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Skopje: concrete vs fiction.
From Internationalism towards ethnonationalism

Abstract

The recent resurgence of interest in Balkan brutalist architecture within the architectural discourse serves a dual purpose. It not only addresses a notable gap in historiography but also reflects a shifting perspective towards a heritage that continues to hold significant cultural and architectural value, particularly in the context of 1960s and 1970s urban and architectural development. This contribution focuses on Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia, as an illustrative case study of the modernization efforts in former Yugoslav countries. The city's architectural and cultural legacy, from the post-1963 earthquake reconstruction guided by Kenzo Tange's master plan, currently faces the risk of erasure due to the transformative effects of the Urban Renewal Plan (SK2014).

Key Words

Skopje — Kenzo Tange — Brutalism

The prolific architectural production in Yugoslavia after the Second World War remains a relatively lesser-known chapter in the history of architecture. Only recently has it been reevaluated, shedding light on the quality and distinctiveness of a modernization process in which architecture served as the tangible expression of a societal vision. This era witnessed highly experimental architectural endeavors on various fronts, encompassing spatial organization, urban integration, material utilization, and technical coherence. Moreover, these experiments incorporated a fusion of urban and architectural decisions with interpretations of distinct national styles that shaped Yugoslavia.

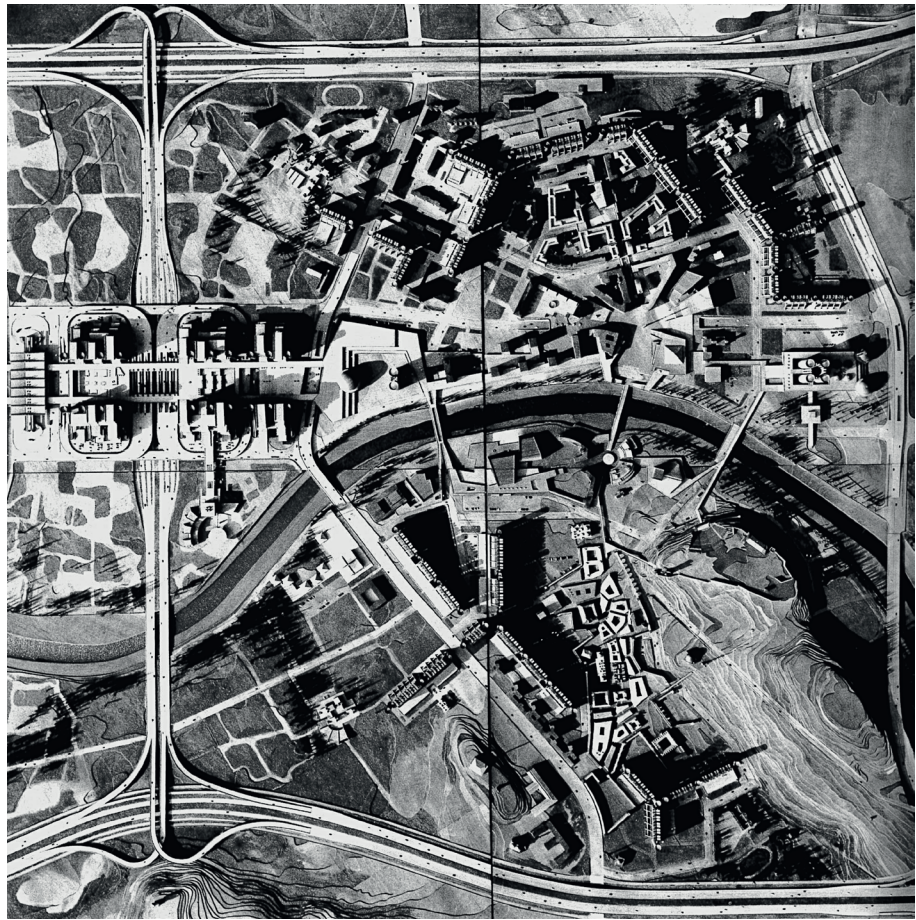
Within the Balkan region, the city of Skopje (Ckonje), the capital of North Macedonia, stands out as a distinctive case study. With its current population of 526,500 inhabitants, Skopje holds a significant place not only due to historical events but also because of the architectural density that redefined its layout and urban structure during the 1960s and 1970s.

