

Skopje: Déjà Vu City

Exploring the Hybridity of “Skopje 2014”

Darko Tushev



Fig. 1: Part of Skopje's telecommunications center receiving a baroque treatment.

Uncanny Amusement Park

Have you ever wanted to take a trip around Europe? Maybe see the Parthenon in Athens, the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, or perhaps the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin? Well, why spend so much money on plane tickets and rental apartments when you can see all the sights in just one place - Skopje.

As the title suggests, when you take a walk through the streets of Skopje, you might feel a strange sense of Déjà vu. The one to thank would be the former prime minister of North Macedonia, Nikola Gruevski, who about ten years ago began commissioning buildings inspired by famous European monuments to help bring his vision of a more European Skopje

to life. However, one unfortunate byproduct was a new form of architectural hybridity that does not appear to blend all that well with the preexisting environment. One moment you are in a brutalist shopping center, and the next thing you know, you are surrounded by a wall of facades that seem to have come straight out of some baroque fever dream.

All this was a part of the so-called “Skopje 2014” project. A radical attempt at distancing the city from its communist past and helping it achieve a new, idealized European appearance. The project was carried out through a process of “antiquitisation,” which involved giving many of the modernist buildings a retrograde facelift and erecting a myriad of ancient Greek-style monuments and statues in hopes of forging a

new heritage that will reconnect the Macedonian people to their alleged ancient Macedonian roots.

Today, the effects of this project are most visible around the city's central square, where Doric columns and pilaster-trimmed windows stand in the place of sleek pillars and glass curtain walls; the artificial appearance resembling a twisted neoclassical Disneyland.

Futuristic Past

If you were to ask anyone from Skopje's architectural community about "Skopje 2014," you would find out that the biggest problem correlated with the project was its threat to erase the city's modernist identity set by the futuristic masterplan by famed Japanese architect Kenzō Tange back in 1965.

These two visions of the city are in a constant battle for dominance in the cramped city center, forming a hybrid between different values - modernism and postmodernism.

For a larger part of history, though, Skopje has never really had a clearly defined architectural identity. Until about half a century ago, the city could be described simply as a mix of neoclassical-inspired government buildings, primitive houses, and newly emerging modernism. However, on July 26, 1963, a massive earthquake hit Skopje that would forever change the city's image. The event took the lives of at least one thousand citizens, left more than two hundred thousand homeless, and leveled around eighty percent of the city. What followed in coming years was one of the greatest acts of solidarity of the time, where nations from both the western and eastern bloc briefly lifted the iron curtain and reached out with massive relief efforts. Bulgaria, Finland, Czechoslovakia, and Denmark built whole neighborhoods of temporary housing barracks. Romania gifted a hospital, Poland a museum of modern art, Russia a concrete panel factory,

and the United States offered scholarships to Macedonian architecture students. In the end, the architects saw the earthquake as a blank slate onto which they could project their ideas for a new, better Skopje and in the process define a fresh and progressive modernist identity for the city.

Kenzō Tange, on the other hand, won the competition for Skopje's new city center, with his cutting-edge masterplan. The plan was based on the principles of metabolism - a post-war Japanese movement that looked at the city as a living organism, leading to a design that is modern, fast, and adaptable.

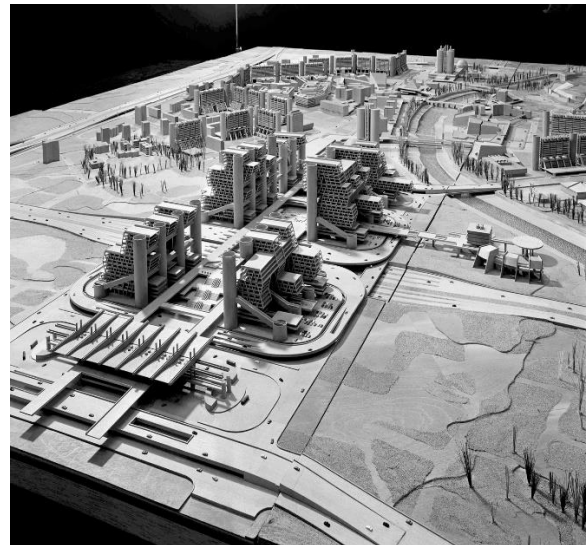


Fig. 2: A model of Kenzō Tange's 1965 masterplan.

Tange's planning involved creating an open space around the Vardar River, occupied by buildings such as cultural centers and concert halls, which would encourage cultural exchange between the two halves of the city split by the river. Additionally, he envisioned a massive wall of interlinked apartment blocks, which he nicknamed the "city wall," surrounding the loose and spacious city center.

Nevertheless, on its own, this does not define the hybrid character of "Skopje 2014".

Neoclassical Farce

The stark stylistic contrasts of this project can be best seen along the bank of the river. What, according to Tange's plan, was supposed to be an open area for cultural development is now overrun by a clumsy assembly of neoclassical government buildings, tightly packed together, forming a colossal wall of sorts. Behind, you can find the national opera and ballet house built in the 1970s by the Slovenian group of architects "Biro 71." The majestic deconstructivist structure, which seems to resemble a group of sharp glaciers, was meant to act as a visual centerpiece on the north side of the river, balancing out the equally dominant presence of the new trade center on the south. A white concrete plateau of cascading steps leading down to the river effortlessly framed the building and seamlessly tied it into the architectural ideals laid down almost a decade earlier. Today, that plateau is no more, as it has been flattened into a massive concrete slump on top of which sits a tacky curtain of structures, shielding the modernist "blemish" from public view. As if the government thought: "Maybe if they can't see it, they'll forget all about it."

