

RECLAIMING THE OLD INTO THE NEW CITY CONCEPT: REVISITING THE “NEIGHBOURHOOD UNIT” CONCEPT AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR THE 15-MINUTE CITY MODEL - A CASE STUDY OF “DOMCHE” IN SKOPJE

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines and compares the two planning concepts based on policies of decentralisation and sustainable development, one from the period of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, part of the SFRY, and the second derived from different current political and planning strategies. Although the two periods have distinctively different features, the two concepts seem to have more in common than they differentiate.

Namely, the paper examines the “neighbourhood unit” concept, which was incorporated into the planning system of the cities in former Yugoslavia, and the newly recognized “15-minute city” concept, both aiming at the promotion of liveable and sustainable urban environments. The concept of a “neighbourhood unit”, was defined as a basic urban planning unit for the residential city’s areas, a social territorial community with the function of meeting the daily needs of the residents and a self-governing organisation of citizens. The “15-minute city” approach supports the concept of a transit-oriented development strategy and the idea of a “city of proximity”, where all the requirements of daily life can be found within 15 minutes of walking distance. The goal is to reconsider the use of existing facilities in the city and to improve the quality of life by eliminating city fragmentation caused by travel-dependent activities.

Through a case study of Domche, a former cultural and local centre of Taftalidze, a housing district in Skopje, this paper highlights the negative effects of neglecting community-oriented planning principles in favour of speculative interests and lucrative private initiatives. The paper aims to identify best practices for revitalising neighbourhood units by providing recommendations on possibilities of reclaiming the old model into new uses and neighbourhood realities. It highlights the importance of creating a sustainable urban environment that prioritises the needs of local communities, in addition to prospects for commercial adaptation and revitalization of local businesses.

KEYWORDS _ *“neighbourhood unit”, “15-minute city”, community-oriented planning principles*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of the neighbourhood has been an influential idea in urban planning in continuum for the last century and nowadays it is being re-actualized. The resurgence of the idea for the neighbourhood appears as a response to the negative aspects of urban living such as impersonality, insecurity, social exclusion and lack of control (Rohe 2009). The different planning tendencies in their search go beyond the physical design or aesthetics, including the creation of healthy social communities and environmental quality, as well as the development of the local-neighbourhood economies (Florida, 2017). Perry's transference of the sociological formulation of the neighbourhood into the spatial device of the neighbourhood unit (Perry 1998) was introduced as a new formula for good neighbourhood design at the beginning of the last century (Rohe 2009). The new initiatives emphasised the need for collaborative revitalization programs that focus on residents' and communities' organizations inclusion (Elwood 2002). The local governments have renewed the idea and shown determination of promoting neighbourhood-level revitalization initiatives, based on collaborative planning, common spaces and good service delivery.

The concept itself evolved over time continuously in the 20th century, depending on different spatial and ideological structures, while emerging as a fundamental planning device of post-war reconstruction policies. In post-war Yugoslavia, respectively in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, in an urban, technical-technological and aesthetic strategy in the field of architecture and urbanism, the principles of modernist architecture and the functional city were adopted. In the planning strategy of polycentric development during socialism, the neighbourhood unit was seen as stimulating for the development of collective patterns for spatial operationalization and values of a new way of life in a new society.

With the system change in 1991, new ideological and ownership structures emerged which affected housing planning and reduced the quality of the common spaces and premises from the previous planning models. While the first period has been characterized by the polycentric planning and construction of large housing estates equipped with corresponding services and self-efficient neighbourhood units, the second period has manifested itself through incremental interventions with almost no concern for the common spaces and necessary social services, very often resulting in the deterioration of the existing premises left from the previous period.

In spite of the local circumstances, it is evident that the idea of developing the planning concept around the neighbourhood unit, as a fundamental spatial and social entity, is still challenging. The neighbourhood concept remains a foundational principle of modern urban society, constantly shifting between its universal value and localized meaning (Florida 2017), an idea that is greatly supported by the authors of this paper.

