

# *Skopje Brutalism Trail*

## Rebuilding Social Fabric through Architecture and Performance

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### **Skopje: City of Solidarity**

Skopje's urban history, dating from the turn of the first millennium, is marked by discontinuous periods of prosperity that were interrupted by a series of hazardous events, such as wars, fires, floods and earthquakes. The overlapping of different historical layers makes it a heterogeneous city, which embraces the traces and artefacts that its vibrant history has left behind. Each period in Skopje's modern history can be seen in the imported theoretical models and practices of city-building, adapted to its specific, local conditions. One exceptionally significant event that defined the course of the city's urban development is the devastating earthquake of 1963, when more than 80 per cent of the city was destroyed and over 75 per cent of the inhabitants were left homeless.<sup>1</sup> This condition created the opportunity for a new start and the construction of yet another sociospatial dimension of Skopje by means of a modern approach to planning and a series of

exuberant (mostly brutalist) architectural designs. This massive redevelopment of the city is the result of a 'world solidarity', a term that refers to the help it received from 77 countries from all over the world, who responded both to the immediate as well as the long-term needs of the city and its citizens. Thus, the project for the reconstruction of Skopje was driven by a new perspective for redevelopment, one that was nuanced and entailed a profound and extraordinary sense of humanity and ethics.

This article is based on the experience of the 'Skopje Brutalist Trail' workshop, organized as part of the COST Action 'Writing Urban Places', in line with the activities led by Working Group 4, which focuses on the development of fieldwork. The fieldwork in Skopje focused on the general topics of brutalist architecture and solidarity, which are still present in the city, and offered a new perspective on social engagement through activism, where creative writing and artistic performance were used to develop urban narratives that link the city's architectural legacy with *in-situ* findings and the memories of people and places.

### **Solidarity and Community-Building**

The powerful idea that underpinned the theoretical and disciplinary framing of the 'Skopje Brutalist Trail' workshop was that solidarity and community-building can be achieved through acts of collective thinking, co-creation and meaningful interventions in an urban setting. The origins of this line of thought can be traced back to the 'contact theory' developed by Louis Wirth, who argued that an exposure to diversity in dense urban settings increases the chances for tolerance to emerge.<sup>2</sup> Since then, a whole discipline of urban and social tolerance developed, which can roughly be defined as the 'capacity of the citizenry to negotiate harmonious encounters with difference and to engage with difference to secure improvements to social wellbeing'.<sup>3</sup> Today we understand that mere contact with diversity in itself is not enough; what is necessary for social cohesion to develop is meaningful interaction between different social

groups, which can only be achieved through a set of interconnected conditions: a) a strong governmental apparatus that rests on or presupposes the legal equality of different social groups; b) the striving towards the common interests of the members of those groups; and c) a focus on spatial practices, meanings and forms that might promote positive contact.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the co-creation of space (but also meaning) rests on an in-depth dialogue between all parties involved, as a respectful exchange of opinions and ideas, until a deep collective understanding and a balance between creators and users are achieved. It respectfully takes into account multiple cultural backgrounds in an effort to reconcile them and create the basis for mutual cohabitation.<sup>5</sup>

Rebuilding communities and fostering social cohesion after large-scale urban destructions has already been recognized as a key component of disaster resilience and disaster risk science, of which Socialist Yugoslavia – and Skopje in particular – is an excellent example.<sup>6</sup> The global effort put into the reconstruction of the city following the 1963 earthquake is still cited as a precedent where a divided, Cold War-era world overcame its differences in an undivided act of solidarity with the Macedonian people. This enormous endeavour came out of (and perhaps occurred thanks to) the spirit of the Youth Work Actions in Socialist Yugoslavia, in which the country was rebuilt and modernized following the Second World War destructions.<sup>7</sup> These voluntary, community-based works acknowledged the plurality of the local contexts, while physically, politically and culturally (re)building the nation through a collective effort. The younger population and government bodies were bound by a shared, common vision of the future and a belief in collective power to improve society as a whole. What community-building and co-creation (of space) have in common is, first, the understanding of social tolerance as a dynamic category; then, the focus on citizen participation as well as on inclusive and transparent planning processes; and, finally, a framework for meaningful interaction with difference, organized through strong governance and with an equal status for all groups involved, to not

only build a shared environment but also a shared future – together. Long-lasting relationships that survived even the Yugoslav civil wars of the 1990s are a testament to this model's success.

