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Lozanovska, Mirjana 2010, For or against Tabula Rasa : how to perceive the contemporary city, in *IASTE 2010 : Proceedings of the 12th Conference of the International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments : The Utopia of Tradition*, International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments, [Beirut, Lebanon], pp. 13-28.

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FOR OR AGAINST TABULA RASA: HOW TO PERCEIVE THE CONTEMPORARY CITY IN TRANSITION



The Japanese architect, Tange's winning scheme for the reconstruction of Skopje after the 1963 earthquake, was manifested in a new urban matrix for the city. Since then, an urban planning institute reinvigorated by the historicism of the late 1970s has attempted to re-instate the pre-earthquake architectural and urban traditions. The paper examines the new historicist approach and questions its idea of utopia and tradition. Through the City of Possible Worlds MBMHP Venice Biennale project, the paper explores an alternative position on utopia and tradition for the city of the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION: TABULA RASA

Tabula Rasa has been perceived as a founding platform for utopian modernist visions of urbanism and architecture where much ground clearing preceded imaginative projections of new cities and buildings. Ground clearing was both a literal exercise of removal of existing fabric (considered to be in a poor state physically and/or visually) and a metaphorical practice of removing inherited ideologies to make way for the new. There has been immense critique of this approach in advanced western societies since the late 1960s paralleling a growth of several movements, including a critical regionalist movement and a movement sometimes called postmodernism (USA) and sometimes historicism (Europe). The critical regionalists highlighted the value of local existing fabric and inherited architectural traditions, especially local traditions in non-western geographies, and thus proposed a revision of Eurocentric narratives of architectural history. More emphasis was put on signifying practices and elements that linked architecture to local place, rather than on space and form. Several complexities have arisen since these reactions to modernism: local modernisms had already developed, since the 1930s, but especially since 1945, producing a non-unifying picture of modernism itself, but also a layer of tradition that can be perceived as modernist. In addition, sometimes historicism was confused with tradition. This is illustrated in post-colonial context where there is interesting and unresolved questions about the place of colonial architecture – is it local tradition or historicist? The result of this is that lines between modernism, critical regionalism and historicism require both more detail and understanding of historical contexts such as colonisation and in the case of Skopje, communism. If these layered histories precede the present city, how do contemporary cities in the process of reconstruction and/or transformation interact with the contrasting ideologies, and what new architectural and urban practices shape the contemporary city?

This paper will examine the urban history and practices that have shaped Skopje, capital city of the Republic of Macedonia, since its destruction after the 1963 earthquake. Contrary to previous critical positions that align the tabula rasa model with modernist strategies, the paper will argue that the historicist model negated the modernist visions and its local manifestations and can therefore be also seen to be working in the mode of tabula rasa. In the awarded 2006 Venice Biennale project entitled "The City of Possible Worlds," Minas Bakalcev and Mitko Haji-Pulja (MBMHP), state about the layered histories, "Each coming project abolished the previous one, and the desired ideal city meant negation of the existing one through the tabula rasa model."¹ This exhibit offers a possible new perspective on the

contemporary city in transition, and while implicit in much of the argument, offers a conceptual framework and perspective, and is discussed in conclusion. In examining Skopje, the paper will also refer to the reconstruction urbanism in Beirut.

TABULA RASA

Destruction of a city either through natural catastrophe or war has the poetics of a blank page. Architects and urban designers have called this a *tabula rasa* inviting new visions and new futures to be projected on a perceived emptiness. The Latin origin of *tabula rasa* is more literally a 'scraped tablet' a tablet with the writing erased, and this implies that the tablet was inscribed but the inscription has been erased. In this sense, *tabula rasa* is not simply a given emptiness but a condition that can be analogous to a destruction of a city in that the city had been there, but to varying degrees the shape and form of the city have been erased. The sense in which architects and urbanists use the term also implies a blank page – a state in which there is "an absence of preconceived ideas or predetermined goals."² Both of these meanings are not factual representations of the conditions of a destroyed city but are mediated by several processes, including: material and organisational traces of the existing city; representations of the city that are already inscribed onto the imagination of architects and urbanists (either positively or negatively); pre-existing urban plans that can be retracted for future projections; differential memories and traces of the pre-destroyed city; post-disaster politics that affect the possible directions for the reconstruction of the city.