Skopje can be described as an “interrupted” city, where its visage bears the marks of numerous transformations and reconfigurations. Here, the influences of East and West converge and interact, while diverse ethnic groups co-exist, including Macedonians, Albanians, Serbs, Turks, Bosnians and many others. In the 1960s, Skopje represented an opportunity to actualize the tenets of modern architectural culture, akin to more renowned examples like Brasilia (1960) and Chandigarh (1953). Tracing its origins back to *Scupi*, an Illyrian settlement later annexed by the Roman Empire, Skopje has a history marked by successive waves of conquests, including Ottoman Turks, Bulgarians, and periods of Serbian and Yugoslavian control. The city became the capital of the independent state of North Macedonia in 1991.

Six decades ago, on the 26th of July 1963, Skopje endured a devastating

Fig. 1

Kenzo Tange, Model of the Master plan for New Skopje, 1965.



earthquake registering a magnitude of 6.1. This seismic catastrophe resulted in a tragic toll, with over 1,000 casualties. The earthquake wreaked havoc, causing damage to 60% of the existing urban structures and leaving 80% of homes either severely damaged or completely destroyed.

In the aftermath of this catastrophic event, the strategic communication and rhetoric surrounding it, bolstered by the charismatic leadership of Josip Broz Tito, drew international attention. The charismatic appeal of Tito led to a massive outpouring of humanitarian aid, effectively designating Skopje as a symbol of global cooperation between nations. During the delicate era of the Cold War, Macedonia was transformed into a sanctuary of peace, where even in the midst of geopolitical tensions, humanitarian efforts converged. Notably, the American military, dispatched by President Kennedy, and Soviet seismology experts, sent by Premier Khrushchev, converged on the same ground to offer their assistance.

In this context, the Skopje Reconstruction Plan emerged as an unparalleled opportunity to showcase to the world the Yugoslav socialist model in action. It transformed Skopje into an international laboratory for profound contemplation on urban theories that had been the subject of intense debate within the CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne). Additionally, it provided a platform for a generation of Yugoslav architects to actively participate in the global architectural discourse. The significance attributed to the reconstruction efforts is underscored by the involvement of the United Nations. The organization sponsored and coordinated the international competition for the New Skopje Plan¹ (1965), under the guidance of architect Ernst Weissmann (1913-2005), who was the director of the United Nations Center for Housing, Building, and Planning and a student of Le Corbusier. The earthquake, therefore, marked a moment of crisis and upheaval, but it

also presented an opportunity for the reestablishment of Skopje as a «world city, symbolizing international solidarity and embracing cosmopolitan ideals, as eloquently articulated by Weissmann» (Tolić, 2012). The Plan for New Skopje carried significant symbolic weight, as it aimed to demonstrate «the physical and technical organization of a specific political, social, economic, and cultural model» (ibid).

With the belief that solutions could be amalgamated and refined, the winning proposals emerged from two distinct groups: one led by Kenzo Tange, accompanied by Arata Isozaki, Yoshio Taniguchi, and Sadao Watanabe, and the other by the Institute for Urban Planning of Zagreb, under the leadership of Radovan Miscevic and Fedor Wenzler.

The objective of this article is to delve into the urban model introduced by Kenzo Tange's Plan (Fig. 1), which has profoundly shaped Skopje since its reconstruction. Furthermore, it explores the latest urban transformations the city has undergone, particularly "Skopje 2014 Plan" in relation to Tange's Plan.

Kenzo Tange's New Skopje

The Japanese team's Plan for the city of Skopje is conceived as an architectural experiment to be carried out in 40 years, with the year of conclusion in 2000, designed by a monumental infrastructural system that organizes and structures the city, as already experimented in the Plan for Tokyo Bay (1960) and that of the Residential Unit (1959) for 25,000 people, developed at MIT in Boston. In these projects the city is designed by a network of continuous connections, for vehicles and pedestrians, to which perfectly recognizable «new architectural prototypes» (Tange, 1965) differentiated by intended use are grafted.

