

THE "ART FORTRESS" AS A RESPONSIBLE APPROACH MODEL FOR REGENERATION OF SKOPJE'S SPATIAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

The City of Skopje, repeatedly fragmented throughout its history, is in constant need for redefinition and reconstruction of its spatial identity in relation to its cultural heritage. With recent developments that have rendered the urban fabric's historical and memory layers completely unrecognizable, the question of Skopje's spatial identity has reemerged in terms of responsible methodologies and approaches.

One of the activities within the ROCK (Regeneration and Optimization of Cultural Heritage in Creative and Knowledgeable Cities) Project was called "Art Fortress". It treated the urban and architectural development of the Kale Hill in Skopje, with an aim to transform it into an attractive and vibrant city part with all of its cultural, educational and recreational functions. Two important cultural monuments dominate the Kale Hill: the medieval fortress - Kale and the Museum of Contemporary Art. The exceptional historical and contemporary significance of these two imposing structures for the City of Skopje, their symbolic voltage juxtaposed to the natural morphology of the terrain and cultural diversity of the surrounding, have been largely diminished due to many years of neglect of the broader location of the Kale Hill.

This paper elaborates the activity "Art Fortress" in detail and summarizes the conclusions that have the potential to create a responsible approach model for regeneration of Skopje's spatial identity, concerning inter-institutional collaboration, academic and professional inclusion, public awareness, international competition and exhibition. Most of all, this paper elaborates the qualitative lessons learnt of how we should treat a valuable city fragment in spatial terms, through the medium of public space and a series of both "soft" and "hard" architectural procedures as a long term strategy and management plan for treatment of this national cultural site, an approach that we can surely rely upon confronted with our city's spatial identity in crisis.

KEYWORDS _ *Cultural heritage, responsible approach, Skopje, spatial identity, ROCK Project*

INTRODUCTION

"Urban life muddles through the pace of history. When this pace accelerates, cities and their people become confused, spaces turn threatening, and meaning escapes from experience. In such disconcerting yet magnificent times, knowledge becomes the only source to restore meaning, and thus meaningful action." (Castells, 1993: 559)

"Art Fortress" was one of several activities that took place within the ROCK Project. ROCK means **R**egeneration and **O**ptimization of Cultural Heritage in **C**reative and **K**nowledge Cities. The project involved ten cities, of which some were called *Role Model Cities* that have already experienced a transformation from *Heritage cities* to *Creative and Knowledge-based cities*, while the *Replicators Cities*, among which Skopje, are currently initiating the process, developing transformation programmes, finance and engaging key-players. (Rock/ About: 2020) *The Role Model Cities* have opened their creativity and knowledge to the Replicator Cities in need. The "Art Fortress" activity focused on part of the historical city centre of Skopje - the Kale Hill, in order to demonstrate how a responsible approach, based primarily on knowledge, creativity and cooperation, can produce a long term plan for regeneration of one urban fragment, that can further be used as a model for regeneration of the spatial identity of Skopje.

RESPONSIBLE APPROACH MODEL

Although the term "responsible approach" may seem easily understandable at first, it is contextually dependent and differentiated, as well as philosophically broad. In architectural context, it steps outside disciplinary boundaries, obligated to work as a mediating force in the societal conditions in place. Architecture is understood as a process of responsible recognition of values and ethically based decisions, bound to the idea of making a fundamental change in one particular place and time and honestly committed to improve the existing conditions of (public) life.

