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## Urban planning and transitional development issues: The case of Skopje, Macedonia

Like many cities in neighbouring countries, the Macedonian capital Skopje has undergone radical changes that have affected urban-planning processes for over twenty years. Over the past century, during which Skopje's population has grown more than tenfold, social changes have not only affected planning processes but also impacted the built fabric of the city. As a result, the city has been transformed by a diverse set of dynamics. The last twenty years of Skopje's development have been marked by a long and painful transition, a process through which the city has had to adjust to new complexities. The current crisis engulfing the city has led to deterioration in the quality of the built environment and has created fertile ground

for speculative developments. It has become clear that urban planning is no longer able to operate as an instrument of control and development with the primary aim of protecting and promoting public interests. This article analyses the planning initiatives both before and after the 1990s, defining the main phases of transformation since the 1990s according to the key legislation, political factors and administrative decisions that have contributed to the urban transformations of the city.

**Key words:** urban planning, post-communism, Skopje, transition, urban transformations

## 1 Introduction

Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, has a population of over 600,000. The city has undergone processes of radical social, political and economic transformations, processes that have had a major effect on the planning system and further influenced the city's built environment. Although Skopje's role as the capital of a sovereign nation is relatively recent, the city has a legacy of urban planning spanning almost a century.

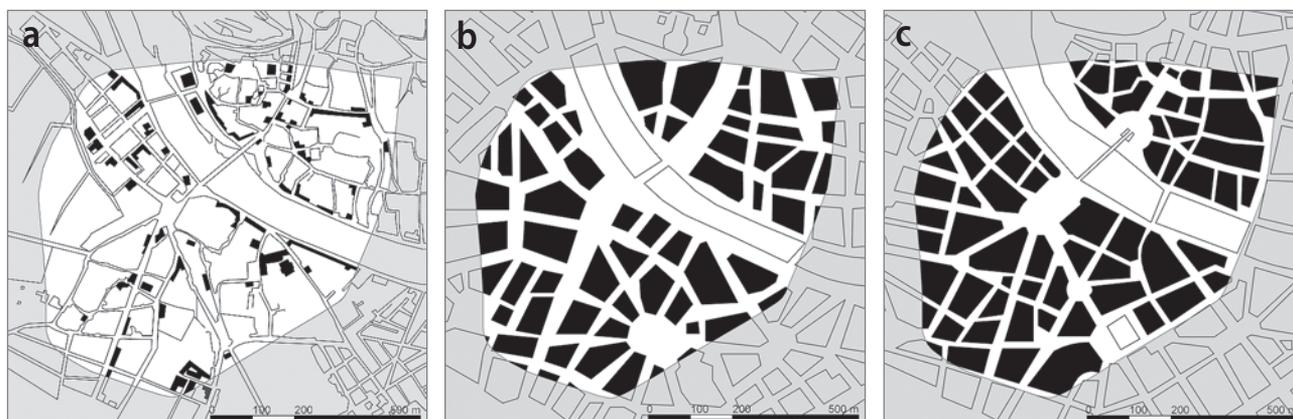
Planning initiatives prior to 1990 indicate comprehensive planning approaches and control through which ideas for a better city were envisioned and partly realised. Since the fall of communism, there have been substantial changes in urban development contributing decisively to urban restructuring (Tsenkova & Nedović-Budić, 2006; Stanilov, 2007a; Hirt & Stanilov, 2009). With these changes, the capital and market economy have been central to growth and development processes, requiring the establishment of a new planning system. Urban planning initiatives since 1990 have had to be operationalised in a context that was in the making, leading to the fragmentation of the urban fabric and further undermining the position of the planner. The period after 1990 was an unruly time in which immense changes were recorded in the spatial structures and planning systems of post-communist cities (Sailer-Fliege, 1999; Pichler-Milanović, 2004; Tsenkova, 2006). During this period, major spatial changes occurred in Budapest requiring immediate changes in the various systems in the country (Tosics, 2006), Belgrade was dealing with multiple crises at the same time (Vujović & Petrović, 2007), Bucharest was dealing with the aesthetics and scale of its past monumental architecture (Ioan, 2007) and in Sofia the discontinuities in the development of the city were further reinforced (Doytchinov, 2004). Skopje has undergone fundamental changes that affected its planning context too. The last twenty years of the city's development have been marked by a long and painful transition, a process in which the city has had

to adjust to new complexities. The current crisis in which the city is engulfed has led to deterioration in the quality of the built environment and has created fertile ground for speculative developments. It has become clear that urban planning is no longer able to operate as an instrument of control and development with the primary aim of protecting and promoting public interests.