The detail with which the architecture is designed opens up a specific scalar dimension of the city project, in which the macro scale combines with that of the architectural object. An approach evident in other projects by Tange, such as the one for the Tokyo Olympics (1964), the complex in Hiroshima (1949-1959), the Offices in Kanagawa (1958) and the masterplan for the Osaka International Exposition (1970) in which «the functional typologies all have their own very specific volumetric peculiarity which often makes them act in contrast in the composition, and which makes them become a real experimental laboratory and source of linguistic inspiration for the Japanese architect's subsequent projects» (Aymonino, 2017)

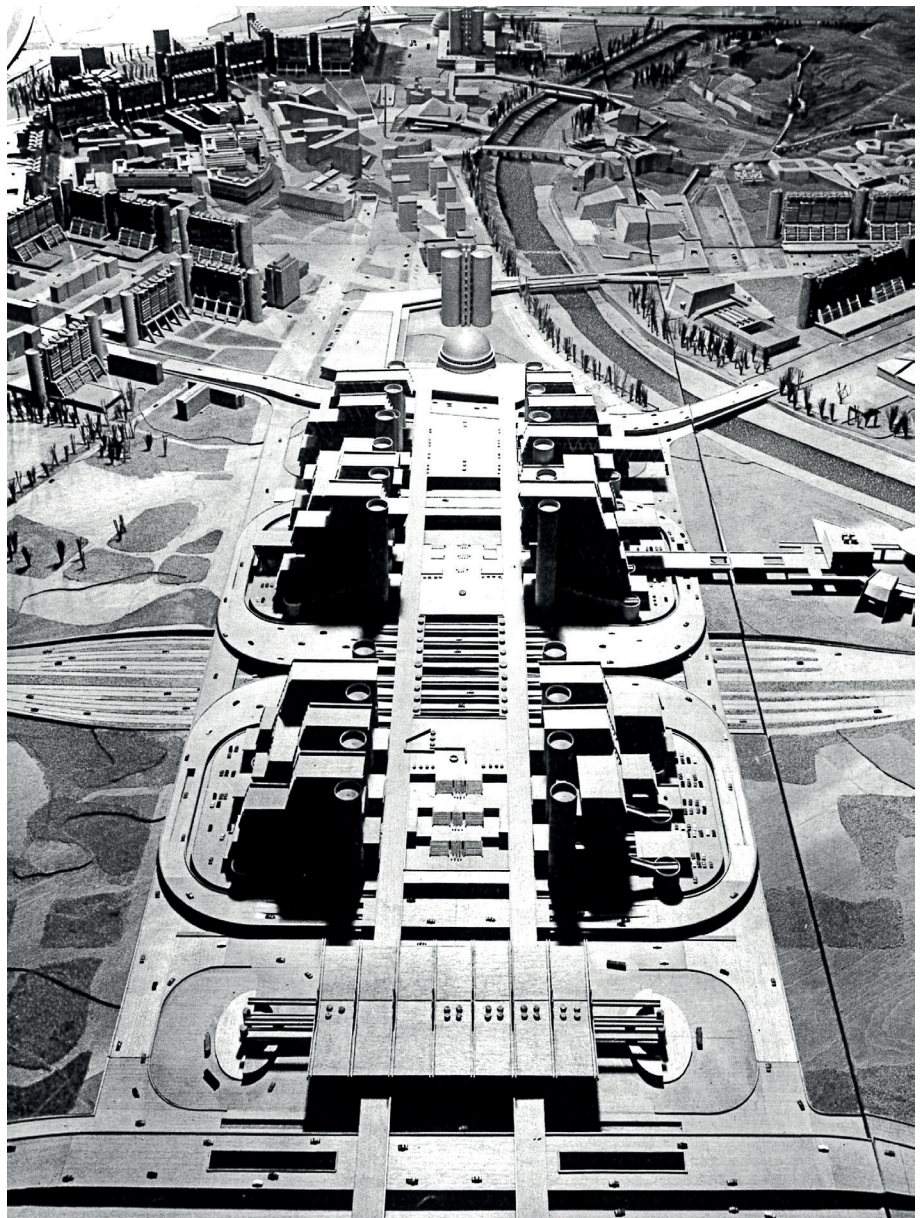
The references to the Cluster City (1952-1953) by Alison and Peter Smithson also emerge in filigree, in the uninterrupted and branched cluster system of building bodies. In Skopje, the Japanese architect starts from tabula rasa, from a zero floor obtained by demolishing the few pre-existing structures that survived the earthquake, in correspondence with which he inserts green areas, and identifying a park on the Kale hill on which the Museum of Contemporary Art stands today and the Freedom Monument.

The structuring elements of the project are identified in the *City Gate* and the *City Wall*: the "door" and the "wall", architectural and urban interventions that evoke the memory of medieval Balkan cities.

