

Project: www.skopjeraste.mk

POLICY BRIEF

TRANSFORMING THE GREEN SPACES IN SKOPJE

The SkopjeRaste project: Strategy Proposal for possible urban transformation on the case study urban block B10 in Debar Maalo Quarter, Skopje

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Skopje, July 2014

INTRODUCTION

In the previous version of the project and web-platform www.skopjeraste.mk our focus was on collecting, presenting and making a base for further analysis on a certain part of the center of Skopje. We analyzed the problems of complex processes of densification of the urban tissue in the case study area Debar Maalo and Bunjakovec in order to create a new visual language for a better communication between the citizens and the municipality or the city planners. In the past 24 months we learned a great deal about the website's new role as a tool working in-between the rigid system of planning of the city and the bureaucratic nature of the process of approving and realization of the urban plans. From the responses that we got from the local citizens and with the data collected we can understand some issues much better and we can act in different ways in order to prevent, understand and share our ideas with as much users as possible and to finally propose a citizens act, to articulate local citizens visions and to help the urban planners in understanding the vivid social environment of contemporary Skopje.

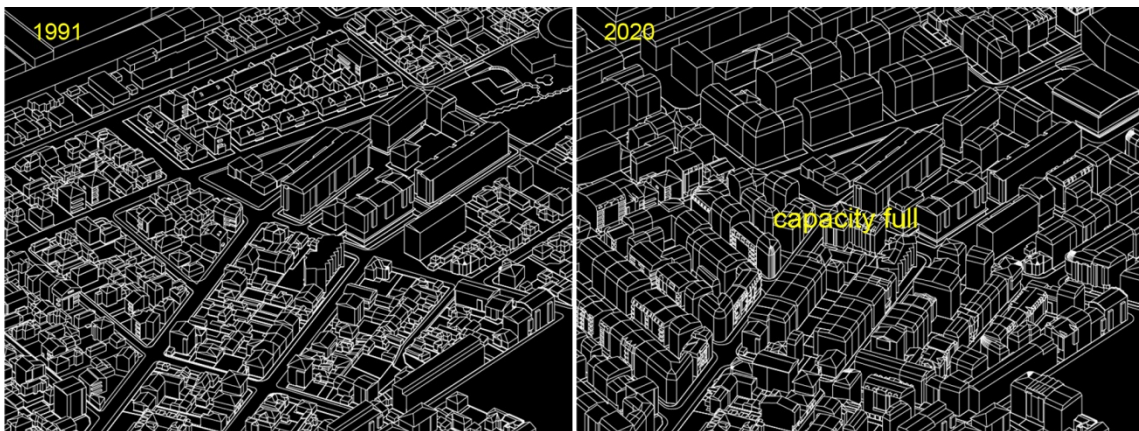
Informalities and abnormalities in Skopje are so frequent today that we've almost turned them into a formal approach. The residential and public structure of the city is changing at a pace that the planning systems fail to register and to prepare for. The only segment of the urbanization and the societal transition which the system was able to detect and to put its claws on - is the financial benefit. The already complex task of planning and managing of the city was further complicated with the processes of re-urbanization and the growth out of the domain of the traditional planning system. As the city grew from the inside and outside of its already blurred borders, a large part of the 'strategy' was to approve what was already built and to gain benefit from it. The residential structure especially, is the first layer in the city that reacts sensitively to the social and political changes in the society. While registering the changes in the society; it reacts with transformation of its contents thus creating new urban and architectural context. These transformations are leaving long term problems but also freedom to change the nearest piece of environment to the needs of the individual or a certain civic group. The urban planning and architecture are dependent on the substantial budget that comes from the state (municipalities) or the private capital investments to orchestrate such a complex process. Both disciplines are determined to act in a system which demands visions of durability, longevity and sustainability in order to support and plan the future based on the needs of the citizens and the *idea* of growth desired necessary to the system to function. Profit wise, the citizens (owners of the land) learned how to 'play the game' and became an equal partner in the processes of building and influenced the planning methods of large parts of the urban mass of the city. With their obvious involvement, the housing capacities in our case study areas of Debar Maalo and Bunjakovec grew drastically, thus creating profit for both the citizens and the municipality budget. In the best parts of the 1990's and 2000's the investors acted as a third party smoothening the negotiation process leaving the table with a huge profit. The municipality (the city) got their share with communal taxes income leaving the citizens to negotiate even up to 30% of the total profit of the building project. In this area consisted of small houses and very little of social housing buildings, the financial gain to the citizens was substantial. If we measure the citizens' role in the whole transitory process; it is hard to avoid the obvious power that the owners of the land held during this process of negotiation for complex urban transformation. One of the tasks of this text is to provoke the

citizens to acknowledge this fact. It is also a provocation to the planners and architects to deal and catch up with the pace set by the rest of the society; hopefully forcing those to propose counter strategy or strategy which goes along with the rest of the social fluxes. Solutions were many during the examined period of 20 years but it was the comprehensive and inclusive strategy which was severely lacking. In fact it was the key factor of creating the model of unsustainable growth which was spreading simultaneously in the best parts of the urban domain of the city and the country.