This article deals with the urban plans, changes and rebuilding affecting the centre of Skopje, a centre concentrating administrative and commercial functions not only for the city but for the country as well. All of the plans created for this part of Skopje have been attempts to reinvent the centre. Furthermore, the implementation of each of these plans has thus had a profound impact on urban changes in the city. The article first describes the planning initiatives in the city before the 1990s. It then describes the transformation processes and phases after 1990. Finally, some comments and tentative conclusions regarding the latest developments in the city are drawn to discuss the possible future of the city.

## 2 Urban planning in Skopje before the 1990s

The history of urban planning in Skopje began in the early twentieth century with the first plan for the city by Dimitrije Leko in 1914, when Skopje was ruled by the Kingdom of Serbia (Figure 1b). Leko's plan represented a vision for the city containing European influences and marked a clear shift in orientation after five centuries of Ottoman rule, which ended in 1912. This period has also had influences in the shape of the city. During Ottoman rule, Skopje developed patterns of unstructured and organic growth with streets that curve and meander in accordance with the terrain. During this period, the city was centred around the Bazaar, the centre of commerce and trade and therefore the most vibrant part of the city, albeit non-residential. In this respect, the 1914 plan breaks the



**Figure 1:** a) Site plan of 1914; b) Figure-ground of the block structure of the central city area of the regulatory plan by Dimitrije Leko of 1914; c) Josif Mihailović's 1929 regulatory plan (illustration: Jasna Stefanovska).

links with the past and envisions a city with wide streets and centralised public spaces that are defined by urban blocks with an irregular shape. It is in this plan that the city spread equally to the southern side of the Vardar River for the first time. This plan also established the basis for urban planning in Macedonia and, although only minor parts of the plan were realised, it served as a starting point for the future planning of the city.

The second plan for Skopje was created by Josif Mihailović, a city mayor appointed by King Alexander in 1927, and also an urban planner and an architect that studied and worked in the United States and England prior to returning to Skopje. The plan devised under the guidance of Mihailović (Figure 1c) and approved in 1929 was developed based on the previous plan of 1914. During this period the city was part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and in 1931 it was named the capital of the Vardar Banovina, one of the provinces of the kingdom. This plan created the basis for modern Skopje by clearly outlining a ring surrounding the city centre as one of the main elements of the plan. Residential perimeter urban blocks define the ring and the main public spaces in the city. The notion of the ring surrounding the city centre that was presented in this plan remained an element in the subsequent plans as well. The Mihailović plan was the first to present the idea of two squares connected through the Stone Bridge, a city landmark built in the fifteenth century. The development of these squares commenced shortly after the plan was approved. This plan marked the beginning of a comprehensive approach towards Skopje's city planning. The execution of the plan from 1929 was coordinated by Josif Mihailović himself until his sudden death in 1941, and the beginning of the Second World War further interrupted its implementation.

The Second World War and its aftermath created new realities for the country and the capital when Macedonia and five other republics constituted the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia in 1945. In this newly established context, the first post-war plan was created by the Czechoslovak modernist architect and urban planner Luděk Kubeš, who was invited with his team by the Macedonian authorities to conduct the process and the plan itself. The 1948 plan (Figure 2a) shows strong influences and references to Le Corbusier's Radiant City plan (Fr. *La ville radieuse*) of 1935 (see Le Corbusier, 1935), creating a new basis for planning the city, starting from a *tabula rasa* and not respecting what had already been built. Free-standing buildings fill in the city's territory and the plan also divided the city into functional zones, in line with the trends of that time, and for the first time boldly proposed extending the city's development eastwards and westwards along the Vardar River.

In 1963, Skopje suffered a devastating earthquake in which the lives of over a thousand people were lost. The damage to

the urban fabric was tremendous; more than 80% of it was destroyed (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1968). As a result of this massive destruction, the city was projected to undergo radical transformations. These radical transformations were possible in part because there was a centrally controlled planning system with an ideological background aimed at post-earthquake renewal of the city and building a better city as well. An impressive list of experts from all over the world visited Skopje shortly after the earthquake in order to contribute their expertise and help the city in need, resulting further in an unprecedented sense of cooperation that made Skopje a city of international solidarity. With the help of the international community, the entire world was focused on Skopje in the wake of the earthquake. Thus this terrible tragedy also gave the city a unique chance to rebuild itself into a modern city – and Skopje seized the chance.

