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, over the past century has been undergoing processes of radical transformations that were not only societal, political and economic, but also ones that impacted the city's planning system and further influenced the city's built environment. Throughout the past hundred years, the population of the city increased more than tenfold (Demographic Research Centre, 1974, p. 54), from 41,000 inhabitants in 1921, 166,870 in 1961, 314,552 in 1971, 448,200 in 1981 to 506,926 in 2002, a period in which the city correspondingly expanded its territory.

The speed of the city's growth varied in different periods, but was the highest in the decades following the Second World War, which coincided with Yugoslavia's policies that aimed at concentrating the country's industrial assets in a limited number of cities. Skopje was one of those cities, and as a centre of metallurgical, chemical and pharmaceutical industries, the city became the third largest in Yugoslavia, following Belgrade and Zagreb (Stefanovska & Koželj, 2012).

These developments in the city took a turn in 1963. On July 26, 1963 a devastating earthquake hit the city, taking the lives of more than one thousand people and destroying more than 80 per cent of the urban fabric of the city.

This tragedy required the city to be rebuilt, and Skopje seized the chance to be transformed into a modern city. In the aftermaths of the earthquake, an impressive list of experts visited the city and with the help of the United Nations, one year after the earthquake an international competition for the reconstruction of the city centre was organized. Eight teams of architects were invited to submit their proposals, four foreign and four Yugoslav teams. After evaluating the projects, the jury decided that three fifths of the prize should be awarded to the team of Kenzo Tange from Japan, and the other two fifths to Radovan Mišević and Fedor Wenzler of the Croatian Institute of Town Planning. In the months that followed, the team of Tange, the Croatian team and Skopje's Institute of Town Planning and Architecture (ITPA) worked on the master plan for the reconstruction of the central area of Skopje (UNDP, 1970).

In the following years of Skopje redevelopment and transformation, the disciplines of urban planning and architecture took centre stage; the city became a testing ground for novel architectural ideas and a meeting place for architects from both East and the West projecting their visions over Skopje's 'non-aligned' territory (Mariotti, in press). As a result, the local urban landscapes have been enriched with the works of foreign architects working in Skopje. At the same time several Macedonian architects, educated and trained in the USA, Finland and in the Netherlands, have also contributed to the rebuilding of the city with landmark buildings having a lasting impact on the cityscape of Skopje.

After the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the independence of Macedonia in 1991, the country entered a dynamic processes of adjustment that left the country disoriented. Skopje's urban fabric was trapped in crisis as well, creating a fertile ground for speculative developments, ultimately degrading the built fabric of the city. This formed a foundation for yet another radical transformation of the city.

Since 2010, the city is undergoing a process of massive restructuring and reimagining, as part of a project named 'Skopje 2014'. The project, commissioned and envisioned by the current government, remodels the city centre of Skopje and creates an image of the city that never existed as such, problematising further its background. This 'new' Skopje is replete with buildings that are built in a *new* 'baroque' and 'neoclassical' style, *faux* facades, follies and sculptures that are scattered around and infill city's public spaces (Fig. 1). These new constructs are Skopje's transitional produces, a crux of the crisis in which the city is trapped and a representation of what is now a culmination of the long and painful transition.

This paper provides an insight into the processes of re-creation of a 'new' image of the city through new constructs built in Skopje since 2010, inducing a public amnesia of the not so distant past.

'Skopje 2014' and the Construction of Public Amnesia

In February 2010, following some questionable building activities in the city centre of Skopje, a six-minute video was aired (Stefanovski, 2010). The video offered to the public for the first time the opportunity to see what was about to happen in the city centre of Skopje and projected the vision, the scale and the vastness of the planned future developments in the city (Fig. 2). As the video had Skopje 2014 in the title, it was unanimously assumed that 2014 was the anticipated date for the completion of the presented massive restructuring of the city. The video provoked an immense debate, among the architects and planners but also among the public, questioning the necessity, the aesthetics