Parallel to the building boom, the public and the green spaces of Skopje - its *voids* - were the first to succumb to the wave of the massive densification of the urban fabric of the city. Even in the previous practice and treatises of the socialist urban planning these *voids* were seen as an uncharted territory but were preserved as 'empty' spaces or a necessary element to create the balance between the built and un-built mass. Their role was also to provide the necessary balance between the green 'experience' and the simple and vital need to fulfill the standards of green space per dweller. In the residential areas of the post-earthquake socialist Skopje the green (public and open) spaces were an amorphous 'sea' in which the urban blocks floated in a orthogonal grid. Today their character remained unchanged with the trees (the green capital) only growing bigger and creating more oxygen than before. But with the looming danger of being *filled* with objects, as part of the so called strategy; it is urgent to address the problem and to propose counter strategy.

1 SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM

The tectonic change of the geopolitical context from former socialist Yugoslavia into an independent small neo-democratic republic changed the character of Skopje, from a city on the fringes of the former federation into a contemporary Balkan capital. This shift of powers and global decentralization of the region put an extra weight on the fragile new democratic system and its institutions, forcing them to respond to the new change and invent autonomous methods which mirror the local demands and conditions. Urban planning and the change of official policy fell short of catching the pace of the new vibrant market of small scale investors and the capital they generated from below. This capital and the change of ownership were the motor behind Skopje's urban and the planning system transformation.



The 3D model extracted from the data collected, visualizes the growth of the selected area

Instead of articulating and stimulating sustainable growth of the city, the authorities and the planners embraced the new situation and capitalized from it. The owners of the houses succumbed to the pressure made from the city to produce new capital for funding the budget through an upgrade of all private houses into small apartment buildings. The lack of coherent strategy behind this vibrant process created long-term problems of sustaining and managing the newly *upgraded* areas of the city. The case study areas of Debar Maalo and Bunjakovec which are subject of this project were a perfect example of the creation of the model of growth that spread throughout the city or even the country¹.

The problem of the uncontrolled and unsustainable growth has been widely debated since the early 90's. Aside from the experts view on this there was a widespread recognition of the brutal transformation process in the public. Goran Stefanovski, one of the most recognized Macedonian contemporary play-writers, wrote a theatre play in 2006 called: '*The Demon of Debar Maalo*' as one of the most significant public responses on the fast transformation of not only the physical but the social and the cultural aspect as well. "Once I tried to imagine how the barber would find living at Debar Maalo and the premise attached perfectly to our time, our brutal

¹Why Skopje grows linked article from brief 2013, Jovan Ivanovski

15 years of transition. The character looked stronger than reality". Yes, the individuals could sometimes be stronger than the reality but on a long term, the changes of the urban environment surely changed the way we live, work, connect and use our private and public space.

Undoubtedly, the problem will increase, if we follow and execute the current urban plans and their simple building formula of fulfilling the maximum capacity of the existing housing structure. In order to increase the much needed financial security the citizens supported the expansion of their household property of dwelling net space at the expense of the green space (gardens) they had before the upgrade. For example, the neighborhood Bunjakovec 2 grew from 191.575m² of gross dwelling capacity in 1991 to 418.038m² in 2012. It is expected to increase to 693.476m² in the near future according to the plans released by the municipality. Twenty years later, the effects of such growth affected the decay of the quality of life and stand as a stinging fact even amongst the ones who contributed and created this model. As the director of the theatre play once commented: *"We all have the urge to tell something about Skopje even what we don't like,"* the general opinion is that both the old and the new dwellers are feeling the change of the urban problems in real life. It is hard not to when we know that the infrastructure remained the same and the parking lots and the cars occupied most of the free public space. That means that the pedestrian space and routes are inconsistent and even less than they were in 1991. The data we have collected this year, visualizes the fact that the buildings grew 3.6 times but the whole area maintained merely the same square meters of pedestrian space as in 1991.² As the cars occupied the free public space outside of the borders of the regulation line of their urban parcel, the layer that suffered the biggest transformation were the green space. This environmental and qualitative loss was the most talked one and the one which initiates a lot of political agendas in the local elections in 2013. The opposition party which won the governance over the municipality of Centar used the issue to gain votes against the incumbent on local level as well as in the run in for the mayor's office of the capital. In 2014 the municipality of Centar took an action to plant new trees on several streets in the area we examine. This is a proof that the authorities are softening the public discontent with the ever persistent problem of the lack of green spaces in the area (<http://www.opstinacentar.gov.mk/shuplividrvagorgipeskov.aspx>).

Is it a change of strategy or flirting with the electors? Maybe it is too early to say, but initiatives like this bode well for the global awareness and the popularization of the issue in the media. In the summer of 2013 after the elections there was a clash between the protestors and the police in the very center of the city. The local citizens, other NGO's and a group called *Parkobrani* were fighting against the building of a huge public building on the place of the park that was build along the residential strip of high rise apartment blocks after the earthquake. The resistance was shortly muted with a strong persistence of the police and the building started. The benefit of this scenario, if any, was that the wider audience of Macedonia and in Skopje in particular, learned more about the 'green' problem. The search for basic quality of

²The pedestrian space for Bunjakovec 2 quarter shows that in 1991 there was 32.265 m² and in 2020 there will be no significant change, as it will remain at 31.264 m².

urban life in the center of Skopje became a topic for a much heated political debate and food for a massive media manipulation from the both sides of the fence.



The opposition candidate promised 500.000 sqm of new green areas in his campaign before the local elections.