Shortly after the earthquake, the Institute of Town Planning and Architecture of Skopje (ITPA) was conducting the process for drafting a new master plan for the city with the help of the foreign experts of the United Nations led by Doxiadis Associates from Athens, Polservice from Warsaw and Wilbur Smith and Associates from the UK. The plan projected rapid expansion of the city within the next twenty years and envisioned the city as a regional capital. The plan was approved in 1964 and provoked an immense public debate. An exhibition was organised to present the plan and “[o]n 20 October 1965, the Project's work was duly put on public display in Skopje at the most comprehensive town planning exhibition ever staged in Yugoslavia. For the next month people flocked to see it at the rate of 10,000 a week – among them such distinguished visitors as the President of Yugoslavia, Marshal J. B. Tito, and other members of the Yugoslav Government; the Prime Minister of Poland, Mr. Josef Cyrankiewicz; and the Swedish Foreign Minister, Mr. Nilsson” [*sic*] (United Nations Development Programme, 1970: 124). This exhibition and the remarkable number of visitors it attracted illustrate the unprecedented complexity of the planning processes and the public interest in the planning processes in the country and in the future of the city. Although this master plan had a duration of twenty years, the city centre required an immediate response to the disaster. One year after the earthquake, in 1964, an international competition for the reconstruction of the city centre was organised by the United Nations urging “the enlistment of the best available talents” (United Nations Development Programme, 1970: 297) and marking a new beginning of planning Skopje. “The intention of the organizers, it was explained, was to obtain an ideal town planning scheme by enabling the ITPA to draw upon a fund of ideas contributed by a variety of highly skilled firms with a wide range of experience” (United Nations Development Programme, 1970: 298). To achieve this idea, eight

teams of architects were invited to submit their proposals, four foreign teams: Luigi Piccinato (with Studio Scimemi) from Rome, Maurice Rotival from New York, Kenzo Tange and associates from Tokyo and Jo van den Broek and Jaap Bakema from Rotterdam, and four Yugoslav teams: Radovan Mišćević and Fedor Wenzler from Zagreb, Edvard Ravnikar and associates from Ljubljana, Aleksandar Đorđević from Belgrade and Slavko Brezovski and associates from Skopje. After closing the competition, the jury's majority vote "recommended that three fifths of the prize-money should go to the Kenzo Tange team, because of the high quality of its overall design composition and detailed ensemble layouts. The other two fifths should

be awarded to Mišćević and Wenzler, because their proposal made such a valuable contribution to the efficient and practical realisation of the programme" (United Nations Development Programme, 1970: 301).

The final version of the master plan for the city centre was called the ninth version (Figure 2b) and was a product of the team of Tange, the Croatian team and Skopje's ITPA, but clearly under the leadership of Kenzo Tange and his team's competition entry. By the time Skopje's master plan was on the drawing board, Kenzo Tange was already an important figure in Japan. Years before he entered the competition for Skopje, he had presented another large-scale project, the one for Tokyo Bay in 1960 known as A Plan for Tokyo: Toward a Structural Reorganisation, striking a new order for the city and accommodating its growth along the linear axis across the bay. The plan for Skopje's central city area that resulted from the competition in 1964 and that was made official in 1965 was a symbolic plan and its monumental "wall" and "gate" alluded to the European medieval city schemes binding together the central area of the city. The city gate marks the east-west axis of the city and is the location of the majority of the civic functions of the city: administrative, service, and commercial. The city centre is enclosed within a city wall wherever possible and it is represented through residential slabs and towers marking the outer side of the ring. The 1965 plan also has a strict hierarchy of all types of traffic and within the city centre it aims at uninterrupted pedestrian movement segregated from vehicle movement and elevated in parts for that purpose. The plan further distinguishes between the old (in the north-south direction) and new (in the east-west direction) axes of the city, and the city square is the place where these axes intersect.

