

Rediscovering public space in the inner ring of Skopje

Chair Methods and Analysis: Positions in Practice

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Introduction

As part of the graduation studio Methods and Analysis: Positions in Practice, we investigated the city of Skopje. A city with a turbulent history of which various traces are still visible: from being destroyed, rebuild and currently rebranded. From an architectural point of view, this has created a very interesting environment featuring various contrasting styles. Yet despite the redevelopment masterplans, the city never seemed to fully achieve its potential.

Relationship between graduation topic and studio

“The Methods and Analysis education engages students in their own processes of position-taking, via curiosity-based research, trans-disciplinary exchange, and the disciplined use of architectural instruments and methods.” (TU Delft, 2020).

Curiosity-based research

The idea for my graduation design first came to mind when walking through the Macedonian street and discovering there was a dark alley within one of the neoclassical façades leading to a courtyard behind. It turned out that there were many courtyards like this dispersed throughout the city, but all in poor condition and hardly used even though they are surrounded by residential buildings and thus easily accessible for locals. This discovery led me to further observe how public space was used in Skopje and I soon realised that the same story applied even to the recently renovated squares and parks.

During my education, I have always been interested in designing public space in buildings. As such, seeing the current usage of public space in Skopje on the one hand and realising its potential on the other is one of the reasons that motivated my choice for this topic for my graduation design. Unlike projects I worked on before, however, there was not yet a clear

purpose for the intervention. In addition, the courtyards are inextricably connected and interwoven with the larger urban environment. Simply improving the aesthetics, as attempted with Skopje 2014 and as I had personally observed, would not necessarily result in more usage. Instead, I first wanted to find out why the public space in Skopje was not used more and try to resolve this with my design.

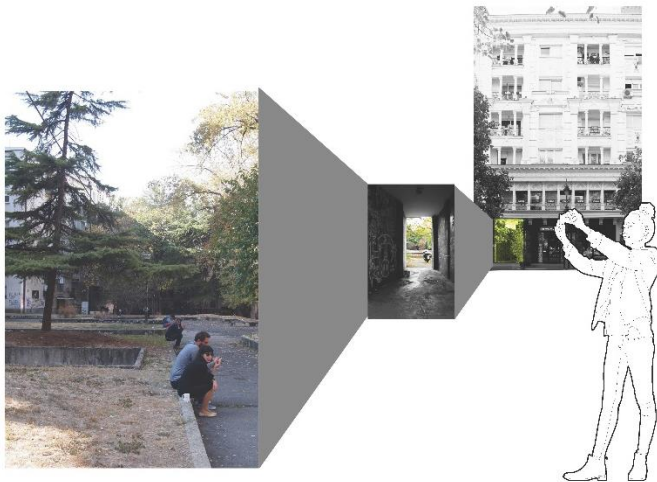


Image: Courtyard behind dark ally

Position-taking

During our field trip to Skopje, my group mates and I conducted interviews with some of the local people. Elderly people told us they missed the greenery that had been replaced since Skopje 2014 as they no longer had a place to meet their neighbors, while younger people stated there was no place for them to play. Briefly put, both young and old felt that there was no space in the city to do things.

Upon further investigation, I found that going somewhere to do something often stems from a desire to engage in social activity. As was noted “people are social creatures and need social interaction” (Jan Gehl, 2010). They do not, however, tend to leave their home to fulfil this social need for solely this reason. Instead they need some excuse or motive. In other words, they

need a destination to go to do something. This simultaneously explains why so many people no longer feel a connection with the city, feel more alienated as the Skopje 2014 masterplan took shape: it removed opportunities for social interaction to occur.

The courtyards offer a lot of potential to increase the quality of public space in Skopje, but for the intervention to also be meaningful, I chose to adopt the position that the design should encourage social interaction so as to provide the local people with areas to once again meet others. In other words, the public space should not act only as a place within the public realm where everyone is allowed to go. It should be viewed as a bridge between people as well as between people and the city.

Intervention scope

The interventions were initially intended to include all the courtyards within the inner ring of Skopje. However, due to time constraints, it was chosen to select three sites that can serve as an example for redesigning the other courtyards as well as offer an option to connect the dispersed courtyards into an urban park. As such, the intervention not only targets the interior of the courtyards but also includes the transition with the surrounding environment. This not only makes the courtyards more inviting, but also reduces the stark contrast that currently exists between the neoclassical façades and public space.

