

THE ISSUE OF URBAN PUBLIC SPACE IN AGE OF “INVESTOR URBANISM”

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Summary: *By reviewing the current condition of urban public space in recent decades, the paper explains the relationship between current urban planning priorities and the changes that are taking place in cities due to them. The research was conducted in part of the city of Skopje, more precisely on the territory of the municipality of Centar, as the most prominent example of the situation. Skopje from a city with a rich history of socialist urbanism and a laboratory of progressive modernist ideas for a city, in the long transition period loses its most pronounced quality - the wealth of open public spaces. Changing the goals of urban planning and giving priority to economic demands, expressed through the need to fill the budget of local self-government and the demands of investors for intensive construction, are key in changing the attitude towards open public space, most pronounced as a reduction in volume and quality.*

Keywords: *urban planning, open public space, “investor urbanism”*

1. INTRODUCTION

The independence of Macedonia in the 90s and the long and frustrating transformation of the social and political system, from socialist into democratic, placed the making of urban policies, the planning, design and managing of cities before specific challenges. The shifting of priorities from collective to private interest, has changed the perception of city development and its built structure. The urban planning in Macedonia has been upgraded based on experiences from developed European countries, mostly from those whose legislation is close to the inherited urban practice, by passing a new legislation and with the intention to set the grounds for a new „democratic” urban planning.

However, thirty years of experience has shown that urban planning and practice has failed to surpass the “childish sicknesses”, a phase almost all “young” capitalist economies went through, in the sense of protecting public interest and regulating and balancing economic interests [1] [2]. In an environment where the city is managed top-down, decisions on city development and building are lead in direct relation with the investors and constructors.

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The need for investments and adding to the city budget is seen as the main priority, without taking into consideration the interest of the citizens as well as all the factors that are important for providing high quality urban environment.

The most vulnerable category of the built city structure is the public space, the space belonging to all citizens and a space that is essential for the quality of the urban environment. As result of the previous manner of managing city land and urban planning, the cities in Macedonia have inherited land “without an owner” or construction land owned by the RM- Republic of Macedonia. A large portion of the land was returned to the owners in the denationalisation process, but there is still land that cannot be easily transformed because on it or within its vicinity there are types of use or constructions which do not allow for the land to be transformed. Such examples are lands with complex of residential, educational, health, cultural, sport and recreational functions or infrastructure, mostly inherited from the modern approach of planning. The cities in Macedonia, with mostly expressed in Skopje, were planned based on the ideas of CIAM and Functional city (Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier etc.), by dividing the main functions: dwelling, working, recreation, transportation.

2. „INVESTOR URBANISM“ vs. PUBLIC SPACE

In order to provide an understanding of the context in which the investor urbanism and the preservation and securing of new public space in the cities are “clashing”, we provide short overview of the meaning of both terms.

Lefebvre [3], describes the development of a modern city as a product of the capitalist system, where the state uses space for social control, and investor urbanism as part of the capital accumulation and class relations. As the strategies of capital accumulation are drifting further away from the production sectors at the end of the 70s and 80s, the production of the build environment appears as an achievable alternative to the increase in capital surplus. Governments in cooperation with the private sector are passing business laws and regulations, thus making profit guided urbanism as the main aspect for capital accumulation. This top-down approach usually results in privatisation of urban spaces and disrespect of the public interest to the benefit of private gain. According to Harvey [4], the issue of capital surplus was resolved with urbanisation, absorption of capital by restructuring, renovating, expanding and speculations. He claims that the city and the real estate market are the products of accumulation of capital regulating the current economy. The description of Vives Miro [5] is interesting in that he believes that since the 90s, the expansion of neoliberalism includes entrepreneurial upheaval of local self-governments, by playing a new role in urban management. Local self-governments, together with private investors and urban elites became the promoters of development by creating a city based on competitive logic, in order for the position in the global urban hierarchy to be determined. Hence, according to Bugaric [6] the investor urbanism represents a form of spatial development where the investors and the central or local government are making decisions regarding the city development without allowing the citizens or other community representatives to give their own contribution. The only goal is to increase the profit by implementing the corporative design, which always influences the community. He also believes that investor urbanism is especially spread in countries going through

different political regimes, where urban development is subject to corruption and real estate manipulation.

