

Visual Essay

Architectural Antiquisation

Mari Lending

It took president Biden nine weeks to revoke president Trump's *Executive Order on Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture*, issued on 21 December 2020. In Oslo, in the week of the presidential inauguration, we had sixty-five third-year students read Trump's contribution to architecture in the course 'The History of Architectural Theory', where we start in the present moment before manoeuvring backwards toward Pliny the Younger and Vitruvius. To me, the executive order proved a perfect opportunity to introduce two thousand years of architectural debate and ideas, and the fascinating document that bears Donald J. Trump's signature certainly deserves a place in the anthologies on architectural theories, not least because of its intricate system of footnotes and definitions of vital terms such as 'Classical Architecture', 'Brutalist', and 'Deconstructivist': '(b) "Brutalist" means the style of architecture that grew out of the early 20th-century modernist movement characterised by a massive and block-like appearance with a rigid geometrical style and large-scale use of exposed poured concrete.'¹

The executive order corroborates a rich modern tradition in which 'classical architecture' and popular taste is made to coincide. Such conflation invites dichotomising and polarising. Here, 'modernist' and 'contemporary' oppose 'classical', while the 'architectural elite' is contrasted with 'the American people'. The 'general public' is defined in terms of negation: '(e) 'General public' means members of the public who are not: (i) artists, architects, engineers, art or architecture critics, instructors or professionals, or members of the building industry' – while part (ii) contains a number of other groups residing outside of the general public.² Section C deals with transformation and restoration. The order charges that, when renovating federal buildings (those not built in accordance with the classical and beautiful), 'redesign should be given substantial consideration, especially in regards to the building's exterior'.³ This beautification strategy carefully aligns the American presidential order with the recent work of another state leader with architectural inclinations, namely the project 'Skopje 2014', commissioned by Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski of the nationalist party VMRO-DPMNE for the capital of what was in 2019 renamed the Republic of North Macedonia.

The Norwegian artist Espen Gleditsch's photographic series *Who's Afraid of the Neo-Neo-Classical?*, shot in Skopje and shown in Oslo in the spring of 2019, depicts contemporary downtown Skopje as hovering somewhere between construction and ruin. The fabulist nostalgia of nationalistic identity politics is architecturally expressed in the covering up of the facades of brutalist buildings with columns, porticos, tympanums, and cupolas in polyurethane and plaster. The populist operation comes with a vocabulary of its own. Gleditsch's architectural investigations into the phenomenon of *antiquisation* ('antikvizacija') adds yet another layer to an already palimpsestic antiquity.

#1

Since the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, Greece has blocked the Republic of Macedonia's access to NATO and the EU, insisting that the name Macedonia be reserved for the northern Greek province, and constraining its naming rights to the euphemistic acronym FYROM (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia). After a 2018 referendum, the renamed Republic of North Macedonia has gained NATO membership, while negotiations with the EU are pending. Through an extraordinary version of the phenomenon of inventing tradition, and to depict an unbroken heritage back to Philip II of Macedon and the empire of his son Alexander the Great, the war over the past has been fought by deploying fantasies of Hellenistic antiquity in the service of contemporary, nationalist populism.

The transformation of modern Skopje is due to seismic shifts; first geologically, then politically. Major parts of the city were destroyed in an earthquake in July 1963. Under President Josip Broz Tito of the un-aligned Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the UN organised a competition for rebuilding Skopje. In 1965, Kenzo Tange won the competition and made a masterplan. Over the next decades, the city became something of an open-air museum for brutalist, concrete experiments, with individual buildings designed by international and regional architects.

Among the buildings that disappeared with the earthquake were typical examples of 19th century neoclassicism that furnishes cities all over Europe and beyond. In the neo-neo-classical idiom framed by Gleditsch, the traces of 19th century cosmopolitanism as well as the unexpected cold war internationalism represented by UN diplomacy and Tange's masterplan is wrapped up in an oxymoron: a nationalistic classicism.

The photo shows Zoran Staklev's The MEPSO building (Electricity Transmission System Operator of Macedonia) on the River Vardar in a fantasy classicist edition.



