

GYPSUM ORNAMENT

What is and ornament and how it is perceived in Skopje?

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I INTRODUCTION

Architecture as it is multidisciplinary profession, as Vitruvius described: “The architect should be equipped with knowledge of many branches of study and varied kinds of learning, for it is by his judgement that all work done by the other arts is put to test. This knowledge is the child of practice and theory”. (Vitruvius, 1960) Although the role of an architect has changed from Vitruvius times, the core of the discipline is surprisingly similar. And while Vitruvius associated knowledge with science and practice with fabrication and practical skill, in today’s perspective it is impossible to separate this clearly as new paradigms of research are beginning to recognize the value of what architectural theory has done for millennia. The recognition of practice reaffirms the identity of architectural research.

Since there was no particular brief carried out in the studio, regarding site or building, research was divided into three phases, in order to better understand the city and culture. The whole research is divided into three phases that allowed me to get a grasp on current events happening in Skopje, which allowed me to distinguish my research question which is still in work in progress. In this essay I will explain how I built my research method, what heuristic techniques I used and well as reflect on examples done by other architects.

Skopje – current capital of North Macedonia (former Socialist Republic of Macedonia then part of SFR Yugoslavia) was hit by 6.1 momentum magnitude earthquake in 1963. 80 percent of the city was destroyed leaving over 1,070 people killed and more than 200,000 people homeless. (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1968) During the time of cold war, when Soviet Union was leading space race and Berlin was freshly divided by an Iron Curtain, earthquake of Skopje dozens of countries rushed to rebuilt the shattered city making Skopje “City of International Solidarity”. Numerous Planners – from Croatia, Greece, Poland and Japan were brought together with factories and inventory as well as manpower to help rebuilt Skopje.

Unfortunately, after all participants moved out of Skopje, further development of city gradually sank into corruption and Bureaucracy which later in 2010, were presented under the name of Skopje 2014, by releasing a promotional video. (Perseytube, 2010) This project was highly criticized by the professional community for its “new classicism” style and many monuments scattered around the center area without any logic to its location. New buildings accommodate secluded institutions such as the constitutional court, state archives and archeological museum under one roof, which are not promoting public life. New buildings of Primary Public prosecutor’s Office and agency for Electronic Communications of Skopje together with Ministry of foreign Affairs of North Macedonia built on the left bank of the river Vardar completely blocks Macedonian Opera and Ballet building and square. New buildings not only hide and restrict the possibility to perceive Macedonian opera and ballet building as part of the typology merging in to mountain landscape, but also radically changes the concept of public square by blocking connection towards the river.

Since the beginning of twentieth century many theories of architecture considered ornamentation as superficial layer and yet despite all the criticism from the professional community, broader public seems to have mixed up feelings towards buildings under “new classicism” as well as brutalist architecture that was built during the reconstruction of Skopje. *But how people perceive this city transformation? And is an ornament a superficial surface, that should be removed from contemporary architecture? And if so where one should draw a line to define where ornament ends?*

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

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Being not able to visit the city itself and working remotely at the beginning of the research correlation research method was chosen as it doesn't require an active intervention, while allowing to focus on natural occurring of patterns. In order to proceed with this method required two or more specific variables. As a topic of contextual analysis traditional family structures was chosen as one of variables. As a second variable domestic house structure were chosen. This included traditional Macedonian houses and socialist apartments, that were built as part of Skopje reconstruction after an earthquake.

Collection of this data, which included, literature, articles and drawings of domestic structures (fig.1), allowed to clarify the understanding of how family structure influenced development of traditional housing and village as well as how family structure was influenced by industrialization and mass production of houses, which then led to study of people flows in different urban tissues.