NEIGHBOURHOOD UNIT CONCEPT FOR SELF-EFFICIENT LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

In the post-war period of the socialist development of the Republic of Macedonia, the adopted functionalist city principles in planning affected the spatial organization of the cities. The urban planning and housing development supported the ideas of Modern urbanism: planning and development of the neighbourhood unit of 5000-6000 inhabitants, as a basic planning spatial unit, a new organisation of transport activities and diversification of pedestrian and motor traffic, multi-dwelling housing blocks of different size, surrounded by ample green areas and an open-air recreation and complemented with commercial areas and local centres, health facilities, schools, kindergarten and nursery, dominated the physical structure and cityscape. The neighbourhood unit as a basic spatial unit in the polycentric model of urban planning manifests itself firstly at the conceptual level of modern architecture and the functional city which reduced human needs to their elementary level of uses, and secondly as a time-distance frame of accessibility to the services. The concept of a residential community from an urban aspect was clearly defined: "it is a social territorial community with the functions of meeting

the daily needs of people and families, it is also a self-governing organization of citizens, a part of the wider basic social community of the city as a whole, and at the same time a basic urban planning unit for the residential areas of the city” (Petrović 2004; Sefaragić 1988).

The concept of neighbourhood unit was based on self-efficiency and was complemented with facilities of social standard as extended housing. The distances to the social, commercial and educational facilities were calculated due to the spatial model and requirement for accessibility from the place of residence to certain public functions and services within 400-800 meters and a time distance of 10-15 minutes. When several units were combined, a larger housing district of up to 30.000 inhabitants was composed which was complemented by community centres, commercial and leisure facilities, and higher levels of educational, health and cultural institutions.

Unfortunately, most of the housing developments and the complementary services of the so-called “extended housing” experienced the same process of transformation, usurpation, and careless densification after the system change in 1991. The original plans and buildings of the local or communal centres have gone through several phases of transformation or structural conversion, while a large number of premises and common spaces were neglected or abandoned, deteriorated or diminished, which in the end dramatically changed the character, safety and pleasantness of the local environment.

15-MINUTE CITY CONCEPT

The General Urban Plan of the city of Skopje orients towards a comprehensive strategy of a transit-oriented city, following other European cities in the approach of the so-called “15-minute city”. Such a concept of a transit-oriented “city of proximity” assumes that all the needs of daily life can be provided within a time frame of 15 minutes from the homes of its residents. The main goal of this concept is to eliminate the fragmentation of the city caused by travel-dependent activities. The solutions and measures should refer to each individual neighbourhood or quarter/district, in order to establish a common framework for the 15-minute city, to fulfil the requirement for accessibility from the place of residence to certain public uses and services within a time frame of 15 minutes, from any point in the city to the place of work, trade, health, education or entertainment.

In this regard, the idea of the neighbourhood was re-established. Nevertheless, the neighbourhood as a carrier of social data and values works only if it is a layer of the comprehensive system of urban amenities (Pozoukidou and Chatziyiannaki 2021). Although the need for self-contained neighbourhoods has decreased and the idea was abandoned as a consequence of the invasive traffic solutions and proliferation of the automobile, it became obvious that this standpoint led only to issues such as urban sprawl, biodiversity loss, pollution and traffic congestion. All this prompted urban planners to reconsider the neighbourhood scale and the decentralization of services and activities, once again (Pozoukidou and Chatziyiannaki 2021).

The definition of the concept is pretty straightforward: it is an ideal geography where all human needs are met within a radius of 15 minutes. Introduced by Carlos Moreno, the 15-minute city concept seeks to create self-sufficient neighbourhoods by decentralizing urban uses and services, in which the essential needs of housing, work, commerce, health, education and entertainment are met. Moreno advocates for dense and connected mixed neighbourhoods, both socially and functionally. Emphasis needs to be placed on human-scale urban design and diverse uses of public and semi-public spaces, and highlighting seven additional features of the 15-minute city concept: mixed-use, modularity, adaptability, flexibility, human-scale design, connectivity and digitalization (Khavarian-Garmsir et al. 2023). The Congress for New Urbanism declared that the benefits of the 15-minute city concept are multiple: it is a socioeconomically equitable concept, it minimizes the need for transportation, human-powered transportation is increased and most importantly all services are conveniently located and accessible by multiple modes.

