

P4 Reflection

Island as Common Ground

Methods and Analysis Graduation Studio: Positions in Practice. Skopje

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Introduction: Forming a Position in Practise

The process of formulating a position has been the main topic and challenge throughout my graduation year within the studio 'Methods and Analysis' and the topic 'Positions in Practice'. This has not been a linear process. Rather, research and design have informed one another back and forth from which my project has emerged and been refined. Throughout this process I have formed my position in relation to Skopje, the location of my project, as well as developed my own position in a formative process as a young architect.

In the studio of Methods and Analysis we are encouraged to take a well-founded position regarding the various topics that make up the place in terms of architectural, social, political and cultural conditions. This wider concept of architecture is what drew me towards the studio. Architecture operates within these wide breadth of fields, and it is therefore important to study it in relation to them.

For this reason, Skopje was the chosen city of the studio. Skopje is a heterogenous city, full of complexities and contradiction, and has struggled with its identity and conflicts throughout history. In 2014 the nationalist government developed an architectural project of a huge scale; aiming to redefine the city under a single identity by creating buildings mimicking the neo-classical type and erecting hundreds of bronze statues of 'macedonian' heroes (notably Albanian-Macedonian presence is ignored in these motifs, despite them making up a third of the population). This has created a huge disruption in Skopje and created further divides. Besides this, the country has struggled economically and with an insurgency in 2001 between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians which has left bruises that are still present beneath the surface.

Architecturally, the built environment is an interesting one, the conflicting ideologies can be seen in the city, with relics from the Ottoman empire, surviving buildings from the socialist Yugoslav era and the most recent neoclassical 'facelift'. Each change to the urban fabric in Skopje seems to come violently. Initially with the 1963 earthquake which destroyed 80% of buildings, to the following Japanese socialist masterplan of Kenzo Tange, which gave an image to Skopje as the capital of brutalism; an image which was foreign to the Skopjans of the time. Most recently with the Skopje 2014 project which acts in direct opposition against this socialist past-concealing the facades and blocking views to surviving buildings of the former era.

The Project

***Problem Statement:** In Skopje, the approach is to write and re-write the city. Within its architecture, a battle between oppositions is expressed. Neo-classical v Brutalism. Socialism v Nationalism. Macedonian v Albanian. The list goes on. Yet life continues amongst this, and these binary oppositions do not represent the true life of Skopjans, or any life at all, life is not binary, a city cannot be named under a single definition. The city's image is showcasing an environment that does not reflect the life of its people, which is vibrant, multifaceted, every-day, normal. The built environment of Skopje does not make it easy for social integration, with public spaces which are frequently bare and flat – dominating and monumental squares devoid of the layers needed to let life happen.*

***Project Intention:** The contested and nondescript 'island' between the old bazaar (Albanian territory) and Macedonia Square (Macedonian territory) forms the location of my project. This no-mans land is a place without stigma and therefore provides a key opportunity to create spaces for integration between the different communities. The island is made up of disparate built entities, the paradigm for Skopje's built fabric of opposing expressions. The site includes the old Hammam dating from 1500 during the Ottoman Empire, now the national gallery; the Macedonian Opera and Ballet from the Socialist era to the most recent development; Skopje2014 museums positioned along the riverfront. These buildings work in isolation from one another and the public spaces are largely neglected. The site harbours great and unrealised potential to*

constitute as Skopje's common ground- to improve integration and presence in public space, to provide the canvas for a vibrant, everyday life. The latent space possesses the existing ingredients, what is needed is the emulsion to make them function as whole. 'Island of Common Ground' provides the glue between the disparate built entities, to celebrate Skopje's complexity and encourage appropriation, integration and meaningfulness.

