

Reflection

Staging the Abandoned:

Open-air Theatre Revitalization of Kale Fortress, Skopje

Chair Methods and Analysis: Positions in Practice

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I. Introduction

The Chair of Methods and Analysis focuses on developing architectural positions and practices through thorough research on Skopje. The studio investigates how these different urban narratives under architectures relate to the everyday life in the city, how human actions constitute and affected by the built environment, thus students can come up with architectural proposals for a more empathic and integrated city for all. We began with a month of multi-layered group research and analysis, followed by fieldwork, thus individual research and proposal.

Skopje is a place that struggles to define its national identity, within the people and to the world. Despite waves of protests and the Colourful Revolution ended in smoke in 2016, the Government ignored people's voice and proceeded the controversial project, Skopje 2014. This autocracy led to a direct association of people between the resentment towards the regime and the urban environment/infrastructure. The people-environment detachment caused some people became blasé and disengaged with their surroundings; while some expressed their anger through graffiti and "appropriating" space in unauthorised and egoistic means, contributing to the out of repair and worn out cityscape.

II. Fascination

With the prior interest in micro-scale human interaction, we (in collaboration with Haydn Lo, Yanyan Tsui) formulated our thesis research under the theme of 'Informalities' in Skopje. We investigated the informal interventions in Skopje within the framework of Meaningfulness, Appropriation and Integration; in three layers of analysis, namely Conceptual, contextual and disciplinary. By identifying 6 street conditions around the city of Skopje, we discovered that *"The more Visually Fragmented the street is, the denser the Informal Interventions are"*. As the process continues, this phenomenon is likely to reciprocate when the informal interventions become part of the street condition and further fragment the visual perceptions.

I wondered how people process these physical and visual qualities in their perceptions. What kind of spaces generate the atmosphere which makes people feel eligible and comfortable to occupy, thus appropriate? Strolling around the city, I am especially intrigued by

how people project their emotions onto architecture, particularly on those ‘generously made’ space for Skopje 2014. This observation has led me to the research investigation into the what does ‘Generosity’ mean to a place in the wider concepts of Grace and Beauty; and how it could be embraced as a virtue for the pursuit of people in the city.

III. Context and Research Question

The project site situates at Kale Fortress, a historic archaeological site at the highest point overlooking the city of Skopje. Despite its rich cultural value and prestige location, the site has been abandoned for years since the inter-ethnic conflict between the Macedonians and Albanians in 2011 over the construction on a church-shaped museum. Together with the other three abandoned structures in the Fortress area, I regard them as ‘emotional scars’ neglected by the people.

This graduation project seeks to revitalize the Kale Fortress area by converting the abandoned structures into Open-air theatres. By identifying the four abandoned structures as an Anchor and centre of activities, the design aims to reactivate the fortress area by giving a ‘second-life’ to the ‘Modern Heritage’ and acknowledge them as part of the context/ history. Theatre is chosen to be the medium for its nature of expressing and interacting. It also provides a space for reimagination and empathy during performances. It is hoped to give a new perception and memory association of the place being open, generous instead of a taboo to the users. With the main design focus on the Church Museum, the developed design strategy is to be further applied to the rest of the three structures so that the fortress area could be perceived as a whole and accomplish the design intent in a broader context.

IV. Research Method and Design Approach

i. Informalities

The research addressed the topic in mainly two approaches, through Phenomenology and Architectural theory, switching back and forth depending on phases. On-site studies are context-led, by fieldwork applying serial photography to capture human experience and vision. Approaching the streets under the lens of Visual

perception helped us to understand the direct relationship of informal intervention with the street condition in a more figure-ground manner (Fig.1) in terms of human perspective. Aided with theories review of Affordance, Ad-hocism¹ and architectural proposition of Atelier Bow-wow, we gained insights on how people altered and invent ways to appropriate a space based on the physical condition and available materials. This guided us to observe and identify various behaviours on site.