The main components of the 15-minute city concept are proximity, diversity and density, but it is undeniable that the 15-minute city concept does not establish a universal and invariant solution that fits all. In order to become effective, the concept has to balance physical and non-physical attributes, derived from the local urban and social peculiarities, as well as from certain governing and legislative structures. It serves as a bottom-up approach to well-being, which purpose is to bring activities to the neighbourhood. It is rather a proximity-centred strategy, as opposed to an accessibility-centred one, that enables easy access to a range of amenities vital for the quality of life, which is an ultimate spatial planning principle (Pozoukidou and Chatziyiannaki 2021).

ENDANGERED NEIGHBOURHOOD COMMUNITY VALUES

In order to demonstrate the characteristics of the two concepts described above and refer to the negative effects of neglecting community-oriented planning principles recently oriented towards speculative housing developments, concerned with individual lucrative interests than with common benefits, the paper elaborates the case of the neighbourhood of Taftalidzhe 1 and its former cultural and local centre of Domche, as a case of lost opportunities. The neighbourhood Taftalidzhe 1 was developed as part of the post-earthquake reconstruction of the city of Skopje according to a widely accepted polycentric model of urban planning of housing communities based on different spatial complexity levels, being one of the 14 new prefabricated suburban neighbourhoods for 70.000 residents given as a solidarity donation by a Yugoslav Republic or by the international community.

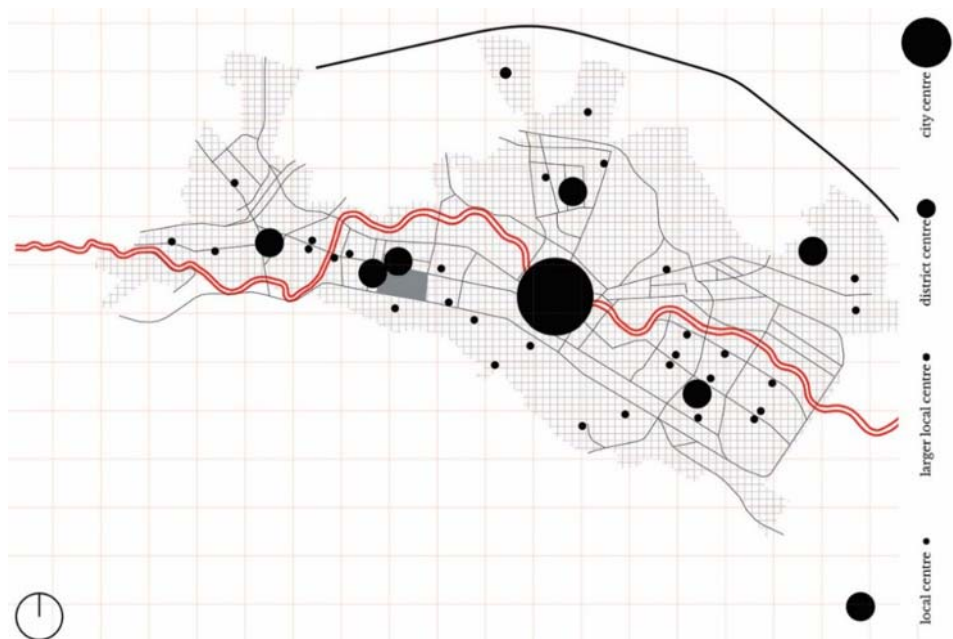


Figure 1: The system of centres as proposed by the GUP of 1985. The neighbourhood of Taftalidzhe 1 is marked in grey. Source: A Centers and Public System Development Study for the General Urban Plan of Skopje 2022-2032, Faculty of Architecture, University "SS. Cyril and Methodius"

It is important to describe that the socialist housing policy at the time was a product of the dominance of the collectivist ideology and its corresponding structures. Collectivism in housing was directly operationalized by forcing standardized, collective type of housing, as preferred spatial organization,

and in order to realize collective values in the process of socialization. During the socialism development, the concept of neighbourhood unit has been adopted as a new spatial and social form of organization that could satisfy the quality of life in new residential areas. It was based on self-efficiency and was complemented by facilities of social standard as extended housing. Apart from housing as the dominant use, the neighbourhood was complemented with commercial and service facilities areas, local community centres, health facilities, a school, a kindergarten and a nursery. The neighbourhood of Taftalidzhe 1 followed the same pattern of development: housing, as a primary element, supporting functions, as a secondary or complementary element, and traffic, as a third element of connection. In this scheme, the neighbourhood of Taftalidzhe 1 borders the main traffic artery of Skopje on the northeast and the two district centres, which were part of the polycentric city model and the four-level established system of civic centres with the Master plan of 1965: the city centre, district centres, larger local centres and local centres (Institute for Town Planning and Architecture Skopje, 1985). The adopted model of centres in a modified version is confirmed in the General Urban Plan of 1985 (fig 1.) and 2002, while in the General Urban Plan of 2012, it has been completely abandoned.

