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Constructing Collective Memories Through Spatial Transformations – the Case of Macedonia Square

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Abstract. Identity is the distinguishing element that differentiates and forms nature, the environment, and places. In the discipline of architecture and urban planning with identity, is understood the product that makes a place unique or what makes the spirit of the place. Skopje is one of the city living changes and metamorphosis courses. The city has undergone significant urban transformations through the communism seal, Kenzo Tange's post-earthquake master plan, and the 21st century changing project of "Skopje 2014". This paper aims to explore identity and collective memory in an architectural and urban context and the changes made in the urban forms. By using observations and specialized literature, this study aims to investigate the recent two major changes in the city of Skopje. Thus to summarize, the start of the physical changes and social trauma will be defined and its role in the loss of identity and the effect on the urban environment.

Keywords: Identity, Spatial transformation, Macedonia square, Collective memory

1 Introduction

Identity is the unique element that makes nature, environment, architecture, nation, or a place and differentiates it from others. When an object is unique, we say that it possesses identity [1]. The identity notion is hard to define, but we can recognize many characteristics such as architecture, culture, history, tradition, lifestyle, memory, and politics.

Identity can be narrated, perceived, felt, understood, imagined, inherited, and it can also be developed and changed through time.

Places are significant sources of identity because they are conglomerates of figures and images that have meanings and are essential to us. Proshansky defines it as a composite of remembrance, concepts, interpretations, ideas, and related feelings about specific physical settings [2]. Furthermore, the identity of people is connected with the place they live and belong to, a fact which can be complemented with the saying: "When a person wants to tell who he is, it is, in fact, usual to say: "I am a New Yorker," or "I am a Roman." We understand that human identity is to a great extent a function of places and things. Human identity presupposes the identity of place"[3].

Place identity can be connected with authenticity as well. Through it, we understand the involvement of the place with the surrounding or the way place identity and the

history of the place interrelate. On the other hand, identity's an evolutionary process that can change over time, depending on the relationship between people and the environment. An essential factor in the transformation process plays the different ideologies through which the place passes.

2 Skopje a Collective and Spatial Memory

Architecture is one of the main factors and maybe the most important one for creating the city's identity because it reflects the stages in which the city has developed. Skopje is such an example that suffers from the danger of losing its identity because of the modifications done in its cultural, social, and urban components.

The importance of Skopje in the topic of identity comes from the rich history, civilizations, and urban, social, and cultural layers. Skopje has traces dating from the neolithic, Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman periods and symbol buildings of the mentioned periods [4]. The city has experienced many conquests, occupations, and destructions followed by new constructions and attempts to create new ideas independent from the previous ones by making it hybrid and multi-layered.

The controversy of Skopje starts with the concepts of "Occident" and "Orient" [5]. These characteristics are widely found in all the Balkan cities and not just in Skopje in particular; however, more than anywhere else, they influenced Skopje's structure.

The city's major flourishing can be considered the 20th century when Macedonia was part of the SFR Yugoslavia. At the time, Skopje was able to absorb investments and power.

At the same can be found Skopje's documented urban plannings.¹ The first plan was created when Macedonia was part of the Kingdom of Serbia (the plan of D. Leko, 1914), followed by the plans of J. Mihajloviq (1929), L. Kubesh (1948), and Kenzo Tange (1965), which symbolize the communist spirit and time. All the plans had one common idea: to get rid of the past and give the city a fresh new modernist look; however, only fragments were realized.

Nevertheless, the changes proposed and realized in the urban plans were not compared with what came later. In 1963 a big earthquake destroyed 80% of Skopje [5]. The Yugoslavian state immediately after the earthquake promised to rebuild Skopje, even better than it has been, so the promise was kept. In its help came the United Nations with funds that would help the city's rebuild, housing reshaped, and the city refaced [6]. Moreover, a general plan was made and an international competition for the city center was organized. The project needed to include some principles, such as incorporating both sides of the river Vardar in the new development of the city, the new buildings should not exceed the height of the fortress, and the old Bazaar should be incorporated in the new modern project [5].

¹ Before the urban plan of D.T.Leko exists a zoning plan created during the reign of the Ottoman Empire that shows Skopje's development in the 19th century.

However, the most important key in all the process was the organization of an international competition that included the central area of Skopje (the Big Ring). Even though different names participated², the first price was shared between the Japanese and Croat teams [7]. Tange and the team together with Miscevic and Wensler gave Skopje another look and were bragged because of the brave and modernistic ideas [8].



Fig. 1. Post-earthquake plan for Skopje's city center a) the Japanese team winning project (url/1), b) The Croat winning project Radovan M. & Fedor W. (url/2), c) the ninth version (url/3).