In parallel with the changes in the social organisation of the country throughout the twentieth century and the diverse visions for the capital city, which predominately affected its central area, the population of the city recorded astounding changes. Skopje had 41,000 inhabitants in 1921, 68,880 in 1931 and 88,355 in 1948 (Demographic Research Centre, 1974: 54), and it was further noted in the report that "Skopje, the capital city of the Republic of Macedonia, has the highest growth index of all the republican and provincial centres over the period 1921–1971 (and the same goes for the Republic as a whole)." The city recorded even higher rates of population growth after the Second World War. According to the first census held after the war in 1953, the city had 120,130 citizens. This number had risen to 166,870 in 1961 and almost doubled over the next ten years, reaching 314,552 in 1971, the first census after 1963. By 1981, the city's population had continued to grow, amounting to 448,200 citizens, thus representing a more than eleven-fold increase in its population in a period of just sixty years. As the population of the city



**Figure 2:** a) Figure-ground of the central city area of the 1948 regulatory plan by Luděk Kubeš and the group of Czechoslovak urban planners; b) Ninth version of the 1965 plan for the reconstruction of the central city area (illustration: Jasna Stefanovska).

grew, the city became a centre for the metallurgical, chemical and pharmaceutical industries in the country and the seat of the university, and Skopje went from being a small town to the third-largest city in Yugoslavia after Belgrade and Zagreb.

### 3 Urban planning in Skopje and phases of post-1990 development

Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the independence of Macedonia in 1991, fundamental changes have created new economic and social conditions that affected the planning processes in the country (see Siljanoska et al., in press). The transition processes disoriented the country and led to unemployment rates as high as 30%, with 19% of the population living below the national poverty line (World Bank, 2011). The planning system and the institutional formations also changed after 1990, resulting in major restructuring of the city. During this period several phases of development can be distinguished, marking the departure from the communist planning and social organisation.

In the first period (1991–1993), which occurred immediately after the fall of communism and was also marked by the breakup of Yugoslavia, there was no clear regulation of building processes. This period marks the stagnation period. The country was in a formation process, and building activities in the city were halted due to lack of legal norms. This period ends up with the first steps towards privatisation and the transformation of ownership that took place under the Law on the Transformation of Enterprises with Social Capital (Mac. *Zakon za transformacija na pretprijatijata so opstestven capital*; Sl. v. RM, no. 38/1993) in 1993. This law clearly marks the process of departure from communist planning as a result of the transformation of ownership, one of the critical tasks in the transition phase. This period was characterised by the suppression of growth in all sectors and there was a general lack of construction activity.

The stagnation period (1993–2004) was followed by a destabilisation or fluctuation period. During this period the privatisation processes began (and are ongoing), creating new conditions for building activities. In fact, privatisation in Macedonia was a long and painful process launched in late 1989 (Privatisation Agency of the Republic of Macedonia, 2011), but the process actually started once the country was independent and had its own legal system. The first law was the 1993 Law on the Transformation of Enterprises with Social Capital, followed in 1996 by laws regulating the privatisation of state capital in companies and privatisation of the agricultural sector. Moreover, the reintroduction of ownership initiated speculative developments and destroyed the equilibrium that had existed under communism. In these initial stages of the country's

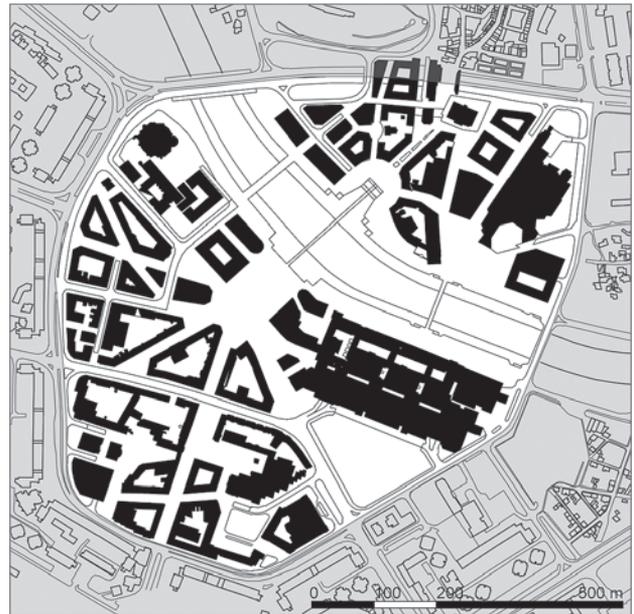


Figure 3: Figure-ground of the “Small Ring” central city area of the 1997 plan by Miroslav Grčev, Vlatko P. Korobar and Mirjana Penčić (illustration: Jasna Stefanovska).