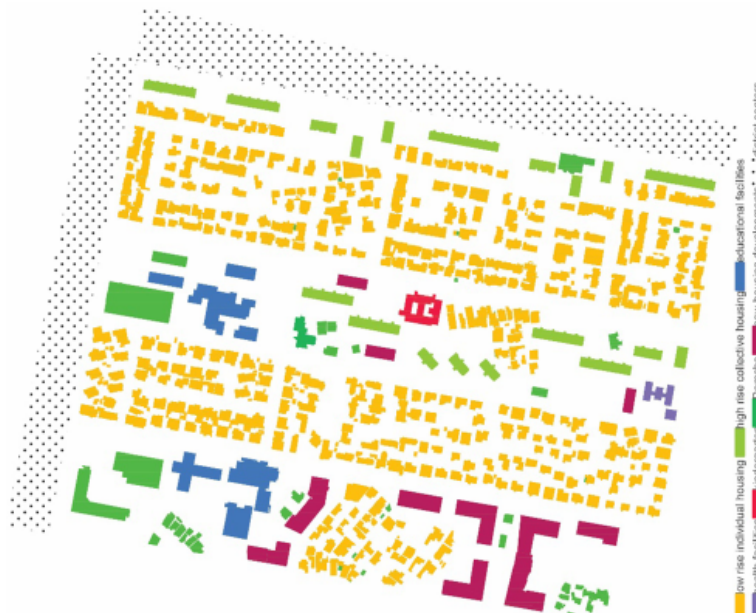
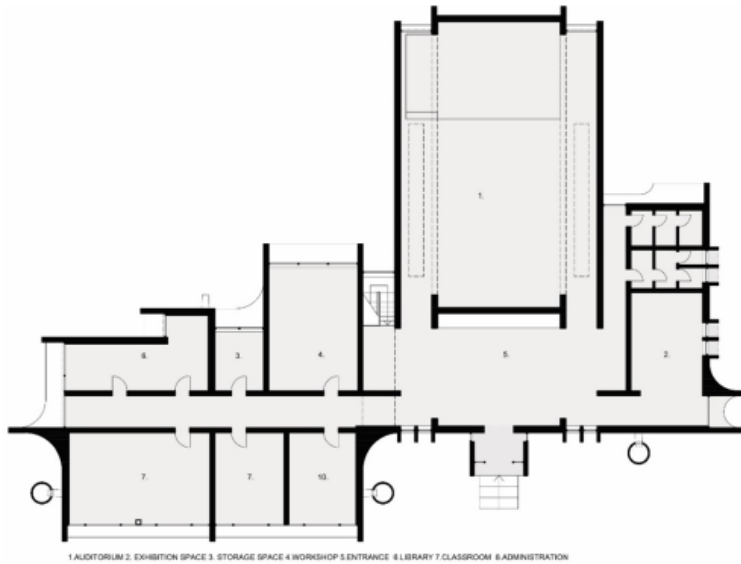


Figure 2: Land use of the neighbourhood of Taftalidzhe 1. Source: Authors' personal archive

The current urban fabric recognised is almost the same proposed by the General Urban Plan of 1965: a mix of high-rise freestanding housing blocks along the boulevard "Partizanski odredi" and low-rise detached and semi-detached single-family housing in the inner part of the neighbourhood and complemented facilities of a primary school, a kindergarten, primary health services, a local community centre and commercial units. (fig. 2)

The local community centre was the smallest brutalist architecture designed by Kiril Muratovski (Константиновски, 2001) and built between 1971 and 1973 and could be easily considered as building heritage. It is composed of modular concrete elements with the constructive elements forming functional spaces for a variety of programs (fig. 3). The building of the local community colloquially known as Domche (meaning home in an affectionate way) in the beginning hosted families that had their homes destroyed by the earthquake of 1963. Later on, it served multiple cultural, sport and recreational uses and as a seat for local community activities.