The effects of living in well balanced urban environments with sufficient 'dozes' of green spaces experience for the dwellers is the most desired situation for any housing project and urban plan. (<http://www.bbc.com/news/health-22214070>). The desire is regulated in the urban planning rulebooks as a ratio between the build space and the one that stays open or 'unused' in order to create balance between the two layers. In the center of Skopje in the article 25 from the Rulebook of Standards and Provisions for Spatial Planning from 1999, says that: "every residential urban parcel should be consisted of 20% green space". From the data we are presenting on the platform, today's situation tells us that the city quarters of Debar Maalo and Bunjakovec have 13.90% green spaces and will have only 4.5% in 2020. If we consider that the density of the total floor area is almost 4 times more than 1991 we can put the insolation, microclimate changes (heat and ventilation) and detrimental effects in the mix of problems burdening the local residents. More productive and healthier communities can benefit the overall social layer in the city and the lack of green space experience can be a problem which is hard to examine, especially when there is no physical way to change the structure of the already built city. The pollution problem is a more complex and far more dangerous one than the detrimental effect on the quality of urban life. It is fair to say that the shortage of grass and trees is not the cause of the pollution itself but a factor of significant disadvantage. As a lot of heavy polluters are still in the very core of the city despite their allocation plans it is a very direct signal of the shortcomings of the city planning Skopje stretched and grew over the years and these factories remained within the borders of today's city. The unclear strategies for the use of the energy resources and poverty forced people to abandon centralized systems for heating during the 6 months' season and turn to the most basic one – burning wood, wooden products and every object flammable. These factors mixed with the geo-position of Skopje and unfavorable winds make Skopje one of the most polluted cities in the world. Despite being a state problem of global proportions, the vanishing of the green spaces certainly brings the urbanism and city planning into the fore. Stopping this process might not eradicate the problem but the citizens might benefit a great deal from it. A lot of the green spaces are already gone and replaced with a building or a parking / traffic infrastructure. Saving the

remaining ones in the case study areas will be a hard call bearing the fact that the city plans multi-storeyed public garages to ease the problem of the parking in the center. But if the authorities and the local citizens find a model of formal or informal mutual approach to save or transform the public green spaces, it will be a successful chapter worth copying to the other parts of the city.

2 URBAN STRUCTURE BACKGROUND

SkopjeRaste project has been an ongoing extensive study on one of the main showcases of the transitory nature of the residential layer of the fabric of the city of Skopje. Contrary to the one of the arguably biggest building campaigns in recent history called Skopje 2014, our focus has been intentionally put on the residential rather than the public domain. Historically, the big ideological ideas about the city have been always implemented partially due to the instable geo-political and social conditions in the country and the region. New historical chapters brought new plans and ideas about the *rebuilding* or the *reshaping* of the city in order to imprint the ideological markers of the time of their rule. As a consequence, the city of Skopje has always been perceived as an unfinished product upon which the new ruler should intervene and to *finish* it; mostly referring to its most representative objects and places in the city center. As a statement against the strategy of the project Skopje 2014 this project tries to identify the real contemporary problems of the citizens and to map the forces which are transforming the urban life. One of the necessary methods is to present the history of the residential elements of which the today's urban form is consisted in order to emphasize its importance.

Traditionally, the most typical residential urban formations in Skopje are the neighborhood. How a typical neighborhood does look like in Skopje? What makes a part of the city a neighborhood? Is the same word used in Oslo, Bratislava or Skopje? The background of this phenomenon is probably more complex and we can trace back in the time when Skopje was at the fringes of the Ottoman Empire. Like most Balkan cities the urban matrix was more oriental than western. Patches of urban clusters in organic growth spontaneously spread the city to its limits. After the fall of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires and the emergence of the new Balkan states, a new style started to reshape the fabric of the city imposing new typologies of urban form and new architectural language. The residential areas at that time were mostly small houses with gardens but at the beginning of the 20th century got mixed with 'new' European style 'urbanized' blocks and individual houses on small parcels³. However, the majority of the old residential areas bared names with the Turkish (Arabic origin) word for neighborhood – *Mahalle* or *Maalo* in the Macedonian version. *Maala* were neighborhoods with their distinctive characteristics and got their names after the ethnic group which lived there or some other characteristic connected to the way of living or the urban typology: narrow, big, small, upper, lower etc. Coincidence or not one of the case study areas is called Debar *Maalo*

³ In 1914 the Serbian architect and urban planner Dimitrije Leko created the first post-Ottoman master plan.

and the origin of its name comes probably from the city of Debar (Western Macedonia) where these newcomers came from. The diversity of ethnic and social network of maala was the pillar of the Skopje's indigenous identity.



Bunjakovec



Public space was merged with the narrow streets

The history of the Debar Maalo and Bunjakovec quarters starts at the beginning of the 20th century when the former agricultural land on the borders of the old city had been transformed into a residential area. In 1912, the five centuries long reign of the Turks was over and their spatial planning system was substituted with the new Serbian establishment and more European approach. The first general spatial and regulatory urban plan was designed in 1914 by the Serbian architect Dimitrije Leko in which these fringe areas of the city were planned to be populated. Before in the Ottoman times the land was inappropriate for living because it was near the bank of the river Vardar and was often flooded or had relatively high underground water levels. This was changed when in 1922 the Serbian engineer Hranislav Spasic regulated the bank of the river and transformed the land into area on which the city could stretch its historical borders. Seven years after the regulation of the river the new houses with gardens on small parcels started to appear and formed the today's margins of the area. After the WWII there have been several attempts to substitute the existing urban model with the emerging new modern – socialist urban typology but the plans and their implementations were halted mostly because of the inability of the state to facilitate and sponsor such campaign. The urban plans of 1960 and 1968 tried to not only erase the existing *old* structure physically but planned to shift the model from individual into collective housing; which were the pillars of the new collectivist ideology of the socialism. The attempts to impose the new urban model on the whole area were not successful except for certain voids and strips at the borders of the area (with the idea to continue its transformation to the inside) which were filled with new housing blocks. The situation remained almost intact until 1981 when the detailed urban plan finally and officially ended the pursuit thus leaving the existing model and the remaining structure of individual family houses to exist in its original form. Since our project examines the transformations in the period from 1991 to 2020 the other historical changes which followed after the 1981 urban plan have been elaborated in an extensive analysis within the website and the platform.