The Japanese author gained fame from the Tokyo project, where he successfully unified the new informational technologies and growing mobility [12]. On the other hand, the intervention in Skopje was his first project in the West. Even though the price was shared, the fame of Tange and their team dominated and made the earthquake center project known as his project. The solution of Miscevic and Wensler was considered the most feasible and realization in a very real period [8]. As an alternative, the intervention of Tange in the city center of Skopje was modeled through two main elements the 'City Gate' and the 'City Wall'. The 'City Wall' located in the old and new city axis

² In the international competition organised for the city center of Skopje four international offices, and four Yugoslavian ones. In the end, was suggested to divide the first price between an international and Yugoslavian participant.

intersection is an area surrounded by high residential buildings. The idea of the 'Wall' was to proclaim a specific residential enclosed place [13] to save the old Bazaar from future developments. Its form, resembles a castle, whereas the towers symbolize the defense towers found in every old city or castle. On the contrary, the 'City Gate' located in the new axis is the entry in the city (gate into the city), and it includes the new train station and new road formats. These structures served as transition points between regional and local traffic [14]. Whereas, the other buildings foreseen in the master plan (the post office, dormitory, telecommunication building, the archive of the city of Skopje, and governmental buildings) were designed by local architects ³.

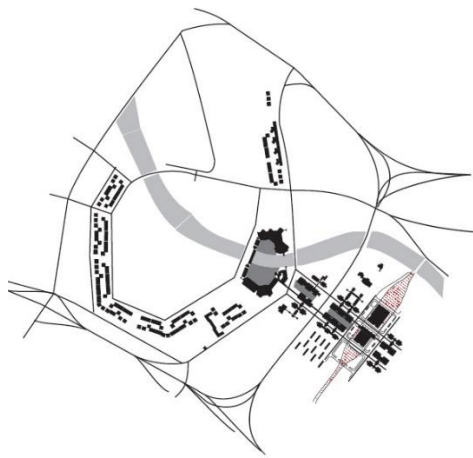


Fig. 2. The realization of the city center competition plan [15, p. 80].

In the end, a synthesis project needed to be made. In the ninth version between the Japanese team plan and the Croatian one were taken the most praised elements, and transformed into a single plan (Lozanovska & Martek, 2018). Tange's plan tended to eliminate the existing housing texture, whereas the other tends to ignore the old traditions. The main idea behind it was to unify the city and its nations and to match the criteria for a better quality of living in the future. Nonetheless, it was not as easy as it was thought first. Skopje was a multi-cultural city, where the unification of housing and a standardized way of leaving was hard to conceive (Lozanovska & Martek, 2019; Poliservice, 1964).

After the realization of some fragments of the 9th version, the left bank of the river became a business and governmental hub, whereas the left side with the old Bazaar which first had to be transformed into a cultural hub, remained in the shadow of the post-earthquake plan. On the other hand, for the realization of the 'City Wall' many buildings have been demolished [13]. By any means, the plan intended to transform Skopje into a developed city where the railway station would have functioned as one

³ The Post Office and Telecommunication building were planned by Janko Konstantinov, the dormitory and the archive by Georgi Konstantinovski.

of the most critical transferring points in Europe. But unfortunately, the Yugoslavian state broke up before all these dreams would come true. Macedonia (today North Macedonia) got out of Yugoslavia as the poorest country, and because of economic reasons, the plan of Tange was never completed.

Tange's plan is still being talked about and judged for its appropriateness or suitability. But, we should applaud his courage and question if Skopje and his habitants were prepared for such changes? Was Skopje prepared for such a plan?⁴

3 Reinventing the City

After the fall of communism, the city struggled to create its character and was trying by force to disintegrate itself from Yugoslavian traces. The battle was not going on just in Skopje, but in the whole country as well, but despite it, Macedonia never triumphed to detach completely. For a long period of time, it remained the only country that carried the traces of Yugoslavia in its nomenclature, known previously by the world as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

If Tange's plan led Skopje towards modernization, then the next one was conducting Skopje through unknown paths. The 'Skopje 2014' project was a political party's ideology with the main intention to give the city a neo-classical and baroque look reminiscing periods the town never knew. This act intended to furnish Skopje with new museums, government buildings, construction of monuments, and depicting historical figures from the region, all realized by a neo-classic style. The other point here was to remind the glorious antique period through architecture [17]. With this action, the periods that were not profitable for Macedonia or haven't contributed to its affirmation in history were considered unimportant and had to be changed.

This was another step that led the spatial organization of the city back and forth. The space again was undergoing tabula rasa processes of relaying and changing according to the new needs of the government.

The central area of transformation was the main square, called 'Macedonia square'⁵, and implemented new construction of pedestrian bridges, sculptures, monuments, and camouflaging facades. Moreover, the new buildings were used as new facades for hiding existing ones [20], more specifically the objects resembling the communist spirit. By doing such an act the new constructions of the Skopje 2014 project are thought of as walls behind which hide parts of unwanted history. Among others, the project was named "revival in 100 steps" and aimed at "correcting the lingering socialist "anomalies" by introducing radically different views of the society and its

⁴ After the earthquake was made a social survey of the population in order to learn their needs. However, again after the realization the inhabitants of Skopje tried to adapt the building environment according to their needs. The creators of the plan were not satisfied with the outcome, which made questionable the function of the post-earthquake plan.

