CONTENTS

SAN ROCCO · FUCK CONCEPTS! CONTEXT! baukuh on contextual architecture * Ilaria Boeddu on Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* * Jan Bovelet in defence of concepts * Jack Burnett-Stuart on Richard Meier's Getty Center * Adrià Carbonell on ideas * Ludovico Centis on the gardens of Babur * Amir Djalali on Dürer's monument to the peasants * Fabrizio Gallanti on urban rules * Kersten Geers on Philip Guston and Robert Venturi * Matteo Ghidoni on the contexts of the Continuous Monument * Diederik de Koning, Laura van Santen and Thomas Cattrysse on banknote bridges * Eric Lapierre on realism * Mark Lee on Grassi, Rossi and Venturi * Oliver Lütjens and Thomas Padmanabhan on Venturi and only Venturi * Charlotte Malterre-Barthes on Kenzo Tange in Skopje * Francesco Marullo on Vasari's loggias * Ariadna Perich Capdeferro on Aldo van Eyck's orphanage * Pietro Pezzani on Cedric Price's contemplative landscape architecture * Giovanni Piovene compares Palladio's and Scamozzi's villas * Matteo Poli on enclaves * Federica Pau, Sabrina Puddu and Franceso Zuddas discuss the city as an egg * Nicola Russi classifies notions of context * Davide Sacconi on J. P. Oud's De Kiefhoek * Pier Paolo Tamburelli on the invention of architecture * Martino Tattara on Brasilia * Guido Tesio compares Giuseppe Valadier's Piazza del Popolo in Rome with Gottfried Semper's Zwinger Forum in Dresden * Oliver Thill kind of likes concepts * Andrea Zanderigo on Polesello's triangle * Cino Zucchi writes a letter to conceptualists * with photos by Stefano Graziani and Giovanna Silva

e limit, the context
the project: stand-
iiracle of technical
)y means of a rigor-
nce of finite archi-
ct we can read the
ie physical, spatial
d village. The equi-
cept are pushed to

SKOPJE, OR HOW CONTEXT FUCKED CONCEPTS AND VICE VERSA

Charlotte Malterre Barthes

All of us, at some moment, have had a vision of our existence as something unique, untransferable and very precious. This revelation always takes place during adolescence. Self-discovery is above all the realization that we are alone: it is the opening of an impalpable, transparent wall – that of our consciousness – between the world and ourselves. . . . The adolescent . . . is astonished at the fact of his being, and this astonishment leads to reflection . . . The singularity of his being . . . becomes a problem and a question. Much the same thing happens to nations and peoples at a certain critical moment in their development. They ask themselves: What are we, and how will we fulfill our obligations to ourselves as we are?
Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude: The Pachuco and Other Extremes*, 1961

On a summer morning in 1963, in the middle of the Cold War, the capital of the Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia was reduced to rubble by a 6.1-level earthquake. In spite of the resulting death, destruction and desolation, this disaster would prove to be the biggest opportunity for the UN to demonstrate its unity and goodwill, as well as for the "free world" to show its political solidarity to Tito in the face of Stalin. For young architects, it was an improbable occasion offering the chance to build a new city made of concepts – dare we say, one that was context-free – from scratch.

What follows is the story of Skopje, the guinea pig of the hot, young Metabolists, "the world's bastard",[1] a ready-made tabula rasa, an experimental playground for Le Corbusier's worshippers, Paul Rudolph's students and Alvar Alto's trainees: Skopje was a battlefield of context fighting concepts.

[1] Milan Mijalkovic and Katharina Urbanek, *Skopje, The World's Bastard: Architecture of the Divided City* (Vienna: Wieser Verlag, 2011).

2
The teams were: Slavko Brezovski and the Makedonijaproekt of Skopje; J. H. Van den Broeck and Bakema of Rotterdam; Aleksander Djordjevic in collaboration with the Belgrade Institute of Town Planning; Radovan Miscevic and Fedor Wenzler of the Croatian Institute of Town Planning of Zagreb; Luigi Piccinato and Studio Scimemi of Rome; Eduard Ravnikar and associates of Ljubljana; Maurice Rotival of New York; and Kenzo Tange of Tokyo.

3
United Nations Development Programme, *Skopje Resurgent: The Story of a United Nations Special Fund Town Planning Project* (New York: United Nations, 1970).

4
Lin Zhongjie, *Kenzo Tange and the Metabolist Movement: Urban Utopias of Modern Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 188–95.

5
United Nations Development Programme, *Skopje Resurgent*.

6 Igor Kovačević et al. (eds.), *Urbanity Twenty Years Later: Projects for Central European Capitals* (Prague: Centre for Central European Architecture, 2010).