The first recognizable transformation of the architecture of the historical *Maalo* which went through a brief 'europeization' of the Serbian rule was the clash with the socialist generic architecture and its calculative centralized planning. This transformation affected the

treatment of the public green spaces which were left to the management of the municipal or centralized systems. In the Maalo neighborhoods, the people used their home gardens and narrow street infrastructure as a private and public space for social activity. Small squares and parks were rather spontaneous and created in the intersections of the infrastructural flows. So historically, citizens' experience towards public green spaces in the residential areas before the socialist housing urbanism was primitive. The emergence of the new typology brought new perceptions of the public green and the public domain in general.



Bunjakovec quarter (Maalo) at the beginning of the 20th century.

The end of the WWII and the global political change, confronted the socialist ideology of the new Yugoslavia with the inevitable need of restructuring and repairing of the damaged country. The modernism as a spearhead of the ideology, proposed simple and unified solutions for the standardized urban planning, especially the social housing. In Socialist Yugoslavia the modernism was a perfect foil for creating generic architecture and to force urban development which was way beyond the real capabilities of the existing cities exhausted from the long period of wars, poverty and no significant cultural progress. The value of the property and land was speculative and easy to manipulate as a financial capital in order to reach the goals previously set by the political establishments and ideology of the whole society. In this historical context, Skopje as a capital of one of the republics of the federation, adopted these methods of spatial control and planning where the tight and efficient spatial control, served the government to expand the cities and to transform the country and its land according to the necessities of the new order. This new society where the lands were owned by the state forced the people from the rural areas to seek for new jobs in the capital and the new mega industrial capacities. The trend to move into the cities tested the capacities of the planners and the governance to deal with the demographic and physical changes of the cities. To *build as much*

as possible for as fast as it can was a motto which left no particular role for the green public spaces except the ratio of built mass against the green space. The built mass and the residential capacities were the real priority leaving the *free* spaces and other program with peripheral roles. With no specific character they have no other strategy but to be *loose*⁴.

In 1963 the earthquake as a natural disaster physically changed 80% of the urban mass of the city and left an open territory for new types of residential architecture. The continuity of the identity and urban life were under serious challenge with the urge to accept the harsh reality of the necessary transformation and growth. Skopje grew both demographically and territorially introducing the new urban morphology with new micro public spaces far from the center, the bazaar, the central city park or the bank of the river as the main traditional recognized public areas. Introducing new acres of public green spaces between housing blocks created uncharted territory for most of the inhabitants and the newcomers from other part of the republic. The land had little economic value to the planned economic system of Socialist Yugoslavia and the space between the housing blocks was amorphous and had bigger green-to-built ratio than most of the minimum rates proposed by the standards today. We can argue that it was meant to absorb future upgrade of the original housing estates but we have to consider other causes like the fact that the large cranes which carried and lifted big pre-fabricated concrete blocks, slabs and other structural elements needed space for maneuvers and transport. They certainly needed space to operate and considering the speed in which the city was growing, the extra green space was less of a problem. Other cause that was taken into account, partially, was the wideness of the eventual evacuation routes which should be breached in case of another earthquake. The evacuation process if managed fast and clean of large debris can be very effective in saving a lot of people after the initial impact. With the large parts of the city structure gone, there was an urgent need of quick rebuilding process and an opportunity for fast enlargement and reconfiguration of the old structure and urban morphology. Skopje adopted and absorbed the influences of the foreign architects accompanied with the international and domestic financial aid. The urban laboratory started proposing different solutions for the future of the new modern city.

In a society of tight spatial planning system and usually maintained by the community services, the green *voids* were left undefined until the late 80's and even today. In the late 50's one of the strongest opposers of the post-war modernism's treatment of the free spaces - Aldo Van Eyck argued: "*A building is more than the sum of its functions; architecture has to facilitate human activity and promote social interaction*". In context to this old debate about the inventiveness and originality of the modern architecture; with a safe chronological distance to merit the effectiveness of the ideology, we can simply analyse the citizens' behaviour towards the public green. The proposed program and urban equipment was scarce and repetitive. Benches, children's playgrounds, multi-functional concrete formations, metal "U" shaped bars

⁴ *Loose space is a concept first used by Karen Franck and Quentin Stevens in 2007 in their research⁴ of the tightness and looseness of the public and urban space. Tight means that an urban public space can have one purpose and predetermined function by the designer. Loose is a term used to describe the ambiguity of the space and diversity of program and functions that can happen simultaneously in one area.*

for cleaning and battering carpets, fountains which never really worked, and other prefabricated objects were scattered in the spacious green. With only nuisances and slight variations the public green in that time were just amorphous spaces, which made citizens feel equal in having nothing that stands out as in other aspects of the socialist or communist ideology.



