

Skopje, Great, Greater, Grandeur: city between solidarity and exclusivity

Ognen Marina

“Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears”

Italo Calvino (Invisible Cities)

When M.A. Laugier presented the idea of the city as part of nature he expressed a clear intention of restoring the “natural” order to the chaotic and disorderly creation of the mankind as the city had been seen in the eighteenth century and prior to the Enlightenment. Architecture has accepted the task of “politicizing” its own product and has become the tool for control through provision of order and the identity of the city making it distinctive from everything else (Tafuri, 1973). But, at the end of the nineteenth century the natural order of the cities would be substituted with the order of the technological progress and the political agenda promoting the never-ending change. The concepts and the images of socialist utopia from the nineteenth century in the core of their ideology have the belief and faith in reaching, or better to say, building a better world through progress and technology, ultimately becoming the means of control for planning, ordering and controlling formlessness and chaos.

The urban plans of Skopje in the last 100 years share the same belief in the power of modernization, progress and technological development as the main driving forces in creating a better world. The end of Socialism and the end of the utopia as a basis for the construction of cities has also been followed with general disappointment in the power of politics as the force within the society that is capable of providing ideas and means of creating a better world and urban identity. The concepts, theories and policies of urban development that have been behind the founding ideology of urban identity of new greater and grandeur city have substantially changed the urban, social, political and ethical context of the city of Skopje.

The Meta-City

Skopje is one of the most dynamic examples of radical urban transformations that have shaped the identity, not just of cities, but has had greater impact on the emergence of modern societies in the Balkan region. The city has been part of six states in the last hundred years and due to the changing geo-political conditions it has gained different identities, clearly being the place where most of the history of the twentieth century exercises its creation and destruction. Hence, understanding the societal changes framed within the dominant ideology of the time and seasoned with geo-politics could give us the magical formula that should enable us to comprehend the radical transformation of the city.

At the end of the nineteenth century Skopje was a city with a dominant oriental urban structure consisting of an organically shaped street network framed with urban blocks that followed the natural or geographical logic of the site of occurrence (Fig.1). The system of

blocks was organized in small neighborhoods, called “mahala”, as the places of dwelling of citizens with various national and religious backgrounds constructing the urban collage. It is a medieval city in a sense that there is no distance, no separation or distinction between the citizens and the city. It is a city of instantaneous experience, a city without symmetry, right angles and large perspectives. This city is unpredictable, unstable, and vague - it is a city that stands as contradiction to the clarity and scrutiny of the European historic urban order and planned cities.



Fig.1: Old Bazaar in Skopje as the remains of the oriental urban structure

It is the city and the society that is in the state of meta-urbanity where the urban structure is inherent to the social structure, and development is observed more as natural growth rather than a change imposed by forces outside of the city. The identity of the city is inherent to the idea and the structure of the city deliberated from the agents mediating the relations between citizens and the city. This meta-city will be the main image and the paramount that all the later plans and ideas for urban development of Skopje will oppose in an attempt to create new and distinctive urban and national identity.

The Great City

The first major urban change in the urban structure of Skopje appeared after the First World War with the radical shift in the geopolitical situation. The newly established state (created out of parts of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires) was due to create its own identity. The new elements of the civic architecture were added to the city that enhanced its image of a European city, but it was the introduction of new urban axes, boulevards and ring roads in the urban plans from 1914 and 1929 that had made the most serious impact on the future development of the city. This change was also done with the construction of the

classicist architectural style, mainly for the institutional and administrative buildings and the creation of a new urban identity through establishment of new social iconography (Fig.2).



Fig.2: City of Skopje in the first half of twentieth century

This urban project was used to establish a principle of order intended to construct novel forms of inhabitation in the city and to create a new and more “European” identity of the city. The construction of novel elements of urban form into the existing urban structure of a meta-city had twofold aims: firstly it provided clear delimitation of the order of the new city with the (dis)order of the previous meta-city, making it an opposite to the previous urban and societal existence, symbolically delimiting the past and the future; and, secondly, tracing the limit in the physical space as a primordial form of establishing the settlement form that reached to the power formation founded on the new spatial divisions and new spatial order.