### **Skopje's Brutalist Architecture: Utilization of Solidarity**

The post-earthquake reconstruction of Skopje is most visible in the presence of brutalist architecture that emerged in the process of its reconstruction. The immense redevelopment in the aftermath of the tragic event of 1963 was guided by the United Nations in cooperation with local authorities. One of the most valuable aspects of Skopje's reconstruction is its enormous emancipatory impact on society in general. The reconstruction of the city (then, the capital of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia within the Yugoslav Federation) employed not only the technical and material support from the country itself and from abroad, but also the latest knowledge and skills in the programming and governance of various institutions, which guided the cultural development over the following decades. Besides reforming everyday life, the architectural masterpieces that were built for public functions and official institutions not only shaped the physical space but also the character of society. Modern architecture in the 1960s had appropriated the already established, global brutalism movement in architecture and as such made a great impact on the city of Skopje and Macedonia in general, resulting in what has recently become the generally accepted, international position of considering Skopje as the capital of brutalist architecture.

Beyond the architectural merits of brutalism and its stylistic qualities of formal, structural, and material legibility, promoted by figures like the architects Alison and Peter Smithson as well as the architecture critic Reyner Banham, Skopje's brutalist legacy affords an exceptional sociocultural production in the city and in society. Indeed, Skopje's brutalist episode offers the chance to reassess the essential question of brutalist architecture: whether its virtue is a question of ethics or aesthetics.<sup>8</sup> While the general

perception of brutalist architecture focuses merely on its tactile and visual qualities, it becomes more important to perceive this movement beyond mere aesthetics and to see these structures for their social and urban innovations rather than for its purely superficial appearance.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of Skopje, brutalist architecture propagates its true ethical value because the sociocultural utilization of architecture was institutionally embedded and became a societal goal. The series of remarkable buildings that were realized following the earthquake's devastation is both bold and progressive. They vary in programmatic category, size and typology, and they are aesthetically abundant and socially generous in their own specific ways.

### **New Narratives for 'Domche':**

#### **Perhaps the Smallest Brutalist Building in Skopje**

Over the last decade, almost 60 years after the heroic and collective, international effort to rebuild the city, and after 30 years of endless sociopolitical and economic turmoil in the modern Macedonian state, various initiatives have been taken to understand and valorise the specificities of the architectural (brutalist) legacy, which has been endangered either by the processes of decay or by intentional negligence. While most of these activities are inspired by the alluring formal appearance of the brutalist buildings and limit themselves to the visual domain, some initiatives are trying to examine and re-establish the social and cultural values of these buildings within everyday life. In that way, the fieldwork in Skopje fosters the intersection of the social values of collective spaces with neglected and outdated public buildings.

The 'Skopje Brutalist Trail' workshop focused on a particular building from 1973, which served as a community centre for 30 years and is colloquially referred to as 'Domche' (a diminutive form of the noun 'home'). Occupying an area of less than 500 m<sup>2</sup>, this building is perhaps the smallest brutal-

ist project in Skopje. Although the building has been out of use for more than a decade, it is still vividly present in the memory of the people – both the inhabitants of the neighbourhood and of the city. In an attempt to re-enact the social role of architecture, the workshop on the case of Domche expands the notion of architecture and its formal language in the way Kica Kolbe described a building as a ‘stone book where the walls and rooms are the “letters”’.<sup>10</sup> As such, during the workshop, the sculptural, concrete building was turned into a collection of narratives.

The significance of narratives as used in the process of understanding places and activities lies in their capacity to bring together personal experience and material reality. While the first is related to perception as a rather subjective element, the second refers to the spatial notion of place as a physical and thus objective element. The participants of the workshop conducted their subjective, interdisciplinary research to create distinctive narratives about the building. The new narratives for Domche were created through a specific combination of facts and fiction, based on the synchronicity of places, personas and events, thus bringing together various people and buildings in unexpected encounters. This approach expands the meanings of a building beyond the physical aspects of the place, representing a dynamic relationship between the subjective and the objective, between perception and cognition.