The post-earthquake building campaign produced generic architecture which fitted the necessities of the Socialist Yugoslavian society and the rebuilding of the destroyed city.

All these different urban typologies and leftovers from the proposed big ideas for the city left the city of Skopje to 'glue' the patches from the different historic eras and political campaigns. The success and the morphological shortcomings could produce certain 'cracks' in the territory which were either intentionally left 'unresolved' or were a subject of a transformation which collapsed. As the contemporary Macedonian architectural treatises find similarities of this situation to the urban theories and urban projects from the 70's, Skopje can be perceived as a failed attempt of an *archipelago city*⁵. Although the initial term of *archipelago* strategy was used to tackle the problem of depopulation, Skopje's case could be used both as strategy and term to anticipate aggressive urbanization. That means that the different urban patches from different periods and typology are *islands* which are floating in the vast *ocean* of the unresolved or the *empty*. The eventual inability of the *islands* to communicate and connect between themselves leaves problems but also *loose* spaces which can be occupied and easily moulded according to a certain strategy and necessity of the users. These spaces open up the

⁵ *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*: Pier Vittorio Aureli analyzes Oswald Mathias Ungers' projects and its idea of the *archipelago* city.

idea for their transformation and their uncertainty pushes the project to search for a new strategy to find their new identity.

adopting informalities

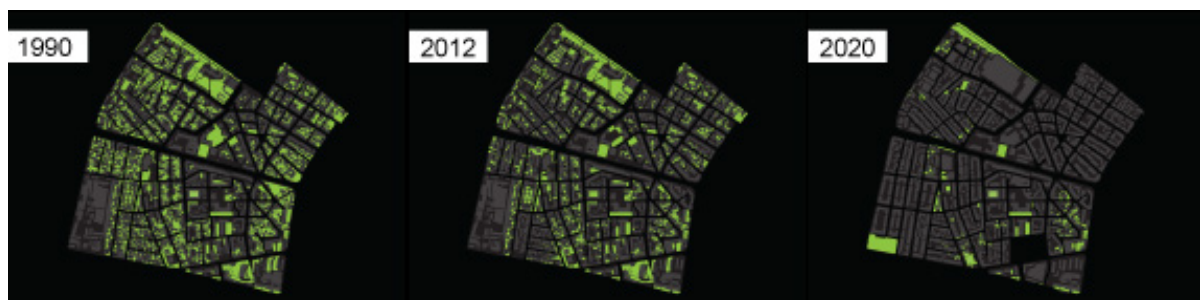
Signs of transformation or *individualization* of the green spaces appeared when some of the new dwellers who migrated from the rural parts of Macedonia brought their previous habits; exploiting small pieces of land for agriculture and gardening. Some of the buildings had pieces of their urban parcel filled with gardens and produced food which was very unfashionable at that time, but was tolerated, considering there was a rigid centralized system of growing and production of food in Yugoslavia. There is no official statistic to support these occurrences and their part in the whole picture but it is important for this text to explain the intentions of the people to reclaim - to *individualize* or to give personal imprint into the public space.

Like many of the post-socialist cities, Skopje also went through a process of transformation of the ownership in the first years after the fall of the former system. In 1993 the Parliament of the newly constituted country approved the *Law on the Transformation of Enterprises with Social Capital*, which started the long road of transition and privatization. Shortly after, set of laws followed and privatized the state owned capital and agriculture (1996) paralleled by shift of power from the government-controlled to more municipal and decentralized. The legal framework for decentralization was constituted in the *Law on Local Self-Government* (1995) which gave more autonomy to the municipalities and local governance but the real effects were seen after 2004 with the *Law on Territorial Organization of the Local Self-Government*. This important reorganization reduced the number of municipalities from 123 to 84 merging some rural communities with the cities and putting extra weight on the local governance and management of the resources. The budgeting, services and most importantly, the urban planning were given to the autonomy of the municipalities with freedom to issue urban plans that will dictate the future urban development of the country. From this point the state began the acquisition of rural and agricultural land into the urban domain and within the borders of the cities and the regulations of the urban plans.

The legalization of the unregulated and 'wild' architecture began to formalize the urban sprawl at the fringes of the cities, especially Skopje as a cultural, economic and political capital of the country. In 2011 the *Law on Illegal Buildings* transformed 342.794 buildings in Macedonia (Ministry of Transport and Communications) with more than 40.000 pending applications by the end of the year. The deadlines for applications were many, as they were prolonged in order to invite more people to submit their property and to pour money into the municipal budget. The transformation of informal into legal and formal brought a new reality for Skopje and the rest of the country. Instead of suppressing the inevitable growth outside of the urban territory, the officials adopted a strategy of embracing the processes of informal behavior which were out of the reach of the legal framework and the aperture of the general and detailed urban plans.

The global policy of adopting informalities and transforming them into the formal territory is a process which functions on every scale of the social and urban transition. The detailed urban plans were usually designed to feed the appetite of the aggressive market of small scale

investors and fast growing urban mass in the center. Often they were a subject of individual efforts and pressure to the officials to respond with speculative planning and quick fix solutions without a clear comprehensive strategy and multilayered approach to the complexity of the demands. The Law on Illegal Buildings was a reaction to the urban sprawl on the borders of the urbanized domain but it also gave advantage to the inner densification of the existent urban structure. Many of the unauthorized occurrences are yet to be sanctioned or approved. According to the detailed urban plans, released by the officials, more than 30 objects in Debar Maalo and Bunjakovec before 2012 are considered as 'illegal' or have some legal issues with parts of the building. This statistic does not show the formal and informal urban equipment objects, stairs, old street lighting rods, fences and many undefined objects that occupy the public space and are under the jurisdiction of the municipality or the city.