independence, the responsibilities of local government were reduced because during this period the number of municipalities increased from 34 to 123 in 1996, and consequently their size and responsibilities decreased. The first departure from this centralised and government-controlled system to a decentralised one transferring power to the municipalities was in 1995, and the transition was first marked by the Law on Local Self-Government (Mac. *Zakon za lokalnata samouprava*; Sl. v. RM, no. 60/1995) of 1995. This law transferred more power to the municipalities, enhancing the responsibilities of local government. For the first time, this law gave the rights to local governments to adopt their own budgets, giving them financial autonomy and the freedom to coordinate programmes for culture, education, healthcare, public services and urban planning. Urban planning programs were to be achieved through the ability of local governments to adopt a general urban plan and adopt a detailed urban plan. This law reinstated the autonomy of the municipalities and marked a departure from the central approach to planning by transferring planning responsibilities from the national level to the local level. Although the first legal steps were taken as early as 1995, the first actual steps towards reorganisation and decentralisation can be considered the reduction of the number of municipalities from the 123 established in 1996 to 84 in 2004 through the Law on the Territorial Organisation of the Local Self-Government of the Republic of Macedonia (Mac. *Zakon za teritorijalnata organizacija na lokalnata samouprava vo Republika Makedonija*; Sl. v. RM, no. 55/2004).

This period of destabilisation involved expansion of the city to the outskirts and much illegal construction. This phase

marked the beginning of sprawl because the city started to spread outwards. The newly built developments were highly segregated in use, were low-density and scattered, and were built on agricultural land. Parallel to this, in the newly established setting, the first initiatives towards a master plan for the city centre of Skopje were taken as early as 1991, after it became the capital of the independent Republic of Macedonia. However, the first plan for the city centre after independence was made official only in 1997. The plan that was made official in 1997 is the work of Miroslav Grčev, Vlatko P. Korobar and Mirjana Penčić (Figure 3). At its core, this plan envisaged filling in the deserted spaces in the city centre and restarting the building activities that seemed to have been discontinued in the two decades prior to the plan. In fact, this plan came after a gap of more than thirty years in the planning processes in the city. At its core, this plan is a reaction to the rigidity of the modernist planning processes for the city that were essential to the previous two city plans. The planning means of the 1997 plan included increasing the level of urban character, restoring the city's fragments and individual buildings, reconstructing existing buildings, inserting buildings into the existing block structure and reconstructing the urban blocks and parts of the city defined by the existing axes.

The 1997 plan remained unchanged for more than ten years, a period in which only some minor parts of it were realised, predominately those dealing with inserting buildings into the existing block structure. In the meantime, the planning system in the country deteriorated, creating fertile ground for changes and revisions to the plan. This is reflected through the domination of politics in planning, deregulation of the planning processes and changes in the social context marking the end of the fluctuation phase and a shift towards a new period.

The period since 2004 is a service-driven period and is characterised by new investments through which the interests of the individual are considered as a prime choice for planning leading towards fragmentation of the urban fabric. Urban planning is further moving from a centrally controlled mechanism towards fragmented planning bodies of decentralised government, but this level of government is failing to have an overview of the whole process while primarily protecting the public interest. Furthermore, since 2002 with the Law on Local Self-Government (*Mac. Zakon za lokalnata samouprava*; Sl. v. RM, no. 5/2002) the municipalities have been responsible for urban planning processes and for issuing building permits for buildings that the law defines as being of local importance. Furthermore, the municipalities also have independent sources of income through local taxes, charges and fees set by law. During this phase, building activities outside of the city core have been reinforced and most growth has occurred on the fringes of the city, exacerbating the sprawl initiated in the pre-



**Figure 4:** a) The constitutional court, state archives and archaeological museum under construction; b) The Museum of the Macedonian Struggle and the Old Theatre. These buildings are some of the key projects introduced into the city centre as part of the Skopje 2014 project (photo: Jasna Stefanovska).

vious phase. People are tending to leave the city's central areas and move to the outskirts. Although the new Law on Local Self-Government was enacted in 2002, the actual decentralisation and transfer of competences started in 2004 with the Law on the Territorial Organisation of the Local Self-Government of the Republic of Macedonia. This law reduced the number of municipalities and, consequently, their responsibilities were enhanced.

