



## Skopje – Macedonian architecture in context

12 October to 17 November 2017

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- Curators:** Adolph Stiller (Vienna; concept, design and execution)  
Vladimir Deskov (Skopje), Ana Ivanovska Deskova (Skopje),  
Ivan Ivanovski (Skopje)
- Venue:** Ringturm Exhibition Centre  
Schottenring 30, 1010 Vienna
- Opening hours:** Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm, free admission  
(closed on public holidays)
- Press tour:** Wednesday, 11 October 2017, 10am
- Speakers:** Vladimir Deskov, Ana Ivanovska Deskova, Ivan Ivanovski, Adolph Stiller
- Official opening:** Wednesday, 11 October 2017, 6.30pm (invitation only)
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*In the latest instalment of the Architektur im Ringturm exhibition series, Wiener Städtische Versicherungsverein focuses on the exceptional architecture of the Macedonian capital Skopje. The exhibition highlights the development of the city on the banks of the River Vardar, which has been shaped by a host of different influences since it was first settled 2,000 years ago and has experienced various ruptures in its history.*

Located at the crossroads of a number of key trading routes, Macedonia's capital Skopje has been through turbulent times that have left distinct traces on its urban fabric. Each of the overlapping layers dating from the various periods in the city's history – medieval Byzantine, Ottoman, pre-modernist, modernist, late modernist and post-socialist – reflect different cultural influences and display urban development concepts all of their own. This collage has created a unique urban construct that pays testimony to the geopolitical conditions which have shaped Skopje's various identities. In terms of historic building styles, this recurring process of building, "erasing" and rebuilding underpinned a sense of continuity in the midst of a constantly changing political environment and the blending of different cultures. As far as architecture and urban development are concerned, these sporadic bursts ultimately gave rise to an agglomeration of juxtaposed fragments within the city.

### **The start of the modernisation process**

The first of successive waves of modernisation that started around the turn of the century, and in particular after the first world war, brought with them the idea of progress and technological development, triggering a process of radical urban transformation that would shape Skopje's future identity. The collapse of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, and the subsequent establishment of the first state of the South Slavs (later the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes) led to the initial changes to the urban fabric, and to the city's Europeanisation. In the late 19th and early 20th century, and in particular on the basis of the urban development plans prepared by Dimitrije T. Leko (1914) and Josif Mihajlović (1929), Skopje began to take on the appearance of a European city. The plan proposed new city limits that extended the section of the city on the right bank of the Vardar, forming a ring. A new city axis was created, along with boulevards and squares where institutions and public administrative bodies set up offices. These buildings either feature late versions of eclectic European styles or are characterised by more or less early modernist design.

### **Skopje: 1945-1963**

Modest at first, the modernisation process gained traction after the second world war as Macedonia became one of the six republics in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Between 1945 and the early 60s, Yugoslavia's political system was in a permanent state of flux, shifting away from a totalitarian Stalinist model shortly after the war in favour of a philosophy of "brotherhood and unity". At least as far as architecture was concerned, the abrupt split with the Soviet Union in 1948 transformed modernist architectural design and the arts into a symbol of cultural liberation. In direct contrast to the aesthetic of Soviet socialist realism, modernist architecture became the tool of choice for political symbolism, with the aim of highlighting Yugoslavia's progressive mindset and distinguishing the country from the other Eastern bloc states.

As part of the wide-ranging urban development programme launched after the second world war, the first wave of post-war modernism produced extensive urban projects that combined pre-war experience with new insights in an attempt to satisfy the country's urgent needs. The influence of Le Corbusier's Ville radieuse (radiant city) and the principles set out in the Athens Charter (clear, functional zoning, freestanding buildings with ample light, air and greening, etc.) was plain to see in the first post-war development plan for Skopje, devised by Czech modernist Ludek Kubesh. Fully consistent with the principles of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM), the plan was radically different to the previous layout and brought about a conceptual realignment, including an ambitious initiative to extend Skopje along the Vardar and along the city's east-west axis.