The decrease of the green spaces / 21.6% (1990) > 13.8% (2012) > 4.5% (2020)

In this environment of constant transition, the public green spaces are an easy target for the municipalities to trade the space for commercial use or short term profit from the taxes of the private investors. Taking the municipality of Centar as an example today all the green spaces which are not under the ownership of the buildings are a property of the municipality. By law, the local officials should take the civil sector and the local citizens into an obligatory consideration for activities which will gain public buildings or other program of common benefit. Citizens are due to report to the proposed meetings and debates about the detailed urban plans and future changes and ideas. The previous establishment which governed the municipality transferred all the land and public green areas into their account and for the project case study areas of Debar Maalo and Bunjakovec we have seen nothing significant in direction of upgrading and transforming the public domain in general. The green spaces are disturbingly vanished from the area mostly because of the fact that the large amount of the green was consisted of the gardens of the houses and private yards.

3 INITIATIVE / STRATEGY PROPOSAL

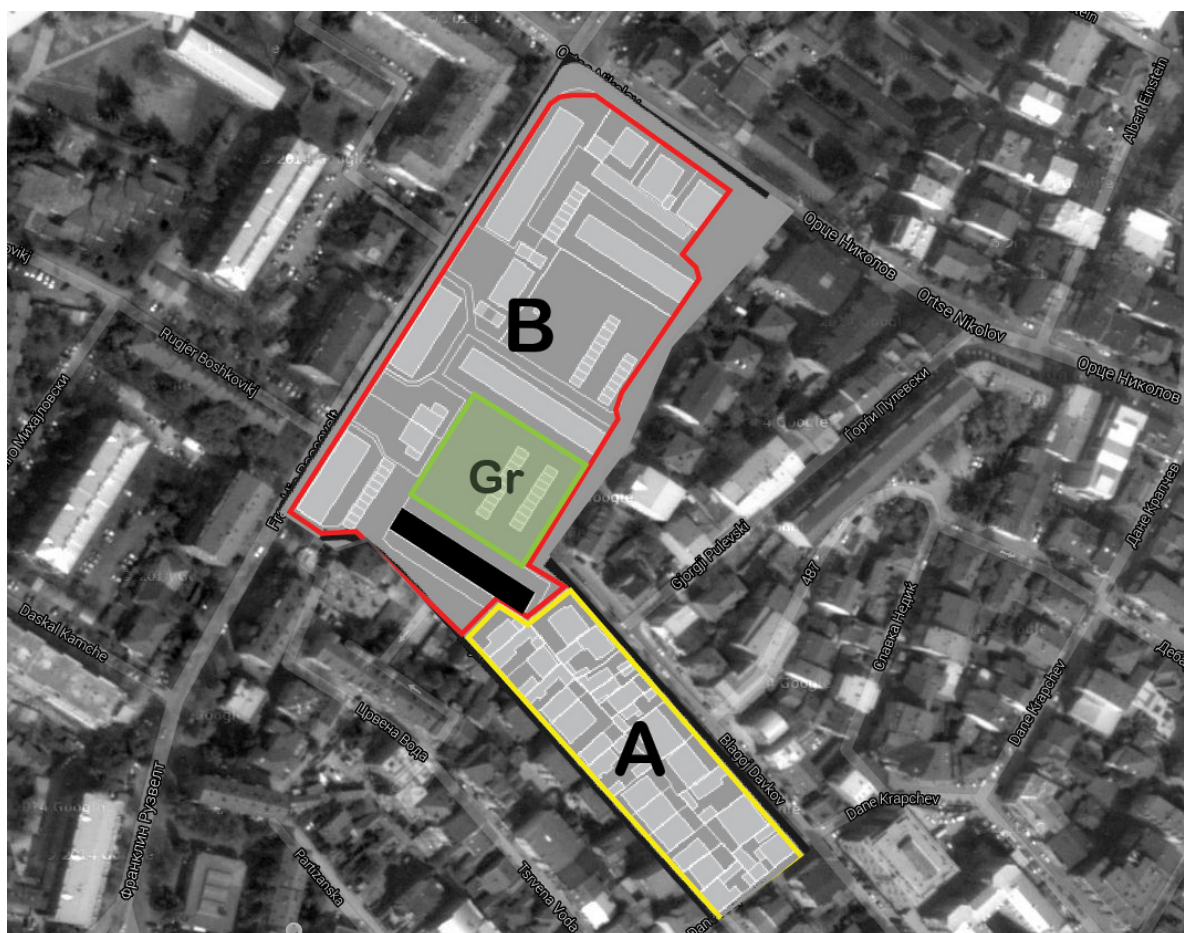
The increasing magnitude and complexity of interacting lives must make us realize that our future depends upon an understanding and control of our common system – a self-regulating, interdependent, dynamic pattern that moves from yesterday into today and from today into tomorrow. - (Gyorgy Kepes, Arts of the Environment, 1972)

Getting back to the core of the text, SkopjeRaste project's aim is to create new visual language and method by which the citizens and the planners (municipality) will communicate better in order to create a comprehensive vision of the future planning of the city. The first objective was to raise the global awareness about the participatory role of the individuals or civic groups into the urban planning system and the effects of the bottom-to-top actions into the global picture. The very essence of the platform is to collect data, to analyze it and to put itself between the informal or formal processes in order to change help and articulate. This initiative is part of this text as a result of the necessity to protect one public green piece from surrender and transformation into public garage slot. Its final goal is to create a strategy rather than to find an isolated solution to a specific problem. What we learned in the past 24 months of analyzing data is the lack of strategy and systematic answer to the challenges of the fast and vibrant transformations of the housing capacities, going often to extremes which we cannot anticipate fast enough.