In the days after the earthquake, Skopje became the object of the world's attention. Expressions of sympathy were sent to its bewildered population, and these were soon followed by the arrival of eminent visitors. A dark-eyed Marshal Tito, who accepted the international community's condolences as well as offers of assistance in the name of his people, was photographed hiking among the ruins of this city of 300,000 inhabitants, fifty percent of whom had been left homeless. Seventy-seven countries lent support in various forms (the Italians provided emergency shelters, the Bulgarians promised to build a concert hall, etc.). As part of this wave of solidarity, the UN made the decision to sponsor an international world-wide design competition for the first time in its history.

Two years later, the Yugoslav government and the United Nations Special Fund invited four teams of local architects and four teams of foreign architects to compete in designing the "Skopje City Center Master Plan".[2] The former were a Macedonian team, a Serbian team, a Croatian team and a Slovenian team, all of whom were citizens of the Yugoslavian Federation, while the latter comprised Dutch, Italian, American and Japanese teams, aka "the free world". The winner was to be awarded a prize of 20,000 dollars by Ernest Weissmann, Director of the UN Centre for Housing, Building and Planning.[3]

Kenzo Tange won. His Hiroshima Peace Centre and the Tokyo island-city concept had already garnered recognition for Tange, who was the founder of the Metabolist movement. With the award of the Skopje project, his team was being asked to reconstruct 120 hectares of a functioning urban organism. In fact, Tange had accepted the invitation to participate in the competition because he had thought it represented "a model case of urban reconstruction".[4]

According to the jury report on Tange's entry, "the main conception . . . is based upon a contrast between the inner city and the rest of the city center, . . . [with] a strong framing by large residential buildings which form [the] City Wall . . . , an imposing building group with [a] transportation loop symbolizing the main City Gate".[5] In fact, the proposal was founded on technocratic implementations employing a symbolist language: it was a techno-utopia.

While some claim that the winning project was sensible and reacted intelligently to what remained of the city,[6] one can only gasp at the sight of the plan. Monumental elements, architectural gestures, high-rise building and massive volumes encircle the competition area's perimeter; the Plan Voisin comes to mind. Was Tange's Skopje

ame the object of the
sent to its bewildered
ie arrival of eminent
ed the international
sistance in the name
the ruins of this city
d been left homeless.
s forms (the Italians
promised to build a
ity, the UN made the
design competition

l the United Nations
ts and four teams of
"Skopje City Center
am, a Serbian team,
om were citizens of
rised Dutch, Italian,
ld". The winner was
Veissmann, Director
ning.³

itre and the Tokyo
tion for Tange, who
th the award of the
struct 120 hectares
e had accepted the
ise he had thought
ion".⁴

"the main concep-
city and the rest of
e residential build-
uilding group with
Gate".⁵ In fact, the
tations employing

sensible and react-
e can only gasp at
itectural gestures,
e the competition
/as Tange's Skopje
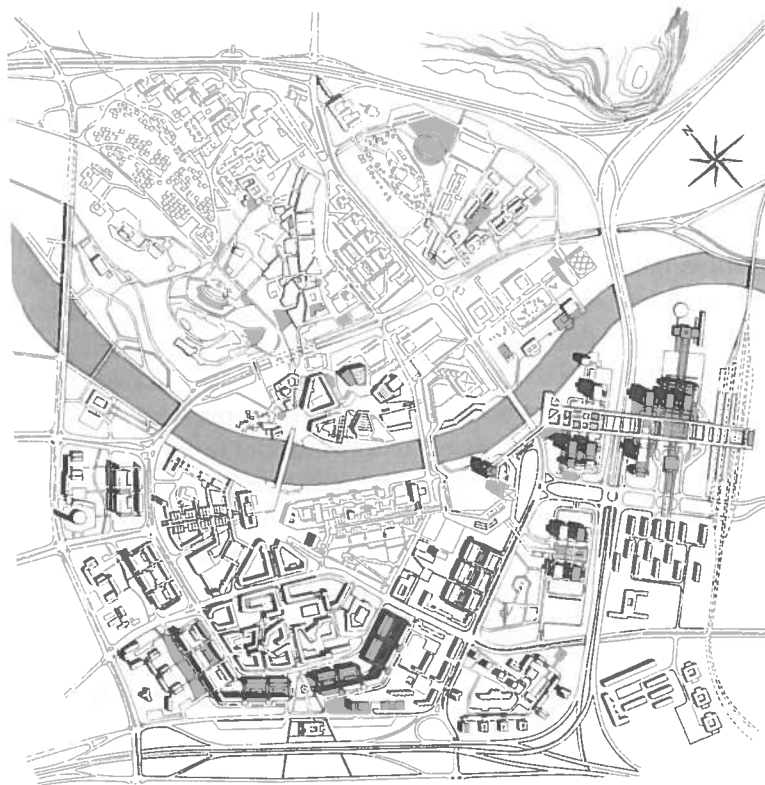
Kenzo Tange, United
Nations Development
Programme, winning entry
plan, 1970; from *Skopje
Resurgent: The Story of a
United Nations Special Fund
Town Planning Project* (New
York: United Nations, 1970)