The Project: *My graduation project provides a raised platform, spreading itself throughout the island of transition between the two core territories of Skopje. Beneath its canopy it will house spaces to activate the site and its existing buildings. These incorporate structures such as food market stalls, cafes, restaurants, bars and theatre spaces yet these are open to change and adapt according to community and stakeholder wishes. These form lightweight structures within the strong surrounding framework. The project sits between the blurred line of architecture and public space- it aims to provide the constant within which the flux of life can adapt and change.*

The Process

The most challenging part of the graduation year was for me, establishing the chosen project. Transferring the multitude of knowledge we collected, analysed and processed into a single coherent project whilst trying to contend with the ethical implications that now became clear after learning about the social, political and cultural make up of such a complex situation as Skopje was a difficult process. The Skopje 2014 project highlighted this power embedded in architecture to disrupt a whole city. The knowledge we gained during the research phase both helped and hindered the process of developing a project. The increased awareness of the situation could be paralysing as I became more constricted and found at times to contradict myself. Once the final project was chosen this knowledge has become a help, pushing the project forward and providing a solid basis to make informed decisions. In terms of developing something that already has a trajectory, the research provided a strong basis to help make decisions and to alter the design in slow but sure steps. Solidly grounded in this research the project gained meaning and importance.

In terms of my research method to develop a project, I did not proceed with a specifically planned intention of how my method would work, nor do I think this would be the most fruitful methodology for me. Instead, throughout the research process I gathered as much information as possible in a multitude of different ways. In order to understand the situation from many angles; we conducted, as a group, many different types of research from cartography at a distance to in situ experience including photographic, journalistic and anthropological approach. The wide scope of different research angles conducted by the rest of the studio has created a wide body of material and different perspectives to learn from and incorporate. This has created an understanding that would be impossible to achieve individually in the given time frame. What I personally found the most beneficial stands out from the rest. Firstly, the field-trip, as the first-hand experience and observations allowed for realisations that would be impossible from afar and secondly the use of closely related reference projects.

The predominant method in developing my own project was with the use of precedent projects. After the contextual research, the research of architects and theories have taken a primary role in my research. With my established aim to unite various built entities without homogenising them; the project 'Plan for Frankfurt' by Candelis-Josic-Woods' became my main inspiration. In this project, a 'mat' form building spreads itself throughout platforms over the site uniting the existing buildings without altering the existing. Simultaneously creating a 'web' of relations connected via streets and courtyards. The strong tectonic platform structure allows the flexibility for the 'infill' lightweight structures hosting the functions to change and develop with time. This flexible model is relevant to Skopje as a city in constant flux, the permanent structure offered the opportunity to

provide a constant within the changing surroundings, and allows for a light structures within, which can be adapted and changed according to the communities' wishes. It also provides the opportunity for architecture to gain a mediatory role within Skopje rather than an oppositional one.

In support of this, when doing the contextual analysis, we derived that the GTC shopping centre was one of the few buildings/spaces that was functioning very well as an active public space. This is also a mat style building, with an emphasis on the importance of in-between space – or streets – to create opportunities for social interaction, strongly supported by the varying functions that are embedded within the structure. This provided further evidence that a similar project would work well in Skopje.

An example of a productive use of self-contradiction and criticism is what I experienced after P3. This was aided by feedback from the tutors and with the time to reflect on my work. With my project aim being to unite the disparate built entities and provide a neutral between the architectural noise; I then realised the aesthetic of my project- heavy weight concrete expression in fact prescribed itself to the 1960s era in Skopje of the Kenzo Tange masterplan, and the GTC and therefore was not the neutral expression I was striving for. Due to the vast scale of the project, this aesthetic was also overly dominating.

This lead me to adjust my frame of reference to seek a more elegant and lightweight expression. This lead me to the work of Japanese architects Junya Ishigami and Sanaa. I found that this work followed closely from the mat like buildings but with a much more elegant, and almost transparent aesthetic. With today's technological advances it is no longer necessary to have a heavyweight, structuralist appearance. This move helped my project to become more transparent and therefore to fit into the existing more seamlessly.