The Grater City

At the end of the Second World War the socialist idea was introduced in the city urban structure though the implementation of the modernist concept in urban planning following the belief that the urban chaos could be overwhelmed through the establishment of novel spatial order. In the words of Manfredo Tafuri (Tafuri, op.cit) the dynamic disequilibrium of the cities where the forms were no longer the absolute values but instead proposals or the frames for the organization of collective life will be in the core of the socialist project. This idea was followed by the reorganization of building production and of the city as a productive organism – considered to be the stage for the social and public activities. It was the public and collective life that would mediate and integrate the separate objects in the space into a meaningful whole.

The modernization of the city of Skopje was abruptly disturbed by the earthquake that struck the city on the morning of 26 July 1963 and left more than 85 % of the building stock in ruins

This unfortunate occasion was recognized as an opportunity to demonstrate the solidarity of the UN and of the international community followed by the presence of intellectuals and politicians from all over the world (Fig.3). In the months after the earthquake the elaborate international support would result in urgent development of plans for the reconstruction of the city varying from a new city that would keep the ruins of the old city as a contemporary archeology to the ideas for total reconstruction.



Fig.3-Model of the center of Skopje presented to U Thant Secretary-General of UN in 1965

The vision that prevailed was Skopje as a planned city under an architect's complete control with intention to create a total urban image around which a devastated city could be resurrected (Lin, 2010). The plan to reconstruct Skopje included an international competition for the city center, being one in a series of large international competitions for reconstructions of cities like Berlin, Tokyo or Tel Aviv. The design of the city center was

commissioned to the Japanese architect Kenzo Tange (Fig.4) marking the first export of Japanese Metabolist concepts outside of Japan and with visions for new Megastructures like the City Wall and the City Gates that should make a symbolic reference to the historical urban elements and yet create a new city for the new society (Tolic, 2012).



Fig.4-Kenzo Tange and his team with the model of the part of the Center of the city of Skopje

The development of strong imagery in the city center was coupled with a parallel concept of a greater city developed as an elaborated project for urbanization of new urban territories. The urban project now undertook the role of the control over the urban territory through promotion of standards and norms, demographic engineering, infrastructure and zoning in spatial development (Fig.5), exactly in the way that the term urbanization was defined (Cerdà, 1867). Simultaneous existence of these two opposite concepts and the limited resources in the period that followed the initial post-earthquake renewal enthusiasm had driven the creation of a unique image of the city between the urban territory and urban form and caused a limited realization of the plan enhancing the notion of fragmented urban structure.

The reconstruction of the city after the 1963 earthquake has obviously gone beyond the importance of the physical renewal of the city. Often it has been used as a symbol of international cooperation, solidarity and ultimately as a showcase of the potential and power of politics to produce new vision of a better society. In the words of Maurice Rotival, a UN expert: "the world now expects that the new Skopje will become a model city, built not for the present but for the future... for the world's sake, Skopje has to be not just city to live in, but also a monument to the hope in a better world" (Tolic, 2012). The new city of Skopje was

meant to provide a wide theoretical and material ground for the promotion of new standards and lifestyles through the design of the city that was strongly inclusive in its nature, demonstrating solidarity and cooperation as the new paramount in the international community and geo-politics in a world divided into opposite political blocs. The new urban structure that was emerging should have been greater than the city itself!