The urban block B10 from Debar Maalo was a case study for the initiative.

As a case study area for the initiative we chose the urban block **B10** from Debar Maalo quarter. It is in our focus for several reasons: 1) its **structure** is consisted of two different parts of different urban typologies which are typical for Skopje 2) it has a **green space** which is in real jeopardy of vanishing 3) the **personal involvement** of REACTOR and ARHITEKTRI as part of the local community and its role, both as a local subject and of an outside catalyst and facilitator 4) real opportunity for the project to serve as a **helping tool** amid the inevitable transformation of the area.



The block is consisted of two different urban typologies (A and B) and the Gr zone is our focus zone of the initiative.

The case study block **B10** is a blend of two different urban typologies from different periods of the planning strategies of Skopje. The area **A** on the plan is a typical post-Ottoman urban block with organic and spontaneous grown structure of urban parcels derived from former suburban agricultural lands at the fringes of the city's territory. By 2012, 12 out of 23 objects were upgraded into apartment buildings and 11 are still in their original condition of single family houses; from the beginning of the 20th century or with an individual upgrade prior to the building boom of the 1990's and 2000's. According to the existing detailed urban plan this area will transform into a dense block of high but narrow buildings with narrow streets dividing it from the next block. Most of the green gardens or backyards of this typology are vanished due to the upgrade of the objects. The building lots got bigger and wider so the rest is being subdued to the ramps, entrance platforms, stairs etc. This scenario has been repeated throughout the whole area and it is a typical dense urban block that is reaching its maximum capacity. The original parking lots were either inside the property in a form of garage (object) or a small plateau shaded with green 'slab' of grapes or other plants that can climb and form dense cantilevered formations on light metal and string support. Some of the houses used to park to cars outside of their property and due to the low frequency and total number of vehicles the streets and pedestrian lanes were reasonably free to use. Prior to the upgrade 'free' parking on the streets was rather tolerated both by the citizens and the authorities. With the upgrade of the volume of the built mass and the demographic change planners proposed

underground parking but separated and non-shared between different urban parcels. Sharing was a case only when the owners merged their property before getting upgraded in order to gain few extra square meters of net dwelling space. The legislative allowed 1.1 and then 1 parking space per dwelling unit in the central area of the city. The logic is to 'hide' the cars beneath the structure and to increase only the frequency of the traffic without changing the infrastructure of the streets. The problem with this model was in its implementation and management as most of the cars were flooding the streets and the pedestrian spaces blocking the traffic and forcing the citizens to walk on the driving lanes. As most of the small scale investors did not have sufficient funds to finance and manage the whole building process, they were heavily dependent on the investment from the new owners and future dwellers forcing them to pay beforehand. In these circumstances the buyers of the new apartments were not obliged to buy the necessary parking and service spaces in order to make the model functioning in full capacity. They were co-investors so the rules needed to be bent in order to ease and quicken the process where all of the players: municipality, investors; citizens would share their spoils at the end. The garages were left half-empty but the outside – the public space and infrastructure were invaded with the shortcomings of the private domain.



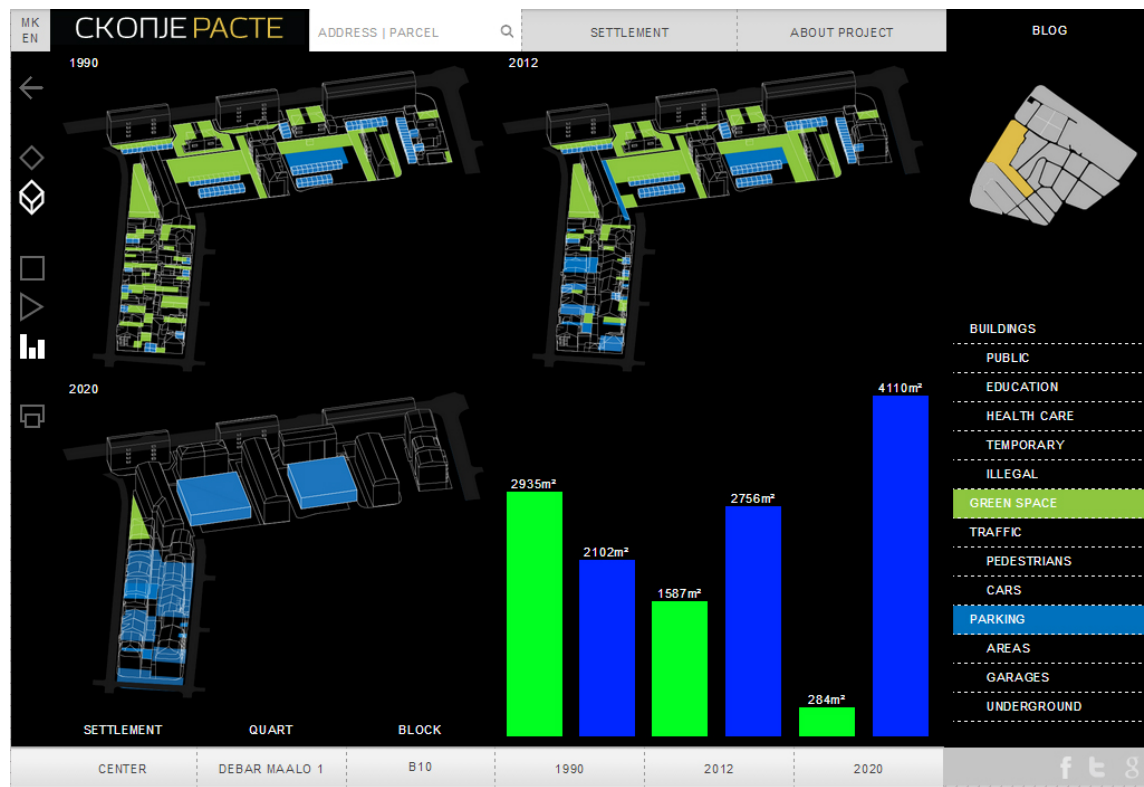
The B10 urban block is acting as a buffer between the old structure of Debar Maalo and the 'new' socialist residential housing area (marked with yellow) from the 1960's.