During this service-driven period and following 2007, several formal revisions to the 1997 plan were conducted, each of them with considerable controversies, substantially changing the built fabric of the city centre and the initial vision from 1997. These many revisions and changes to the initial plan that occurred in a rather short period of time failed to respond to the social, economic and urban state of the city and through these changes and the processes that created them it has become clear that planning is unable to operate as an instrument of control and development while primarily protecting public interests. The centre of the city is being made

denser not only with the injection of an increased programme, but also through new buildings that filled the empty spaces through a speculative planning strategy, leaving few public spaces unaffected by the changes. These changes for the most vital part of the city were secret missions by a very few planners and were neither publicly discussed nor developed, calling into further question their background motives and the transparency of the quick approval by officials.

At a later stage, all these changes were given the name Skopje 2014 and were made public for the first time through a video that aired in early 2010 (Perseytube, 2010). In addition to putting the vision under one umbrella, this video also sought to clearly specify the intended year for the vision's completion. The video has been seen by more than 180,000 people so far and is still raising questions about the necessity and aesthetics of the vision.

The Skopje 2014 project has been highly criticised by the professional community. Critics commonly referred to it as an "antiquisation" because its core has public buildings built in a pseudo "antique" style and many monuments celebrating people from Macedonian history scattered around with no logic to their location. These iconic projects for the new capital attempt to recreate an image of the city that never existed as such and further problematise its historical background. Furthermore, although it is public buildings that are being built in the city centre, the process of making and approving them is equally as controversial and questionable as the plan they are part of. These projects conflict with the use of public space and their typologies are nonexistent, as in the case of the building projected to house the constitutional court, state archives and archaeological museum under one roof. The rest of the buildings built along the quay include the agency for electronic communications, the building for the public prosecutors and financial police headquarters and a new building for the ministry of foreign affairs. These buildings appear to be secluded institutions and are not promoting public life in one of the most central public spaces in the city.

These phases illustrate that Skopje has undergone processes of radical transformation that are not only institutional, social or political, but ones that have been affecting its built environment as well since 1991. In fact, Skopje is still undergoing processes of adjustment to the new complexities. The newly adopted changes in the legal, administrative and financial systems are a clear departure from the communist organisation and planning, "but to what is much less certain" (Harloe, 1996: 11). In the case of Skopje it is clear that the city is still in a transition phase and has not yet reached the phase of the full transformation from one organisational system to another, whatever the latest might be. The transition in Skopje's case