There is no actual or literal *tabula rasa*, but the recalling of *tabula rasa* as imaginative apparatus brings to bear a particular orientation to the potential agency and impact of the reconstruction agenda. This orientation is utopian because it invites imagination for a new city as if on a blank tablet. This is a very different idea to fragmentary building as a spectrum of practices that would include careful restoration, reconstruction of building parts, insertion of new components and new buildings, that would accommodate the existing patterns, fabric and morphology. Lebbeus Woods's work on Sarajevo is motivated by the theory that a war that is destroying a city somewhere is destroying a part of a civilisation, and therefore is an attack on cities everywhere.³ Beyond the theory, Woods sets up a creative methodology for reconstruction practice, suggesting that the condition of broken buildings, their damaged state and lack of maintenance require new forms of thought and new conceptions of space. In proposing a series of interventions with the given names – *injected*, *scab* and *scar* – with the corporeal associations, Woods proposes an approach to reconstruction that is at the other end of the spectrum of *tabula rasa*. In this paper the 2006 MBMHP project provides yet another approach and conceptual framework.

Real conditions often become more effectively a 'clean slate' with the intensive demolition that invariably occurs after a natural disaster or war. After destruction buildings are assessed for structural stability and often demolished, ruined structures are also demolished, rubble is cleared, sites are excavated and

prepared for reconstruction. *A priori* ground clearing practices precede the potential building, but importantly this produces *tabula rasa* in such a way that invites more literally utopian projections because it effectively erases the destroyed past city and architectural traditions from present visible conditions. The image of a blank site at the scale of the city allows for fantasy and the projection of new visions of urbanists, planners and architects. For this reason war/natural destruction is not antithetical to planning, in the sense that it clears the ground for urban transformation. Planning becomes the ordering mechanism in the midst of confusion after a war or disaster. Lebanese urban planner, Jad Tabet, for example, argues that 'for Lebanese planners, war would appear as their revenge so-to-speak against a society which always showed an intolerable 'antipathy towards planning.'²⁴ Not more than 7% of the Lebanese built environment has been built according to predetermined physical planning.²⁵

The Beirut war period 1975-92, very quickly rendered the downtown area, around which the city was organized, into an empty space, and caused decentralization and a paranoiac dismemberment of space into more and more secluded territories. Parallel to this was the reconstruction project period 1975-present, giving emphases to the idea of building the imaginary city is a recurring theme in Beirut parallel to cycles of violence. At the end of the war the ground clearing of the CBD in Beirut and the connection between *tabula rasa* and utopia is represented in a billboard illustrating the new Beirut. Placed at the edge so that its foreground is an empty site of the once dynamic CBD. Flanked by the expanse of the Mediterranean Sea and the horizon beyond, the billboard engenders a vision of a new place. But the *tabula rasa* has enabled this to be presented as a desirable future because it simultaneously compensates for the emptiness and the emptiness has removed from site the past and the memory of tradition and destruction. Rudolphe el-Khoury exploring the idea of 'emptiness' refers to concepts such as *tabula rasa*, stating: 'This cleared ground has no discernible physical differentiation: all traces of streets and building masses are now erased. Also obliterated are the property lines, zoning envelopes, and other invisible but no less 'real' demarcations which customarily determine or inflect urban morphologies.'²⁶

Angus Gavin, urban planning advisor to Solidere, the company that operated the entire CBD reconstruction, elaborates that the "tabula rasa manner of the early master plans gave way to a more contextual approach which valued pre-existing visual, townscape and topographic features of the city."²⁷ Gavin sets himself up as an architect that values local tradition mediated through the framework of 'contextual approach,' in opposition to the modernist ideals and *tabula rasa*. In empirical terms this included a survey of 800 buildings in varying states of damage, out of which a total of only 291 were eventually retained. While this increased the number of buildings salvaged for restoration by 50%, the figure and approach is disputable according to architects concerned with conservation. More buildings were demolished before rebuilding began.²⁸ Moreover, because of the fragmentary approach of individual buildings, conservation of local contexts and urban sites were by default overlooked. One example of this is the Place de Martyr, which in a piecemeal, way eventually opened to the sea against the traditional inscription. Existing and historical conditions appear only like ghostly pencil marks, oscillating between visibility and invisibility, their presence and future uncertain, hovering between memory and history. It is

stated that most buildings were photographically documented 'to justify the demolition orders', but this equation between documentation as a historiographic technique and demolition as a constructive exercise points to that which is subtracted, the negative exercise prior to reconstruction.⁹ A narrative of erasure and forgetting emerges in the aspiration for reconstruction and optimism.

