

Methods & Analysis Studio | Position in Practice

## **A New Perspective of the Vardar River**

*Redevelopment of Public Space along the Vardar River, Skopje*

### **Reflection**

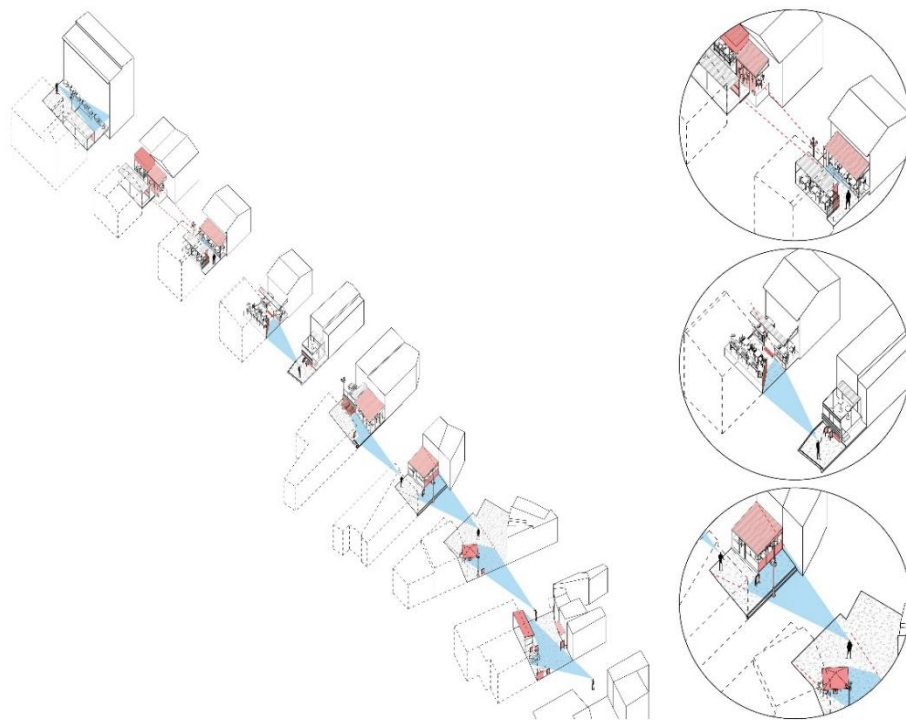
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## I. Walking in Skopje

The research in Skopje opens up my interest towards understanding the intricate relationship between people, public space and the city. While in Skopje, despite the glamorous facades that the city portrays, there are many parallels within. The construction of Skopje 2014, aiming at rebranding the identity of the capital, made huge architectural impacts to the city. While it alters the urban scenery significantly, it has simultaneously overlooked its side effects to the immediate surroundings, leaving many “leftover” space behind like a big veil covering its flaws. This leads me to consider the impacts urban transformation, regardless of spatial alteration or façade refurbishment, could bring to the city and people. Some people become accustomed to the new urban setting, some felt unease yet could only appropriate to it, while some do not notice at all.

The studio started off with a group research effort under the theme of “informality” investigating the two-fold relationship between occurrence of informal interventions and visual fragmentation of streets in Skopje. This preliminary investigation provides a solid foundation to my later research on using perspectives, manipulation of sight and elements in influencing one’s journey throughout a space (fig.1), how this relationship determines the dynamics of the space (whether it is approachable or vice versa) and how elements such as dimensions, layers, materiality could impact the way people perceive and experience places. The second stage of the research took a step further to analyse public spaces which are neglected or undermined due to strong imposition of the surroundings in order to comprehend the urban setting of Skopje.



(fig.1. Visual fragmentation induced by informal interventions of bar street in Old Bazaar, Skopje. Drawing by author.)

Thus, with this knowledge in mind, my thesis sets out with the aim to formulate ways to revitalise “veiled” public space to people, to unfold its latent potentials as important indicator of the city; moreover, especially in the case of Skopje, people are surrounded by conspicuous political messages daily, the project would also like to counter people’s imposing surroundings and to forge an “escape” for them, allowing them to venture away from their hectic urban setting and ultimately, to establish a new relationship of them and the city.