The designs of the courtyards used a more open-minded approach to architecture and are therefore not strictly limited to buildings. Instead other fields of study, such as urbanism and landscape design, were consulted to offer the best possible solution for employing public space to increase social interaction amongst the locals. Hence, the approach became more: “how could architectural elements be used to encourage the use of public space and with it social interaction?”

Relationship between studio and project method and approach

“a contextual analysis concerned with the specificities of the city; a conceptual analysis that develops those specificities into theoretical concepts; and a disciplinary analysis studying local architectural precedents.” (TU Delft, 2020).

The studio Methods and Analysis advocates a multi-layered approach consisting of contextual, conceptual and disciplinary analysis that results in a fully-fledged architectural intervention. I followed this framework carefully with respect to my graduation design.

Contextual analysis (observation)

Contextual research was conducted through observation of Skopje and interviews with locals, complemented with additional desk research to learn about the city’s history. Skopje is a multifaceted city containing remnants of the traditional old bazaars, the brutalistic buildings constructed after the earthquake in 1963 (rebuilding) and has now adopted a neoclassical style with Skopje 2014. Focusing on the relationship between people and public space, I carefully observed Alexander Square in the center of the city; watching what people were doing and how they used the space. This includes: people are passing by or sit on the benches, merchants sell their goods, and children are playing in the fountain. I noticed there was little variety of activities and the activities are recurring (repetitive).

Within the inner ring, three more examples can be found. Two squares smaller but similar to Alexander Square, both surrounded by neoclassical buildings and featuring statues, benches and potted plants. Finally, the park also features neoclassical statues and some greenery. Here too, a little variety of activities was observed.

To find out how people feel about the public space, we interviewed locals. The elderly mostly mentioned missing the greenery in the city since Skopje 2014, whereas younger people said they had no place to, for example, play sports.

In short, people want places to do something and meet others.

Based on the observations and interviews, neither types of public space provide a proper place to meet, nor any incentive to stay. As a result, there was very little social interaction, but courtyards offer potential. This resulted in the following design aim: To redevelop the courtyards within the inner ring of Skopje to increase social interaction and develop the research in another layers of research conceptual analysis.

Conceptual analysis (theory or transdisciplinary exchange)

In order to accomplish my design aim, I subsequently had to study how social interaction could be stimulated and what role architecture could have in this process. To this end, I conducted a literature research in which I also learned from other disciplines like urbanism and landscape design.

From theory we learn that social interaction can be simulated in various ways. “It is the resultant of necessary and optional activities” (Jan Gehl, 2010). Where necessary activities, such as going to work or shopping, will occur anyway, optional (leisure) activities rely on the physical environment. Amongst others, this can be achieved by introducing various spatial elements like props and thresholds. Secondly, greenery has been positively associated with social interaction and bonding within residential communities. In addition, the structure of the green space is proven to heavily influence activities. This also explained why I observed hardly any activities taking place within the courtyards. Finally, another way of increasing social interaction is

through water features. Not only can it create a pleasing space to stay in when used restrictive, it can also direct people and be a focal point of itself.

Based on the findings of the literature research, I formulated the following hypothesis: Social interactions within the courtyards can be stimulated by combining architectural elements for activities and quality nature (green & water).

Disciplinary analysis and turn into instruments (precedent)

The final step of the analysis was to translate the theoretical findings into practical architectural elements that could be used within the design. For this I studied precedents from Carlo Scarpa and Aldo van Eyck.

The precedent study included two projects of Carlo Scarpa: Querini Stampalia Foundation and Tomba Brion. The first thing I learned from studying Scarpa is how to combine architectural elements and form with water features to guide circulation. For example, long basins that separate paving and green will direct people to walk around. In addition, the basins themselves could act as focal points at the same time.

In addition, studying these precedents taught me how walls can be used to separate space, yet simultaneously connect both sides. Scarpa often broke up the walls or purposefully introduced gaps within them to maintain a connection between both sides rather than introducing a hard boundary.

Thirdly, it demonstrated how leveling influences the rhythm of walking through space and thereby directly impacts the circulation within a space. Briefly put, long leveling changes slow down the rhythm and circulation whereas short leveling changes speed them up.