Fig. 2: A screenshot of Macedonia Timeless Capital Skopje 2014



Fig. 3: View from the Stone Bridge in Skopje in 2004

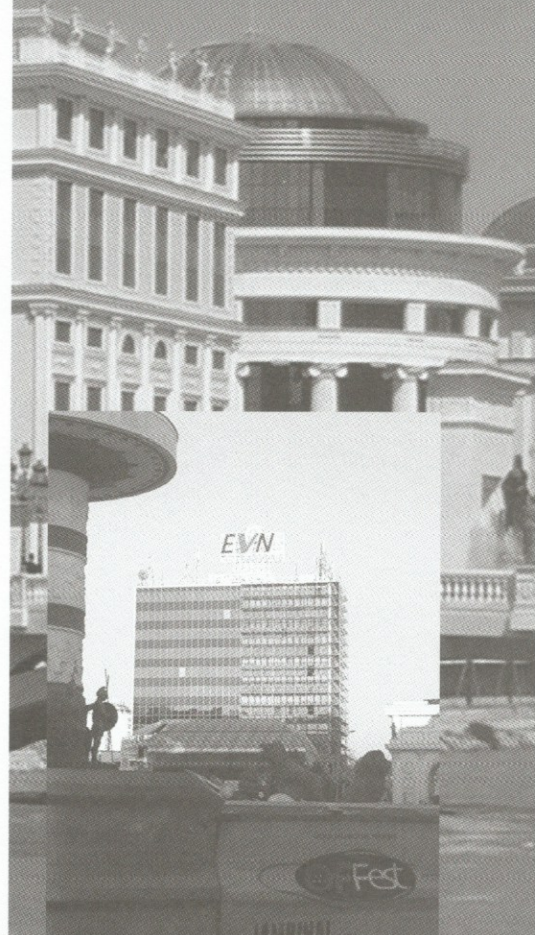


Fig. 5: Changing facades in the city centre of Skopje in progress



Fig. 7. Re-dressing the building of the Government of Macedonia

and the cost of the newly proposed vision that aimed at transforming Skopje into a barely recognizable city.

In the months and years that followed, the vision that was portrayed in the video was becoming a reality. The city centre was getting filled with new buildings for state institutions and multi-storey parking garages all built in a style labelled as baroque, a pseudo interpretation of a historical style, and a striking contrast to the modernist and novel architecture that dominated the city centre in the period after the earthquake. As part of the materialization of a new identity of the city, the city centre of Skopje now hosts a new building for the Constitutional Court, State Archives and Archaeological Museum, all under one roof, a theatre, a City Hall, a museum, two ministries, the Public Prosecutor's Office and Directorate of the Financial Police, an Agency for Electronic Communications, a building for the city's water supply company, a Criminal Court, a Faculty of Dramatic Arts and six new multi-storey parking garages (Fig. 3, 4).

In addition, new facades have been attached to the existing buildings in the city centre, matching the surrounding *grandeur*. The facades of some of the buildings in the city centre that were built in the 1970's and that represented cultural icons in the city and a representation of the achievements of the tectonic nature of architecture during the period of the country's socialist past, were remodelled, matching the 'new' style that was projected to dominate in the city centre (Fig. 5).

As a result, the building of the Government of Macedonia built in 1970 (formerly the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Macedonia) was remodelled, covering the modern aluminium facade with classical columns and white plaster (Fig. 6, 7). The department store that defines one of the sides of the central square in Skopje, from 1960, another example of the presence of the functionalism in architecture got a new facade and caryatids in the ground floor. The modern curtain wall building at the edge of the central square built in 1962 is undergoing a facelift with stylistic features too (Fig. 8, 9). At present, the Headquarters of the Electricity Transmission System Operator of Macedonia (MEPSO) on the banks of the river Vardar, a brutalist building with visible *béton brut* columns and curved roof is being dressed in a projected nostalgia, with white plaster and decorative columns (Fig. 10, 11).