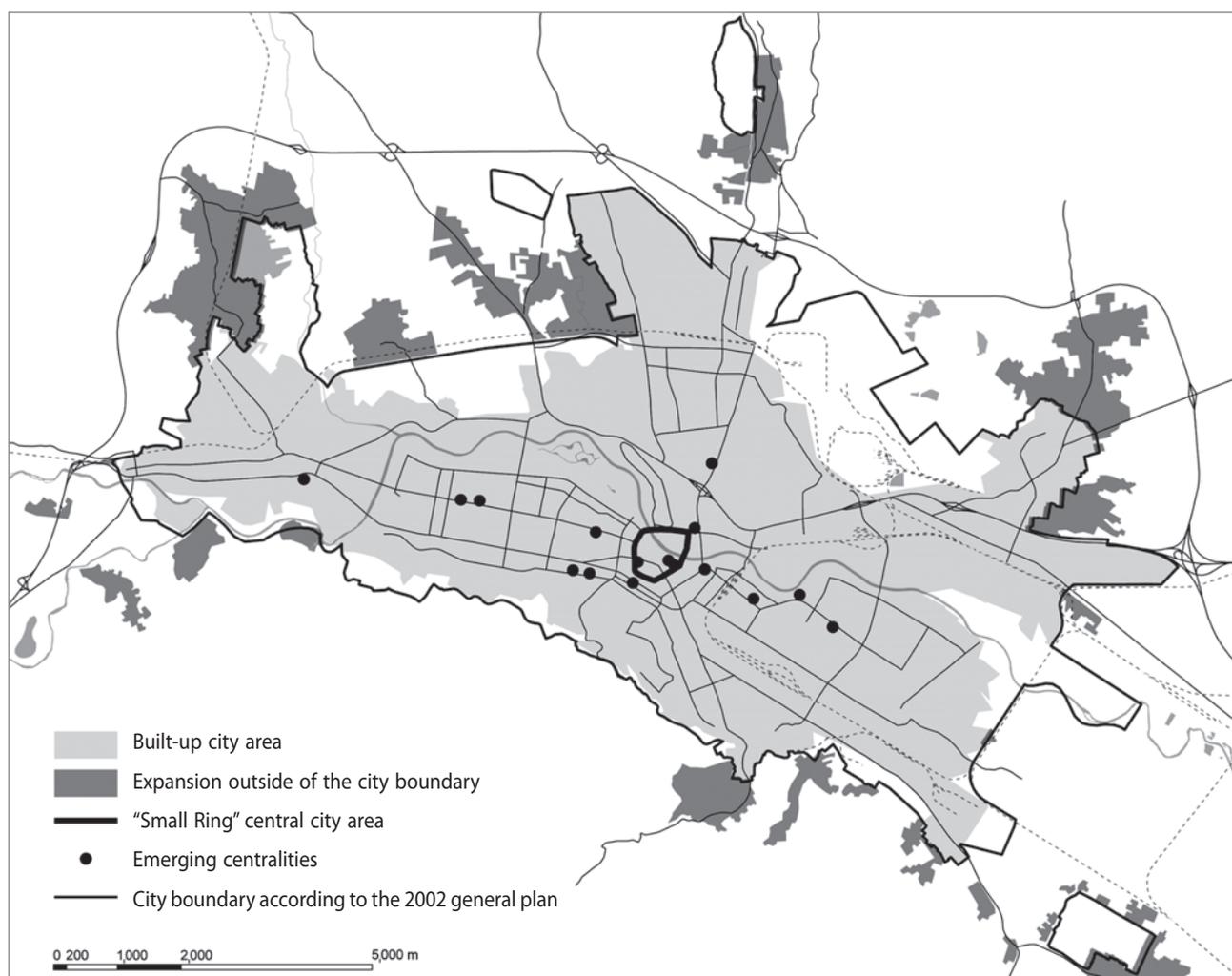
has lasted more than twenty years and, as in the case of other cities, "the focus on transition tends to emphasise discontinuities rather than continuities" (Nedović-Budić et al., 2006: 11).

The transition can be proclaimed to be over only when the planning processes have become more transparent and democratic, prioritising public interest, and when urban planning reaches a stage of an "indispensable social activity for all democratic societies that have reached a certain level of maturity" (Stanilov, 2007b: 424). The end of the transition phase will enable the development of public projects and public-private partnerships aimed at creating high and stable levels of growth at all levels and an equal distribution of spatial opportunities. It will also embrace stabilisation of the planning processes along with strategic planning and thinking that will work towards a vision of a better city. An important factor contributing further to the discontinuity of the transformative processes and the future planning activities in the city has been the recent legalisation of previously unregulated and unauthorised buildings throughout the country. In 2011, the Law on Illegal Buildings (Mac. *Zakon za postapuvanje so bespravno izgradeni objekti*; Sl. v. RM, no. 23/2011) enabled the legalisation of 342,794 buildings in the country (Ministry of Transport and Communications, 2011a). The final number of illegal buildings with applications to change their status in Skopje remains unknown, but just days before the deadline for application, 3 September 2011, the number of applications had reached 39,786 (Ministry of Transport and Communications, 2011b). It is likely that the final number is even higher. This legal condition undermines the purpose of future planning activities in the city and the future of the city is therefore less certain. While these controversies are shaking the capital, the changes in the city's population are also striking. Since 1990 the new capital has seen constant population growth and rapid demographic changes. From 448,200 citizens in 1994, the city's population had grown to 506,926 by the time of the 2002 census, and this figure is likely to have risen further to more than 600,000 citizens by the time of the next census. These growth rates are a result not solely of a constant increase in the city's birth rate (6,118 in 2007, 6,306 in 2008, 6,527 in 2009 and 6,703 in 2010, according to the State Statistical Office), and decreasing mortality rates (4,639 in 2007, 4,536

**Table 1:** Emigration and immigration in Skopje, 2006–2010.

Year	Immigration	Emigration	Migration index
2006	5,057	4,321	+736
2007	3,898	3,174	+724
2008	3,025	2,557	+468
2009	2,109	1,505	+604
2010	2,270	2,014	+256

Source: State Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia (2006–2010).