Without exception, the architectural output of this era took its cue from European modernism and the International Style. In the relatively short space of 15 years following the second world war, the modernist trend began to turn Skopje into a prosperous administrative and industrial centre, superimposing new layers on the existing architecture. Although never officially proclaimed as the prevailing movement, in the late 1950s the International Style with its pared-down, freestanding constructions was the first major trend in socialist modernism, as expressed in elegant administrative, institutional and residential buildings. The architectural language, which was primarily hallmarked by rectilinear forms with plane surfaces free of ornamentation, functional floor plans, rationalism and purity of form, can be seen in all of the selected constructions from this period, such as the Grand Hotel Skopje by Slavko Löwy; Slavko Brezovski's Nama department store and Workers' Hall; Skopje exhibition centre by Klime Pljakoski; the court building designed by Nikola Sajičić; and the Macedonian Electricity Company offices by Branko Petričić

### **Skopje: 1963-1991**

Skopje's rapid development was brutally interrupted by a catastrophic earthquake that hit the city on 26 July 1963, destroying almost 80% of the building stock. The reconstruction effort was backed up by an unprecedented show of international solidarity, paving the way for the most important phase in the city's recent architectural history. The redesign of central Skopje as a hugely complex and significant area for the city and the region temporarily took a back seat in view of the urgent aspects of the rebuilding programme. However, in 1965 it was the focus of an international architectural competition organised by the UN Special Fund, the Yugoslavian government, the International Union of Architects and the Yugoslavian Architects Association. Eight teams were invited to take part. The international panel of judges chaired by Ernest Weissmann awarded the prize to Kenzo Tange and Croatian architects Radovan Mišćević and Fedor Wenzler.

Tange's visionary concept was showcased in a series of tenders for urban renewal projects held at the same time, including in Berlin, Tokyo and Tel Aviv. Late modernist and bold in terms of their spatial scope, Tange's designs called the functionalist city model into question, with the aim of making profound physical changes in Skopje's urban development compared to the period before the earthquake. The plans proposed an enormous city, and borrowed two highly symbolic elements from Japan's transformation: city walls and a city gate. In addition to Tange's omnipresent influence, pluralism nurtured the coexistence of a wide range of other architectural languages in the Macedonian capital: an extension of European modernism, functionalism and the International Style.

### **Current challenges**

The city has been through another sea change over the past two decades. After the collapse of socialism and the violent break-up of Yugoslavia, the Republic of Macedonia and its capital began the transition from socialism to neoliberal capitalism. Formerly the capital of a constituent republic, Skopje became a national capital, initiating a process of dramatic remodelling similar to that seen in other Central and East European cities.

This social and cultural "retraditionalisation", which was carried to excesses in the architectural sphere, led to the construction of new neo-eclectic buildings (mainly government institutions), countless monuments reflecting historical narratives, as well as concentrated efforts to banish and obliterate the legacy and values of modernism from public memory.

In combination with the challenges of political, economic, social and cultural life, this political process triggered a dynamic and striking spatial transformation, particularly in the last ten years as a result of the Skopje 2014 project. Politically motivated and extremely controversial, this project draws on a strong "historical" narrative in order to shift the focus to the search for a quasi-national identity, with a view to remoulding Skopje as a national capital.

## **Catalogue**

Architektur im Ringturm XLVII

Adolph Stiller (ed.):

**Skopje. Architektur im Mazedonischen Kontext / *Macedonian Architecture in Context***

Approx. 170 pages, German/English, with contributions from Vladimir Deskov, Ana Ivanovska Deskova and Jovan Ivanovski. Extensive collection of unpublished material in the form of plans, sketches and photos; city map with the various locations marked.

Price: EUR 28

## **Wiener Städtische Versicherungsverein launches new architecture website**

In March 2017 Wiener Städtische Versicherungsverein launched a new website devoted to the Architektur im Ringturm exhibition series: [www.airt.at](http://www.airt.at). The highlight of this innovative information platform is an interactive journey through the Ringturm, Wiener Städtische Versicherungsverein's headquarters – by scrolling up from the bottom of the screen, users can access the latest information and everything they need to know about the Architektur im Ringturm series. History lovers will also be in their element: ingenious timelines portray every Architektur im Ringturm exhibition staged since 1998, as well as the history of the Ringturm – from the original idea for its construction in 1952 right through to the present day.