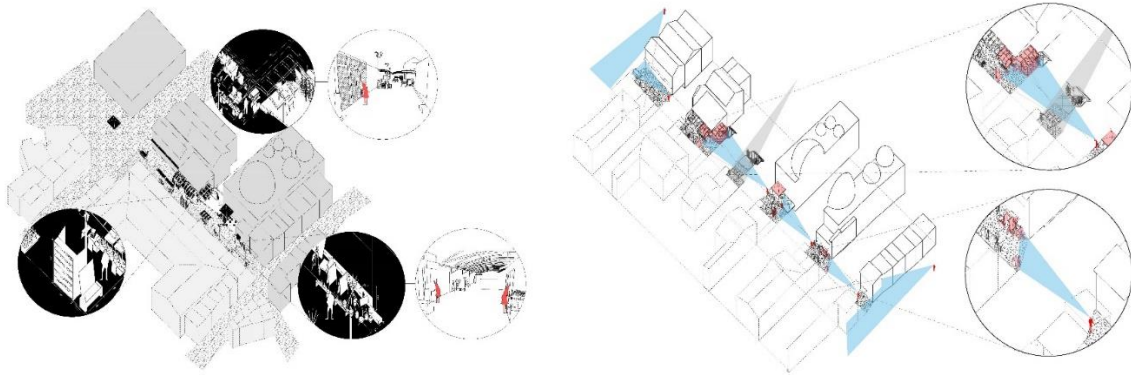


Fig.1 Figure-ground axonometric drawing of Antique street, Skopje Fig.2 Exploded axonometric drawing of Antique street, Skopje

ii. Of Grace and Generosity

In the investigation of Generosity, I mainly focused on the theoretical approach, first looking into the notion of home and sense of security, encountering ideas from Joseph Rykwert, Alain De Botton and Witold Rybczynski. One can identify that they all associated 'Home' with ideas of 'Generous', 'Beauty', 'Elegance', and a Virtue. Home is not necessarily a static place; it can be anywhere: when emotional textures echo with individual's memories and 'their own internal prized songs'².

The research on the word 'Generosity' led me to a broader notion of 'Grace' and encountered the article 'The Grace Machine: Of Turns, Wheels, and Limbs' by Lars Spuybroek - which has the most influence on my conceptual framework of the project. Using methods like etymology, the author draws generosity into the larger gift

¹Jencks, Charles, and Nathan Silver. *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation*. London: MIT Press, 2013.

²Botton, Alain de. *The Architecture of Happiness*. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2014.

exchange cycle of Grace and beauty. He unpacks the word origin of Grace in Greek: ‘Charis’ means favour, generosity, gratitude, enjoyment, recompense and beauty. In the Greek language, a word is a verb and a noun at the same time – Therefore, in terms of Grace, *Things act, and actions present themselves as things*.³ Putting the idea into the circulation of Grace (Fig.3), we give, we receive, and we return; at the same time, ‘Giving’, ‘Receiving’ and ‘Returning’ exist in the cycle as an object. As the exchange continues, the act and the pleasure multiply.