THE UNITED NATIONS COMPETITION FOR THE RECONSTRUCTION OF SKOPJE AFTER THE 1963 EARTHQUAKE

Here I want to contrast this brief outline of Beirut with the destruction of Skopje during the 1963 earthquake in order to examine the problematic, but also the heroic and utopian practice of reconstruction.

After the 1963 earthquake, which is said to have destroyed more than 65% of the urban fabric, Skopje, capital city of the Republic of Macedonia (then in Yugoslavia) became a centre of architectural activity. The United Nations held an international competition for the reconstruction of Skopje, inviting four foreign firms - Van den Broek and Bakema (Netherlands), Luigi Piccinato (Italy), Maurice Rotival (USA), and Kenzo Tange (Japan); and four Yugoslav firms - Aleksandar Dordevik, Eduard Ravnikar, Radovan Misčevik and Fedor Wenzler, Slavko Brezoski. Tange's submission received 60% of the first prize, and was asked to co-operate with the 40% winning firm, Misčevik and Wenzler, from Zagreb.¹⁰ Tange's Skopje master plan is regarded as a utopian project because it partially realised the theoretical innovations begun in his Tokyo Bay project propelling a new form of urbanism symbolised by the key elements of the 'City Wall' and the 'City Gate' in Skopje.¹¹ Layered on this sense of utopia are other dimensions including the way that the project expressed a particular international and humanitarian solidarity amending the previous tensions in the United Nations with the late CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne)? Mobilization for the reconstruction of Skopje has been called a precise Marxist 'revolutionary situation' that further congealed the Federation of Republics of Yugoslavia, and monumentalised the role of the United Nations for its almost fantastic co-ordination in a turbulent world at the height of the cold war (?).¹²

Skopje became a vital point of visionary experimentation in urban design, regional planning and architecture, a potential that Tange has noted, was assisted by the combination of the *tabula rasa* left in the wake of destruction, and a central socialist government that enabled the resources for realisation of ideological projects.¹³ This coincided with the beginning of the period of self-management and democratisation of Yugoslav society, its policy of non-alignment, and the investment in art and architecture throughout Yugoslavia. Under the rule of their charismatic leader, Josip Bros Tito, Yugoslavia enabled more permeable political and cultural boundaries; it became an image of a progressive yet socialist society, and in the mid-1960s, Skopje was its symbol.

A two kilometre square area in the centre of the city was the site for the international United Nations competition, an area outlined by a preceding regional town planning study (Doxiades company from Greece (known for its research through the journal *Ekistics*), and Polservice, a Polish group from Warsaw).¹⁴ On this square 2km format, Tange's design is organised around the winding organic line of the Vardar River running east-west across the plan. The river divides the plan in two: to the north of the river, contours of the steep topography of the Kale fortress hill add to this natural and ancient sense of place and civilization. To the south, linear and abstract arrangements of solid and void produce a modernist image. A faceted and fragmented ring of buildings – the city wall – giving a powerful shape to the city inscribes a centralized geometry. Radial lines reinforce a central city plaza at the tip of the ancient stone bridge that connects this south side to the meandering streets of the Ottoman Čaršija district via a series of lines and junctions.

But Tange dismantles the rigidity of a centralized urban geometry and its Eurocentric tradition by introducing a new east-west civic axis that is symbolised by a series of towers that culminate with the City Gate (the transport hub of the city) to the east. The east-west civic axis extends and responds to the regional plan of urban growth towards a linear rather than a centralized urban form. At the city plaza, it is met by a north-south civic axis, the Marshall Tito Boulevard, and a pedestrian mall formed by housing blocks. Around the edges of the two square kilometres north-south and east-west roads inscribe a square outer shape to the plan. A north-south freeway runs through the City Gate, which organises a complex system of transportation and exchange between regional and civic scale. Open spaces and greenery buffer the buildings and civic spaces from the scale and speed of the freeway lines. Tange's City Wall and City Gate are exemplary pieces that play equally as elements of architecture and urbanism, and their potency is due to a combined programmatic and symbolic force.