#2

At first glance, Gleditsch's series might be conceived as ironic, in the sense that it portrays an apparently ludicrous endeavour. After all, Skopje has in the last decade been nick-named the capital of kitsch. Yet, the images also evoke a century of modernist critique of 'classical' monumentality. The urban scenographies in present-day Skopje do not really pretend to be buildings such as the Vittorio Emanuele monument, New York Public Library, or the Lincoln Memorial: examples of an emptied monumentality that Louis Mumford in the 1930s felt were threatening to turn the world into a graveyard.⁴ The urban transformation mimics the recipe Sigfried Giedion bemoaned in 1944: 'the recipe is always the same: take some curtains of columns and put them in front of any building, whatever its purpose and to whatever consequences it may lead', although Skopje hardly qualifies as pseudo-monumental.⁵ The abundance of conspicuously placed columns are real in the same sense as La Strada Novissima was a very real thing in Venice in 1980, when Paolo Portoghesi under the title 'The End of Prohibitionism' aimed at rehabilitating the classical column from twentieth-century totalitarianisms. Assisted by set designers from Cinecittà, he pursued an imaginary architecture 'animated by the crowd, and where, as on a stage, there was always an inside and an outside, a part for the employees and another for everyone else.'⁶ Yet while Portoghesi's temporary play took place in the Arsenale, the stage set Nikola Gruevski initiated around 2010 is the city centre of a European capital. These curtains of columns are unabashedly scenographic, with colossal columns obscuring windows in the original buildings, making the view from both the inside and the outside the scene of anti-tectonic propaganda.



#7

Espen Gleditsch has explored modernist polychromy in his work, such as the colour schemes of Eileen Gray, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Arne Korsmo. He has also worked photographically with classical sculpture. In the carefully framed image 7, the re-clad Government Building, designed by Petar Mulickovski in 1970 for the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, comes forth as a pristinely white work on paper. The building consists of seven cubic volumes lifted above ground, in a concrete and steel construction and with the facades dominated by rows of windows. This fragment of 'Skopje 2014' appears as a twisted version of the engraved frontispiece of Sebastiano Serlio's book on antiquities, published in Venice in 1540. The facade of Serlio's book shows rusticated stone arches through which a broken obelisk can be seen in the distance. The allegorical personification *Architettura* stands in a niche with drawing and measuring devices in her hands. Strewn prominently across the foreground are building fragments: bits of entablatures and cornices, a base and parts of fluted columns covered in weeds. The frontispiece displays the passage of time and antiquity as a depository. There are no people present either on Serlio's printed page where the architectural language of classicism was written in marble, or in the Skopje photo, where a classicist dialect is uttered in polyurethane. Whereas Serlio's engraving promises a landscape of discovery awaiting the curious student of history, the empty whiteness of the Government Building telegraphs a different message: move along, nothing to see here.



#11

Behind undemocratic leaders' love of new classicisms lurks Periclean Athens. Ancient Rome with its changing regimes has also furnished an architectural repository for modern states: while Napoleon identified with imperial Rome, Brutus and not Caesar became the hero in the fledgling United States of America. By invoking 'the classical architecture of Ancient Athens and Rome', president Trump wished to 'visually connect our contemporary Republic with the antecedents of democracy in classical antiquity', and to remind the citizens of their rights and responsibilities 'in maintaining and perpetuating its institutions'.⁷ That requires buildings that 'command respect from the general public'. In downtown Skopje, the sources for the recent urban redevelopment were of a more direct sort, in order to install national pride in the public by projecting the cultural legacy of ancient Macedonia onto the contemporary city.

In Skopje, architects are not excluded from the general public. Yet independent of *métier*, the public was not happy with the redesign of the exteriors of their buildings, nor with the senseless expenditure of money. There were no crowds to animate the constructions, as in Venice in 1980, and the exteriors did not appeal to the audience, that is, to 'everyone else'. The second layers of facades have been continuously tagged with graffiti and smeared with paint, while the beautification apparatus is crumbling and suffers from cracks, leaks, and collapsing materials. In 2017 Prime Minister Gruevski was received a prison sentence for corruption, and has since 2018 enjoyed political asylum in Victor Ôrban's Hungary.