Master Plan "one of the most experimental of times for urban plan-
ning in the Balkans"⁷ or rather that dreadful moment when theoretical
speculations come true? Tange was given the chance to materialize
his Metabolist ideas on an urban scale, and in Skopje he surely found
fertile ground for implementing the "total plan" he had developed for
Tokyo. In Tange's words, "Yugoslavia is a Socialist country in which
land is not privately held, [so] the city government had sufficient power
to make it possible to introduce our total plan."⁸

This top-down approach is certainly symptomatic of a zeitgeist
relationship between architects and the authorities. Tange's assertion
magnifies the inherent facilitation of implementing large-scale pro-
jects in regimes that do not have participatory or democratic political
processes. He describes the approach to his project as follows: "[A]n
ultimate form for the whole is designed on a virtually constitutional
basis and all development is made to agree with this form . . . [T]his
would make it possible to produce a total image", a gesture one could
claim was only possible because of authoritarianism. But was Tange

7
Ibid.

8
Zhongjie, *Kenzo Tange.*

153

9
United Nations Development
Programme, *Skopje
Resurgent.*

10
Ibid.

really given carte blanche to implement his conceptual design of structure and symbols?

The Board of Consultants directed the process of implementing Tange's Master Plan. Firstly, the prize money was not all given to Tange. He got only three-fifths of it, with the remainder being given to the Croatian team (headed by Miscevic). This can be taken as the first impediment to "a total plan"; it was more than just a symbolic gesture, too, for it was decided that each competition entry would be scrutinized so as to extract the best features and integrate these into the winning entry. The Skopje Institute for Town Planning and Architecture (ITPA) was to produce a conclusive plan by 1966, a task they shared with Isozaki, Taniguchi and Watanabe from the Kenzo Tange group, and with Miscevic and Fedor from the Croatian team, along with numerous other consultants (traffic engineers, earthquake specialists, officials overseeing historic monuments, etc. . .). In early 1966, the conceptual layout was put into print. Several aspects that had been present in Tange's original draft were altered. The "City Wall" apartment blocks were reduced in height and fragmented to allow air circulation; while other elements were downscaled as well. However, the Master Plan's form was still recognizable. One of its central elements was the railway station, or "Transportation Center", a paradigmatic project to examine in recognizing the underlying drama of what happens when concepts lose to context. Tange conceptually understood the Master Plan as a "transformer" whose mission was to "translate the mechanism of contemporary society into a spatial structure".[9] Dubbed the "City Gate", this interchange was to be a resolutely modern elevated joint-core structure with parallel rows of high-rises running along a central axis paired with multiple levels and looping traffic flows (car traffic below, elevated railway tracks, detached pedestrian routes above) on "a more-than-human scale".[10]

During the summer of 1966 in collaboration with the ITPA, the town planning department and railway engineers, the Tange team established detailed design guidelines and an overall programme for the "City Gate". The railway tracks were to be elevated to 8.5 metres above ground at the passenger platforms. The space beneath them was to accommodate the post office and the bus station. There were only four tracks in the design's first phase, but these grew in number to eight in the second phase (1981–91).

Around this time, the Macedonian and Croatian teams, who were somehow still involved, expressed concerns regarding the

11
Zhongjie, *Kenzo Tange*.

12
Ibid.

13
Stephanie Herold, Benjamin Langer and Julia Lechler, *Reading the City: Urban Space and Memory in Skopje* (Berlin: Technische Uni Berlin, 2011).

14
Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks . . .* (Berlin: Taschen, 2011).

ceptual design of

s of implementing
as not all given to
ainder being given
an be taken as the
an just a symbolic
tition entry would
nd integrate these
own Planning and
lan by 1966, a task
be from the Kenzo
he Croatian team,
ineers, earthquake
ts, etc. . .). In early
veral aspects that
altered. The "City
nd fragmented to
ownscaled as well.
ible. One of its cen-
ortation Center", a
underlying drama
ange conceptually
ose mission was to
nto a spatial struc-
s to be a resolutely
rows of high-rises
levels and looping
s, detached pedes-
.10

with the ITPA, the
s, the Tange team
all programme for
ated to 8.5 metres
ace beneath them
tation. There were
ie grew in number

atian teams, who
ns regarding the

seismological dangers of the "City Wall" and submitted an interim report to the Board of Consultants. The resulting controversy seems to have coincided with the Tange team's gradual loss of control over the project from this point onward. An obscure sentence concludes the otherwise carefully detailed UN report entitled "Skopje Resurgent": "This . . . of course, was a matter not so much of development planning as of development control in the course of the plan's implementation". Tange was obliged to leave the Board in 1967,[11] and the first train pulled into the Transportation Center on 27 July 1981.