On the other hand, the issue of “public space” in the cities is also interesting. Definitions on public space may vary, however the general view is that public space comprises of squares, sidewalks, parks, playgrounds etc., which are providing a scene for public interaction and communication between people in the city. The issue here is to differentiate “public space” from “open public space”. What makes public space an open public space is the access to the space and this must be accessible for all citizens, this is something usually disregarded by planners (Carmona [7]; Sennett, [8]). When defining public spaces, even though there are established urban practices in every country, globally there is an opportunity to organise the typology of public spaces, as well as: the meaning, criteria, indicators etc. In the Charter of Public Spaces [9], broad and comprehensive definition of public space is elaborates as: “Public spaces consist of open environments (e.g. streets, sidewalks, squares, gardens, parks) and in sheltered spaces created without a profit motive and for everyone’s enjoyment (e.g. public libraries, museums)“. The provision of public space in the city is usually related to the right of citizens, additionally to their basic right to have their own home and space where they work or are cared for (kindergartens, schools, etc.), to have space for socialization, communication, leisure, but also to practice democracy (Sennett, [8]).

Looking at the developments in the cities around the world, more specifically in the city of Skopje, the conflict between “investor urbanism” and the more and more louder civil actions for preservation and provision of new public spaces is becoming evident. Globally, the struggle takes place under the motto “Right to the City”, inspired by the works of Lefebvre [10], as well as inspired by the struggle and the work of Jane Jacobs, mostly by her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* [11]. The louder and more massive protests of citizens are driven by the growing awareness that the city is rapidly losing its free space, and that the citizens are denied the opportunities for a quality life which is mean just living and working, where everyone is locked in his home or office. Buildings are popping up at every turn, and street corridors are being winded to only to cater to the needs of the cars.



Figure 1. Presentation the project Diamond of the company Limak, before the prime minister, the minister of economy, the mayors of Skopje and the municipality Centar Skopje. [12]



Figure 2. First Archi Brigade (2009) - Protest of the architecture students as a reaction to the planned construction of a building on the square Macedonia [13]

3. A CASE STUDY IN CENTAR, SKOPJE

The city of Skopje, as the capital and largest city in Macedonia, is mostly exposed to the pressures of the economic aspects of the country, represented by the politicians who manage it, but also by the business community, which sees the biggest profit here. For a long time now, the construction sector has been considered a major economic driver, which participates in the technical structure of investments with 57.5%, so it receives support from the state for large activities and more construction.

The case study focuses on issues of public space, on the territory of the municipality of Centar in Skopje, in order to identify the mechanisms involved in their preservation or loss thereof, under the pressure of "investor urbanism". The selected boundary is extremely important in the city of Skopje, but also in the country, and it is specific in its character in terms of: a mixture of urban matrices, historical and cultural values, valuable architectural heritage, recognisability, population, attractiveness and higher real estate values.

Methodology - The research was conducted by:

- Selection of examples to be considered. Several cases have emerged from the research, but due to the scope, some of the most representative have been singled out. public spaces within residential communities; public spaces within public buildings; large special-purpose urban areas; large unused urban areas; and large green public spaces.
- Collection, review and selection of documents. Used were: General urban plan of the City of Skopje (2012-2022) [14], detailed urban plans for the area of the municipality Centar in Skopje [15], relevant material referring to the chosen examples etc.
- Analysis of individual examples and field work to evaluating the situation.
- Synthesis of the obtained results and presentation thereof.

3.1 Public spaces within residential communities

Within housing sections (city quarters), a large number of public spaces attracting the interest of investors have been recorded that, such as children's and sports playgrounds, local parks, parking lots, empty plots, etc. The land on which they are located is always owned by the state (some recently transferred to the municipality), and represents an asset

of the state/municipality. This is the “most visible” property and the manipulation thereof (sale, exchange, grant), seems the easiest, and tangibly fills the state/municipal budget. What it is interesting is that the central and local government does not see it as a resource that should be preserved and does not recognize its true value for providing and improving the quality of life of local residents. Often, due to the long-term negligence by the local government these spaces are in poor condition and are sometimes not used because of that. Hence, they are considered as something that the administration should “get rid of”. On the other hand, investors driven by several government measures, such as “one euro per square meter of state land”, as of 2010 [16, 17], can buy cheap construction land, which entails smaller investments.