Furthermore, the ‘Skopje Brutalism Trail’ workshop followed a method of theatre-making protocols and used narratives to develop artistic interventions in the actual urban context.<sup>11</sup> At the beginning of the three-day workshop, participants from 12 different counties were first introduced to the local context – the city and its brutalist architecture, including the specific site of Domche. More importantly, they were introduced to each other through a performative presentation titled ‘I Am Building’, in which each participant performed a short monologue by taking on the role of one building located in the place they came from. That brought together 18 different

buildings from 16 different cities that share key features: they belong to the modernist/brutalist legacy, have a certain architectural and/or historical relevance to the city, and house some form of public function. Although in a very limited time span, and analogue to the rehearsal readings during a theatre-making process, a common ground was established so that each participant of the workshop could reflect on their individual perspective. It culminated in a form of public rehearsal, where the workshop findings were presented publicly. The outcome of the ‘Skopje Brutalism Trail’ workshop was a theatrical performance in three acts (performed by the participants of the workshop) and showed three general approaches in telling Domche’s stories: the first act told stories of far-away buildings, as distant relatives of Domche; the second act told stories inspired by Domche in different languages, spoken by the participants of this working group (narrations in the form of poems, short stories or scripts); and the third act told Domche’s stories through artefacts found on the site by staging an auction through which the audience could directly participate in the play.

As the workshop demonstrated, the interdisciplinary assembly of participants allowed for the exploration of the meaningfulness of architecture to go beyond discursive or visual observations of spatial attributes, while the combination of architectural elements with visual and performing arts made it possible to communicate the variety of findings directly within the group and to the public. The combination of narration with acting and performing created an emotional chronicle of the building’s past and present, but also produced synchronicities that open up towards its possible future.

The modus operandi of the ‘Skopje Brutalist Trail’ workshop took the key points for community-building, as applied in the processes of Skopje’s post-earthquake reconstruction. It focused on empathy in thinking, designing and knowledge exchange, which was symbolized in the slogan ‘I Am Building’ (the building as the main character). Methodologically, reading rehearsals as used in theatre-making were undertaken for the co-devel-

opment of characters and narratives. Finally, the text was transformed for a performance on stage where a degree of situatedness was achieved through the co-creation of space through movement. Writing (urban) stories and places thus became a tool for narrating shared futures.

### Conclusion

As a form of a socially engaged art, public performances aim to mobilize communities towards a common goal.<sup>12</sup> This transforms the artistic approach of acting into a tool for advocating, making the artistic act political in the sense that they do not only represent an objective reality, but create particular situations.<sup>13</sup> The performative event as the final outcome communicates a narrative plot and its characters to a wider audience, thus transforming the writing (a rather intimate act) into an open (public) interpretation. Although the performance happens instantly and has a fleeting presence, the immediateness of the performance makes the act an effective mode for communicating the meaningfulness of architecture in relation to the cultural production of urban space. Its repetition over time is never a facsimile reproduction, but an evolving process where narratives are adapted to the momentum of the performance. In that manner, the public performance of the 'Skopje Brutalist Trail' workshop in the park of the Faculty of Architecture in Skopje in late September 2022 follows the similar activities already conducted, and was further developed in a performance that took place in December 2022 at the site of Domche, as part of the MOT international theatre festival.<sup>14</sup> This suggests that new releases of Domche-stories are to be expected, each time reaching a wider audience and producing new interpretations. Every rendition of the building as a main character provides new layers in its meaningfulness and creates new possibilities for its integration in the context, through various appropriations. Therefore, the series of performative events on Domche serve as a platform in which the deteriorated condition of a once highly appreciated neighbourhood space can find its way back to the community.

## Reflection on the Theme and the Workshop Experience

### Holly Dale

In September 2022, the COST Action 'Writing Urban Places' conducted fieldwork in Skopje to investigate the brutalist heritage of the city and used literary tools to generate an image of an inclusive, shared future.<sup>15</sup> This review will elaborate further on the two literary methods used in the fieldwork: descriptive writing and transcription.<sup>16</sup> In doing so, the review aims to explore how literature can help residents make sense of the brutalist heritage in their communities, using past, present and future narratives. Today, a growing number of heritage conservation projects make efforts to reflect on past inconsistencies, integrate contemporary values and develop approaches to ensure more inclusive futures.<sup>17</sup> This research draws from the concept of 'urban literacy', introduced by Charles Landry and developed further by Klaske Havik, to understand how literature can be used to explore brutalist heritage.<sup>18</sup> Havik proposes to connect architectural research to literature by addressing three interrelated concepts: description, transcription and prescription.