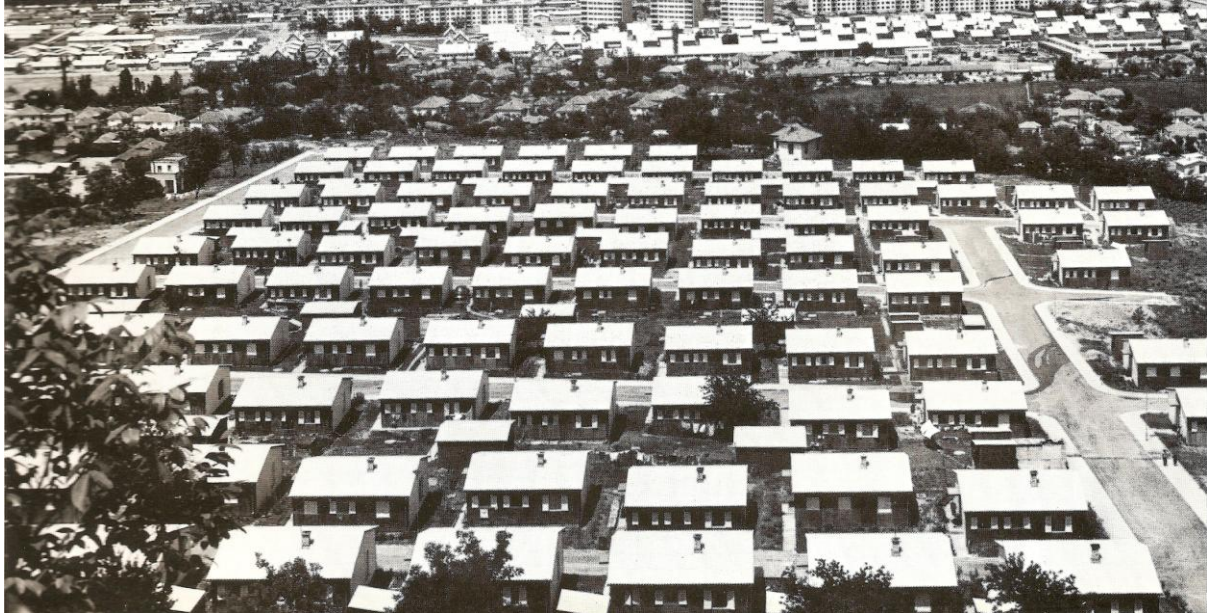


Fig.5-New urban post-earthquake residential developments in Skopje

The City of Grandeur

The time of Socialism has been often considered as interruption in the development of society and erasure of national tradition. The end of Socialism marks the end of the over one hundred years old belief that the world can be radically changed through the technological progress and engineering of cities. But the shattered dream has also been followed by disappointment in the power of politics as means of progress and the role of the public as a force within the society that is capable in providing the ideas and means of reaching the better world (Pinder, 2002).

With the change in the political and social system in the 1990's, followed by the transfer and re-examination of property regulated by the principles of commercialization and privatization, the urban and social landscape of the city has become even more conflicting. This condition, oddly enough, will lead once again into the "re-invention" of a yet another urban image and un-scruple consumption of public space. Almost one century after the first urban plan for the city of Skopje, fifty years after the devastating earthquake and, maybe most importantly only one year after the Greek veto that has blocked the Macedonian Euroatlantic integration, a new governmentally financed urban project titled "Skopje 2014" was promoted. Its main purpose is to "re-construct" or to re-invent the identity of the city and of the nation as a historic legacy to the urban territory and memory through museumification and "normalization" of buildings and public space in the center of the city (Fig.6).



Fig.6-New landscape of the center of the city with architectural additions of Skopje 2014 urban project

It is not too far-fetched to say that the “Skopje 2014” urban project ended up in reducing the complex structure of the city to a semantic nightmare and politically banal image with dubious meta-historical narrative behind it (Fig.8). With this, it can no longer be seen as a utopian projection but an acute and sarcastic tool to control the reality in which we live. It reduced the city into continuous urban image meant to dissolve the multifaceted structure of the city into symbolic elements such as the column, the wall, and the monument, envisioning the city as a vast, artificially lit and rich in color interior (Fig.7).



Fig.7-New Triumphal Arc in the center of Skopje

The differences between the historic layers of the city and the memory of the past have collapsed into a unique and repetitive imagery of the national grandeur exclusive in its

existence and emergence. In the practice of this urban project we can see the emergence of a politically dubious process that disintegrates into two dimensions, the formal one of aestheticization of the public and the authoritarian one that appropriates and transforms the public and private space into “sanitized” hybrids. The former concludes in the process of museumification or mediatization of the space due to the intention to eradicate the differences in the urban space and to introduce a dominant political, social or even national paradigm bringing the narrative of the urban identity to the level of banal re-presentation. The latter is established through the “normalization” of urban space where all the differences and elements that deviate from the publicly declared standards of what is socially and politically accepted as a norm and normal should be eradicated and are not socially acceptable (Fig.8).