**Figure 5:** Illustration of Skopje's recent development trends: expansions outside the city boundaries and emerging centralities outside the central city area (illustration: Jasna Stefanovska).

in 2008, 4,584 in 2009 and 4,649 in 2010), but also of the processes of internal migration within the country, where there is a record of immigration from other cities to the capital.

In this respect, the actual population of the city may be even greater and the growth rates even more striking because there are people from other parts of the country, especially students, that reside in the city but remain unregistered. Together with the growth of the city's population, the last twenty years have seen an increase in the city's territory. In the past decade this expansion has taken the form of aggressive development and extension in the inbuilt areas and fertile land surrounding the city with a lack of careful planning to accommodate sustainable growth. Another aspect worth mentioning in this phase is the emergence of new centralities, places with large agglomerations of office and commercial buildings. This concentration of consumer services has been one of the major factors contributing to the spatial restructuring of the city since 2004. These newly created centralities played an important role in the transformation and spatial restructuring of the physical structure of

the city, not only through a shift from the city centre to the outskirts, but also in creating a new urban landscape.

#### 4 Conclusion, or *Whatever happened to Skopje?*

"Now we are left with a world without urbanism, only architecture, ever more architecture. The neatness of architecture is its seduction; it defines, excludes, limits, separates from the 'rest' – but it also consumes" noted Rem Koolhaas (1996: 193) in his essay "Whatever happened to urbanism?" Skopje seems to have been trapped in such a predicament with the latest proposals and developments for its city centre. Architecture, and even more architecture if it can be considered as such, is being proposed and erected – except that what is currently happening in the city centre can hardly be described as either planning or architecture. In fact, the latest developments in the city centre do represent the death of the profession, and a step back from its path to overpass the transition phase and

to surmount its overall disorientation, questing for an immediate exploration of the “right to the city” (Harvey, 2008). Ironically, almost a century since the first plan for the city was created, and almost half a century after the 1963 earthquake and the heroic plan created for the city that also resulted in massive involvement of the public through its public display and astounding visits, in the twenty-first century Skopje seems to have become a reversal of all previous initiatives. There are no longer bold and contemporary visions for the city or exhibitions inviting public exploration and participation, and the very few discussions among professionals fail to produce any major result. The 1965 plan might have changed Skopje’s skyline, but the latest revisions of the plan for the city centre are indisputably changing the fate of the city and its cultural landscape.

This article has covered the planning history of Skopje in the past hundred years and has also detected three critical periods of transitional development: stagnation, destabilisation or fluctuation, and a service-driven period. The article has also discerned diverse planning episodes for a fragile capital and demonstrated the diversity in their presence related to the time and context in which they were made. The first part of the article examined the beginnings of the planning initiatives for the city starting in 1914 and the visionary projections for the future of the city in various political contexts of the country, and the second part deconstructed and investigated the planning of the capital city of a newly independent country in an everlasting transition. This period became real after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the collapse of communism, after which Macedonia and the other countries of the former Yugoslavia entered a transition period. These new realities influenced and changed the built environment, contributing to deregulation of planning processes and fragmentation of the city’s urban fabric. The transition in the case of Skopje is not yet finished, and the city is still struggling to outshine it.

In this respect, the latest developments in the city centre are only confirming the presence of the transition and the inability of the city to get through it. At this very moment the major and most prestigious public buildings have been introduced and are under construction in the city centre – a theatre, a philharmonic hall, state archives, an archaeological museum, a constitutional court, a building for the public prosecutors, financial police headquarters and a museum – drawing everyone’s attention in this rather small central part of the city. Through the style in which they are being built and the speed of their completion, it is clear that the latest project for the city aims to “highlight these ingredients, just as the icons of national identity, in such a way that the public could not fail to be impressed” (Wagenaar, 2000: 4). The city centre is congested at present and will become even more so after all the

projected buildings are completed and in use. In parallel with these dynamics in the city centre, the periphery of the city is also being attacked with construction, unplanned and illegal developments that remain largely unnoticed but are fundamentally changing the face of the city and contributing further to its uncertain future. Skopje will need to rise again, as it has done several times already throughout history. It rose after the 1689 fire set by Austrian General Piccolomini, again after the devastating earthquake in 1963 and now it needs to rise from the long transition too. “More than ever, the city is all we have” writes Rem Koolhaas (1996: 193) at the end of his essay, and this is the case with Skopje.

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