However, the international community has all but forgotten the project as reference or precedent in urbanism and in architecture, and there is no comprehensive study of the Skopje master plan as project or its partial manifestation. A dominant part of the local architecture and urban community has, at the end of the 20th century, engendered a blunt critique of the project as the cause of much of Skopje's problems as a city. Despite the enthusiasm with which the project was embraced at the time, and the way the people of Skopje proudly acknowledged 'Gradski Zid' (City Wall) as an identifying element of their renewed city, the 1990s urbanists have perceived the project as one of a deterministic modernist agenda that has imposed an abstract vision onto the destroyed fabric of an existing city. In their view the project has not had a successful manifestation.

Criticism of the realization of 'Gradski Zid' (the City Wall) has come from urbanists that argue its intention to produce a pedestrian zone does not make sense of its geometry that borders with vehicular traffic; that it lacks a cohesive architectural expression because it was designed by various architects; and that it has become a socially elitist block.¹⁵ Only the third seems a valid criticism. Otherwise, a very vibrant pedestrian zone is evident between the city centre and Gradski Zid, and between the blocks in

the green areas activated by shops, cafes, offices on the ground level; any aerial photograph or Google earth image reveals the clarity of Tange's gesture of a city wall, and the languages of the various architects using similar materials and aesthetic references appear like variations on a theme. However, a different position and perspective had taken hold of some of the agents in planning institutions, and in the university, and their agenda was to reorient the urbanism in Skopje.

New Urbanism in Skopje In the early phase this may be seen as emphasis on the local context and its history, distancing itself from the late modernist agenda of Tange. In discussion with Domenika Boskova, from the Faculty of Architecture, SS. Cyril & Methodius University,¹⁶ the growth in negativity towards Tange's plan was explained as a series of related events. A new 1980s master plan emerged from the Institute of Urbanism for the City of Skopje led by Kolev. It did not make dramatic changes to the 1965 Tange plan or the developments and manifestations after Tange, but perhaps it laid the ground for rethinking the master plan inherited from 1965. A reorientation of urban planning emerged in the mid-1990s, and interestingly via an architectural/urban competition rather than a policy from a government institute. In the mid-1990s a national competition was held for the central city square in Skopje, this was an urban project, but the area was much smaller than Tange's 2km central city area. The competition invited proposals for the city square area on both the north and south sides of the famous old stone bridge.

The winning scheme of the mid 1990s competition by team Miroslav Grčev, Vlatko Korobar, and Jasmina Siljanovska, proposed a neo-classical geometry that formed a closed square to both the north and south ends of the old Stone Bridge. It was perceived by the architectural community as a clear reference to the Josif Mihajlovič plan of the 1930s. The neo-classical model is further reiterated through the axonometric model which illustrated the shaping of the proposed building massing and the figure-ground morphology. Many of the proposals submitted for this competition reiterated a neo-classical urban approach aligned with the historicism of Leon Krier, and the emphasis was for a neo-classical imagery for the city of Skopje. The neo-classical shaping of each urban parcel was most bold and explicit in the winning entry.¹⁷

More problematic, argues Domenika Boskova, was the second phase of the competition. The area for the proposal was extended beyond the site of the city square, such that the whole area of the minor town ring was included for proposed development. Not quite the 2kms square of Tange's master plan, but up to the 'City Wall', and along the banks of the river Vardar. More precisely this would constitute demolition, re-development, and other practices of erasure of Tange's vision, as much of this area was already built since the post-earthquake reconstruction, even if not entirely according to this plan. The second phase thus extended this revised utopian vision of a historicist imperial city via the shaped massing, radial geometry, and siting of key 'cultural' monuments to give a different symbolic emphasis to the centre of the city area. A vision that illustrates a desire for a globalised mix of imperialism and capitalism. In addition, it revised some of the transportation arteries of the city, and proposed new

routes for the movement of vehicles. Tange's master-plan, aspects yet to be realised, and a consideration for what already existed and how this might be improved, was disregarded by a growing momentum towards new construction of 'old looking buildings'.