## II. **Approaching the Vardar River**

The riverbank of the Vardar River, a major river in North Macedonia that cuts through the centre of Skopje, separating the capital on North and South sides. Despite being the largest public space of Skopje, it ceased to evolve while both sides develop rapidly with vivid commercial activities and prominent neo-classical settings. On one hand, the site is situated at the most vibrant area yet remains solitary; on the other, public space and activities afforded at the riverbank is limited. The Vardar River has long existed in the history of Skopje, from having water transportation to transfer goods to becoming a favourable place (a beach) for people to gather, up until the river was fully regulated. Today, the riverbank is a promenade with a clear separation of pedestrian and cycling pathway, with benches placed occasionally for sitting, presenting a continuous linear pattern within the linear riverbank and disconnected from the upper city level.

The approach to the riverbank lies in micro and macro scale: enriching people’s journey at the riverbank while diverting their attention from the cityscape and mediating the boundary between the two levels, returning the riverbank as a public space to the city and people.

### Articulating Experience of People

The early ethnographic analysis of the site provides insights of performance of the riverbank, observing its flow and how the experience of people unfolds along the space over time and flow, indicating the first and foremost strategy to approach the site is to break the linearity and devise a desirable place for people to stay. The previous research on visual fragmentation, informal interventions and street condition led to a small conclusion of reciprocal relationship among them, determining the nature of the street. I became aware of the phenomenological impact that each element could have towards one another. Phenomenology studies the role of body in experiencing the built environment<sup>1</sup>, the immediate effect one would perceive through different objects.

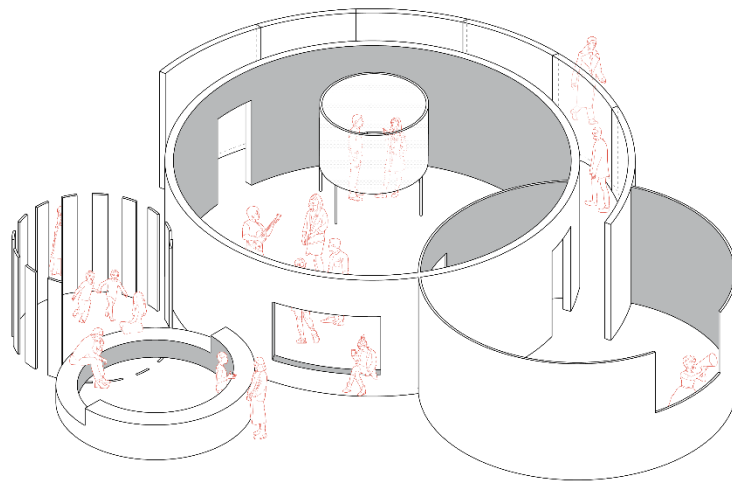
The aim of the design does not merely limit to manoeuvre how people view the site, it also proposes to physically alter the way people journey through the path, gradually mediate them away from city life in a subtle way. A study on Dan Graham explores the his pavilions and installations with the delicate use of transparency and reflectivity in order to break the one-way relationship of inside and outside and furthermore, to realise that the perception of people and city are both the observer and the observed.

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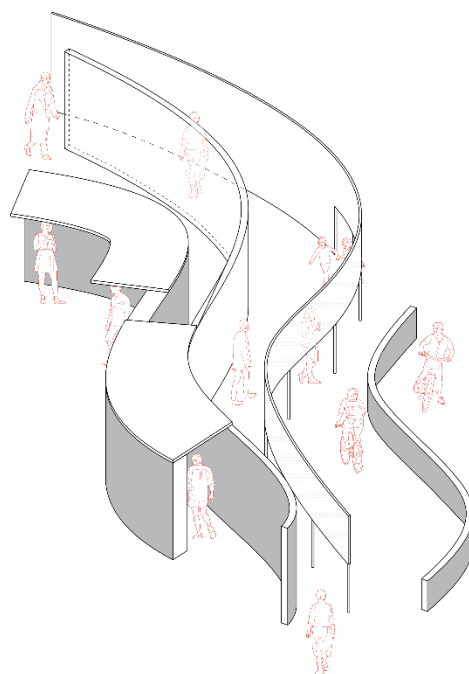
<sup>1</sup> Ingold, Tim. *The Perception of the Environment*. Routledge, 2000.