By using the concept of the 'door', we not only aimed to model a structure with the physical appearance of a door, but also anchored in people's consciousness the idea that it is a door through which one enters Skopje. If the intervention does not keep its symbolic name, it will be rejected by the population. The city wall also became famous and although some argued that the 'wall' was an obstacle and should be removed, people resisted the idea of a project without it. The city wall, which became the center of its iconic image, suggested not abandoning the idea of the 'wall'. We learned, through

Fig. 2

Kenzo Tange, Model of the Master plan for New Skopje, 1965. View of the City Gate.



experience, that it was necessary to identify a series of symbolic processes in the project. (Tange, 1976)

Therefore, connecting the radical nature of the project with the historical identity of Skopje, the “door” and the “wall” that structure the new urban layout are identified as symbolic elements, becoming the emblematic signs connected to the local context. As in previous experiences, Tange reiterates the need to conceive “new prototypes”, through a project that from a territorial and urban scale proposes architectural solutions investigated through detailed drawings and large models.

Furthermore, to create that «open structure» with «infinite growth» theorized in previous projects, the Japanese team proposes the rotation of the urban system in an East-West direction, orthogonal to the historical axis, thus defining a *decumanus* as a new hallway.

This strategy allows for greater connection with the surrounding area, the possibility of growth of the city and the dislocation of the old train station from the central area within the new urban gate.

Here the *City Gate* (fig.2), an imposing tertiary and infrastructural hub, with clear references to the Tokyo Plan, builds a new raised ground, separating

Fig. 3

Kenzo Tange, Transportation Center (1971-1981).



pedestrian connections from car and rail mobility. An architectural megastructure conceived as an intermodal «transformer», which should have housed shops, offices, hotels, cinemas, meeting rooms, only partially built and immediately judged to be oversized for a reality like that of Skopje.

The *decumanus* is conceived as an administrative and commercial axis with a continuous and modular system of vertical nuclei, where the systems and stair blocks are located, connected by horizontally suspended corridors which clearly echo the metabolist architecture of Kisho Kurokawa but also the «street in the air» by the Smithsons.

Pairs of stairways delineate the pedestrian pathways leading from *Gateway Square* to the office block and the car park. The conceptualization of this urban gateway rested on two paramount objectives: first, to craft a unified system harmonizing horizontal and vertical movement trajectories, and second, to conceive a spatial articulation that exercises visual control over flow, movement, and human perception. Simultaneously, each distinct space within this complex corresponds to a physical entity, serving a unique function and adopting a specific form within the perpendicular alignments, where administrative and directional activities are concentrated, as well as in parallel to the axis. Adhering to the visionary planning approach, Tange amalgamates these dual dimensions on a spatial plane through the inclusion of pedestrian bridges and stairways enveloping the entrance buildings and seamlessly intertwining with the office structures. In cases where buildings connect closely, elevated corridors facilitate the organic expansion of these spaces on an urban scale. The entire project adheres to a module that governs the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the volumes, extending down to the minutest details, thereby establishing a common language that streamlines communication between designers and builders. The extensive application of three-dimensional grids facilitates the creation of intricate spatial configurations grounded in the concept of a unified scale.

Within the broader City Gate project, only the *Transportation Center* (1971-1981) (Fig.3) came to fruition. This remarkable structure, realized through the collaborative efforts of Kenzo Tange's studio in Japan, forms the ultimate node of the new East-West axis, extending toward the regional territory.

The third developmental phase of the Plan is characterized by the construc-

tion of the *City Wall*, which appears to draw inspiration from Dubrovnik's city wall. This architectural element takes the form of a double linear residential strip, resembling a horseshoe, and serves as the delineation of the new urban center's perimeter. Its purpose is to accommodate the anticipated population growth of the city in the future.

The City Wall symbolizes an endeavor to harmonize the deep-rooted community spirit of the Macedonian people with the requisites of modern collective living. Recognizing this distinctive aspect, the planning team conceives a spatial arrangement that preserves neighborly relations as an inherent quality of the Skopje community. The original competition project, which initially envisioned residential complexes with ground-floor shops, underwent modifications during the third phase. It transitioned into groups of integrated apartments, incorporating common services within the interstitial spaces.

The architectural composition of the wall comprises two distinct building typologies. The first consists of a linear terraced structure, standing 24 meters tall, featuring apartments designed to align with the height of existing urban buildings. On the upper floors, balconies extend toward internal courtyards. The second typology encompasses residential tower complexes, organized in groups of two or three buildings. These towers are strategically positioned on corners or along streets, evoking the imagery of a fortified enclosure, akin to sentinels guarding both sides of the street. In both typologies, the ground floor accommodates shops catering to daily needs, small restaurants, bars, offices, and meeting rooms. Additionally, provisions are made for self-service parking, catering to residents' vehicles.