As part of the reimagining of the city centre of Skopje, a triumphal arch also was built, domes were added to the parliament building, two new bridges were constructed and a ferri s wheel above a new bridge on the river Vardar is under construction at this moment (Fig. 11).

Furthermore, numerous monuments and bronze-cast sculptures, 34 monuments and 39 sculptures, celebrating people from Macedonian history were also erected in the city centre in a period of less than ten years. The most dominant is the one on the central square of Skopje, a bronze sculpture portraying a warrior on a horse and measuring 14,5 meters on top of a 10-meter high column with reliefs (Fig. 9). There are two new fountains and a folly that were built, all fulfilling the overall vision for the 'new' identity of the city centre of Skopje. The density of all of these constructs is immense and seems to have sprouted in every public space in the city centre (Fig. 12).

These newly depicted realities seem to have stepped in as a critique to the modernist architecture that was dominant in the previous organisational system, and at present propose a construction of a new generation city with



Fig. 8. View from the main square in Skopje in 2004



Fig. 9. View from the main square in Skopje in 2016.

nostalgic architecture at the turmoil of an economic crisis, generating only temporary jobs for a few of the large percentage of unemployed. The cost of the project 'Skopje 2014' until now is more than 640 million Euros and more than 50 per cent of money spent comes from the Government's department for General and Common Works, the Ministry of Culture and the City of Skopje (Skopje 2014 Uncovered).

'Skopje 2014' illustrates the dominance of politics in the design of the built environment of the city, its decisions being publicly justified by politicians and not by urban planners or architects. Furthermore, the master plans for the central city area, enabling the envisioned restructuring, were being amended in speedy and non-transparent procedures. The materials used for the new buildings and facades are as problematic. A lot of the infill behind the *new* 'baroque' and 'neoclassical' facades is from expanded polystyrene and plaster, a quick way to build a vision, although the first signs of decay are already visible.

This results with a 'new' Skopje, a materialization of a vision for a city that is dressed up in a nostalgic recall. The project is dripped with sentimentality and monumentality, and celebrates early nineteenth century urban ideals in the early twenty-first century. 'Skopje 2014' leaves behind a problematic legacy of the lengthy transition in the country, as the city is becoming a showpiece with many new attractions. Moreover, through this grandiose redressing of the city centre, the memories of city life before 2014 are disappearing; the constructed amnesia is omnipresent. "More than ever, the city is all we have" writes Rem Koolhaas (1996, p. 193) at the end of his essay "What Ever Happened to Urbanism?", and this is the case with Skopje too. The city needs to be re-thought, and the right to the city re-displayed and re-claimed.

Jasna Mariotti studied architecture at the Faculty of Architecture in Skopje and TU Delft where she graduated cum laude. In 2014 she received her PhD from the Faculty of Architecture, University of Ljubljana on the theme of post-socialist cities and their urban transformations. At present she is Unit Tutor at the School of Planning, Architecture and Civil Engineering at Queen's University Belfast. Before coming to Belfast she was at the Faculty of Architecture in Skopje where she was Assistant Professor in Urban Design, coordinated and mentored workshops for students of architecture from Skopje, Seville and Zurich dealing with micro interventions in the city.

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Fig. 10: View of the Headquarters of the Electricity Transmission System Operator of Macedonia (MEPSO) in 2004



Fig. 11: View of the Headquarters of the Electricity Transmission System Operator of Macedonia (MEPSO) and the construction activities in the riverbed of Vardar in 2016

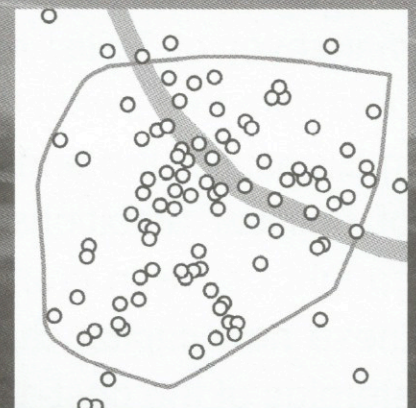


Fig. 12: The interventions of 'Skopje 2014'