Spatial identity, as a concept, is not relevant by itself, but by a series of implications it has on the crossroad between architecture, people and their everyday activities. As vague as it might be, it is a rather graspable concept through the discourse of architectural phenomenology. The philosophy of phenomenology applied to architecture (of the city), spoken in simplest terms, represents the multiple levels at which architecture enables and qualitatively refines one's lived experience of space. At the most basic level, architecture satisfies the most pragmatic biological needs of man, at the higher perceptual level it provokes the human sensory apparatus through which orientation is created and managed, and at the most existential level the full potential of the human being is realized by engaging in healthy and stable social and cultural relations with and within the spatial surrounding. Exactly through the term "stable" in the context of space, spatial identity is unequivocally connoted with yet another series of terms as "continuity", "narrative continuity", "durability", "endurance", "familiarity". (Batakoja, 2019)

"To be is to last, at least to a certain extent. And this durability (or continuity) of our urban (and public) experience depends less on its explicit theoretical or ideological representations than on its being embodied in everyday practices, in physical continuity, in the blunt fact that we can, to a certain extent, identify ourselves with the environment we 'use' day in, day out." (Boomkens, 2008: 19)

Why is it important to underline that spatial identity is a relational category, placed in-between architecture, people and their everyday life and based upon the value of continuity?

Peoples' identities are anchored in space. One of the deepest human needs - the sense of belonging, is achieved precisely through these sensual and intellectual relations with and within one's living space on an everyday level. Without a sense of belonging to a common place and shared cultural values, we cannot expect to have citizens who would be mobilized as a collective, motivated to participate and vigilant for change towards progress. The citizens' commitment to one city is intrinsically linked to this right to belong in one place, to live in one place, to breed, to remember and

transmit, to narrate this value of collective memory to their offspring and in that way to provide cultural ecology, sustainability of the idea of one city. Without providing a sense of belonging, the city cannot proudly carry the category of citizenship, but a selfish enough and passive enough mass of people for the city to continue to crumble under the transitional model of legalized thefts, dubious location assignments, privatizations, bribing, mass emigration, that have been prevailing our Macedonian context for decades. Due to these negative processes academically treated under the name of "post-socialist transition" (going mad), Skopje lost most of its historical fragments of the urban fabric that had the potential to sustain the cultural memory of the city with the values of "stability", "continuity", "narrative continuity", "durability", "endurance", "familiarity". (Batakoja, 2011)



_ Figure 1: Skopje in 2007 and 2015: The Accelerating Pace of Fracturing Spatial Identity (Personal Archive of Meri Batakoja; Above: Unidentified author; Below: Meri Batakoja: photo taken from the same perspective)

That is why the action of "Art Fortress" chose to work with a fragment of the historical city centre of Skopje - the Kale Hill that can still imply the idea of valuable endurance and therefore represents rarity in the fractured image of the City of Skopje. Honestly believing that knowledge becomes the only source for the restoration of meaning, this action was research-based and creatively-driven to create a relevant database of theoretical, historical, institutional/statutory documents and to provoke meaningful actions for the professional and general public, in order to shape our collective thought about one place of great importance suited for the future.



_ Figure 2 and 3: Kale Hill as Rarity in the Fractured Image of the City of Skopje (Author: Maja Janevska Ilieva for the project of Cultural Fortress curated by Jovan Ivanovski and Zoran Petrovski)

KALE HILL: THEORETICAL DATABASE

Kale Hill unites at least five thematic layers important for the nurturing of the collective thought of the City of Skopje and for understanding its unique potential to grow into an "Art Fortress" - a cultural key point of Skopje.

The Endurance in the City Planning History as Continuity of Architectural Thought

Kale Hill persists in the urban plans from the beginning of the 20th century as a "conceptual cross-road" between the traditional Balkan city on the left side of the River Vardar, and the strive towards "europeanisation" on the right side of the River Vardar. As early as 1914, in the first urban plan of Dimitrije Leko, it becomes a core in the appearance of the city - an acropolis with a royal palace, a military chief-command and university buildings reached from the lower town through a grand flight of stairs. The plan of Josif Mihajlovic from 1929 emphasizes the meaning of Kale Hill as an acropolis of knowledge, where the university, student dormitories and the building of the scientific society are located. In the late forties, the plan of Ludjek Kubes marks the area of Kale Hill for a museum complex. (Korobar, 2016: 12-15) The competition entry by Kenzo Tange, following the disastrous earthquake in 1963, proposes two megastructures for functional and symbolical uprising of Skopje, one of which is named "City Wall" and based upon the idea of continuation of the Kale Hill - the medieval citadel, towards a new, contemporary and metaphorical one, linked together with a raised passageway, enclosing the "heart of the city".