This eliminates the need for driveways within the courtyards and introduces a tree-lined strip along the external side, seamlessly integrated with the primary urban green space, which also houses the primary schools.

Every meticulous detail and architectural element in Tange's comprehensive project aims to translate the dynamics of contemporary society into a tangible spatial arrangement.

Skopje's Béton Brut Cityscape

While Kenzo Tange's renown played a pivotal role in drawing international attention to the Plan for *New Skopje*, thus projecting Yugoslavia's modernization under Tito onto the global stage, it was during this subsequent phase that the energies of local architects and artists came to the fore.

Only in recent times, the significance of their contributions has been adequately recognized. Notable figures such as Bogdan Bogdanović, Juraj Neidhardt, Svetlana Kana Radević, Edvard Ravnikar, Vjenceslav Richter, Milica Šterić, Mimoza Nestorova-Tomić, Georgi Konstantinovskij, and Janko Konstantinov represented a veritable «Yugoslav avant-garde» (Ignjatović). Their international experiences endowed them with the ability to interpret the nation's drive for modernization within the realm of architectural design.

In the years following Tange's masterplan, Skopje underwent a period of remarkable ferment, evolving into what can aptly be described as a «béton brut cityscape» (Lozanovska, 2015). It became a laboratory for the exploration of brutalist architecture, a movement that indelibly shaped the city's visage and identity.

The *Operative Atlas. Skopje Brutalism _Graphic Biography of 15 Architectures*² (Tornatora, Bajkovski, 2019) stands as comprehensive and well-structured exploration of this architectural heritage, commencing with an analysis of the original drawings meticulously preserved in the city archives. This endeavor unearthed hitherto unpublished materials, shedding light on the

**Fig. 4**

Janko Konstantinov, Telecommunications Center (1972-1981).

complexity and originality of this architectural production and seeking to establish its rightful place within the architectural discourse while ensuring its due recognition.

Among these architectural gems, the National Bank of the Republic of Macedonia (1971-1975), designed by Olga Papesh (1930-2011) and Radomir Lollovikj (1933-2014), and situated in close proximity to the railway, stands out as the inaugural structure realized as part of the City Gate project's final segment. The Telecommunications Center (1972-1981), (Fig. 4) designed by another Macedonian architect and painter, Janko Konstantinov (1926-2010), exhibits a captivating fusion of visionary elements reminiscent of Japanese metabolist architecture. This intervention comprises three distinct buildings — the telecommunication center, the administrative building and the counter hall — all situated atop a single platform that not only connects these structures but also defines an urban courtyard. The round form of the counter hall conjures the imagery of a grand tent with a ribbed roof, supported by anthropomorphic structural elements, projecting outward and bestowing upon the building an extroverted character reminiscent of architectural marvels like Oscar Niemeyer's Metropolitan Cathedral of Brasilia (1970) or Pier Luigi Nervi and Annibale Vitellozzi's Sports Palace (1957) in Rome.

Tracing along the banks of the Vardar River, the Commercial Center (1967-1972) by Zivko Popovski (1934-2007) emerges as the conclusive episode of the new East-West axis within Tange's masterplan. This architectural feat represents a pioneering typological structure, ingeniously fusing commercial spaces — incorporated within a sprawling multi-level horizontal platform — with preexisting residential edifices seamlessly integrated into a series of towering structures.

This complex presents an innovative departure from the conventional American-style shopping center model. Located strategically within the city's center, it adeptly resolves the linkage between the main square and the urban park Zena Borec. Functioning as a diverse nexus, it orchestrates a network of external and internal ramps, facilitating pedestrian movement through verdant spaces and connecting them to the layered urban fabric of the city. A succession of terraces, akin to authentic urban squares, unfolds a modern reinterpretation of the traditional Bazaar concept, wherein the thoroughfares

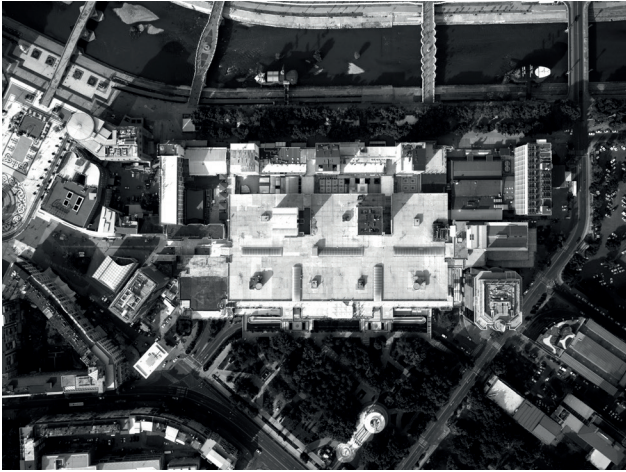


Fig. 5
Zivko Popovski, Commercial Center (1967-1972).