However, the conversion of the function of public space is not only due to the construction of buildings, but also in order to satisfy the requirements for providing parking lots for the surrounding buildings, which is prescribed by the Rulebook on Urban Planning [18] and the Rulebook on Design of Buildings [19]. The strive of investors to build as much as possible, usually in locations where there is no capacity, encourages the conversion of existing children's playgrounds, block greenery, etc., to be planned for public parking lots. Here we can also list the insertion of new facilities on public land and the need to provide access, i.e. streets.

Additionally, the denationalization of land further contributes to the reduction of public spaces, where owners of plots located on those locations appear. The local government does not see the consequences of returning those properties and does not even try to find other solutions.



Figure 3. Urban quarter City Wall-West, insertion of new construction site on existing children's playgrounds and local parking lots

3.2 Public spaces within public facilities

The categorization of public spaces includes the yards of care and social facilities, education, health, culture, sports, etc., which are usually not fenced, but if they are, they are available without exception for all citizens. They are considered “everyone's and

nobody's", and very often other inappropriate content is inserted in them. Such contents are needed because of to the intensive construction in the environment.

There has been a regular occurrence of confiscation of part of the land and formation of a plot for construction of substations, especially in the yards of kindergartens and schools. They are often the only empty space in densely populated residential quarters and it is easiest for local authorities and urban planners to plan the installation of substations there, which owners or investors who want to build do not allow for them to be placed on their plots or part thereof. Child safety is not taken into account at all.

Another regular occurrence is the construction of large public garage facilities, which are placed on the existing parking lots within the unfenced health, culture, sports and similar facilities. Former parking lots are separated from the large public spaces, parcels are formed and they are usually given to investors for construction. The same investors later convert these facilities into business, commercial, catering and other uses, and thus the surrounding population is losing in two aspects, both in public space and parking lots.

In the yards of public facilities, often new surfaces for buildings are inserted due to the same reasons listed above, for "easy surrender" of the land owned by the country or the municipality and the need to full in the budget. Investors, again, see their interest in cheaper land, but also in "easier bargaining" with the state/municipality. Namely, the government and the municipalities actively promote the sale of land under facilitated conditions, etc. "attracting investments".



Figure 4. Urban quarter Bunjakovec, Universal hall – Part of the site occupied by new Multi-story Car Parks

3.3 Large urban areas with special function

Larger urban areas, most often referred to as "undeveloped construction land" are also the streets corridors, water canals, transmission lines and the like. These open urban spaces are important for the citizens for several reasons: the streets due to the possibility to get smoothly from one point of the city to another; water canals for water collection and protection against flood; and power lines for safety reasons. Additionally, street corridors are important as a designed space in front of buildings and for creation of good city ambience. In the municipality of Centar, the main ones are the corridors of the traffic network and several water canals collecting the waters from the mountain Vodno.

With respect to the street network, there is a tendency for narrowing the corridors or at least to use it for broadening of the roadway. New buildings are placed directly on the front property line, in the street profile, sidewalks are built with minimum dimensions (1,5 m). Planners see no reason to protect the corridors where they are wide, nor to widen them to provide quality open spaces - sidewalks with a passing width for more people, with tree lines, urban equipment, green belts, bike paths. On the contrary, there is a tendency to narrow the pedestrian space and the space in front of buildings, at the expense of increasing the areas for construction of new buildings. The advantage given to cars also leads to the loss of former wide boulevards with wide median strips. The most drastic example is the destruction of the most beautiful city boulevard in Skopje, boulevard St. Clement of Ohrid. The water canals from Vodno are treated as non-existent and technically surmountable, so their passage through the city is regulated underground. These canals, an important urban element the arrangement of which can contribute, in addition to safety and aesthetic quality, as green-blue corridors.



Figure 5. Boulevard St. Clement of Ohrid - From a beautiful boulevard to an asphalt canal

3.4 Large unexploited urban areas

Large unused areas appear in the city, which are either abandoned factory complexes or city quarters which for various reasons have not been used for the purposes that were planned or were auxiliary to some other purpose. Large urban areas, formerly occupied by large industrial complexes, are now partly located in central zones.