A dramatic shift in ideology occurred with this second revision of the master plan for Skopje, which in effect has established a dominant and hegemonic historicist position. This can be described as antithetical to the Tange model, and blatantly oppositional. But it also deviates from the mixtures of manifestations on the ground, that included unplanned and sometimes unauthorised construction, adaptations of the Tange model to existing contexts, situational and reactionary practices. It is evident in our contemporary ideological climate, such a historicist position is popular amongst localities that are keen to consolidate a particular form of nationalism – and this includes Eastern European nations transitioning from communism to national democratic governments, as well as Western nations that are investing in demarcating a nationalism against a form of globalisation that essentially involves migration. Such a historicist position is sometimes mistaken for 'critical regionalism' and/or 'tradition' due to its appearance of history. Here I propose that it is antithetical to critical regionalism and can operate in the same *tabula rasa* mode as the one it assumes belongs only to modernism.

It is often noted that the reference to the new urban approach was the urban plan of the 1930s developed by Josif Mihajlovič, a figure well regarded for his development of the city infrastructure of water and electricity still in use in Skopje today.¹⁸ The actual urban fabric of this time was never completed as a neo-classical vision and project, on either side of the river. The really built reference comprised two neo-classical buildings that flanked the stone bridge on the south side of the river and that were destroyed during the 1963 earthquake. The city square as such had not established a closed geometry imagined by the new historicist visionaries of the mid-1990s. On the north side of the river was the National Theatre building, but this was set amongst parklands. Beyond the National Theatre was the Jewish quarter of small winding streets and houses. These had not been demolished to make way for the 1930s Mihajlovič neo-classical plan. Thus on the north side of the Vardar river, only to the east of the bridge, where the Turkish quarter was located, two arcaded buildings had been constructed which followed the concave geometry of the master plan. One of these later became the Stone Bridge hotel, but enclosed its arcaded loggia. It is evident that in the history of the city, the literal existing city is not the only reference for new ideas, that visions and plans of another time, and another ideology become reference.

In this context, utopia and tradition, are articulated by the lines and codes of drawing practices and methods of documentation. Looking more objectively at the architectural history of Skopje would present difficulty towards establishing one particular tradition or one unified history. Accepting this hybridity and its limits of one tradition, the post-earthquake master plan of Tange, along with the many bold modernist structures, makes an indelible inscription and image, in drawing and manifestation. The historicist plan explicitly negates this visible, evident and organisational tradition. Even when the

perspective is towards an unbuilt past vision for the future, the gesture to reinstate a singular historical moment as utopia requires several negations of other existing or possible articulations. Such a negation occurs through the mode of *tabula rasa*.

This is similar to the *tabula rasa* approach of the UN competition. The UN report¹⁹ states there were not much of a town prior to reconstruction, and no town planning institute. This contradicts images of pre-earthquake Skopje, plans, sketches and documents.²⁰ Historians, critics and planners of Skopje identify several key dates in its history as a town: 1912 – Skopje under Ottoman rule; 1920s – Skopje under the Serbian Kingdom; 1945 – Skopje as capital of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia in the newly formed federation of republics of Yugoslavia; and 1963 – Skopje destroyed by the earthquake, and the reconstruction of its new order; and since 1994 Skopje is undergoing urban transformations as the capital city of the Republic of Macedonia. The return to a neo-classical aspiration in the mid-1990s coincides with the period of the disintegration of that other utopia – Yugoslavia as a Socialist Federation of autonomous states. A search for some other urban model to re-instate a different political ideology and the formation of a national identity is a condition for the architectural revisionist approach.

It is often assumed that the modernist agenda brings into conflation ideas of utopia with *tabula rasa*. An ideology about tradition and local place was perceived to be a reaction to the universal neutrality that modernism had manifested at an international scale. And yet, the position established in this mid 1990s competition was hardly regionalist or local. It presented a belated form of a postmodern nationalist agenda that ignored equally the then established 'local modern' in production for at least five decades, as a model for several typologies, including housing, institutional buildings (hospitals, schools), and public buildings.

