

# Reflection

Methods and Analysis: Positions in Practice

Wang, Wei-Chieh

Contextually Refurbishing: Pores-and-Extensions of Fragmentized Buildings

## Introduction

From the spring semester, 2019, the graduation studio of the Chair of Methods and Analysis focused on the site of Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, followed the themes meaningfulness, appropriation, and integration, and analyzed them by the contextual, conceptual, and disciplinary aspects. Students had to practice this research method and combine personal fascination, then formulated the research questions after the excursion. And answering these questions helped the students to decide the position on the proposal.

Before the site excursion, I was struggling with defining my fascination with a word, and how to apply it to site investigation. Therefore, I tried to review the information I was interested in from the site, individual research, and precedent research, then found and summarized the commons or specials. I noticed that many distinct characteristics constructed my impressions of the city, formed by different periods and reasons. From this, I conclude the research target of my graduation project: the emerging cityscape, the residential extension.

Comparing with focusing on the city center, where designed by the theory of Metabolism, I am more interested in the residential area, which occupied most spaces of Skopje and should be able to have more values to the city. Architects designed the residential blocks forming the image of the city at first, but, later, the extensions on the facades made by users took over the impression. The transition and balance between the architect's and the user's domination of the cityscape, which is generating accumulated features, caused my attention. This motivation became more obvious and stronger throughout my graduation project.

## Fascination

At the beginning of my graduation year, the studio guided the students using and discovering personal fascinations to start a discussion. I have a broad interest in many different things, yet I never had decently looked for the commons and considered them as tools that can be used in my research and design process. So, it was quite an interesting and a fresh start for me.

During the discussion, it was hard not to use architectural references to explain my fascination because, as an architecture student, I inevitably related it to architectural aspects. Finding a word that represents my fascination as a lens to make research was difficult for me because it needed to describe abstract feelings and concepts, and to transform them into precise words. This is a method that I had not practiced, meanwhile, not using mother language to do that was a challenge to me as well. Therefore, I tried to use the basic and simple word as my starting point to discover, clarify, and develop my fascination.

After several tryings, I used "connection" as my viewpoint to research Skopje, and it allowed me to focus on three aspects of the

city. 1. Functional connection, from an individual to a collective, circulation, like corridors and staircase, links rooms together becoming a building (it may have a program); buildings create a community, then a city, by traffic, such as passages and roads. 2. Physical connection, the ways, such as ramps, stairs, and bridges, connect places that spatially disconnected, like different heights and gaps that cannot cross. 3. Contextual connection, a phenomenon explains the relationship between human society and the environment and how it has been created. It relates to the thinking logics from the previous architects and designers, the climate of the region, the living life of the citizen, and the history, policy, and economy of the city.

## Impressions of Skopje

After actual visiting Skopje, I analyzed the context which constructed my impressions of this city, especially the extensions of the residential buildings, through the lens of Behaviorology. This idea was mentioned by Tsukamoto Yoshiharu, Atelier Bow-Wow: "Form which supports building behavior. In places where certain attributes of a building repeat and accumulate, a streetscape order is produced. For such an appearance to emerge, these places were not planned, nor were there original blueprints. Rather, their forms seem to have stabilized after years."

Through discerning when the emerging form was appearing, how long it has lasted, whether it is stable, whether it is an unplanned result, and whether it has been repeating and accumulating, it helped me understand how a bottom-up and autonomous cityscape was created. That is to say, the new form which was generated by residents indicated the insufficiency and unsuitable parts of the original design to the current situation. It changed how users use the spaces fundamentally. Reflecting on this notion on my graduation project, I considered these existing extensions as important references to renovate the existing buildings properly. Reconsidering these extended spaces, circulation, and configuration can be regarded as a revision to the result of the previous design which could be considered as an experiment of the ideal way of living. Architects' new intervenes start to respond to the city context. Therefore, I, as an architect, wanted to ask two questions: 1. What values that the renovation can provide to the community and the city, not merely enhancing or maintaining the former spatial quality and design purposes. 2. How to reference the ways of residents using spaces and interacting with others?

## Urban Expansion of Skopje

In 1963, Skopje encountered a devastating earthquake, United Nations and many countries provided resources to help and reconstruct the city. The city center was redesigned by Japanese architect Tange Kenzo, in the concept of Metabolism, and the ring area included most of the core functions. Out of the ring, there were many residential blocks designed to settle the refugees who lost their homes and new citizens who came from the countryside and other countries and worked for the city reconstruction.

