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Skopje The Multiple Faces of the City

Klaske Havik

The Railway Station

It was spring 2005 when I arrived in Skopje for the first time. We came from Thessaloniki, and while the journey did not cover such a big distance, the trip took hours. The train passed slowly through the dry landscape, stopping in villages and at undefined patches of land in the vicinity of the Greek-Macedonian border. At such stops, uniformed men demanded our passports and walked away, looking at our documents while standing in the dry grass next to the tracks while smoking and chatting with their colleagues. Eventually, we would get back our passports, the train would set to motion and then stop again, a few miles further, for the same ritual to be repeated. Finally, the train entered Skopje from the northeast, it crossed the River Vardar on an elevated bridge and then stopped in what seemed like a transparent tunnel – the roof of the platform. Except from a few families who got off our train with bags and suitcases, the station seemed deserted. Our Macedonian friend who came to pick us up seemed surprised by the mode of transport we had chosen to come to Macedonia, as if travelling by train was something from the past. In the time of Yugoslavia, cities across the territory had been well-connected by train, but after the country had

fallen apart into different nation states, not much was left of the public transport system. The station seemed grey and dilapidated, the space under the bridge merely accommodated some cars, while a few vendors tried to sell their candies and cigarettes to the sparse travellers.

Skopje's railway station, designed by Japanese architect Kenzo Tange, was once the centrepiece of the reconstruction of the city after an earthquake in 1963 harshly damaged most of Skopje's city centre, including the old railway station. The new station, located to the east of the city centre, was a brutal concrete bridge, with transparent tubes above the platforms. Tange, the leader of the Japanese team that won the international competition for the reconstruction plan of Skopje, imagined the station to be the starting point of a large multilevel platform that would have entered the city, providing access for pedestrians above the roads that would be reserved for motorized traffic. The structure would be flanked by concrete towers and enter the city centre at the new 'city wall': a halfmoon-shaped chain of concrete multi-storey apartment buildings, embracing the south part of the city centre up to the riverfront. The latter was realized, as was the station, but the platform connecting the two interventions was never built. This



Fig 1. Skopje city wall, part of the reconstruction of Skopje after the 1963 earthquake, by Kenzo Tange (1965).

gap in the project has always left the station as a kind of alien creature somewhat outside of the city's urban life.

The railway station, at first sight a mute and deserted piece of concrete, appeared to have different faces. It stood for an ambitious city vision, a modern project with international allure, it served the Yugoslavian era, when cities all over the territory were collaborating and thriving. And as I arrived in Skopje that April day in 2005, it stood for the loss of that era, for neglect and decay. Later, one of the students with whom I visited Skopje in 2012 understood the railway station as a creature with multiple personalities. *I am a bridge*, she wrote, *I cross over the elements, I separate and unify*. And she continued: *I am a stranger, I am restless. People see through me*. The state of decay the building was in, gave life to yet another personality: *I am a telluric membrane. I am a place of habit, a place for survival. Animals live here. Animals die here.*¹

We enter the city.

The Table and the Bridge

We were sitting at a wooden table on the first floor of a bar called Piazza Liberta that was located just at the modern city wall, on the corner of an apartment block. It had dark wooden panelling on the walls with bookshelves, and bowls with shelled peanuts on the wooden tables. The peanuts were to accompany the beer, and one could drop the peanut shells on the wooden floor – the shells actually helped to soak up moisture and keep the wooden floors in good shape. Our friend had opened that bar in the year 2000. I knew her from my high school in the north of the Netherlands. She was born in Skopje but in the late 1970s her parents moved to the Netherlands, where they ran a Yugoslavian restaurant in a small provincial town. After her studies in the Netherlands she decided to move to Skopje and immerse herself in the local life of the city that was struggling to find itself again after the fall of Yugoslavia.

On the other side of the table sat the two local architects that our friend happened to know and that she wanted us to meet. Between our beers and peanuts, they balanced their words carefully, speaking attentively about the city that was both their home and their laboratory. One of the men drew a section of the historical bridge over the River Vardar. The new pavement of the main city square, he argued, had changed the section of the bridge, it was no longer a fluent connection between the northern (and culturally more oriental) part of the city, and the more modern Christian part on the southern side of the river.

After our beers, we accompanied the architects on a walk through the city centre. We stood on the old stone bridge and looked at the river beneath us. Even though it was way into the evening, children were playing actively on the low banks of the bridge, running along and in the shallow water. We contemplated the two different worlds that Skopje accommodated, and that the stone bridge brought together. Even in the darkness of the evening, we could distinguish the two faces on each side of the river: the commercial city centre on the south side, against the backdrop the Vodna mountain with an illuminated cross; on the north a low-rise roofscape of small houses, punctuated with minarets.

The Other Side

Hidden from the hustle and bustle of the bazar, we sat in the shade of the old birch tree in the courtyard of Kapan An. This typical *han* from the fifteenth century was a traditional inn, which used to accommodate travellers in rooms on the first floor around the courtyard, and their cattle and caravans on the ground floor below. The walls on the ground floor were made of masonry in a lively pattern of irregular local stones and bricks combined. Along the courtyard wall, the continuous balcony of the first floor offered a wooden ceiling where nowadays restaurant tables stood in the shade. On the first floor, behind the wood-carved railing of the balcony, the walls were covered in white plaster, and dark wooden doors gave access to the former guest rooms. The roof was pitched, with red tiles.