There are several such areas in the municipality Centar: City quarter "Novo maalo 1", reserved for the "Republic Centre", which since 1965 has been reserved for accommodation of the buildings of the state administration; The complex of the former furniture factory "Treska", the unrealized "City Gate", the parking lot intended for the Fair and others. These large locations are under particular pressure from investors, and the

central and local governments are forcing the sales thereof, again for profit, without considering that these spaces, in addition to intensive construction should also provide an absent content for the residents, but also for new citizens who will settle or work here.

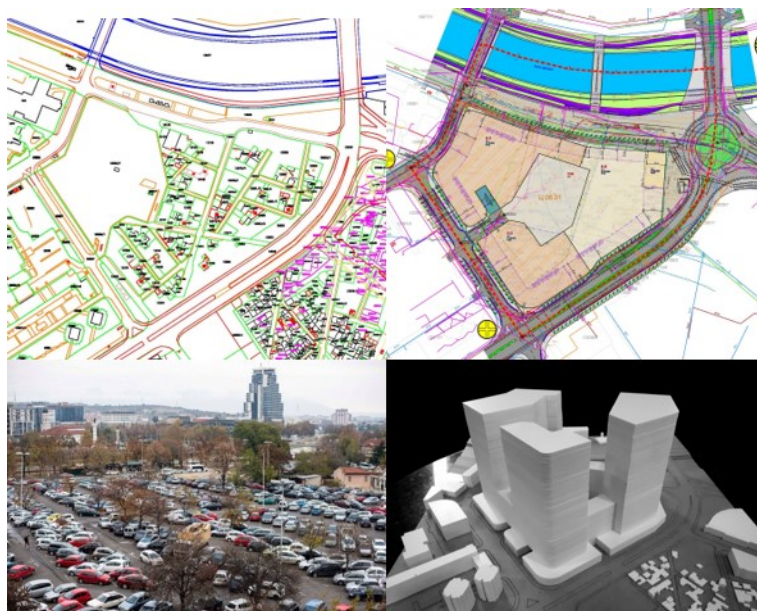


Figure 6. City Quarter „Novo maalo 1“ - From the last unfilled lot in the heart of the city to a new concrete monster

3.5. Large green public spaces

Large green public spaces are: parks, sport and recreation complexes, river banks etc. They ensure the quality of the city in terms of ecology, protection of biodiversity, but also large open spaces for leisure, socialization, recreation and sports. Unfortunately, parks are increasingly being targeted by investors, using existing facilities (summer terraces, restaurants, playground facilities, amusement parks, zoos, car parks, etc.). These facilities are given under concessions or alienated, and the owners do not refrain from huge appetites. Some of them become commercial, trade, catering and even business facilities, which are not suitable for parks. The same happens with sports and recreation complexes and centres. Moreover, these new facilities and purposes require additional access and parking. This leads to the loss of valuable free spaces.

The river and its shoreline are also targeted by investor appetites and the already fragile ecological corridor, important for the city, is being usurped. Under conditions of an outdated concept of a “trapped” river corridor, in regulation, the river is seen only as a channel, which is constantly narrowing to a minimum, and not as an important repair area. Here, too, the remains of abandoned buildings and “no one’s land” are used to alienate state land, without any desire to protect it.



Figure 7. City Park – „Plot hunting“

4. CONCLUSION

“Investor urbanism” is currently the main driver of the “development” and the construction of the city. The state and municipal authorities together with “investor urbanism” are rapidly and aggressively alienating every space that seems to them as “nobody’s” and are wasting the city resource - the undeveloped land, i.e. the public space in all its forms. Recognized cases of usurpation and alienation of precious city public spaces can help change the awareness of why this public space is important, what its potentials are and who to protect it from.

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ПИТАЊЕ ГРАДСКОГ ЈАВНОГ ПРОСТОРА У ВРЕМЕ „ИНВЕСТИТОРСКОГ УРБАНИЗМА“

Резиме: Прегледом тренутног стања урбаног јавног простора последњих деценија, рад објашњава однос између тренутних приоритета урбанистичког планирања и промене које се због њих дешавају у градовима. Истраживање је спроведено у делу града Скопља, тачније на територији општине Центар, као најистакнутији пример ситуације.

Кључне речи: урбанистичко планирање, отворени јави простор, „инвеститорски урбанизам“