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Fig. 1: Detail of the 1948 master plan for Skopje by Luděk Kubes

Socialist Urban Planning and the Housing Question: At Home in Skopje

By Jasna Mariotti

The Second World War and its aftermath displayed significant changes in the patterns of urban development in Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, which occurred in parallel to the processes of political and societal restructuring. The formation of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia in 1945, of which Macedonia was one of the six republics constituting it, resulted in an instilment of socialist ideals on a national level and rapid industrialization. These conditions contributed to the growing urbanization and growth of capital cities throughout Yugoslavia, phenomena that were closely linked to industrialization and jobs in industries which were provided in cities (Musil, 1980). Among the capital cities of the Yugoslav republics, Skopje's population grew the fastest during this period, from 120,130 in 1953 to 444,760 in 1991, transforming the city from a small town to a centre for metallurgical, chemical and pharmaceutical industries, and becoming the third largest city in Yugoslavia, after Belgrade and Zagreb (Stefanovska & Koželj, 2012).

Fig. 2: A post-war neighbourhood in Skopje
(From: Institute for housing construction management, 1968)



Planning paradigms for the city also changed after Second World War, accommodating Skopje's ongoing growth and any projecting vision for the future expansion of the city. In the newly established context of the socialist country, Luděk Kubeš, a Czechoslovakian modernist architect and urban planner, was invited with his team *Atelier Arhitektu* by the Macedonian authorities to draft the new plan for the socialist city. (Fig. 1) This 1948 plan for Skopje shows strong influences and references to Le Corbusier's "Radiant City" 1935 plan (fr. *La Ville Radieuse*); the plan marked new ground for city planning, which started from a *tabula rasa* and did not respect what had already been built. In an attempt to accommodate the city's spatial and demographic growth, new neighbourhoods with freestanding buildings were projected, and following functionalist principles of the modern movement, dwelling, working, recreation and transport were separated. The industries were carefully arranged in clearly defined functional zones in the city's periphery, repetitive patterns of mass housing in-filled the inner city territory, while large areas in the urban tissue were set for recreation. This formed the basis for the development of a socialist Skopje.

Urban planning in Skopje took a turn after 1963. On the 26th of July 1963, a devastating earthquake struck the city of Skopje, causing tremendous damage to its urban fabric and taking the lives of more than a thousand people. The city's housing suffered heavily: of the city's 36,518 housing units, 3,411 were completely destroyed, 11,891 were heavily damaged beyond repair, 14,194 were badly damaged, and only 7,082 were partially damaged (Jordanovski, 1993: 79). The construction of housing after the earthquake was therefore of the utmost priority. The country was ready to tackle this challenge and through an immediate response, already

in December 1963, 99 days after the earthquake, the first dwellers were able to inhabit their new homes (UNDP, 1970). In a period of two years, between 1963 and 1965, 22,250 new housing units were built in the city and around 16,000 were refurbished. At the same time the minimum living area per person in Skopje was raised from 10.6 m² to 14.7 m², a legislative requirement that was in force for all the new apartments in the city that were built until 1981 (Boskovski, 1965). After 1963, under such conditions, eighteen new neighbourhoods emerged in Skopje (Skopje - city of solidarity, 1975). The centralized planning system certainly helped in the decision-making about their location and their inner organization.

The Housing Question and the Socialist City

In the period after the Second World War, the construction and allocation of housing became a state priority, a tool aiming for the establishment of an egalitarian society, where the "establishment of norms for the standardization of housing or 'living space' [had] become an operational part of socialist city planning" (Fisher, 1962: 252). In socialist Skopje, a state controlled agency, the *Self-governing Interest Association* (Mk. *Samoupravna interesna zajednica*, SIZ), was in charge of the realization of the programmes for housing and was controlling the construction of the new neighborhoods and housing units, their number as well as their quality. According to article 5 of the 1974 Law on housing of the Self-managing Interest Association, this association was in charge of "1. Determining the policy of housing construction in accordance with state plans on socio-political communities, 2. Programs and organizes housing construction, 3. Defines the programme and distributes funds for housing construction for the veterans of the Second World War, 4. Defines the programme and distributes funds for financing of housing construction



Fig. 3. A floor plan of a housing block in Karpoš built from prefabricated panels, a) two-room apartment-47.77 m², b) two room apartment 51.07 m², c) three room apartment 69.28 m²

(From: *Institute for housing communal management*, 1968)

and improvement of the conditions of housing in the existing residential buildings and apartments." (Krstic & Pajovic, 1987: 524).