Water from a fake fountain in the *han*'s courtyard drowned out the sounds of the city. Today, cafe An is one of the *high-end* venues, where waiters bring the menu in a leather cover, and the same dishes are served as those at the little bars at the bazar, but for twice the price. There, at the small square in front of Kapan An, along the bazar, tables with red paper table clothes are loosely arranged. Stray dogs and cats scramble around and under the tables seeking leftovers or endeared tourists willing to share a part of their meal. The menus, if at all present, are simple A4 prints listing the names of some dishes. The waiters at the table illustrate the redundancy of these menus and simply tell their guest what is available at the moment. Both in the restaurant at the Kapan An and at the outdoor tables, the dishes are the same: spicy lamb sausages, grilled meat, stuffed wine leaves and *shopska* salad made of tomatoes, cucumber and grated goat's cheese. This is the oriental part of Skopje, which survived the earthquake to



Fig 2. Skopje Bazar.

a large extent. The bazar consists of narrow paved streets with small craft shops: leather tanners, sewing shops, shoemakers and potters.

Ever since my first visit in 2005, I have come back to this part of the city, enjoying a meal at the messy tables or seeking shade in the Kapan An. Steadily, gentrification has hit this part of Skopje. The experience of entering into another world when crossing the stone bridge to the other side of the river has lost some of its magic now that many of craft shops have been renovated and replaced by hip wine bars that are frequented by the inhabitants of the 'Westernized' part of the city.

The City Trade Centre

At the time of our first visit, our friend was planning to open a second bar, in the base of the modern shopping mall on the riverfront and she asked us for some architectural advice regarding the renovation. The façade of the new café would be built up of two rows of doors above one another. These came from a batch of hard wooden doors from a demolition project in the Netherlands and had been brought to Skopje for the project. On warm summer days, the complete façade could be opened to let the breeze from the river enter the interior space. It was one of the first café's in the base that actively opened a terrace on the riverside.

The mall, called Gradsky Trgovski Centar (GTC) or City Trade Centre, is a prominent urban block at the southeastern part of the waterfront. The building consists of a three-storey base with commercial functions around a spacious atrium and has residential towers on top. It was built in 1973 by Zivko Popovski, one of the leading local architects at the time of the reconstruction after the 1963 earthquake. While the main urban scheme was developed by the Japanese team of Kenzo Tange, many other buildings came to existence in the two decades after the disaster. On both sides of the river, some modern public buildings were realized: the Macedonian Opera and Ballet building, designed by Biro 77, a collective of Slovenian architects, was one of the most outspoken pieces of architecture with its

oblique planes sliding down towards the river. The museum of contemporary art was another piece of modern architecture, built in 1970 outside the city centre on a hill in the northern part of the city, designed by a group of Polish architects. Many international architects thus joined in the reconstruction of the city, while local architects also adopted the architectural language of the Modern Movement. Zivko Poposvki had worked with Dutch modernist Jaap Bakema, known for his functionalist and at times brutalist buildings in the Netherlands.

By now, the entire plinth of the GTC building on the riverside is filled with bars and in summer, the promenade along the river is one of the hotspots of Skopje's urban nightlife. While earlier, one would hear the rustling leaves of the plane trees and the slow movement of the water of the river below while walking on the promenade, nowadays the different bars and terraces



Fig 3. The City Trade Centre by Zivko Popovski (1969-1973).

compete with their speakers spreading popular Balkan rock under the trees. The scenery has changed, too. The riverfront on the other side is occupied by new buildings, erected at high speed around 2012-2014. Large buildings, constructed in steel, concrete, Styrofoam and plaster refer to antiquity, their

cornices carrying sculptures of saints and heroes often borrowed from neighbouring Balkan states. New footbridges – again with sculptures – cross the river, while huge fountains are situated on city squares on both sides of the stone bridge, and a triumphal arch was built in the city centre. The Skopje 2014 project, initiated by the populist government at the time, was an attempt to rewrite history and compose a narrative of Macedonia as a glorifying nation, claiming its heritage to Alexander the Great. The whole project seemed to happen in a flash – and without the involvement of the local architects.

A next step in the project was to clad all existing façades in the city centre with plaster on polystyrene panels with the same neoclassical expression – the City Trade Centre included. In December 2014, citizens of Skopje gathered around the building on a snowy evening and made a long human chain around it to protest the facelift of this modern monument. Their hug was heard. The building did not receive a mask.