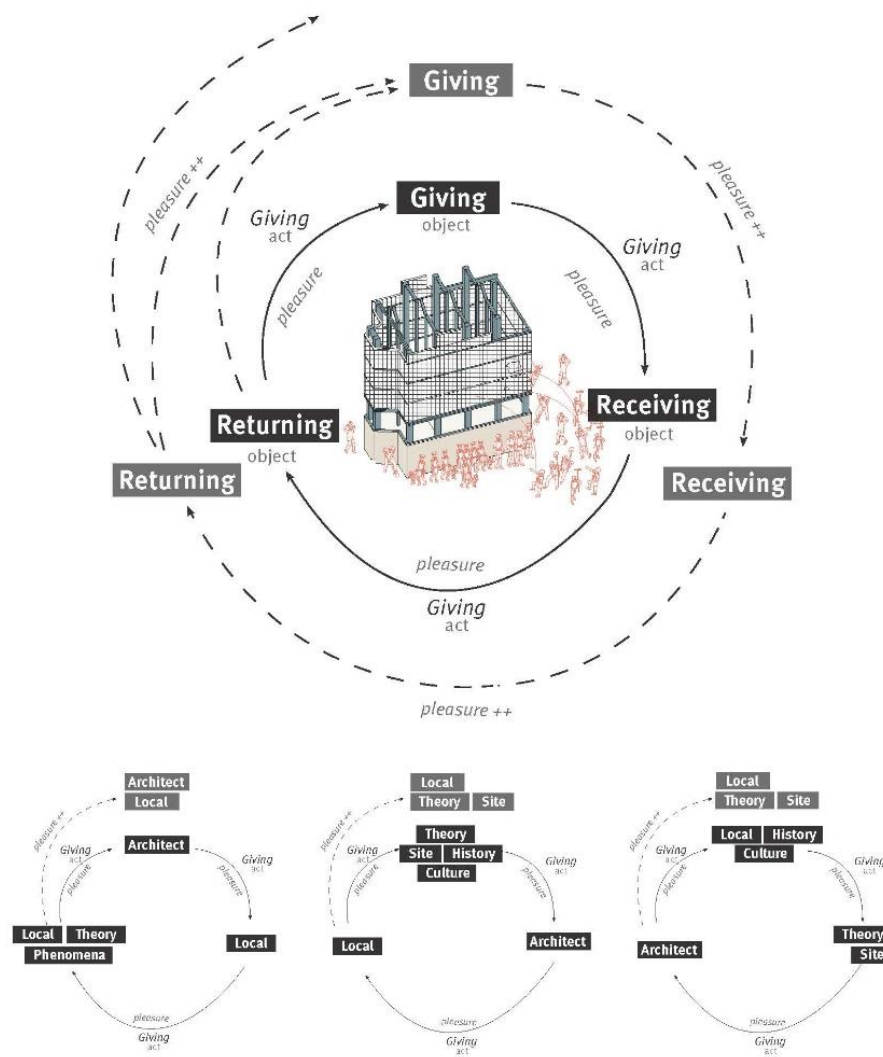


Fig.3 The Circulation of Grace: Shifting Position of Architect

³ Spuybroek, Lars. 'The Grace Machine: Of Turns, Wheels, and Limbs'. Footprint, no. 22 (2018): 7–32.

The Theoretical Analysis has been fruitful to my projects in various ways:

1. **Anchoring the Design Proposition:** Taking the design gesture as an act of giving and the design as a gift, you don't control or contain prescribed expectation of the users' behaviour. Thus, the idea is to encourage but not impose. The design shall act as a magnetic field to attract people to experience the space further, reveal to them the possibilities on the site, yet the people shall be the drive of actions.
2. **Developing design strategy:** I realise that everything is in a cycle and constant movement. The Gift Cycle can be seen in the light of Affect Theory⁴, that we are constantly perceiving from the environment and generate emotions – 'giving', 'receiving' and 'returning' - interacting with the reality. We move to percept, and we are being moved simultaneously⁵. That inspired me to explore my design as a non-static, event-based character, and how extracting elements from the cycle and reshuffle them can be beneficial to the site area chosen.
3. **Reflection of the Position as an Architect:** I start to rethink about the relationship Architect/Architecture, Locals/Site and Theory in terms of the Gift Cycle I come to realize that Architect is not purely a giver to the site to 'initiate' the gift cycle. It is a trinity of Giving, receiving and returning at the same time. We are given and received precious gifts from site, history, own culture and theory encountered, reinterpret them and return(give) back as another form of gifts. This reaffirms my pursuit of a modest and genuine attitude as an Architect.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. The Phenomenology of Perception. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.

⁵ Noë, Alva. Action in Perception. Edited by Hilary Putnam and Ned Block. MIT Press. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.

iii. Of Theatres and Composition

Noticing the theoretical research contributes mostly to the concept and design proposition, I decided to further explore design strategy and site approach through an in-depth precedent study on theatres and their compositions, namely the Restoration and rehabilitation of the Roman Theatre by Giorgio Grassi, Teatra Oficina by Lina Bo Bardi, and Roberto Burle Marx's landscaping projects.

In Grassi's restoration proposal, he took a Post-modern approach, that was to identify a ruin, and achieve a new wholeness by new additions to harmoniously complete the building. This is to make it functional again but also remain the connection with the past. Grassi extracted elements that are useful for theatrical actions such as stairs and monumental doors and represent it in an abstract yet functional way to trigger historical associations. For Lina, 'Street' was her main idea to revitalize this manifest theatre. She plugged in the land strip as stage and lateral galleries on slender collapsible structures for audience seating. The barriers between performer and the audience blurred, and the audience became part of the play. In terms of mediating between architecture and the context, Roberto Burle Marx's works are enlightening. He treats the landscape as a canvas, and design as a way of painting with vegetation, but with touch, sound, fragrance and dealing with the change of time. For instance, in the Mineral roof garden at São Paulo, his design was colour-coded with precise colours and shapes to create a visual rhythm. This aids visually activating the public space and give pleasures to the users.

Addressing the connections between the abandoned structures, I referenced the idea of Bernard Tschumi's 'Follies' for Parc de la Villette in Paris; and Tadao Ando's theatre complex Awaji Yumebutai in Japan – of how specific elements recurring in several connection points between buildings help strengthen people's sense of connection in memory.

iv. Design Strategy and Intervention

Referencing the strategies identified from the Precedents, I came up with my design approach. Firstly, to identify four abandoned structures (The Church Museum, warehouse, stone museum and glass museum) as Anchors (the centre of activities) and

build a multi-configurational theatre around it. By stripping off the existing structure to its more elemental state, the structure opens up, turning in to a proscenium and arena form of stage. To activate the third interactive stage, a balcony is added to blur the boundary in-between. The stages are then surrounded by a curated, colourful landscape to isolate the audience in this ‘new reality’ of play, completing the whole sensual theatrical experience. In a broader context, they perform as several magnetic fields: Architecturally an open attraction point to tourists and locals and Functionally attracting people to engage with the space when there are performances and events.