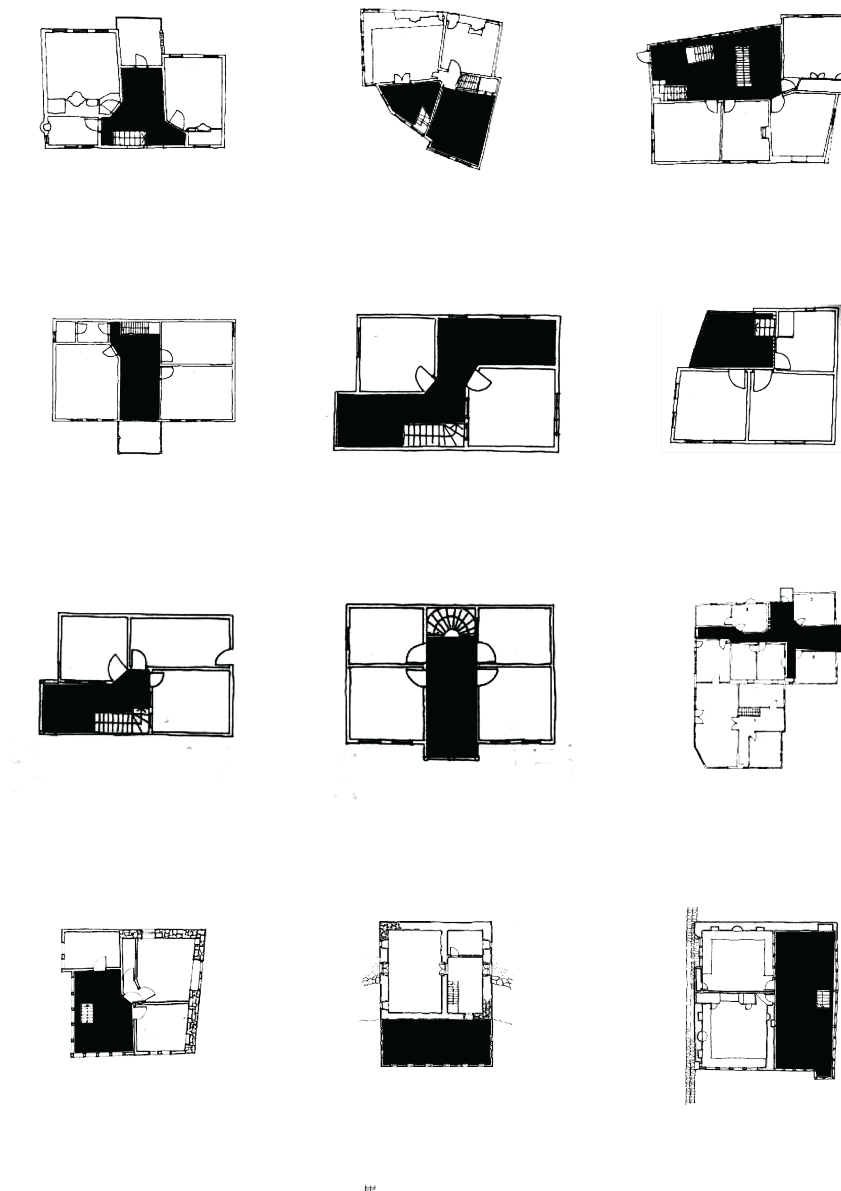


Fig.1 Chardak variations in traditional Macedonian house

Second part of the research was made on the fieldtrip to Skopje. Given the changed circumstances of possibilities qualitative research method was chosen. This allowed an active participation in research and mainly focused on perception of specific site. The main goal of this research was to widen the understanding of broader public perception. Site for the study was Mother Teresa square surrounded by Macedonian Opera and Ballet theatre and Primary Public Prosecutor's buildings. Given the characteristics of the site, it was possible to engage people within the context being studied. Fifty interviews were conducted on the streets of Skopje from people with different age groups, occupations and gender. The interview was constructed to have only one question: can you describe the Mother Teresa square? This specific question, allowed for participants to freely choose what they want to focus on to answer this question. Without the limits of specific questions people were able to tell their stories which varied in many ways, from memories to experiences.

After interviews, all stories were divided into three different scales: 1:10, 1:100, 1:1000, depending on what participants were focusing on. For example, if participant after a question starts describing details of the specific building that puts the story in 1:10 scale and etc. this gave a more holistic understanding the physical environment from common person perspective. By using multitactical approach, an image-based visual exercise called "experimental collage" (Fig.2) were produced that compiled information from the interviews. The main goal of it was to elicit "insights into what a person actually thinks about when asked to describe a specific site and what that space means to him/her and how the perception is different from the professional point of view"