Understanding his work leads to a further analysis of using surfaces as a visual stimuli for people to the city in order to create an alternate perspective and experience.

Analysis of a basic element - surfaces (horizontal and vertical) helps understanding interactions between dimension of space and people's changing way of comprehending and using the space. In order to counter the linearity of site, curves are adopted and tested to its potential application to the site. The use of curves serves as in immediate response to break the banal pattern of the site, giving dynamics, and also, echoes with the fluidity of the river. Two types of curves were investigated: rigid curves (circles) are used to contain activities (fig.2), smooth curves (random) are used to direct people's way of moving (fig.3).



*(fig.2. Potential activities of rigid curves of different sizes, opacity, heights in inducing varying interpretation of use. Drawing by author.)*



(fig.3. Potentials of smooth curve surfaces of different thickness, opacity, heights in inducing varying interpretation of flow. Drawing by author.)

Combining the analysis, I came to establish the rationale of organising them within the public space. The decision to use these tools to approach the site attempts to devise simple articulations that yield strong effects to alter people's way of perceiving space, such as adding a opaque surface to distort people's view to the facades and activities at the upper riverbank, surface of reflective elements to mirror activities and views.

The realisation of a better public space depends on spatial arrangement while also relies on materiality. The site spans from highly urbanised area to less urbanized area, containing the river in between. The atmosphere of the space modifies according to what the site surrounding generates. As the project seeks to provide an "otherness" of place while people gather there, the intervention tends to contrast and control the kind of ambience people encounter by deciding what to reveal and what to veil. A spectrum of materials of different levels of opacity is explored to enact the feeling desired, ranging from transparent, translucent to reflective materials.

### Mediating the Riverbank and the City: Urban Acupuncture

Apart from articulating the performance of micro spaces, the thesis also addresses the larger urban context, to assimilate to the city level, drawing people towards the riverbank and mitigating the boundary of the upper and lower levels.

Urban acupuncture utilises small-scale interventions to yield larger impact so as to transform the urban fabric, aiming to stimulate improvements and positive chain reactions to the urban setting in order to revitalise places.<sup>2</sup> As a concept, interventions could be as big as a building that works as an connection or as minor as devising light atmospheres to change the aura of space. Despite possibilities of the scale the

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<sup>2</sup> Lerner, Jaime. *Urban Acupuncture Celebrating Pinpricks of Change That Enrich City Life*. Island Press, 2014.

interventions could be, they should not be treated as standalone objects but are part of a whole.

Applying this strategy to the riverbank, as the banality lies in the unchanged and straightforward path without sufficient nor satisfying pauses, and the isolated situation of the riverbank requires gentle negotiation with the vibrant city; the acupuncture is to insert multiple interventions alongside the riverside, to fragment the existing arrangement of the site and regularity of experience. The selection of acupuncture points is determined based on its connection to the city level and latent potential of its space. Location of puncture points are then chosen to be intervened – major and minor access points, and underpasses.

### III. Reflecting on Public Space

Public spaces should not merely be simplified to places where people can stay freely. On a personal level, they are spaces which people encounter daily, where people are not obliged nor expected to act in certain ways. They provide to people, offering an alternative from home, workspace, cafes and malls. In return, people gives “life” to the place through the way they interpret and use it. In cities like Skopje where political intentions are conveyed through architectural expressions, public space become even more indispensable for people, so as to be diverted from the implications the city imposes. The project designs multiple clusters of public space with simple settings, from framing different sizes of space and open furniture that can be used as both table/ chair/ something to lie on, all allowing free interpretation of people to use.

Public space reflects social structures, culture and values of the city through pattern of use and behaviour, and *“the more varied and lively a city’s public realm, the richer and more democratic its civil society”*.<sup>3</sup> The canal revitalisation project in Cheonggyecheon, Seoul, exemplifies a return of public space in the city, restoring a former highway to the historical stream it once had been.<sup>4</sup> Now the riverbank has become a coherent part of the city, mitigating environmental concerns and simultaneously activating social activities, revitalising the river as a vibrant centre. Reflecting upon my intervention on what public space means and how it cultivates wider implications, the use of acupuncture in the project adds layers to the existing site, re-open its potentials as a vibrant public space where it coexists with the city. Moreover, a desirable public space encourages interactions and activate security. The multiple punctuations at the site act as a network that connects both sides of the city, integrating as a whole.