_ Figure 4: Kale Hill (the green area in the upper left quadrant) in the entry of Kenzo Tange for the International Competition for Reconstruction of Skopje's Central Area in 1965 (In 1970. Skopje Resurgent. The Story of a United Nations Special Fund Town Planning Project. United Nations: New York.)

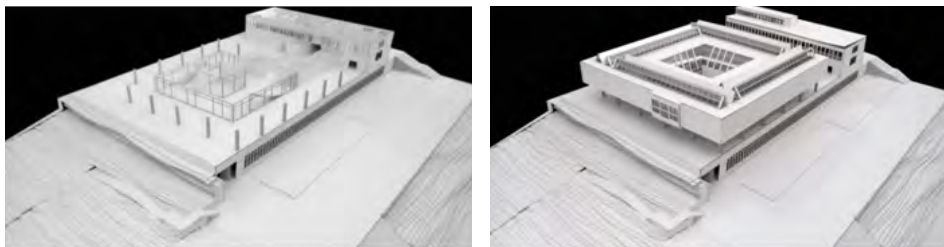
The Natural Landscape as the Most Constant Impression in the Backdrop of City Architecture

Kale Hill is one of many hills and the tallest elevation on the north side of the city that shapes the recognizable natural contour of the City of Skopje, whose sunkenness of the valley rises gradually towards the Skopska Crna Gora Mountain. It follows the flow of the Vardar River on the north-south axis and thus provides special visual qualities. Kale can be concurrently experienced as a vast deserted rocky island, the figure of which dramatically rises over the city skyline, but also as a mild picturesque slope along which the houses of the oldest neighborhoods of Skopje are gently dispersed. (Ivanovski, 2016: 20) The obstacle of representing a topographical and a physical barrier, proved to be the single reason why we still have it as a recognizable city entity. Due to the rare aquatic fossils

found under the sedimentary rocks, as well as of its role in maintaining local biodiversity, the site of Kale Hill is designated as a protected area under the category of Natural Monument. (Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning, 2020)

The Aspect of Being an Important National Architectural Ensemble with Monuments of Culture and Archaeological Sites

Kale Hill is consisted of the partially reconstructed byzantine Kale Fortress wall (the oldest parts dating back to the 6th century), the archaeological remnants in its immediate vicinity (the oldest objects dating back to 3000 BC) and the Museum of Contemporary Art (1970). The Kale Fortress area is the oldest material artifact present in our everyday lives in the city center of Skopje. The Museum of Contemporary Art speaks of yet another very important momentum in Skopje's history - that of the post tragic earthquake reconstruction after 1963 that laid the foundations of the contemporary city based on the values of world solidarity. It was initiated as an institution in 1964 due to the international art associations that called upon the artists of the world to assist in creating a collection of artworks, by which they would support the vision of the city reconstruction. (Museum of Contemporary Art, 2020) The building itself is a solidarity gift from Poland. In 1966, the work by the group "Tigri", including Waław Kłyszewski, Jerzy Mokrzyński and Eugeniusz Wierzbicki, already renowned Polish architects at the time, won the anonymous competition announced in Warsaw and financed by the Polish Government. (Ivanovska Deskova, 2016: 16) The cultural significance of the Museum of Contemporary Art building arises from this unique context it was initiated in, but it is complemented by the excellence of its architecture. The image of the deserted hill above which a lonely white building floats is an exceptionally powerful representation which in being completed and final is so strongly imprinted in the visual imaginarium of Skopje's citizens, that it renders the space remarkably delicate for any architectural consideration. (Ivanovski, 2016: 21) The Museum of Contemporary Art building is also significant through the lens of museum typology, representing a recognizable echo of Le Corbusier-ian museums based upon the square as a figure. The square is further divided into a central space and a circuit gallery immersed in quality diffuse daylight, coming from the well-designed skylight.