Figures 3 - 4: A floor plan and an exterior shot of Domche. Source: Authors' personal archive

With the system change in 1991 new ownership structure emerged (transition from state to private property), which created lots of problems in maintenance and reduced the quality of the premises and common spaces. The quality of all common and open spaces, deteriorated and diminished, which have dramatically changed the character of Domche.

After the Law of denationalization was adopted (Закон за денационализација, 2000) the ownership of the building of the former local community was transferred to the Socialist Party of Macedonia. Residents have engaged themselves in civil activities to question the transferred ownership and the loss of communal building values of openness, collectiveness and accessibility. Unfortunately, the political party's intention, in which ownership it is currently, is to completely demolish the building and, in its place, construct a residential and business centre with an accompanying hotel, devaluing all the meanings the building has had for the local community and as an architectural heritage.

Several initiatives have been undertaken to highlight the importance of preserving the building of the local community and more importantly to draw attention to the need for such buildings and spaces of common good and to the possibilities of future development of community-oriented planning. One of the initiatives organised a performative event whose aim was to challenge the official approaches towards the preservation of built heritage and to engage the residents to fight for their right to public space. Ultimately, the event was directed against the continual shrinkage of common premises and

open public spaces as arenas of expression of public opinion¹. Another initiative was a collaboration between different civic organizations which focused on architecture and built heritage, and the preservation of the built heritage from the Yugoslav period, by promoting collaborations between institutions, organizations and citizens. They highlighted the importance of collective memories as well as the emotional connection between individuals and the building in question², while several artists who exhibited their work pointed out the need for a public space³. Residents' initiatives were oriented towards their opposition to the densification of the neighbourhood and the planning initiatives to build high-rise buildings, which will completely change the image of the neighbourhood. However, unfortunately, for the time being, private investment initiatives prevail over community-oriented values and opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The paper intends to point out on the importance of neighbourhood sustainability and its inevitably close linkage to the community participation, sense of place, community stability, security and maintaining of social networks (Douvlu et al. 2008). It also intends to show the complex relationship between the neighbourhood as a "place" and the neighbourhood as a community, and the meaning it has to a continuation and cultural permanence of the city.

The common spaces and community centres we have been interested in are valuable heritage to be re-evaluated, as they represent the period of different model of planning and housing construction, stemming from the basic ideological and social aspirations of the time. Two concepts from two different periods with distinctively different features were compared, however it could be easily concluded that they have more in common than they differentiate. They represent valuable concept and should be preserved and adapted to the new needs, rather than be replaced by speculative building infills and incremental urban changes. On the other side, the problem with their quality maintenance, preservation and improvement remains and generally threatens the rich variety of common facilities and public spaces existence.

In order to integrate the past concept of the neighbourhood unit into the current neighbourhood realities it is important to apply certain experiences, tactics and measures of adaptation to new needs and uses to the requirements and aspirations of the local community social inclusion: The first step towards revitalizing the neighbourhood is reinforcement of the community engagement and participation. In order to encourage community gathering public spaces and facilities improvements are required, as the social interaction and physical activities could build and foster social integrity. In this regard, it is important to promote mixed-use development in order to promote economic vitality. Another important component in revitalization of neighbourhoods is the creation of walkable neighbourhoods that prioritize pedestrian and bicycle access. In addition, improvement of the transportation infrastructure can help in connecting the neighbourhoods and the city as a whole. Finally, supporting local businesses can help to create a sense of community vibrancy and encourage economic activity within the neighbourhood. By prioritizing the needs of the local community and fostering a sense of community identity, planners can help in creating sustainable and liveable neighbourhoods, both economically vibrant and as well as socially integrated. To summarise, revitalizing a neighbourhood unit requires a holistic approach that combines community engagement, physical improvements, and economic development strategies.

¹ <http://akto-fru.org/en/>

² <https://www.cityscopeskopje.org/proekti/i-also-exist>

³ <https://elenachemerska.com/portfolio/fragments>

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