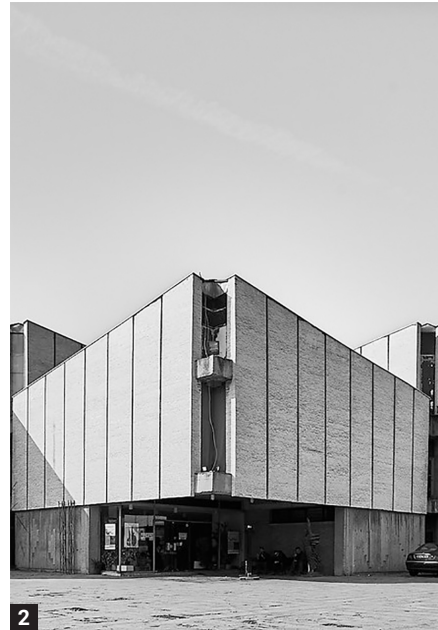
The first literary method used in the fieldwork was a performance titled 'I Am Building'; the method used descriptive writing to rediscover the meaningfulness of the brutalist community centre, 'Domche', by exploring twelve stories of 'Domche'. The 12 stories had been written as part of the project *The City as a Stage* by Filip Jovanovski. Each story has been created through a close collaboration with the community, recounting memories of the past community centre. Literature provided insight into lived spaces, communicated through the descriptive memories of the characters in the stories. Pallasmaa's work on phenomenology highlights how literary

descriptions can explore a broader range of scenes than traditional image-based architecture, allowing for a greater understanding of past events.<sup>19</sup> During a theatrical table reading (rehearsal reading), participants from across Europe appropriated the lived spaces represented in the 12 stories of Domche, with discussions including their personal associations with brutalist heritage in an engaging cross-cultural exchange. Through participation, the boundaries between subject and object were blurred. The role of fiction encouraged the dualism of subject and object to be seamlessly exchanged as the participants' perspectives on complex social and historical narratives generated new meanings. Bachelard already stressed that the phenomenological approach to architecture actively encourages the reversible relationship between subject and object, affording meaningful relationships between people and places.<sup>20</sup>

The second research method transcribed the current use and appropriation of the City Gate and the City Wall, two of Skopje's most significant pieces of brutalist infrastructure. Transcription is the act of writing another version; the literary group Oulipo explored experimental methods of transcription to find new potentialities in their work, a generator of unforeseen possibilities. In the second method, the two brutalist sites were documented in the style of George Perec's work, as 'an attempt to exhaust a place'.<sup>21</sup> The technique records the everyday objects that pass through one's field of vision, highlighting urban and social rhythms. The technique of documenting the everyday use of a space through creative writing provided the characters and perceived settings for the reader to appropriate, giving them principal control over the production of space. The outcome of the method was a series of speculative narratives developed through the transcription of the documentation. Characters unseen in Skopje's current brutalist legacy became the protagonists.

Both research methods used literary tools to address Skopje's brutalist heritage through past, present and future narratives. The bottom-up rather than

the top-down approach allowed participants to engage in the production of space. The literary tools applied in these two methods afforded a multitude of new narratives, as the roles of subject/object and author/reader were intertwined through describing, transcribing and prescribing the city. The outcomes highlight contradictions and omissions in Skopje's current brutalist legacy.<sup>22</sup> While the first method used description to offer critical interpretations of the past brutalist legacy, the second used transcription to offer speculative scenarios by actively engaging the reader. This review highlights how these literary methods can help drive the development of heritage conservation to reflect past inconsistencies, integrate contemporary values, and develop approaches to ensure more inclusive futures.



Photos previous page:

Fig. 1. Krsto Todorovski (architect), Hydro-meteorological Center, Skopje, 1975.

Fig. 2. Mimoza Tomikj and Kiril Muratovski (architects), Museum of Macedonia, Skopje, 1971.

Fig. 3. Janko Konstantinov (architect), Post Office Hall, Skopje, 1981.

Fig. 4. Gjorgji Kostantinovski (architect), Student Dormitory 'Goce Delchev'.

Fig. 5. Janko Konstantinov (architect), Telecommunication Center, Skopje, 1981.

All photos: Blagoja Bajkovski with technical support of Boshko Stolikj.

Fig. 6. Performative Reading 'I Am Building' at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Skopje. Skopje Brutalism Trail workshop (September 2023). Photo: Mila Gavrilovska.

Fig. 7. Site visit to the community center 'Domche' and the Taftalidge neighbourhood, Skopje. Skopje Brutalism Trail workshop (September 2023). Photo: Mila Gavrilovska.

Fig. 8–9. Rehearsal Readings. Working in groups with tutors Filip Jovanovski (FR/U, AKTO Skopje), Miodrag Kuc (Z/KU, Berlin), and Boris Bakal (ShadowCasters, Zagreb). Skopje Brutalism Trail workshop (September 2023). Photos: Mila Gavrilovska.