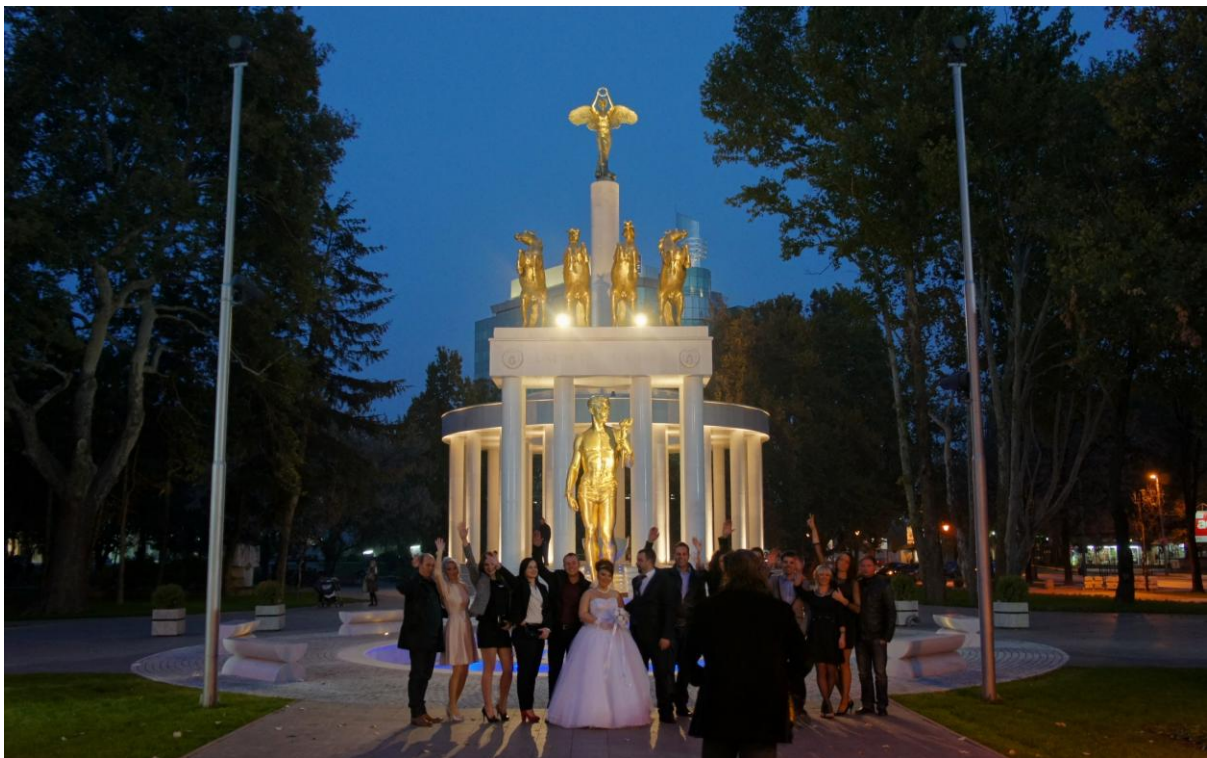


Fig.8-City as a background for politically desirable behavior

This political and aesthetic sanitization of the public domain through promotion of the single socially and politically acceptable behavior is enhanced with the propagation of an eclectic architectural style as the only acceptable way of articulating the architecture of the national and therefore urban identification. In its deepest nature this urban project is pretentiously exclusive exercising the exclusivity of the worldview (Fig.9). At the same time it is dominantly anonymous, where authorship of the buildings’ design has been concealed and unclear even today and since the tenants of the new buildings are institutions they are the ultimate generic and faceless users and clients of the building results of the project.