What this new plan did not consider was that Tange's master plan was not simply an abstract modernist plan, but had already processed several reactions to modernism. Tange was explicitly critical of the relation between function and space typical of the modernism in the period 1920-1960, and thereby developed an approach that would give urban space shape and structure. This is exemplified in the faceted urban configuration of the City Wall, and the way this is transformed into an open linear structure via the City Gate. The master plan and the Peace Memorial Museum of Hiroshima (1950), a tragedy that Tange describes as 'mass-human', and his search for Japanese identity against the a western favoured Japonica provided the foundation for Skopje, which travelled through the urban vision of the Tokyo Bay project. Tange senses intuitively that the primal life force of the heavier Jomon tradition evident in the brutalist concrete structures is essential for urban recovery and national dignity.²¹

It may be a surprise to note that the jury of the 1965 competition praised Tange for his response to the local environment, and especially identified his understanding of: the Kale Fortress (a massive wall surrounding a hill of archaeological layers that is referenced by the City Wall); the Čaršija District (an Ottoman district of winding cobblestone streets); and the Marshal Tito district (modern twentieth-century buildings to the south of the river). Kultermann states that Tange loves tradition and certainly

Tange is known for his scholarship on the Ise Shrine and the Katsura Palace, and yet he does not want his architecture to be associated as traditional.²² Yet his attention to the Vardar River is central to his master plan design for Skopje, stating that 'the lives of Skopje have developed along the Vardar River in the Skopje Valley.'²³

CRITICISM OF NEW URBANISM

Concerted protest against this new image for Skopje, which dramatically negated the vision of Tange, was actively delivered only by a few architects and led by Živko Popovski. He believed that this new projection was a farce and the historicism was driven by a nostalgia for something that had passed. Amongst others, he believed that this was not a dynamic or sustainable approach for Skopje, and that it did not produce high calibre architecture or urbanism that would be valued in years to come.

The criticism was interesting as it came from an architect who recognised and wrote about the Ohrid School of architecture.²⁴ The Ohrid School was so named after the early 1980s architecture of a small town situated on Lake Ohrid (and awarded a UNESCO status), which presented a different path to the more powerfully instated modernist reconstruction of Skopje. The Ohrid School may be likened to some of the critical regionalism of other non-western places and considered the local building and symbolic architectural traditions. Popovski was hardly a hard-lined modernist, especially as his extensively referred to project in Ohrid of the Elderly People's Centre is a careful exploration of the encounter of modernity and regionalism. His criticism of the 1990s competition winning entry and the many competitions which followed that reinforced this historicist approach, was not related to a new era of architecture and urbanism, but how nostalgia and a revisionist approach can become a new form of utopia that erases the many variations of modernist city. Popovski's more creative approach proposes that the modernist city presents 'critical regionalism' with more complex conditions about the local.

What is not often discussed is that a historicist form of utopia as a return to one period in history that overlooks the complex history of the existing city is effectively a tabula rasa mode of thinking and practice. Demolition and symbolic siting become significant strategies. Tange's plan and vision has not properly analysed or critiqued such that its actual problematic aspects can be identified. In the case of Skopje, negativity in relation to Tange's plan and a few prominent public buildings, had already laid the ground since the late 1970s and early 1980s such that the citation of the 1930s plan was embraced as a new utopia. Unfortunately, along with Tange's plan, some radical and innovative architectural experiments did not fit this hierarchical imagery of the globalised imperial cultured city.

THE EXISTING AND NEW OLD THEATRE BUILDING IN SKOPJE

The historicist ideal culminated in a competition for a new building for the 'old theatre' early in the new millennium. Memories of theatre going prior to the earthquake were associated with the neo-classical

building that was destroyed in the 1963 earthquake, even though this was during the time of communist Yugoslavia. After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, it was not theatre or theatre going that was significant but an image of an imperial theatre building. Such a version of capital 'c' culture was passed onto a new generation in which global designer branding mixes well with classical facades, and was joined by a popular front towards nationalist symbolism, as an imagined solution to many of Macedonia's political and social problems.

The example of the 1979 actually built theatre and the competition for the new building of the old theatre in the early 2000s can illustrate some of the problematic logic of the new historicist model.