Fig. 6
Mimoza Tomić and Kiril Muratovski, Museum of Macedonia (1971-1976).

pulsate with commercial activities.

On the opposite bank of the river lies the Macedonian Opera and Ballet (1972-1981), designed by the Slovenian group Biro 71. It is the sole structure constructed from the envisioned Cultural Center, situated at the heart of the city. The Slovenian architects pioneered an architectural masterpiece reminiscent of contemporary designs that sculpt form through tectonic modeling of the terrain, akin to projects such as the City of Culture (1999) in Santiago de Compostela by Peter Eisenman or the Oslo Opera House (2007) by Snøhetta. The Macedonian building presents itself as a tectonic metamorphosis of the land, shaping a new topography where architecture and public space coalesce, extending to the urban stretch along the Vardar River. Phenomenological considerations permeate all spaces, maintaining a rational distribution of functions while delineating plastic forms from the exterior to the interior.

Lastly, the Museum of Macedonia (1971-1976) (fig.6), designed by Mimoza Tomić (1929) and Kiril Muratovski (1930-2005), comprises various exhibition spaces — Archaeology, Ethnology, History — redefining the topography of a segment within the Old Bazar fabric near the Kurshumli Han, an Ottoman caravanserai. Through terrain modeling, the intervention configures a connection device among the diverse elevations of the existing layered fabric. Here, an architecture of pure cubes arises along the diagonals. Eliciting Byzantine masonry, Mimoza adorns the upper portion of the building with white marble tesserae from Prilep quarries, almost suspending it from the darker exposed concrete below. This juxtaposition enhances the abstraction of the cubic volumes, defining both the plan and the elevation. The contemporary intervention's integration into the ancient Ottoman fabric is filtered by the roof's design, characterized by dark-colored slopes contrasting with the white marble volumes. The ridge lines, rotated along the diagonal, create a new skyline in dialogue with the surrounding context.

In this itinerary, we cannot overlook the contributions of Georgi Konstantinovski (1930-2022), a Macedonian architect who completed his education at Yale University under Paul Rudolph. Notable among his works are City Archive (1966) and Goce Delcev Dormitory (1969), representing the early instances of brutalist architecture by a Macedonian architect on an international scale. These structures have remained integral components of Skopje's urban fabric, a city currently undergoing profound transformation, particularly since gaining autonomy from Yugoslavia.

Over the past decade, the principles outlined in Tange's Urban Plan and the architectural heritage have faced significant alterations through the imple-

Fig. 7

Comparison map between post-earthquake architectures (in white) of Kenzo Tange's plan and interventions of the SK2014 plan (in red).

[in white, Skopje Brutalism]

1. Telecommunications Center,
2. Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts,
3. National and University Library,
4. Macedonian Opera and Ballet,
5. Museum of Macedonia,
6. National Bank of the Republic of Macedonia,
7. Saints Cyril and Methodius University of Skopje,
8. Republic Dispatch Center,
9. Skopje Transport Center,
10. Museum of Contemporary Art,
11. City Walls,
12. City Shopping Center.

[in red, Skopje 2014]

1. Macedonian National Theater,
2. Museum of the Macedonian Struggle,
3. Archaeological Museum,
4. Marriott Courtyard Hotel,
5. Marriott Hotel,
6. Ministry of Finance,
7. Agency for Electronic Communications,
8. Public Prosecutor's Office,
9. Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
10. Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services,
11. Commission for the Regulation of Energy and Water Services,
12. MES Macedonia (Energy Regulatory Commission of North Macedonia),
13. Ministry of Political System and Intercommunity Relations,
14. Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning,
15. A1 Macedonia Headquarters,
16. Government Building with an eclectic façade,
17. Republic Dispatch Center with an eclectic façade,
18. EVN (Electricity Distribution Company) with an eclectic façade,
19. Basic Criminal Court of Skopje,
20. Court Palace Garage,
21. Officers' Residences,
22. Gate Macedonia,
23. Monument of Philip II and Alexander the Great,
24. Olympia Fountain - Mother of Alexander the Great.



mentation of the “Skopje 2014 Urban Renewal Plan.” Officially announced in 2010 and funded by the previous Macedonian government, this initiative has, to some extent, been halted, resulting in a varied development in Skopje’s city center. This development has included the construction of new



Fig. 8
Republic Dispatch Center MEP-SO (1987-89), comparison of the original project with the subsequent transformation.