Fig. 10–13. Public performance in the park of the Faculty of Architecture, Skopje. Skopje Brutalism Trail workshop (September 2023). Photos: Mila Gavrilovska.

- 1 United Nations, *SKOPJE RESURGENT: The Story of a United Nations Special Fund Town Planning Project* (New York: United Nations, 1970), 312-315.
- 2 Louis Wirth, 'Urbanism as a Way of Life', *The American Journal of Sociology* 44 (1938), 1-24.
- 3 Jon Bannister and Ade Kearns, 'The Function and Foundations of Urban Tolerance: Encountering and Engaging with Difference in the City', *Urban Studies* 50 (2013), 2700-2717.
- 4 Pnina Werbner, 'The Dialectics of Urban Cosmopolitanism: Between Tolerance and Intolerance in Cities of Strangers', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 22 (2015), 569-587; Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1954); John Dixon, 'Contact and Boundaries: "Locating" the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations', *Theory & Psychology* 11 (2001), 587-608.
- 5 Corelia Baibarac and Doina Petrescu, 'Co-design and Urban Resilience: Visioning Tools for Commoning Resilience Practices', *CoDesign* 15 (2019), 91-109.
- 6 Lorenzo Chelleri, 'From the "Resilient City" to Urban Resilience: A Review Essay on Understanding and Integrating the Resilience Perspective for Urban Systems', *Documents d'Analisi Geografica* 58 (2012), 287-306.
- 7 Reana Senjković, *Svaki dan pobjeda: Kultura Omladinskih Radnih Akcija* [Every Day a Victory: The Culture of the Youth Work Actions] (Zagreb: Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, 2018); Rudi Supek, *Omladina na putu do bratstva: Psihosociologija radne akcije* [Youth on the Way towards Brotherhood: Psychosociology of the Work Action] (Belgrade: Mladost, 1963).
- 8 Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (London: Architectural Press, 1966).
- 9 Antony Vidler, 'Brutalism: Aesthetic or Ethic?', *CLOG 'BRUTALISM'* 6 (2013).
- 10 OKNO, Kica Kolbe, 'Бетовенхале во Бон и Универзална во Скопје – паралели и идеи' [Bethovenhalle in Bonn and Universal Hall in Skopje – Parallels and Ideas], <https://okno.mk/node/85717>, accessed 19 July 2023.
- 11 Filip Jovanovski et al., 'Performing (on) Architecture through Theatre Protocols', in: Carlos Machada e Moura et al. (eds.), *REPOSOTORY: 49 Methods and Assignments for Writing Urban Places* (Rotterdam: nai010, 2023), 118-121.
- 12 The notion of 'engaged art' refers not only to the interactive performance where actors, space and audience actively co-participate, but also to the process of its creation, which, in the case of the Domche narratives, is largely based on participative collaboration with local communities.



- 13 Dérives, Jean-Luc Godard, 'Que faire?' (1970), <http://www.derives.tv/Que-faire>, accessed 19 July 2023.
- 14 The public performance in December 2021 was the result of a four-day interdisciplinary workshop titled 'Lost Modernist Utopias' with students from the Faculty of Architecture, the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (Theatre) and the Faculty of Fine Arts (Painting), tutored by Miodrag Kuč from ZKU (Berlin) in collaboration with FR~U/AKTO, Skopje; MOT, '47. MOT 2022: City as a Stage (Lost Modernist Utopias)', <https://mot.mk/en/event/city-as-a-stage-en>, accessed 19 July 2023.
- 15 Writing Urban Places, 'Workshop Report: Skopje Brutalism Trail', <https://writingurbanplaces.eu/workshop-report-skopje-brutalisam-trail%E2%82%AC%80>, accessed 19 July 2023.
- 16 This review is the outcome of a Short-Term Scientific Grant (STSM) 'Props and Appropriation: Exploring the Everyday Narratives in the City', awarded in 2022 to Holly Dale.
- 17 Juan A. García-Esparza, 'Narrating the Urban Fabric of Our Historical Towns', *Writing Places* 6 (2022), 120-135.
- 18 Charles Landry, *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators* (London: Comedia/Earthscan, 2000); Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy* (Rotterdam: nai010, 2014).
- 19 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin* (Chichester: Wiley, 1996).
- 20 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Penguin Books, 1958).
- 21 Georges Perec, *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, translated by Marc Lowenthal (Cambridge, MA: Wakefield Press, 2010 [1982]).
- 22 Ophélie Véron, 'Contesting the Divided City: Arts of Resistance in Skopje: Contesting the Divided City', *Antipode* 48 (2016).