Especially criticised was the existing building for the Macedonian National Opera and Ballet, Cultural Centre, designed by Štefan Kacin, Jurij Princes, Bogdan Spindler, Marijan Uršič, and built in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia, in 1979. This project exemplifies the innovative and experimental approaches in Eastern European architecture. It is sited on the south side of the river Vardar, facing the modern half of the city across the river, and its service and performers' entry on the main road that divides the site from the 19th century Ottoman half of the city. The view from across the river is of a chiselled geological stone, large faceted planes cascade down towards the river embankment. The whiteness of the surfaces dazzles the viewer on a sunny day, but simultaneously draws their attention to the other side of the river. Along with the famous old stone bridge, this edifice, weaves the south and north side of the town, and thereby acts as an urban gesture.

The building preceded the deconstructivist experiments of the late 1980s and 1990s by at least a decade; fragmentation of the cubic form and the reference to the Soviet constructivists reveals the very different paths of architecture after 1968 in places other than the much-publicised Western Europe and North America. The angled planes produce a geometry that can be perceived as a play of the cubic form, a gesture towards organic architecture, and an interpretation of form follows function. However, it is problematic to interpret this edifice according to the signposts familiar to the narratives of western architecture. From a distance the building appears like a snow capped mountain, brings focus to the actual mountain range behind. The edifice sits in a landscape rather than within urban built up fabric. The architects were winners of a competition for the development of a large site into a cultural precinct including a music academy, a bank and shopping centre, a cinema complex, a philharmonic hall, and this edifice, the Macedonian Opera and Ballet centre. In the master plan, less of the sides may have been visible due to other edifices contributing to a complex of buildings enclosing urban spaces. As a single object it had become visible from all sides.

Collective city stories speak of the immediate dislike of this building even at the time of its construction.²⁵ It is uncertain whether this attitude was an exemplification of a general negativity or a particular targeting of this project. The building is not very well maintained such that its riverside entry, extraordinary in design and presence, has suffered damage and breakage, rendering a kind of undignified existence. By the time of the new theatre competition in the new millennium, the nostalgia for an

imagined 'Old Skopje,' reproduced in postcards, consolidated a public offensive for the actual theatre building. The criticism gained momentum such that the people who worked in the building joined in arguing that it did not work. However, an increasing discomfort around the competition for a new theatre, illustrates that the problem is not about the existing building per se, but a whole spectrum of issues around nationalism and identity.

The proposal for a new building for the old theatre marginalises the existing theatre, in a literal sense, as it is located on a different site (the same site as the pre-earthquake theatre); and in a symbolic sense, as it redraws the modernist image of the city into a historicist image of the city. The existing theatre is further marginalised and symbolically erased because other major public institutions such as the court building now in construction, mask and hide it from visibility, especially from the prospect across the river, in a direct contradistinction to its symbolic presence up until 2010. The new buildings do not follow the winning master plan of the 1979 competition. At the master plan scale there is outright negation of a proposed plan for this site. The architectural image evident in the proposed new buildings, including the court, are 'baroque neo-classical'. It is of a scale that dwarfs adjacent buildings. The court building is sited on a thin wedge of land by the river in a performative embankment strategy such that it becomes the new symbolic facade while it screens existing urban fabric.

At a forum of architects organised by Domenika Boskova to discuss the 2003 competition for the new building for the old theatre it was stated that the idea was not logical: is this project meant to be a reconstruction or a new building? How can it be both or try to be both? Documentation for the 'old theatre' existed and thus it was possible to reconstruct the old theatre exactly. The architects decided that it was not logical or a good idea to proceed with the competition as it was outlined. By this time the authors of the previous mid 1990s competition agreed with this in principle, and can presently be seen in public media protesting against the apparent results and momentum, ironically of their own initial strategy and renewed imperial master plan. The 'old new theatre' is presently under construction.

MBMHP: CITY OF POSSIBLE WORLDS

Prior to this eruption of artefacts and the formation of a meta-narrative of historicism, the 2006 Venice Biennale exhibit curated by Minas Bakalčev & Mitko Hadži-Pulja (MBMHP), proposed different possible futures. It is important that we revisit their project here in order to explore more creative possibilities in relation to utopia and tradition.