_ Figure 5 and 6: Analytical Model of the Museum of Contemporary Art Building in Skopje (Authors: Elena Andonova and Natalija Veselinova for the subject of Architectural Design 4 under mentorship of Aneta Hristova Popovska and Meri Batakoja)

Everyday life specificity speaks of the culturally diverse surrounding, with the vibrant and popular Old Bazaar dedicated to commercial and trading activities just underneath the Kale Hill and the socially vulnerable population at its boundaries. The art enthusiasts circulating the Kale Fortress and the Museum of Contemporary Art just add to the fact that Kale Hill is a sort of spontaneous "social condenser". In terms of accessibility of the area, there is an urgent necessity to improve the connectivity of Kale Hill with the neighboring parts of the city in terms of infrastructure, both traffic and pedestrian, thus contributing towards this unique cohabitation.

Jurisdictional organization

Several institutions have jurisdiction over the territory of the Kale Hill: the Museum of Contemporary

Art, the local government of the City of Skopje, the Cultural Heritage Protection Office and Conservation Centre under the Ministry of Culture and the Department of Nature under the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning of Republic of North Macedonia. The local government and the Museum of Contemporary Art are landowners, while the others are both creators and supervisors of the legal framework for protection of the territory of Kale Hill. (Ministry of Culture, Cultural Heritage Protection Office, 2020)

"ART FORTRESS": POOL OF IDEAS FOR LONG TERM GOALS

In order to give voice to the confirmed meaning of Kale Hill for regeneration of Skopje's spatial identity, to provoke inter-institutional collaboration and to gather multiple perspectives and ideas, an International Competition was launched in April 2019.

This architectural competition was innovatively designed around the criteria of canalizing the perception of the designers through multiple scales. As an example, while the project location (L2) was precisely defined, one of the design requirements was for the participants to also research the city area in the immediate vicinity to the project location (L2), for the purpose of developing a deeper concept for conceptual and infrastructural position of the Kale Hill in today's city center. This broader location (L1), in the outer area of the project location (L2), was expected to be defined independently by the competition participants, depending on their scope of perception. The participants were also asked to study the inner area of project location (L2) and to recognize and value specific locations (L3) for developing concepts of "populating" the space with a few (optimally between 2 and 3) temporary constructions of the pavilion type. The pavilions should represent new points of public interest and in addition to accepting "museum" contents, the pavilions should be open to other possibilities, i.e. enriched or transformed into other temporary uses. By giving the task open boundaries, it encouraged readings as diverse as possible.



_ Figure 7 and 8: Projects Awarded First Prize (Excerpts from the competition proposals; Left: "SO 162", project by Aleksandra Shulevska and Kristof Schlüßler, architects from Berlin; Right: "Modul", project by Ana Rafailovska, Marija Antic Nikolova, Lidija Ristovska, and Nevenka Mancheva Adzievska, architects from Skopje.)

The architectural competition, as the most important institution of the architectural profession for wide and fair competitiveness of ideas, was either completely abandoned in the last decade or grossly abused through various centers of authority in a local context. The members of the Jury, because of the above-mentioned reasons, were carefully selected and consisted of dominantly academic

profiles from the fields of architectural design, architectural history and urbanism, with the participation of the institutions of interest, the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Cultural Heritage Protection Office. Seventeen teams participated in the competition for the design of a conceptual architectural and urban solution for arrangement of the Kale Hill in Skopje until the deadline of 15 May 2019. Working in two separate sessions for evaluation of the received works, the jury decided to award two equal first prizes to the works under the code "SO 162", project by Aleksandra Shulevska and Kristof Schlüßler, architects from Berlin and "Modul", project by Ana Rafailovska, Marija Antic Nikolova, Lidija Ristovska, and Nevenka Mancheva Adzievska, architects from Skopje. The public exhibition entitled "Art Fortress: International Competition for Preliminary Urban and Architectural Development Design for Arrangement of the Kale Hill in Skopje" showcased the resulting conceptual proposals in all of the seventeen projects during October 2019. (Museum of Contemporary Art, 2020) During the evaluation process of the seventeen projects, we discovered a pool of ideas from which not only the criteria for the winning proposals were extracted, but also a list of long term goals that should be followed by the institutions of interest:

1/ Bold and innovative, but at the same time simple and feasible ideas and concepts for cultivating the Kale Hill into "Art Fortress" should be appreciated, with underlined public interest, mostly delivered by a research-based and creatively-driven perception of the inner and outer area of the project location.

