

Resonating Optimism

Gradski Trgovski Ventar (GTC), Designed by Zivko Popovski

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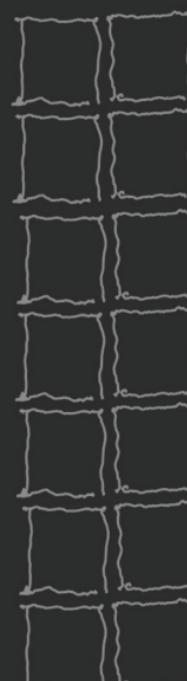


La Biennale di Venezia

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STRADA BRUTALISSIMA

North Macedonia Pavilion
19th International Architecture Exhibition
La Biennale di Venezia 2025



Strada Brutalissima
19th International Architecture Exhibition
La Biennale di Venezia 2025

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National Gallery of the Republic of North Macedonia

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RESONATING OPTIMISM GRADSKI TRGOVSKI CENTAR (GTC), Designed by Živko Popovski

Dirk van den Heuvel

In 1965, now sixty years ago, the architect of the Gradski Trgovski Centar in Skopje, Živko Popovski, travelled to Rotterdam to work at the famed office of Van den Broek and Bakema for about half a year. I spoke with a former employee, Frans Hooykaas, who worked as a direct assistant to Jaap Bakema including numerous competitions and public presentations. He is now 86 years old: do you remember him? Yes! He was full of energy and enthusiasm. I see his photo on the internet now, and recognize his grey mustache, at the time a well-groomed black line in a very lively face. He moved around as if his limbs, legs and arms were all connected by elastics. But sorry, not so much more. Did he work on the Skopje project? On the design that the Van den Broek and Bakema office submitted to the UN competition after the city was hit by an earthquake? Not sure... But it seems likely since he came from Skopje? Also handy in terms of language. If so, he must have worked with the group of Stokla in the office, who did most of the competitions. We were doing so many competitions in those years, big city schemes: Tel Aviv and Ashdod in Israel, the Pampus plan for Amsterdam, Frankfurt am Main in Germany, the university buildings in Bochum, Plovdiv in Bulgaria, Zurich... The special aspect of Skopje was to work with existing buildings, the remaining constructions after the disaster of the earthquake had to be spared and included.

Imagine: Popovski 31 years young when he came to Rotterdam, Hooykaas was just 26 that year. The Dutch port city was still in tatters due to the bombing at the start of the Second World War, the empty lots everywhere around, particularly so in the city centre. The sound of pile drivers and construction machines hard at work for the reconstruction of Rotterdam formed a stimulating background chorus to everyday city life. The city was working to achieve a better future, for everyone. Despite the destruction and hardship, the atmosphere must have been one of unlimited optimism. The first wave of new building projects could already be experienced and admired, such as the Lijnbaan shopping centre and the impressive line of Lijnbaan housing slabs. Also, the new bright modernist department stores which dominated the inner city and were designed by outstanding architects like Marcel Breuer, Kraaijvanger and Van den Broek and Bakema themselves, must have given an air of progress and hope for better times ahead.

Popovski went back to Skopje in the same year, just as Rotterdam a destroyed city, and also full of hope things would get better. Unfortunately for Van den Broek and Bakema, they lost the Skopje competition to Kenzo Tange. Popovski though, would win the competition for the Gradski Trgovski Centar in 1967, and would realize the project in the following years. I visited it myself in 2023. It's hard not to like the project. Despite the obvious need for a makeover, it still holds a sophisticated elegance and generosity: in its material expression, the spatial layout, the stacking of its wide galleries and terraces, the way the public spaces and shops have been organised between the riverside and the public garden, and how the 1950s tower blocks by Aleksander Serafimovski have been integrated in a most natural way. So many lessons to be learned! First and foremost: between the two destroyed cities, and the way the architects faced the challenges, the optimism of 1965 that still resonates.

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Blagoja Bajkovski

Curator of the North Macedonia pavilion at the 19th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia 2025

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