*“Only when people experience the meaning of place and the environment would they truly ‘inhabit’ the place, whereas inhabiting a place means the happening of living,”*<sup>5</sup> reflects also an intricate relationship between space, people and the city. Public space are provided for people, people interprets the way they use it and the patterns of use

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<sup>3</sup> Hanna, Kat, and Rachel Holdsworth. *Making Good - Shaping Places for People*. Edited by Richard Brown.

<sup>4</sup> “ChonGae Canal Restoration Project / Mikyoungh Kim Design.” *Archdaily*, 2 Mar. 2020, [www.archdaily.com/174242/chongae-canal-restoration-project-mikyoungh-kim-design](http://www.archdaily.com/174242/chongae-canal-restoration-project-mikyoungh-kim-design).

<sup>5</sup> Norberg-Schulz, Christian. *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1980

reflect the identity of the place in the city. Only providing a space is not enough but *how* to provide the space for people to freely interpret is the essential question. Hence, apart from enhancing the existing public space to be a better one, the use of opacity in materials seeks to establish a new lens for people to read the city, at a different angle, perspective, and atmosphere, which ultimately establish a new relationship between them.

#### IV. Challenges

The condition of site offers not only the scenographic cityscape, it also offers the uniqueness of nature – the river itself. Often do people neglect the natural affordance of the place they dwell in while it could actually be well integrated in. Skopje is a city filled with noise of different kinds, layered with political, cultural, social disputes, and nature could be an escape for them, where they can find peace of mind at times. Hence, in the design, I address this condition in two ways, one inspired by the fishermen and by materiality. The natural conditions exist in both tangible (river itself) and intangible ways (wind/ sun etc.). Inspired by the fishermen, who are frequent users of the river, and often walk into the water to fish, some interventions are extended towards the river, where people can touch and feel the running of water. The intangible quality of site is addressed through choice of materials, most of the materials used are transparent and soft at which breezes can flow through and sunlight can shine upon to illuminate the space.

Another challenge of the project is to balance between subtle and distinct intervention in the site. The art of acupuncture is on the preciseness and effectiveness. The design decisions are therefore careful when deciding where to pin down, where to build upon and where to make small and gradual changes. To achieve this balance, the site surroundings are put into consideration. The underpass spaces requires illumination and activation, strong interventions are imposed, with full white surfaces to light up the dark space and mirror surfaces to extend the space visually and to hide the massive bridge structure behind. At major access stairs, due to the active environment beside it, big interventions are not favourable, thus, small and subtle changes are made on the floor textures to quietly draw people towards the riverbank.

#### V. Conclusion

Skopje embodies strong messages, with the coexistence of Skopje 2014, brutalist buildings, orthodox architecture weaving throughout the urban fabric, propelling me to further investigate this “contradictive” city. The current setting of Skopje is an accumulated effort of time, meaning and functions of different parts of the city alter accordingly, and the Vardar River is a witness to all the ups and downs of the city throughout time. The project takes the advantage of the quality the river embodies and restores its significance to the city. The rediscovery lies in the revelation of the innate beauty of the riverbank.

The thesis explores the use of small acupunctures of space to catalyse a bigger context. Often did I consider direct and robust intervention the most effective way to transform a site in order to yield an immediate response to an issue or to make a powerful statement. The process of developing the project gradually changes my perspective towards the idea. I have learnt a lot during the research and design process of my thesis. It questions frequently my position as a future architect, of how I address urban issues and of what I regard architecture to be. I believe architects uphold a social responsibility, not only addressed to people but to the city and nature as well. No matter what types of building or space are to be designed, it is reminded that regardless of big or small scale, they are equally important as they are built for people. The challenge is to strike a balance between each stakeholders. Each element attributes one another.

With the open framework and approach the studio provides, it stirs an exploration of the bilateral relationship between objects and street conditions, between details and urban fabric, and between people, their surroundings and the city they dwell in. I was able to explore freely my intentions to the city, venture through the hectic yet captivating city, to position myself in the city through architectural interventions – a mental task of architects and architecture to treat people with care.



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