Aside from Carlo Scarpa, I also studied a precedent by Aldo van Eyck. His view was that playgrounds act as important elements within the city and by keeping them simple and

without predefined function, would allow for a more varied usage. Here, I mainly focussed on how to design the play elements that stimulate activities and could be included within my design: simple geometrical architectural forms that do not restrict the way to play.

Based on the precedent studies, the instruments of architectural elements to be used for my graduation design were derived. This includes walls with breaks and/or gaps, basins, leveling and play elements.

Relationship between research and design

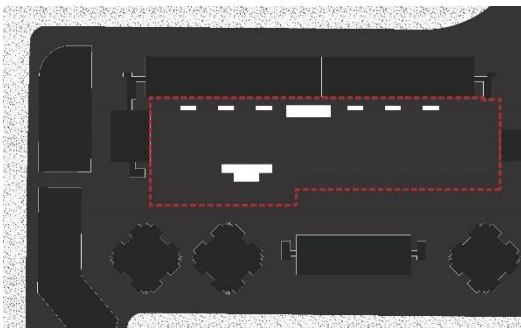
The MSc3/4 – Positions in Practice encourages students to adopt individual positions as architects based on their choice and use of those instruments and methods in analysis and practice.”

Based on the research and analyses, a set of instruments was derived that could be incorporated in the design in order to realise the design aim formulated earlier. This set of instruments consists of walls with breaks and/or gaps, basins, leveling and play elements.

In order to demonstrate how these instruments, contribute to a better usage of public space, and as a result more social interaction, a comparison is made between the current situation and proposed design. Given that the three intervention sites follow a very similar design philosophy, only one site will be discussed here.

Current situation

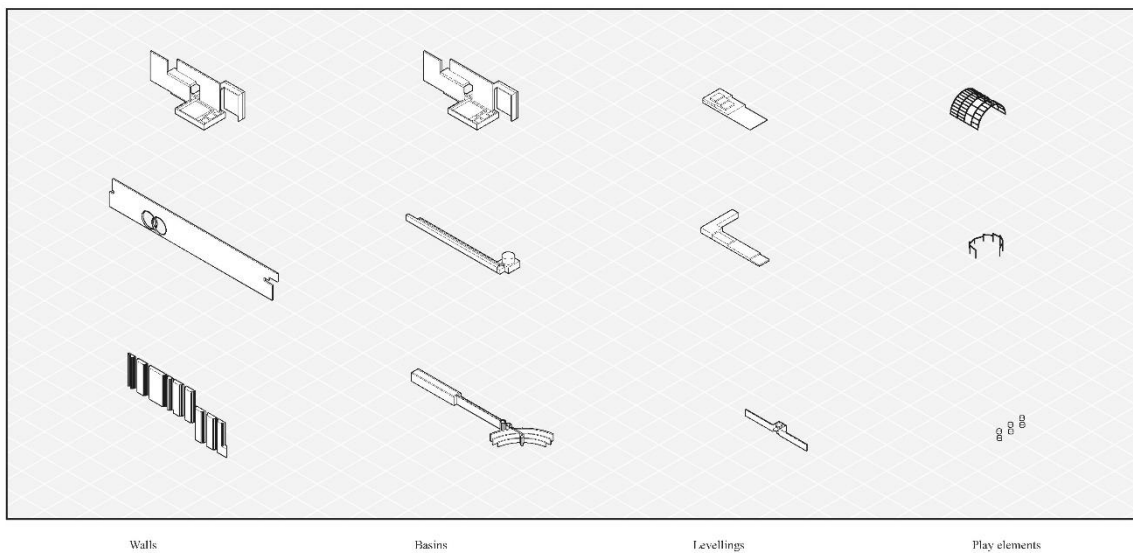
Currently, the courtyard is enclosed by residential blocks and located near a traditional market. As was observed, the main users are either locals and shoppers that only pass by. Narrow entrances are located in-between the buildings. Prior to intervention, the courtyard features an outdoor cafe enclosed by hedges, a basketball hoop with limited space around it, a playground and some area where vegetation is gathered.



Noni map: most of the space is assigned a predefined function leaving little area for other activities to occur. Most of the area is either taken up by green area or circulation space.