While Tang noted "that the urban planning authority of Skopje required architects of individual buildings to abide by the master plan and the building guidelines even in buildings" that he designed,[12] and while it is largely believed that this particular project was made by directly following Tange's competition entry, the legacy of the original concept is elsewhere hardly recognizable. From above, some elements are perceivable. Apart from the main axis and the volumes of the "City Wall", the City Shopping Center (1973) and the National Macedonian Ballet (1981) were built. Along the "City Gate" axis, the commercial bank tower was the only element of the programme to be realized, along with the Transportation Center. Doxiadis, a long-time collaborator of the UN, took over the supervision of the reconstruc-tion effort in collaboration with Polservice (which had been in charge of the reconstruction of Warsaw) and Wilbur Smith & Associates.[13] It is undeniable that the conceptual Metabolist essence of the project became weakened. Isozaki, Tange's main collaborator on the Skopje project, explains the situation like this: "[M]ore and more came in, more conservative people, over our heads. . . . And Tange said, "OK, it's time to compromise and go home." So we did. . . . For me the Skopje project basically died, or was killed, at that point."[14]

The Skopje Master Plan and its implementation process perfectly exemplify the hegemony of contextual factors over concepts – what-ever gets built becomes contextualized by its very own presence. As Tschumi states in the introduction of *Event-Cities,* "there is no archi-tecture without context, historical, geographical, cultural". By exten-sion, this is certainly valid for urban planning, a truth that is magni-fied in the case of the Macedonian capital. Not only was Skopje a city before the Master Plan, but while the final layouts were being worked out, its urban organism was also restructuring itself at a faster pace than planning could ever hope to control or shape. At the same time, the political forces and local powers at work were challenging the

project, while the country was struggling with financial issues, all of which ended up perverting the fundamental concept. Finally, the UN report claims with a lyrical zeal that "town-planning is essentially team work: never has this well-worn phrase meant so much as it did in Skopje". It also concludes by handing the project over to the locals: "It is now for the local authorities not only to implement these plans, but to correct any mistakes in them, and to revise and improve upon them in the light of their own experience."

If, as Reyner Banham claims,[15] Tange is a "brutalist" due to his typical public buildings of *béton brut,* his architectural legacy is certainly vividly evident in Skopje, more, perhaps, than his urban design – the Master Plan – could ever be. While Tange's concept got chewed up and completely assimilated by the contextual forces at work on site, his work also provided fodder for emulation and a fertile terráin for other visionary projects built long after he had left town. For example, Georgi Konstantinovski, a student of Paul Rudolph, produced two remarkable buildings: the Skopje City Archive (1966) and the Goce Delcev student dormitory (1969), both massive volumes in pebbledash concrete, while the Telecommunication Center (1974) by Janko Konstantinov, who left Alvar Alto's studio to help with the reconstruction, incontestably upholds Tange's legacy. For Tange himself, the Skopje Master Plan was a watershed in his career, for after working on it he was invited to develop projects in several countries other than his own, including Saudi Arabia, Nigeria and Syria.

In the arena of concepts duking it out against contexts that Skopje has been, the victory of the latter has been acknowledged, even if it is not an unconditional one. Beyond the prosaic problem of maintenance that master plans must confront, regardless of the success of their implementation, one might suggest that of all contextual factors the greatest adversary of concepts is the universal element of time and the drama it introduces – the threat of the final moment, the caducity of a project.

15
Reyner Banham, *Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past* (London and New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 224.

Previous page, top:
The Transportation Center, platforms, 2011.
Photograph by Lorenz Bürgi

Bottom:
The Transportation Center, 2011.
Photograph by Fabian Roth
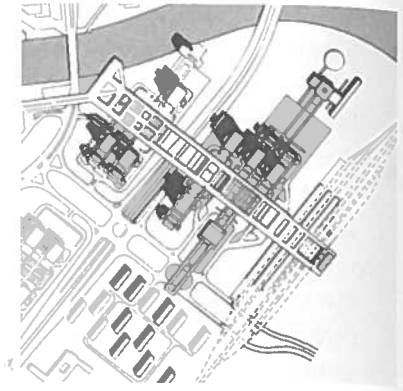
Comparative series:
Concept vs. context