I am aware of the foreign nature of these references. Subtle differences to these Japanese architects were important to integrate the intervention in its surroundings. I have paid careful attention to the layout of the project. For example aligning the entrances to the existing with the new, creating vistas, courtyards and boulevards that complement the existing buildings and their functions. The project aims to activate the island as a whole, not just my project. As well this the materials have been chosen with inspiration from Skopje's different eras- terracotta tiles like the roofs of the old bazaar. White concrete – which blends well with both Skopje 2014 and the brutalist era. A steel structure allows for the slender dimensions, glazed infill provide an open and light feeling.

On the one hand I strive for the project to be open and flexible, yet on the other I have aimed to achieve the feeling that this building belongs in this place. I realise that this is a contradiction in terms. However the flexibility of the project to change over time, in-fact aims to make the project more specific. Places change and adapt, and buildings can accommodate for this. The possibility of the project to adapt in use, to add new 'booths', take them away or change their aesthetic means the project can stay a part of Skopje as time changes it. It allows for appropriation.

Overall, I found that my approach of using references to develop my project, both theoretically and in terms of design was fruitful in helping me to develop a personal position. I realise retrospectively that I would follow a reference quite closely for some time – until it no longer served me and then move on the next. This allowed me to also find what sort of project I wanted for myself, keeping aspects of the reference that were well suited to the situation and eliminating others. Older projects gave me the well-grounded theories I needed to develop my own, and the most recent gave the aesthetic inspiration and modern structural techniques to develop an architecture of elegant proportions. A symbiosis between these references, which at first seem very different allows for another, new model to be created.

Conclusions and Personal Reflections

Within the studio topic 'Positions in Practise' the aim is to take a position in the given situation and also to develop a position as an architect in training. To formulate my own opinion and project, the feedback of tutors has been vital, as well as from peers. Particularly within the Methods and Analysis studio, the tutors tend to have very different opinions. I found this productive in my formative process, by hearing different opinions it has allowed me to situate my own between them, to decipher what I agree and disagree with has not always been immediate but has become clearer as the project develops. I think without this, there are many considerations that would not have come to my mind and it would have been very difficult to progress the project.

My position in this project, and also my position as an architect is to take a stance as a mediator. To me, it is not about making the loudest architecture that counts, but the one that does the most to improve the existing situation. Aesthetics is just one of the multitude of ingredients that make-up a project. In order for architecture to have a positive effect, it must integrate and respond to a multitude of existing forces: political, social, architectural, infrastructural. Architecture never stands on its own but in a relation. The Island of Common Ground is both very present but simultaneously quiet, it aims to integrate into the surroundings and by so doing to integrate the people whom inhabit it. It is not a shy gesture but it also does not aim to provoke or disturb. Rather to build upon what already exists, to create a conversation where there are voices waiting to be heard.

The project is a contemporary interpretation of Candilis-Josic-Woods plan for Frankfurt. The approach of using strong references has allowed me to use already well- founded theory and application of the past and adapt it to a new setting, with my own perspective and to a new contemporary situation. I think that there could be a transferability in this project to apply to other locations which are also suffering from fragmentation in their built environment, in places in need of improving social integration. With adjustments made to align it to the existing flows and with adaptations of materials to suit the new context. The flexibility in function means that it is open to appropriation wherever it is placed, to become specific and respond to local conditions.

There is always more one can do, and the project could definitely be elaborated in its thoroughness. The vast scale has meant I could only focus on a couple of selected areas. Despite this, I feel happy with the final design, and I believe it would have a positive impact on the place and its people. Of course, you can never be sure of the implication of your actions, my project remains theoretical and only by being realised and then with time would it be possible to see the reality of its repercussions. However, I have tried to mitigate possible negative ethical implications to the best of my ability. By learning from the situation and from the past I derived that a monumental building would add further unnecessary opposition in Skopje. I carefully choose the site, as one that has a lot of potential to improve the situation. Yet not an area which has an existing stigma, which is already charged with tension, such as the centre. Instead the project lies between the divides of the ethnic majorities; in a no-man's land which does not take sides. This was also a decision in an attempt to avoid adding to tensions and with the hope to create a building block towards a more harmonious and integrated Skopje.