Contemporary Skopje is encapsulated in the Macedonian exhibition entry for the 2006 Venice Biennale. Four young architects under the guidance and vision of two architecture gurus (Minas Bakalčev & Mitko Hadži-Pulja MBMHP) explored the fragmented and enclave nature of the city of Skopje. Entitled *City of Possible Worlds: World=City=Worlds*, the exhibition addresses the notion of fragments within a city but importantly how disparate fragments might be perceived as a series of co-existing worlds rather than small pieces of a once imagined whole. As such it demarcates a position that is not utopian in the

sense of the word as

‘...an imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect.’ Nor does it deny the significance of utopia as a conceptual framework, but shifts this conceptual framework towards a plurality as signified in the word - ‘worlds’. This plurality does not seek to be whole, rather, to co-exist within the city. In this sense, it suggests that the city as utopia is a place that accommodates many ‘worlds’.

This is an inspired and considered project responding to globalising forces – political, financial and military. The first part of the project, developed by MBMHP, is the conceptual position, drawing from satellite imagery the sense of wholeness and the manifestations of fragmentation. Iconic diagrams, the round world as seen from outer space, and the square city as outlined in competitions, illustrate our inherited philosophies. However, the historical process of cities is also understood as an additive equation, especially as a new building is inserted into old contexts, and private individual investments become infill in existing urban configuration. This leads to the current global urban state of fragments.

The project then zooms into Skopje and its particularities, first identifying a 2 X 2km area, and establishing a set of themes for an index of the city of possible worlds. Here the project directly refers to the competition won by Tange as the 2 X 2 km urban area, a reference that accommodates the modernist city as particular modernisms within Skopje, rather than erasing the modernist city. It also positions itself against *tabula rasa*, or the negation of the existing city. Thinking about this position it is evident that the historicist position first had to establish the idea that the modernist city of Skopje was somehow cohesive in order to negate it as an existing city. The MBMHP project proposes that the existing city is not cohesive, but that its different realms co-exist. Further, the historicist approach proposes that the new city does not have a desirable unified image. Not only is this contradictory to the first of their positions, it assumes that a unified image is desirable. The position of the MBMHP project is that a unified image is construed via a capacity of the city to hold and even represent its plurality. Importantly, how it represents its plurality is vital: the sophistication of “world=city=worlds” is implicit in the poetics of the language that this is not about the popular and fashionable version of plurality as fragments or of one world fragmented, but enclave worlds that co-exist with and within the framework of the city.

Four strategies are outlined for the next phase of the project. Four teams of young architects develop each index: mapping – Mihajlo Zinoski; updating – Saša Tasić & Dimitar Papasterevski; reinventing mobility – Jovan Ivanovski; linking urbanism – Vladimir Petrovski. This design exploration is executed on blackboard with white chalk, giving the project a particularly ephemeral and yet historical nature, illustrating both the impermanence and impact of ideas. This gesture of drawing on a blackboard also engenders an ontological sensibility, retracing the gesture of drawing and writing in a choreographic and physical way. When installed, the blackboards extend to a 10m length, each team’s work is executed in a horizontal band for the length of the board. A freestanding model of the worlds within Skopje (of the 2 X 2 km area), 1200mm high, built from plywood and cardboard (all painted white), delineates each world as a deep fragment – chasms that extend to the floor of the gallery space separate one world from the other. The actual separations of the ‘worlds’ are deep but they co-exist within the city.

CONCLUSION

It is often thought that architecture does not solve the world's problems, but I think the best of architecture, compensates for what the world lacks. In this project, if it is presumed that the city of Skopje, and with it, the Republic of Macedonia lacked a creative and sustainable direction, the MBMHP project states, that direction may be the city as it exists, but reformulated through a conceptual architectural boldness and clarity such that its uniqueness and universality can be presented simultaneously. In the first step it proposes that tradition is how well you observe the local environment, and the toolkit with which you represent its complex history. In the second step, it proposes that utopia can emerge from such a position on tradition if the city can be re-imagined to sustain its plurality of worlds even if these are separated. The fascination of the project is that it presents an unattainable utopian vision on the basis of the chaotic realities of an existing city – in other words the city as is. It reminds me of that experience like the parallax view from a camera in messy chaotic cities: everything is utterly disorganised, but for an instant, a choreography of movement and rhythm, a split-second picture of individual entities in a connected world.

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