⁵ Macedonia square and more specifically the small ring. Unlike the post-earthquake competition project where the intervention had to be made in the big ring, here the intervention area was a part of it.

members” [21]. This was a step known in modernity or a method on how modernity forgets [22].



Fig. 3. After the “Skopje2014” project intervention ([url/4](#)), ([url/5](#)).

However, this action was named as a step towards rebranding Skopje as well [23]. Through the tool of architecture was aimed to create a new look of the city, one that will give it another identity. In the main city square, in a radius of 500m, more than 50 statues are inserted. On a large scale, Skopje resembles a Macedonian narrative [24] with statues and monuments everywhere. The city center is enriched with influencing figures in the field of history or literature. However, the masterpiece was considered “The man on the horse”, the giant bronze sculpture put on a fountain and surrounded by lions and other figures.

The other part of the project included reconstructing some of the buildings damaged or destroyed during the earthquake of 1963 or previous wars. This movement included the reconstruction of “the national theatre”, “the officer's house” [21], the building of a Portal in the square Pella and artistic bridges in the river Vardar.

Skopje 2014 was being addressed as “the makeover that’s divided a nation” [14], “a theme park” [25], or the “city beyond kitsch” [26].

Affected by the change were the architecture and urban formation and the society that did not seem to agree with the transformations. Revolts and protests such as the colorful revolution were organized continually until even the nation powerless in front of the government gave up [27].

4 Social Trauma and Identity Effects

The habitants lost Skopje two times; the first was during the earthquake, and the second was with the Skopje 2014 project. After all the made changes, the city lost readability. Each ideology and political party wanted to leave its temporal traces without caring about the past and, most important, about people. As a result, Skopje turned into a fragmented space with fragmented identities.

By changing the spaces was meant to leave old memories in the past as well. With Skopje’s change was aimed to change the collective memories of the citizens, and to

create new ones. These memories needed to embrace the new city center look, and the stories shown in these spaces and buildings. This time, space played an important role in relaying remembrances and creating new ones.

The city became a puzzle with fragmented projects depicting different eras [28], [29], and memories. On one side is the Roman Fortress, on the other the old ottoman Bazaar, in the central area Tange's megastructures, and in the main center the statues of Skopje 2014. Although many projects have been organized for the unification of the city center, their attempts have resulted in unfinished or projects that remained only ideas. First, it was the post-earthquake plan that aimed at the city's physical and social reunion than in the years to come many competitions to reorganize the main squares⁶ and connect them with the stone bridge [30]. In most of them was saved the tradition of organizing international competitions, with winners from abroad, however, none of them got realized. The central space competition usually covered the space between the Stone bridge. In 1972 the competition was won by Edvard Ravnikar⁷, and in 1979 by Georgi Konstantinovski [31, p. 203].

Tange as well did not reach the point of unifying Skopje. On the contrary, the post-earthquake project had more privations than profits. What followed was a misbalance between the two sides of the river, unfinished communication rings, no connection with the fortress, and the aforementioned urban squares transformed into urban voids. However, the next projects were desperate measures for attention. The Skopje 2014 project made national identity readable everywhere in the square hub. Critics explained this movement as a path to claim ancient native figures or a way of giving a message to the world like "Macedonia might be small, but has produced great people."

However, after the 2014 project, the city remained more divided than ever. People on the edge of poverty or lacking work positions did not need a 22m bronze statue; they lacked essential living elements. The city square was being avoided by the people who truly understand the values it once had. Little by little, the Macedonia square turned into a place with no value. But, tourist seems to love it. They get mesmerized by all the giant statues and baroque facades and love to take pictures all over the city. Looking at the bright side, the Skopje 2014 project has increased the number of tourists who visit Macedonia, evaluating it as the city beyond kitsch [26].

5 Conclusion

With all the changes done, the citizens of Skopje have lost the right to the city [32]. Despite the resistance shown towards the transformations, their voice was never heard. What had to be just small changes resulted in chaotic identity problems that involved

⁶ The two main squares are considered the Macedonia square on onw side of the Stone bridge and Filip 2 square on the other side.

⁷ Edvard Ravnikar was the first to go to Skopje after the earthquake and to prepare a raport about the damages done. He was also part of the Ljubljana team participating in the post-earthquake center organisation.

the city of Skopje and the whole country of Macedonia and conflicts with neighboring countries.

This article has covered the planning history of Skopje in the second half of the 20th century and has analyzed the most critical points of urban transition. These built influences changed the life of all the *Skopjans* and the city's look once and for good.

This should serve as a means to understand the power that architecture can have in constructing the identity of a city and its nation. The example of Skopje 2014 can be seen as a method on how nations create a sense of nationhood and national identity, the perception of the past, or a political attempt to fabricate an ideal past.

On the other hand, unilateral architectural solving always left the people out, with no chance of a saying as if they would not use it. The fact is confirmed by their dissatisfaction and hatred towards the new spaces and objects.

These changes have played a major role in collective memory as well. The conceptual and the fundamental transformations left deep marks in the city, but mainly on the citizens who are obliged to forget the past and comfort the new.

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