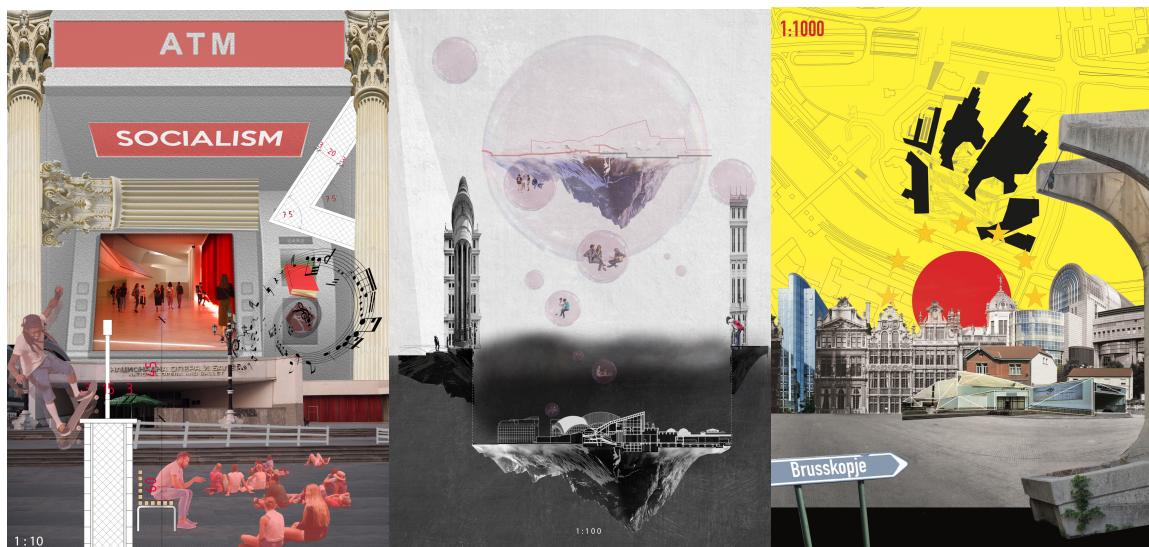


Fig.2 Experimental collages of public perception in three different scales (from the left 1:10/1:100/1:1000)

Third part of the research was based on principles of logical argumentation. In order to proceed, first principles had to be defined so it could form up the conceptual chassis upon which the system could be framed. The whole architecture can be described as an ornament as it is a composition of discontinuous surface/es that are indicated by evidence of division, or a contour or both. This is immediately a statement of essential quantity as well of essential quality, which shows relation between terms in the necessity which is embedded in it. After this it was possible to arrange the categories of ornamentation, which are: revealing, reflecting, and masking.

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Fig.3 Categories of ornamentation (from the top revealing, reflecting, and masking)

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

In “Architectural Research Methods” Groat and Wang (Wang, 2013) argue the limitations of traditional dichotomies that divide research into categories of “quantitative” or “qualitative” research, “hard” or “soft” science or “science” vs. “myth”, to be overly simplistic and puts emphasis on level of research tactics and techniques proposing a “cluster of systems of inquiry” as an integrative framework for architectural research. This cluster integrates knowledge from three main systems of inquiry, which are “postpositivist”, “naturalist” and “emancipatory”.

Correlation method is part of the traditional scientific paradigm called – Postpositivist. Where objective reality exists independently from the observer and knowledge should be obtained throughout objective observations, in which researcher should keep the distance from the subject. Correlation method fits into this paradigm, as its results can be measured and quantified.

One example of correlation method could be William Whyte’s study of urban plazas in New York City, after which zoning codes regarding commercial high-rise were changed. (Whyte, 1980). Whyte wanted to understand why some of the existing plazas were not used and empty, while yet others were crowded with people. Main goal of the research was not only gaining understanding, but also to prepare a set of guidelines for a successful plaza. Observation of eighteen representative plazas and use of numerous techniques such as video- film, basic people counting at specific time intervals, allowed Whyte and his Street Life Project team to chart plaza use as a function of various plausible physical variables. By using correlation method, they later identified the significance of several key design elements.

Another notable study was made by Joongsub Kim where using correlation research method he tried to understand the perceived sense of community among residents of a “New Urbanist” neighbourhood and a typical suburban development. (Kim, 2007) As a variables he chose to study two neighbourhoods, one being “New Urbanist” and one typical suburban neighbourhood but, both comparable in demographic characteristics and located in the same town of Kentlands. He conducted an extensive survey questionnaire, where he asked to evaluate the specific physical features of the design that facilitated their experience in a scale from “not at all” to “very much”. Where emerged patterns identified that New Urbanist theory should be continued and developed further.

Qualitative Research method is a part of Naturalist paradigm. It is more recent approach to social science, which is based on the notion that knowledge and reality is tight with social bond and multiple realities exist. Unlike Postpositivist paradigm belief in objectivity, Naturalist believe that knowledge is reliable when backed by “bold” descriptions and conclusions are transferable rather than repeatable. Researcher is interacting with the subjects of research and it is accepted that the (Wigley, 2001) necessarily to prove or disapprove a hypothesis, but rather to describe the complexities of it.