This has left the riverside a bizarre hybrid of contemporary and retrograde. Hollow Doric columns, moldings, and golden statues on one side, clean modernist tower blocks, and abstract white surfaces on the other.

Unlike the opera house, which, although hidden, retained its original appearance, many other buildings were pushed into the new agenda by receiving a botched, baroque makeover. Yet, the immaculate symmetry and planning that usually accompanies baroque architecture are clearly absent. Standing in the middle of the square, you can make out the underlying modernist grid-like compositions of balconies, large glass surfaces, and asymmetrical layouts that now hide under a plaster mask, playing out some kind of neoclassical farce, with the square as their stage. This perfectly embodies the hybrid nature of "Skopje 2014" and the strange feeling of *Déjà vu* it induces. Knowing a building, but not being able to recognize it.

Many members of Skopje's architectural community, especially those whose work was affected by the project, view the project as an architectural catastrophe.



Fig. 3: The neoclassical blockade in front of the opera and ballet house.

“It hurts when I see how the life’s work of many architects of my generation has disappeared under a Styrofoam tent. With great love and enthusiasm, we rebuilt Skopje after the war and the earthquake, only to now see it ruthlessly destroyed.” said architect Slavko Brezoski in an interview with Balkan Insight in 2016. Brezoski had long been an established architect in the city, putting himself on the map with his department store, Na-Ma, built on the square in 1960. The five-story marble and glass structure quickly became a staple of the scene and was one of the few buildings to survive the earthquake. Today, however, it stands virtually unrecognizable.



Fig. 4: Na-Ma department store, 1960s.



Fig. 5: Slavko Brezoski standing in front of his newly remodeled building.

Another architect, Trajko Dimitrov, fought with the government to keep his metal and glass office building, Paloma Blanca, intact, only to have his appeal thrown to the side. In another interview with Balkan Insight, he states: “This revamp is irrational. It is a project intended to humiliate all living and deceased creators who designed these buildings and left their mark on the city. This is an architectural genocide.” Due to a change in government, the remodel of his building was stopped mid-way, leaving the building stuck between two states, a mix between stainless steel cladding and yellow plaster.

Eventually, even the citizens had enough. When the city’s beloved trade center, GTC, reached the chopping block, hundreds of people gathered around the building in protest, forming a human chain, which miraculously managed to save the building from its otherwise gruesome fate.

All Pain, No Gain

As seen by the examples above, “Skopje 2014” has left the city as an eclectic hybrid between different values crammed together in the small center; between modernity and antiquity, the authentic and dishonest, architecture as function and architecture as language.

In the end, the project was more of a money-laundering scheme masked under the guises of nationalistic values and symbolism. It concluded as abruptly as it began, leaving over half a billion euros of debt for the future Macedonians.

It is crazy to imagine that (with enough determination) a construction project can destroy a city more than a devastating earthquake. Ultimately, however, “Skopje 2014” teaches us not to prioritize aesthetics over context and that perhaps we should not take modernism for granted, as what lies on the opposite end might not always be better.

Sources:

Alexander Clapp (2016): "Skopje, city on the make," in: The Baffler, No. 32, pp. 8-13

Owen Hatherley (2016): "Story of cities #31: Skopje plans for the future by fixating on its ancient past." Retrieved from: < <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/apr/27/story-cities-skopje-plans-future-ancient-past>>. Accessed on: 10.03.2021.

Bojan Blazevski (2016): "Architects of Modernist Skopje Decry Retrograde Remodel." Retrieved from: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2016/12/06/architects-of-modernist-skopje-decry-retrograde-remodel-12-04-2016/>>. Accessed on 10.03.2021.

Sinisa Jakov Marusic (2016): "Mass Revamp of Skopje Facades Continues." Retrieved from: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2016/08/18/mass-revamp-of-skopje-facades-continues-08-17-2016/>>. Accessed on 10.03.2021.

Dr. Prof. Mihail Tokarev (2014): 50 godini obnova I izgradba na Skopje (1963–2013), istoriski I kritički pogled na arhitekturata. Research Paper for the online portal "Порта 3" (www.porta3.mk)

Figures:

Fig. 1: Darmon Richter, via: <https://www.exutopia.com/skopjes-colourful-revolution-fighting-tyranny-with-street-art/>

Fig. 2: via: https://schloss-post.com/debalkanize-skopje/01_skopje-1963-kenzo-tange-winning-competition-entry-1965_fb-klein/

Fig. 3: Pudelek, via: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Skopje_2014_-_Archeological_Museum_of_Macedonia.JPG

Fig. 4: via: https://www.delcampe.net/en_GB/collectables/postcards/macedonia/macedonia-skopje-stokovna-kuka-564669975.html

Fig. 5: Nevena Brezoska, via: <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/12/06/architects-of-modernist-skopje-decry-retrograde-remodel-12-04-2016/>