Fig. 9
Macedonian Opera and Ballet (1972-1981), comparison of the view along the Vardar River with its subsequent transformation.

buildings, bridges, approximately 34 monuments and sculptures, as well as transformation of over 10 existing structures. All of these interventions are characterized by a pronounced eclecticism, predominantly manifested in the facades and exteriors.

In addition to planning new constructions to fill urban voids, the new plan has initiated actions aimed at erasing the remnants of the socialist era and transforming the existing architectural heritage. Eclectic facades, constructed with ephemeral materials, now adorn some of the city's iconic buildings. Simultaneously, new public structures have emerged without a harmonious relationship with the urban context.

In particular the Republic Dispatch Center MEPSO (1987-89), (fig.8) by Zoran Shtaklev as shown in (fig. 8), designed by Zoran Shtaklev, serves as an example of the transformation of modern architecture. It was originally characterized by a horizontal cantilevered roof plane atop a transparent glass volume. However, it has been modified into a structure that roughly resembles a Greek temple, complete with an entablature, columns, and a basement. In the case of the Macedonian Opera and Ballet (1972-1981), (fig.9) deliberate alterations to the public space between the building and the Vardar River have been made. These alterations encompass various architectural interventions, such as additional buildings, monuments, and sculptures. Collectively, they form an eclectic linear curtain along the Vardar River, effectively obscuring the original building and disrupting the urban relationships envisioned in the Tange Plan.

In the case of interventions on the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University Campus (1970-74), (fig.10), the absence of a clear strategy has resulted in the placement of new structures in open spaces, thereby compromising the overall integrity of the campus. This complex, situated north of the Vardar River,



Fig. 10
Student campus of Ss. Cyril and Methodius University (1970-74), comparison between the original project and the subsequent addition of new buildings on the campus.

serves as a pivotal hub within the cultural and educational center outlined by Kenzo Tange's Plan.

In conclusion, the Skopje 2014 project was a controversial attempt to transform the architectural landscape of Skopje by incorporating elements and motifs that imposed artificial "neoclassical" styles, unrelated to the city's history. However, the plan was eventually halted due to reactions from the cultural community, the absence of genuine public participation, and the misinterpretation of the city's heritage. These interventions, lacking a coherent strategy, have disrupted some of the reconstruction efforts. (fig.11-12) Within this intricate fabric, the architectural production following the earthquake continues to exhibit a profound sense of individuality in terms of spatial and urban characteristics, form, materiality, craftsmanship, and more. To the extent that the past seems more modern than the present, this phenomenon transcends mere aesthetics. It presents a landscape characterized by profoundly modern architecture, where "beton brut" serves as a plastic material akin to the works of Giuseppe Uncini, conveying manufacturing processes and materializing a nexus between substance, form, and structure. The relationships, principles, and spatial concepts embedded within such brutalist architecture, while the "utopian" vision of the Tange Plan remains unrealized, not only represent a legacy of the recent past but also constitute a wellspring of ideas for the future.