A good example of Qualitative study can be seen in Karen Keddy’s study. (Keddy, 2006) She used multitactic approach to study an experience of a hospital surgical unit from the perspective of the nursing staff. Main goal of this study was to provide a holistic physical environment and nature of nursing work from nurses’ perspective, rather than focusing on widespread tendency on operational efficiency in health care studies. She carried out a great number of tactics including in-depth interviews, location mapping, photo-documentation, architectural inventories, place-centered behavioral mapping as well as focused observations and an image-based visual exercise, which allowed her to focus on experiential qualities and conceptualizations of the nurses’ work and later to reveal “hidden activities many nurses perform which are not measured or even included in such inventories as work sampling” (Keddy, 2006)

Logical argumentation research method could be traced back to Vitruvius first book of architecture, with his proposition of: *firmitas, utilitas, venustas* (Vitruvius, 1960) Which is a basic trait that logical argumentation exhibits: narration of first principles. A first principles is a fundamental

proposition upon which broad explanatory theories can be built. A clear first principles allow for a clear large domain needing to be captured in a logical frame.

Mark Wigley's study in his book "White Walls, Designer Dresses: the Fashion of Modern Architecture", where he explores the most obvious, but least discussed, feature of modern architecture: white walls. Although the white walls were an expression of ornamentation dismissal in modernist architecture, Wigley argues that white walls are itself a form of clothing: "For civilization to progress from the sensual to the visual, the sensuality of clothes has to be removed to reveal the formal outline, the visual proportion, of the functional body. But the body cannot be completely naked as that has been abandoned. There is a need for some kind of screen that remodels the body as formal proportion rather than sensual animal, a veil with neither the sensuality of decoration nor the sensuality of the body. The whitewash is inserted between two threats in order to translate body into form" (Wigley, 2001) p.15-16 By drawing and arguments about the relationship between clothing and architecture, which were described by Semper and then Adolf Loos, modern architects has presented a theory by transforming the status of the surface.

IV POSITIONING

Although both the Kim and the Whyte studies use correlation research method to clarify patterns of relationship between two or more variables. Correlation method used by William Whyte's study of urban plazas used descriptive statistics, which simply presents or describes important relationship among variables. He primarily relied on graphic charts to present it, where Kim in his study additionally employed what he called correlation statistics. It is used to describe "the magnitude of the relationship between two variables" (Kim, 2007) His study is a causal comparative research that depends on establishing the essential comparability between two examples that differ only in terms of variables to which cause can be ascribed. Although even then such a study can only point to possible causation, because in this particular study it is difficult to establish if both neighborhoods residents moved in with equal attitudes towards sense of community. In that sense first part of the research in Skopje, that also employed correlation method is more similar to William Whyte's study. The problem with this kind of study is that it only allows one predict the association of key variables, as it is problematic, or at least in my case, to define the variables at the first place. Another issue with this kind of method is, that although it is based on objectivity, it not necessarily is so and that has to do with measurement ratio scale. For example, statistically difference between 5 and 10 is the same as between 25 and 30, although the impact of these differences can cause different results and is left to interpretation of the researcher or has to be backed up with additional variable.

Qualitative research method chosen for the second part of the research, allowed to form a better understanding of holistic nature of Skopje. As in Karen Keddy's study I explored issue of perception throughout interviews and an image based visual exercise called "experiential collage". Although qualitative research strategy can be characterized as inductive, many researchers points out that is rather a matter of degree on emphasis. (Strauss, 1987) Unlike other research designs are more likely to rely on deductive logic, Qualitative research tend to stress a holistic exploration of complex situations. However, Keddy's phenomenologically based study was conducted with very transformative school of thought, because she used multidimensionality, multistability and multiple "voices" of phenomena and her perspective seems to be floating in-between intersubjective and subjectivist paradigms. As this example illustrates this type of research have very few guidelines or step by step procedures, which becomes a challenge of dealing with vast quantities of data. The fact that researcher is actively involved in the whole process allow to emerge the risk for misinterpreted data. For example, collages that were produced after conceiving interviews with people in Skopje streets, are very much interpretation of told stories and can be completely different if made by a different person, as it is visible in the collages itself, since it each collage was made by a different person.

As for the Logical argumentation, it tends to generalize its findings and examples of that are very vivid in modernist architecture like le Corbusier radiant city, where he imagined a city for a modern man, who was a combination of a monk, artist, worker and intellectual. (Millais, 2015) Although it's undeniable that Le Corbusier and other modern architects had a very strong influence on current architecture. Although it is obvious that there is no clear distinction between research, or theory, and practice and it is more as gradient transformation.

Division of three phases in my research was also a gradient narrowing on specific topic which not only deepened my understanding of Skopje, but also allowed me clarify the foundation for further development of research and later a design proposal.

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