The Dean's Office, the Post Office

The two architects invited us to come and visit the Faculty of Architecture the next day. From the Stone bridge in the city centre, we walked along the southern waterfront towards the west, passing the surreal building of the post-office, a remarkable building that seemed to be the result of a crossing of Japanese Metabolist architecture and Yugoslav socialist concrete architecture, designed by Macedonian architect Janko Konstantinov in the 1970s and 1980s. We followed the busy Partizanski Boulevard leading into the neighbourhood of Debar Maalo and passed a large orthodox dome church and an open-air market before reaching the Faculty of Architecture, an ochre-coloured modern building with a small yard on the side. Some students and teachers stood smoking and talking under a small canopy, on the flight of stairs that led from the yard to the entrance. When we entered the Faculty, we found on the left-hand side a small glass office for the caretaker, but no one was present inside it. We waited in the hall, which had

a light terrazzo floor, and plastered walls painted green up to the height of the white wooden doors, the upper part of the walls was white. Varnished wooden display cases with glass fronts were hung against the walls, showcasing posters of lectures and courses. The staircase of the same terrazzo flooring was painted yellow on the sides and had carved wooden handrails. We were taken to the Dean's office on the first floor, where we sat around a large table with the two professors we had met the evening before, and the Dean, a professor of urban planning with an impressive black moustache. The meeting was the start of what was to be a long-lasting collaboration. In the decade that followed I often visited the country, bringing students from the Netherlands, teaching at the Summer School in the mountains bordering Bulgaria, and at the Faculty as visiting professor in 2014. Then, at the peak of the Skopje 2014 project, I noticed that the conversations in the Dean's office became more cautious – the Faculty staff had to be very careful in mentioning the delicacies of the political situation. It was difficult to openly criticize the building activities in the city centre.

Some of the teachers and researchers at the school became close friends. Many of the younger generation had studied abroad and worked at internationally renowned architecture offices. Despite all the opportunities they most probably had elsewhere, they chose to devote their time and efforts to the local Faculty of Architecture despite the political and financial struggles. They joined the protests against the rapid facelift of the city, and they continued to teach their students that architecture could be more than the bombastic show they witnessed in their city. They chose to be in Skopje and make a difference, there.

In 2018, Slobodan Velevski and Marija Mano-Velevska were the curators of the Macedonian contribution to the Biennale, with an exhibition entitled 'Freeingspace'. The position of the modern buildings from the time of the reconstructing of Skopje, currently tucked away from the public's view by the grand fountains and the newly constructed buildings, was taken as

point of departure for a series of design scenarios that hoped to again bring some life to these former beacons of cultural and public life. The post office, for instance, was reconnected to the main city square by means of an elevated platform in their proposal. Possibly a gesture to Tange's proposed platform on the other side of the city wall, this platform seems much less rigid in its architectural elaboration and in the uses it affords. It bends and slides, connecting different buildings and the street level, while offering, as a proposed programme, opportunities for play. The intervention is one to be confronted by means of walking, climbing, jumping, bouldering, playing hide and seek, and maybe resting and looking back at the river.



Fig 4. Skopje 2014 development. New buildings at the riverfront.

The City, Its Faces

The image of the city that accommodates two worlds, Oriental and Western, connected by the stone bridge, has faded away. A buffer of new buildings glorifying a dubious past has been placed in between, pushing the real characters of the city behind a cardboard stage set, which equally hides

the modern legacy of the 1970s. Some parts of history are foregrounded, others hidden or denied.

If the railway station could be seen as a living creature with multiple personalities, this diagnosis might be true for the city of Skopje as a whole. It tells different stories, from different perspectives, highlighting different parts of history, following different logics, transpiring different societal visions. The city is alive in its many fragments, its simultaneous faces: in the old bazaar and the stone bridge, in the modern monuments along the river, in the music on the terraces, even in the fountains playing music and giving light shows. It is alive in its people, who use the city and adapt to its continuously changing conditions.

It is 2016, summer. We have just returned from the Summer School in the monastery in the mountains. Ilva and Dzvezda, two 6-year-old girls, Dutch and Macedonian, play with the water of the fountains, run among the sculptures, dance to music in the street and caress the kittens on the terraces. They do not speak each other's language, but they understand each other in seeing each urban element as an object of play, not hindered by any knowledge about its construction, about it being real or fake, belonging to one urban narrative or the other. The city is their stage, where different stories can be played.



Fig 5. Skopje 2014 development. The new face of Skopje city centre: fountains and ‘antique’ cladding. In the background, the mountain Vodna.



Fig 6. Macedonian Opera and Ballet, by Biro 77 (1981), framed by the new neoclassical columns and statues of the so-called Skopje 2014 project.



Fig 7. Model from the “FREEINGSPACE” exhibition, presented at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2018, and at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje 2019, curated by Marija Mano Velevska and Slobodan Velevski. The model depicts North bank of river Vardar, with the site of the Macedonian Opera and Ballet, and in white the new buildings of the Skopje 2014 project. The proposal presented at the exposition FREEINGSPACE was not to demolish all Skopje 2014 buildings, but to accept the current situation, and free the public space towards the river from the new colonnade, re-establishing the connection between the Opera building and the river.

- 1 Manon Tardieu. *Evocative Narratives: The Fictive Character in Site Research*, paper presented at the Conference ‘Writingplace. Literary Methods in Architectural Research and Design’, Delft University of Technology 2013, based on her graduation project in the studio Border Conditions, Delft University of Technology 2012.