The Intervention focuses on the Church Museum to develop the revitalization strategy. The existing concrete tiles are recomposed as outdoor terraced seating to create 3 stages: 1) the inner covered stage inside the skeleton featuring flexible steps and upper balcony 2) the extended stage facing the outdoor terraced seating, accompanied with the under stage dressing/storage area; and 3) the paved outdoor landscape as a stage for arena-form of performance. The theatre is immersed in a gradual stone wall and various colourful bush landscaping. This creates an ambience of openness and provide various ways of appropriations for people to reimagine the space.

The Anchors are subtly connected by extracting signature elements and materials from each existing structure, reshuffling and recomposing them to formulate new theatre designs (Fig.4). The complex is perceived as a whole in user’s fragments of memories during the encounter.

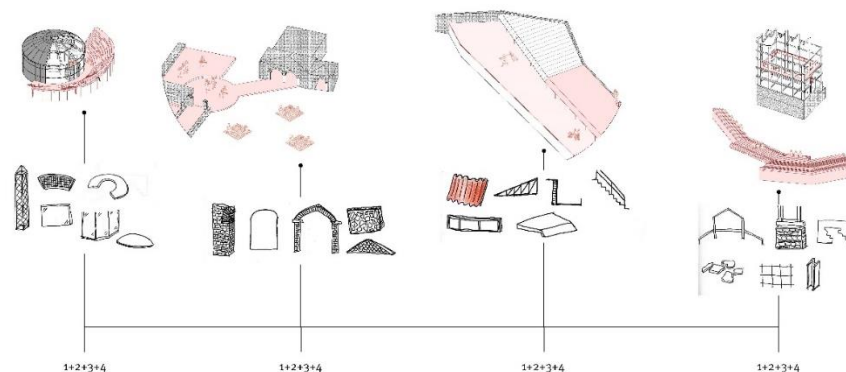


Fig.4 Design Strategy Diagram

V. Relevance

Appreciating ‘Modern Heritage’: Revitalization and challenges

‘Modern heritage/ruins’ is considered one of the most significant challenges of our era; nonetheless, is largely neglected due to its lack of precedents. The challenges stand that they were made of steel, reinforced concrete and prefabricated materials, which decay faster than traditionally built counterparts. Also, these architectures are difficult to be converted simply as museums for its shallow history cannot be a glamorous attraction by itself – architects need to find uses that add values to the original ruin/structure. The project demonstrates the potential of dealing with the existing abandoned structure, to build upon not to build again. The design could be a way of returning the public space to people with a new function yet carefully keeping the trace of the history.

Generosity: The virtue in Architecture

Generosity has strong relevance to the position of architect in practice. Role of Architect has been constantly being challenged and shifting in the field of architecture, from total control to the bottom-up approach that involves multiple parties in the process of decision making. To what extent architecture shall express a vision/virtue of living according to the value held by the architect, and to what extent giving people what they think they want? How to accommodate everyone’s need? This project seeks to propose generosity/grace as both a method and a virtue to be demonstrated through architecture. That could serve as a critical reflection on this debate. As a quality in humanity that I believe is rooted and shared by everyone, the design act could treat people tenderly and ease intense social confrontation in the age of individualism.

While ‘Beauty’ is described as arrested Grace, the project also challenges the conventional modernism thinking of beauty being something default in a city (functionalism), suggesting beauty(grace) as the purpose of the environment and the city through perceptual experience. It is therefore hoped to contribute to the discussion in the field of architectural research about Affect, Perception and neuroarchitecture.

VI. Conclusion

There were many challenges I faced during the research and design process. One was when it comes to bringing theory to practice – how does one translate abstract theories to understandable manner for laymen and communicate architecturally. I have been trying hard to keep my thoughts and design decisions aligned and rationalized with the theories and research which put me into a bottleneck situation for some time. Then I recognized only by allowing oneself drilling into practical detailing and carefully analyse how particular atmosphere can be made via architecture/construction could make productive design progress.

Working for this graduation project is a fun and rewarding journey. It consolidates lots of my thoughts, theories encountered on memories, perceptions and movements in architecture throughout my master study. It is a critical reflection and affirmation of what kind of architect I aspired to be, and the position of architect in the society. Another takeaway was Doing and the wisdom of *Not-doing*. I used to think in a mindset that we Architect shall introduce new, massive buildings to whatever site we are given – just build something, and I found difficult to work on a vast land, setting parameters for myself, and beating the ego as an architect trying to be ‘New and creative’. It was after that I realize that the role of architect is to make the built environment better, while the strategy might not necessarily be introducing new stuff. Simple gestures are also architecture. I learnt to embrace simplicity and modesty. May the project be a gentle note of me, at this ambiguous and uncertain time, on the road as an Architect.

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