The construction of housing units in socialist Skopje benefited from the technological development of the country, and in the context of severe housing need, prefabrication appeared to be the right way forward. In the period after the earthquake, the prefabricated housing unit seemed to represent an 'ideal' way to accelerate the construction process through a quick and cheap assembly of prefabricated parts, while responding to the housing shortages in the city and providing city dwellers with an opportunity to have their own home. Praises for such construction methods came from Yugoslav politicians as well as from Khrushchev, a First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, who visited Skopje on 22 August 1963. In October 1963 Edvard Kardelj, President of the Federal Parliament at the Standing Conference of Cities commented that 'this type of temporary and rapidly constructed unit should become a standard element of housing policy' (Fisher, 1964: 48).

In Skopje, prefabrication started almost immediately after the Second World War, a factory for prefabricated units was built in the city in 1948. In 1963, after the earthquake, a factory for prefabricated housing units was donated to the people of Skopje by the USSR, and was placed where the 1948 factory for prefabricated units had been located. The new factory could build up to 1,200 apartments per year and in the process of recovery after the earthquake around 14,000 units in the city were prefabricated. Having to respond quick to the needs for housing, prefabricated parts for the post-earthquake housing in Skopje were produced in factories

across Yugoslavia, in Zavidovici, Mostar, Skofja Loka and in Pancevo, as well as in the factory in Skopje.

The industrial production of housing had an impact on the city and changed the domestic landscapes of Skopje. After the earthquake, the majority of the urban tissue of Skopje was built from prefabricated units using precast concrete panels, as the industrialized production of housing units was the most economical and efficient way of dealing with the high demand. Architecture was seen as an instrument of social reform and the domestic spaces created during this period became an act of radical experimentation in social imagination, ideology and politics. Urban planning was dealing predominately with the rigid disposition of housing slabs and their relationship to the surrounding greenery, resulting in homogeneous neighborhoods. In order to reduce costs, the design and the construction methods were standardized, and were based on the performance of the production facilities, which then determined the size of the housing blocks. The modular prefabricated components allowed only a few alterations and resulted with buildings that were uniform not just in their structure but in their appearance as well. (Fig. 2)

At Home in Skopje

Prefabricated housing units shaped the concept of the 'home' for many citizens in Skopje. Karpoš was one of the new neighborhoods in the city built after the earthquake. Built on a large plot of land that was nationalized, the area was designated predominately for housing. As with other neighborhoods that emerged during this period, Karpoš represented a critical commitment towards social change by firmly shaping the domestic space. Once completed, greenery and generous public spaces for collective use dominated the area and following the rigid principles of spatial arrangement of building blocks, a school and a

Fig. 4. At home in Skopje. Interior of a housing unit in Karpoš built from prefabricated panels
Photo: Jasna Mariotti



kindergarten were also provided, forming clusters, or collective cores, at the scale of the neighborhood. Karpoš housing blocks were built from prefabricated concrete panels made in the nearby factory, the one donated by the USSR to the city after the earthquake. The panels were positioned on top of each other, outlining five-storey housing blocks. Their façade elements displayed purity, and the absence of decoration or color contributed even more to uniformity across the neighborhood.

The spatial organization of the neighborhood was guided through the disposition of the buildings in a fixed structural grid and through their relationship with the open space surrounding them. The size of the housing blocks depended on the dimensions of the panels and on the performance of the factory. Such a rigid system left very little room for experimenting with different sizes of apartments and with their spatial arrangement in the fixed envelope of the building block. Their inner organization was also fixed to a large extent and depended on the spatial arrangement of a few modules. (Fig. 3) The apartments built from prefabricated panels in Karpoš were two and three room apartments measuring 47.77 m² and 68.29 m² respectively. The apartments were efficient and modular, the bedroom and the living room took a whole module, while the kitchen, the bathroom and the entrance shared one. Consequently, the living room and the bedroom were the same size, 17.22 m². The kitchen was 8.36 m², the bathroom was 3.48 m² and they were standardized in their appearance and size (Institute for housing communal management, 1968).

The heart of the apartment was the living room (Fig. 4), a focus for the family assembly, linking the public and the private in the apartment. Such a layout of the apartment was suggestive that the living room was the

vital component of the working-class urban lifestyle. In such a setting and in the almost manufactured home, not permitting any future changes due to the fixed structural walls, families raised their children. Yet, the home was more than just a house, efficient and rational. It was designed to fit the lifestyle of an average working family, nevertheless the lifestyle of the new urban middle class in Skopje also had to adapt to its design.

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 and coordinated and mentored workshops for students of architecture from Skopje, Seville and Zurich dealing with micro interventions in the city.

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