The urban plan categorized and distributed the city efficiently by functions. However, after transforming from a communism society to capitalism one, people were no longer limited in a given role and hierarchy. They started to have the desires of turning spaces to private. And the urbanization was keeping attract new immigrants from other regions and abroad, so the conflicts between new and existing residents were much intense. Population boom made the city expand, so the residential blocks, where were only for the living, started to have more commercial requirements. In other words, the former system was no longer able to fit the current situation. For example, residents made extensions for their apartment by themselves to acquire

more spaces. And this phenomenon gradually influenced the government to apply a new policy worked with the construction companies to refurbish these old blocks in order to solve the housing insufficient problem. I believed this is a great opportunity to discuss how the architects to intervene in new policies appropriately, consider the context and provide better spatial quality. Therefore, my proposal is an apartment renovation project. This project is not merely to solve the current problems but respond and reflect different levels of issues, from individuals to the urban scale. For this proposal, I took the positions that the project stands for: 1. providing variants to accommodate diversity. 2. Being not only self-interested but altruistic. 3. Offering different levels of interaction between public and private.

## Residential Buildings Renovation

The apartment type I chose has a very widespread and common situation, adding extensions on the façade. It did not only enlarge the rooms' area but changed the configuration which was functionally divided. The extended parts sometimes are the balconies; sometimes are extensions of existing rooms; sometimes are the connections of different rooms. On the other hand, the semi-basements and ground floors added their own independent entrances due to convenience, and some of them transformed into small shops and offices.

These buildings occupied a large area in the city, so my proposal could be applied in other regions as an example. After increasing involving areas, the effect of the renovations will influence the urban environment and regional climate. The building is no longer just a hatch on the map of the urban plan, which only needs to achieve its program, but a medium bridges the gap between the generality of urban planning and the unique of personal life. The refurbishment improves the public spaces and enriches residents' living quality, meanwhile, references the context and become part of it.

One crucial concept of this refurbishment was creating variants to accommodate diversity. Several housing types were designed for various groups, like students, single, and family, and different programs, such as stores and offices. At the same time, three types of sharing balconies were inserted in the apartments, people can decide how they want to interact with their neighborhood.

The other main issue was that, being not only self-interested but altruistic. The starting point of this project was the extensions. These adding spaces created not merely an extra area for living or a buffer zone for the insulation but liberated the lower part of the staircases as an urban passage for the city micro-climate, allowing the airflow.

The added yard for the single-family-house gives the owner a certain degree of privacy, but they are also the semi-open green spaces that can be shared with their neighborhood. Although the public areas were occupied by the extended yard, they have benefits to the public and private, and are maintained by individuals. These apartment buildings originally were designed very compact; modularized units contained rooms of various purposes, and included staircases. So, In order to provide opportunities with different levels of interactions, the public stairs were unfolded out of the building and left void spaces. When the residents move along with the new stairs to the core balconies of their home, they have many chances to interact with neighbors of other floors and the next-door as well. This communication between inhabitants can be observed from the existing community, but only in the public space on the ground floor.

To summarize, this project tried to create pores on the existing buildings to fragmentize them to improve to current conditions, and reference the context to retain intimacy for the residents. Various housing types accommodated different groups; extensions supported diverse programs and improved the building's functions; new circulation provided a path for neighbors' interactions. Enhance the connections between the residents, communities, and the city.

## Conclusion

Looking back to the whole journey of my graduation project, I struggled a lot yet still obtained valuable experience. In the last century, architects put effort and take responsibility on looking for the best solution for the living of all human beings, and I always admired the spirit. However, I also knowledge and believe that, nowadays, nobody can live in a unified model that architects imagined. Users using the spaces created some exciting results which the designers may never expect. I found out that cautiously handling the balance between the designer's ego and the user's requirement is what I care about the most. Thus, choosing a renovation project forced me facing the existing situation instead of assuming that it is a pure self-ideology-fulfillment opportunity.

From the research of applying personal interest on the relationship between the city impression and context guides me to the appreciation of values that the autonomous residential extensions provide, to the intervention that exhibits the influence of the refurbishment project on the individuals and the city. I enjoyed this exercise of rational discovering and developing an idea that I did not know how to describe. It clarified my interest and helped me further build my point of view as well. Although I still confused about what is my faith in architecture, at least I believe I learned a way to pursue it.

For me, the project of the refurbishment was a process of figuring out the position of the architect when facing an emerging cityscape, how to recognize and inherit it? Humbly appreciate existing conditions and discern useful information, and then inspired by it. I also realized that renovating the residential complex seems simple but important and hard to have a fundamental change as well. It, indeed, needs to be efficient and rational, however, it is not only repairing the buildings as they were, should flexibly alter it according to users and the surrounding environment.