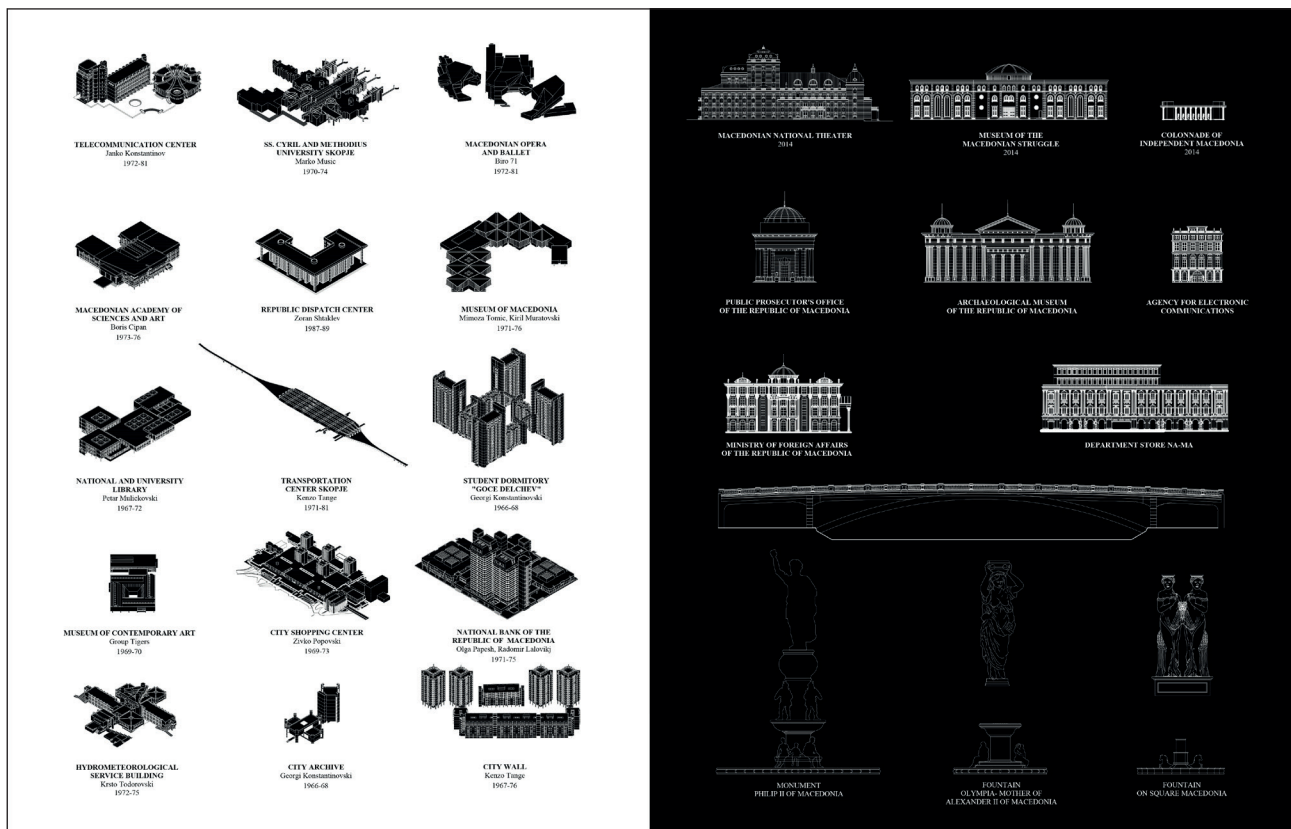
Perhaps Skopje's designation as the Capital of Culture for 2028 can serve as an opportune moment to turn a new page, harnessing its historical heritage to intersect with novel design dimensions and redefine the city's urban identity.

Notes

* The subtitle of this article is inspired by the text of Slobodan Veleviski and Marija Mano Velevska, published in *Freeingspace: Macedonian Pavilion*, 16th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia 2018.

¹ The City Center of Skopje reconstruction international competition saw participation from the following teams: Slavko Brezovski and his team at "Makedonija Proekt" in Skopje; Aleksandar Djordjevic and colleagues from the Belgrade Institute of Town Planning; Eduard Ravnikar and associates from Ljubljana; J.H. van der Broek and Bakema based in Rotterdam; Luigi Piccinato partnering with Studio Scimemi from Rome; and Maurice Rotival from New York.

² *Operative Atlas of Skopje Brutalism_Graphic Biography of 15 Architectures* is a part of the volume TORNATORA M., BLAJKOVSKI B. (2019) – *99FILES: Balkan Brutalism Skopje*, MoCa, Museum of Contemporary Art, Skopje. This research is an excerpt from Blagoja Bajkovski's PhD thesis, conducted under the mentorship of prof. Marina Tornatora and co-mentorship of prof. Marija Mano Velevska at the Faculty of Architec-



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Fig. 11

Arrangement of architectural elements within post-earthquake renovation interventions in contrast to SK2014 interventions in Skopje City Center.

Fig. 12

Photos depicting post-earthquake renovation interventions compared to SK2014 interventions in Skopje City Center.

ture, “Ss. Cyril and Methodius” University in Skopje. The thesis was completed within the Department of Architecture and Territory (dArTe) at Mediterranean University of Reggio Calabria, as part of the XXXII cycle of PhD studies, coordinated by Professor Gianfranco Neri.

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