It is very interesting that the Skopje 2014 project, as opposite to many utopist projects from the past of the city, tends to be a hyper-realistic project being built for a period of less than three years. It is neither a proposal for a new city nor a utopian vision for a transformation of an existing city, but a clear consequence and materialization of the social disambiguation and disappointment in the power of politics to cope with the needs and challenges of society

in solving the problems while providing new visions of the future world. It is also a merciless disillusionment of the power of architecture, freed from the influences of urban context and drawn to the level of banal shape-maker that could not produce differences in the space. Finally, it is evident that Skopje 2014, being a politically poignant project, realized through construction of many new buildings in the center of the city, in its essence, refrains from architecture, and only attempts to architecturally frame the political project of a society faced with identity crisis.



Fig.9-Aesthetisation of the public space as an exclusive place - Monument of the Warrior on a horse

The City after All

The urban plans of Skopje from 1929, 1948 and 1963, although very different in their conceptual imagery share the same belief in the power of modernization, progress and technological development as the main driving forces in creating and building a better world. The central problem inherent to the failure of the socialist utopia, in the words of Tafuri is that “there can be imposed principles as an opposite to the chaos of the city but only as a frame for individual interpretation of the structure and not as an overall and overarching dogmatic system”. Only through acknowledging the principles of the system and yet criticizing and always challenging its concrete manifestation we can reach the complexity of the city.

The urban projects of post-earthquake renewal of Skopje coincide with the socialist agenda to impose control over the urban territory and space through the means of design, especially of public space. Urban development of that period, in general was like a total installation, where planning, architecture and spatial artistic performance were mixed together into a process of reaching an ultimate ideological cause. For that reason it tries to regulate, norm

and design not just the public space but the production of public realm, too. This strategy of urbanization has been based on the idea for potentially limitless, but highly controlled growth of the city resulting in a figurative image of the city. Therefore, architecture and urbanism of the post-earthquake period in Skopje were very successful in creation of distinctive public space of high quality. On the other hand the post-transitional development that occurred after the demission of socialism has introduced the idea of limitless and unrestricted distribution of capital and private interest resulting in a speculative urban development. Skopje 2014 urban project has consumed the public space of the post-earthquake socialist period and have conceptually, aesthetically and physically blocked the existence and access to the spaces and places of the past marking a sharp disconnection in the history of development of the city.

In Skopje, the city between solidarity and exclusivity, it is evident that when the society is faced with crisis, regardless if it is a post-war or post-disaster condition or even the political or economic crisis, it always reacts with the re-invention of the city. The truth is that the further the visions of the new city are from the context of the meta-city, the result is less socially inclusive, promoting the exclusive and exclusory social, spatial and political agenda. The inadequacy and the failure of politics in governing the society in times of crisis radicalize the urban agenda, pointing out once again the importance of the urban theory and practice in comprehending and solving the challenges of the contemporary world.

Cities are imaginary as well real spaces, constituted by dreams and fears along with the materiality of architecture and concepts of urban planning. Questions about the ways in which cities can be imagined and realized in a specific urban context are of considerable importance for critical comprehension of our societies. Most importantly it can help raising the urgent issues on urbanity of the world broadening our perspectives on the way we shape our lives, the society and cities.

References

Tafuri, M. 1973. *Progetto e Utopia*, translated in English, 1976, *Architecture and Utopia*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, The MIT Press.

Tolic, I. 2012. Japan looks West: The reconstruction of Skopje in the light of global ambitions and local needs, in Mrduljas, M., Kulic, V. *Unfinished modernizations between utopia and pragmatism*, Zagreb, Croatian Architects' Association.

Pinder, D. 2002. In defense of utopian urbanism: imagining cities after the 'end of utopia'. *Geografiska Annaler*, 84 B (3-4): 229-241.

Lin, Z. 2010. *Kenzo Tange and the Metabolist Movement: Urban Utopias of Modern Japan*, New York, Routledge.

Cerda, I. 1992. *General Theory of Urbanization*, Barcelona, Electa Spain.

Ognen Marina, PhD is practicing architect and Assistant Professor at Faculty of Architecture, University "St. Cyril and Methodius" in Skopje. His main field of interest is in research of dynamic 3D city models and novel structures in architecture. He is particularly interested in processes of urban transformation and urban innovation through hybridization in the context of transitional societies.