Interventions

The proposed intervention aims to open up the area, distancing itself from predefined functions and advocating multi-use instead. While the design features a wide variety of the aforementioned set of instruments, three main elements can be distinguished.



Instruments learned from the precedent study: walls, basins, leveling, play elements.

Playground The playground was designed according the principles put forward by Aldo van Eyck. It features simple geometric shapes that do not have a ‘predefined way to play’. Furthermore, it features an open circulation space where people can enter from all sides. Not only is it a place for children, but it also simultaneously acts as a focal point as well as meeting point for parents. This is achieved by placing stages and seating areas around the playground where parents can stay for prolonged periods of time while the children play.

Basins Water features can be used as focal points and also be used to guide circulation. Within the proposed intervention, they are used in both ways. Creating a long rectangular basin helps to guide the people passing by along the main artery of circulation, but by including a long bench along its side it simultaneously offers a comfortable place to stay. Furthermore, the basin adjacent to the playground again acts as both an interesting place to stay as well as an extension of the playground where children can play.

Plinths Along the edge of the hard-paved court as well as near the outdoor cafe, plinths are that allow for multiple configurations. These flexible boundaries allow for a large variety of uses, including creating basketball hoops or goals for sports, provide shelter or covering, act as playful installations like hanging chairs, be used to organise outdoor exhibitions, etcetera. As a result, the area where plinths can be placed can be used as either an extension of the outdoor cafe, as an extension of the court, or even as an area in which other activities can be organised.

Apart from these three main elements, a range of different interventions are included in the design. For example, the court does not feature the traditional rubber floor but features hard paving so that it could also be used as a square. Again, a stage is placed next to the court to provide room for people to sit and enjoy watching games or performances while simultaneously guiding the circulation.

With respect to the transitions with the surroundings, walls feature openings and stepwise transitions that open the courtyard and direct the gaze of people passing by, making the courtyards more apparent and inviting from the outside.

Finally, water features are also utilised to connect the dispersed courtyards with each other in order to create an urban park. While it is not possible to really connect and integrate the courtyards into a single and continuous urban park, due to the existing urban environment, the

role of water features as both a focal point and guide for people passing by can be used to create a mental urban park. The basins would be extended outwards and culminate in a more prominent water feature on street level. As such, the water feature would act as a focal point to attract people's attention, where the extended basin would guide people towards the courtyard. If this is implemented consistently throughout the city, people will start associating the water features within the street with courtyards and automatically draw them in.

Scientific relevance and wider application

While the relation between social interaction and the built environment has been well studied, my design includes two quite different precedents and use them complementary. While they both emphasised multi-use, be it in different ways, Scarpa was mostly concerned about architectural form and circulation. Aldo van Eyck on the other hand mainly focussed on play elements / playgrounds and how these could be used in a more creative way. In my opinion, the two could reinforce each other when designing courtyards specifically aimed at increasing social interaction.

While it would be dependent on the type of city, as it would require courtyards to begin with, it could prove an effective way to improve livability of urban areas in which public space is scarcely used. In addition, this project has demonstrated how an architectural intervention can be designed to accomplish an initially abstract goal such as 'increasing social interaction' following a systematic and scientific approach.

Reflection

The methods and analysis gave a new perception of architecture:

The way to figure out a problem and research

Before attending this studio, I was only familiar with the ‘conventional’ approach to architecture with preset methods to define the scope, boundary and circulation. The function and program would be explained through a (architectural) brief. I seldom questioned the reason why I was designing, with what purpose or for what goal. Due to the curious based approach, I became a more critical thinker about design and learned to develop a coherent idea to go along with it.

The way to solve problems

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Theory and precedent

Normally, I would study precedents following a mostly fixed set of rules, circulation, programmes, materials and soon. Now I actively look into theory to discover how to achieve my aim, study precedents with this in mind, and apply this within my design. In other words, adjust theory and study precedent based on position. Tailoring the precedent studies to the purpose of design and supporting this with theory and studies, has resulted in a more full-fledged architectural design. This is a beautiful turning point for me to the future architect career.

Being critical as otherwise I will always simply follow the rules might not work in all cases. Keep an open mind and not restrict myself purely to architecture, and also other disciplines to look into the built environment and city. Now, I would take context into consideration and position the intervention. Becoming a more fully fledged architect in the future.

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