#4

In the post-war era, Skopje has been considered a capital of high-end brutalist architecture. The experiment was part of a particular European regional modernism, situated between the East and the West, as recently featured in the exhibition *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (2018–2019).⁸

A number of the iconic brutalist buildings that furnished Kenzo Tange's masterplan for the city centre of Skopje are untouched by the contemporary antiquisation, among them Janko Kontantinov' Post Office and Telecommunication Centre (1968–1981). Today, Konstantinov's concrete high-rise is the home of Deutsche Telekom. This multistorey building has escaped the whitewash of antiquisation, revealing perhaps the limitations of the idiom – or it may be that global corporate capitalism is simply not as easily taken hostage in the service of nationalist identity politics.



#10

The hyphenated title of Espen Gleditsch's Skopje series – the neo-neo – conjures a conception of history that allows the chronological ordering of architecture as stylistic development along the lines of a nineteenth-century zeitgeist. In the western tradition, new classicisms have repeatedly been relaunched as new beginnings and as a universally valid common ground. When Heinrich Hübsch in 1828 presented his pamphlet with the polemical title *In what style should we build?*, he strongly felt that classicism had become obsolete in the face of new building programs.⁹ The question was surely more radical than his answer, when he proposed the medieval *Rundbogen*-style as appropriate for the future: it still had potential, he argued, as the Romanesque had been interrupted by the Gothic before it was brought into fulfilment. Hübsch's historical construct resurfaced in the *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition at MoMA in 1988, in the juxtaposition of contemporary architectural projects and Russian constructivist art. 'I felt we must reinvestigate the aborted and untested experiments of modernism, not to resurrect them but to unveil new fields of building,' Zaha Hadid later explained.¹⁰ Yet, pointing backwards to prepare for new moves forward, still proposes a conception of history which is fundamentally teleological.

The 'neo-neo' in Gleditsch's photographs hints that anachrony is perhaps more typical than chronology. His portrayal of the weird temporalities at play in a city that appears as more than simply a set design, exposes melancholy while leaving us to ponder what precisely the lost object to be mourned is. Brand-new and ghost-like, Skopje is depicted as a work in progress and a work in reverse, a construction site of ruins in which patina and the passage of time are somehow regurgitated.



Notes

1. Donald J. Trump, 'Executive Order on Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture', issued on 21 December 21 2020 (Washington, DC: The White House), Sec. 3 'Definitions. For the purposes of this order', (b).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., Sec. 2 'Policy', (c).
4. Louis Mumford, 'The Death of the Monument', in *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*, ed. Leslie Martin, Ben Nicholson and Naum Gabo (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), 264 .
5. Sigfried Giedion, 'The Need for a New Monumentality', in *New Architecture and City Planning*, ed. Paul Zucker (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944), 555.
6. Paolo Portoghesi, 'The End of Prohibitionism', in Portoghesi, Vincent Scully, Charles Jencks, and Christian Norberg-Schulz, *The Presence of the Past* (London: Academy Editions, 1980), 12.
7. Trump, 'Executive Order on Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture', Section 1, 'Purpose'.
8. Martiono Stierli and Vladimir Kulic, eds., *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980* (New York: MoMA, 2018).
9. Heinrich Hübsch, *In what style should we build?* (In *Welchem Style sollen wir bauen?*, 1828), in Wolfgang Herrmann, ed. and translation, *In what style should we build: The German debate on architectural style* (Los Angeles: Getty, 1992), 63–102.
10. Zaha Hadid, 1998, quoted in Hal Foster, 'New Fields of Architecture: Zaha Hadid', *Art Forum* 45, no. 1 (September 2006), <https://www.artforum.com/print/200607/new-fields-of-architecture-zaha-hadid-11491>.

Biography

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The full photo series is available at:

http://www.espengleditsch.com/Espen_Gleditsch/work_whos_afraid_of_the_neo_neo_classical.html