2/ Clear landscape tendency should become the main priority while maintaining low urban density, reducing traffic, emphasizing the pedestrian mobility;

An architectural solution of new programmatic zoning of the site and a system of paths and movement that offers high quality connections with the surrounding area;

Adding a strong identity landscape theme to the whole hill by planting local, indigenous vegetation that emphasizes the already existing character and aesthetics of the space, but provide a new memorable image.

3/ A museum garden could be established with designs that do not confront the scale of the Museum of Contemporary Art building in any way;

Designs that have a character of installations in space; on the boundary between architecture and art; with a strong reflection of the potentials and aesthetics of the Museum surroundings.

4/ An institutional solution for removal of the substandard structures in the space between the medieval Kale Fortress and the Museum of Contemporary Art building must be found.

5/ The current state of the Museum of Contemporary Art should be evaluated in comparison to its original authentic state; an inventory of past alternations and decisions for restoration of its original condition as a modern architectural heritage building should be prepared.

The comprehensive records of the building's past and current condition should result in the preparation of the first conservation management plan for modern architecture in the country.

6/Jurisdictional ReOrganization

Theoretically, multiple national institutions with jurisdiction over a single territory could provide multiple shields of protection for a valuable city fragment. However, in reality, this phenomenon showed only disadvantages, mostly due to missing substantial communication and committed collaboration towards common goals and objectives. Even if inter-institutional collaboration is achieved within the ROCK Project, a massive bureaucratic barrier is faced in the process of implementation of the desired results. This condition alarms once again that a jurisdictional reorganization that will observe the territory of Kale Hill as a totality of heritage, as a single common good, is necessary.

"We need to ask ourselves, in any given time, in whatever regime (state governance): who takes care of the public, the common food? It could not be the Government, or any ministry, because they're not experts for that. To understand the problem with the "public", we must understand that architectural design offices in Yugoslavia came from construction companies. So, they designed in line with what the companies manufactured, and that is how in time they got accustomed to only satisfy the conditions set. ... At the same time, the

City Institute for Urbanism was established, which was assigned with the task to take care of general affairs. But, the poor thing flopped, the state no longer had the money to sustain it and there were no orders. It speaks of the unconsciousness of the management, of the state management, that the institution tasked with taking care of the common good must remain.” (Guleski, 2018: 93)

CONCLUSIONS

The regeneration of Skopje's fractured spatial identity will be a long process and partially impossible, since the scope of the change is so big and radical that it almost completely squeezes the historical and memory layers.

This paper aims to call for a responsibility-approach model for regeneration of important fragments of Skopje, with the case study of Kale Hill based upon clear criteria for recognition of their collective significance, such as:

- The endurance in the city planning history as continuity of architectural thought;
- The natural landscape as the most constant impression in the backdrop of city architecture;
- The aspect of being an important national architectural ensemble with monuments of culture and archaeological sites;
- The everyday life specificity.

On the part of "Jurisdictional organization", there is an evident ignorant, even mechanical distribution of authority over important fragments of the city that seeks urgent systemic change.

The significance of the phenomenon of Skopje requires international recognition, due to the need for a fresh perspective and disciplinary experience, in order to start long-term processes, not one-time design solutions.

As for turning the Kale Hill into a contemporary "Art Fortress", architecture should be used as the main tool for space cultivation with its focus on openness and accessibility, programmatic and infrastructural improvement, strengthening the landscape identity by maintaining local biodiversity, establishing a museum garden and preparing a conservation management plan for the Museum of Contemporary Art building that will finally recognize it as high-level modern architectural heritage.

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