Part **B** is a socialist urban typology created in the late 50's and in the beginning of the 60's few years before the earthquake in 1963. It is a set of four-storey housing buildings formerly used and built for the Yugoslavian Army personnel; simple blocks floating amid the 'sea' of green space in-between. Except from being *attached* or *close to* the part A, it has neither similar attributes nor adjustable attitude towards the dominant context which was before its occurrence. It is inserted like a strange 'body' into the old tissue of Debar *Maalo* with no extensions of the typological rhythm or continuity of the urban form. As in most situations it is arguably the lowest point of the socialist architecture and urbanism – connecting with the context. Upgrading on previous layers has been considered as much more complex, time consuming or maybe unproductive in the agenda to spread the dwelling capacities fast and

astute. Despite the fact that the recent transformations of the area bare the most of the physical, architectural and demographic upgrade there were formal and informal processes before the collapse of the socialist system. Analysing the housing and parking capacities can reveal that this typology left unoccupied spaces with that *extra* potential which can be eventually used as a ground for future upgrade of any kind. In the late 80's the dwellers transformed the roof space (the attic) from service spaces into living space. With the recent waves of legalization of the property most of them turned into separate apartments growing the numbers from the initial 24 to 32 units without changing its original volume. In the 90's Like most of the buildings of this type there were the first attempts to 'bulk up' the volume with additional space but only one of the four vertical segments succeeded to attach large terraces on its southern facade. These additions were fashionable in Skopje at that time often adding extra dwelling space or big terraces (open rooms) to the rigid structure and the previous service *loggias*. At the moment, the dwellers via their House Council are in a process of submission for further upgrade of 2 additional floors on the top and a buyout procedure of the land / property under the building. If successful the upgrade will bring at least 8 new apartments and will enlarge the existing apartments from 55 to nearly 90 sq. metres. There is a possibility of gaining 16 instead of 8 new apartments due to negotiation with the municipality but even without it the building will expand its capacities from 2200 to 4.400 sq. metres of gross dwelling space. This upgrade of 100% will obviously test the limits of the previous socialist model of having 2/1 ratio of green per sq. meter of dwelling space. In 2014 there are 2.200 sq. metres of gross dwelling area against approximately 1.135 sq. metres of public green space, which is a ratio of little more than 0,5. In a scale more appropriate to explain the living standards of the existing model, theoretically this ratio means that the each one of the 32 apartments of 50 sq. metres has its 'own' green area of 25 sq. metres. It is obvious that even with the eventual upgrade of 100% the standard of the green area per dweller would far greater than any of the new hybrid typologies that emerged in the transitional period between 1990 and 2014.

Along with the dwelling capacities the infrastructural upgrade is next in the line of course. This is the part where the problems with the green and the public spaces usually appear. According to the designing and building standards for the municipality of Centar the amount of parking space needed for one dwelling unit / apartment is one car, which means the existing 17 garages which were initially designed to accommodate 24 flats are at 0,7 cars per apartment ratio and it is below the required standard. Even with the original concept these urban models provided garaged parking space for less than one car per flat but were spacefull enough to accommodate further upgrade or to tolerate parking in the zones which were not strictly planned as parking lots for the apartments. The density of the cars back in the 60's and today is a different issue but the reality is that the existing garages were insufficient even back then and the dwellers parked their cars in front of the building. This *invasion* of the public or green space outside of the building perimeter or the garages; today has reached it maximum limit and it is at a stage of equilibrium with the demands of the dwellers and the occupation of the free space. Any further upgrade of the capacities of the living space and the number of cars/flats will test the limits of the model more than ever and this initiative should strongly reconsider the planning propositions for the parking solutions of the current detailed urban plan. The plan though, responds to the demands of the proposed upgrade of the housing

blocks and proposes an 8 metres high huge public garage that will eliminate the existing green space and break the urban model to a point that it loses one of the key elements – free green space.

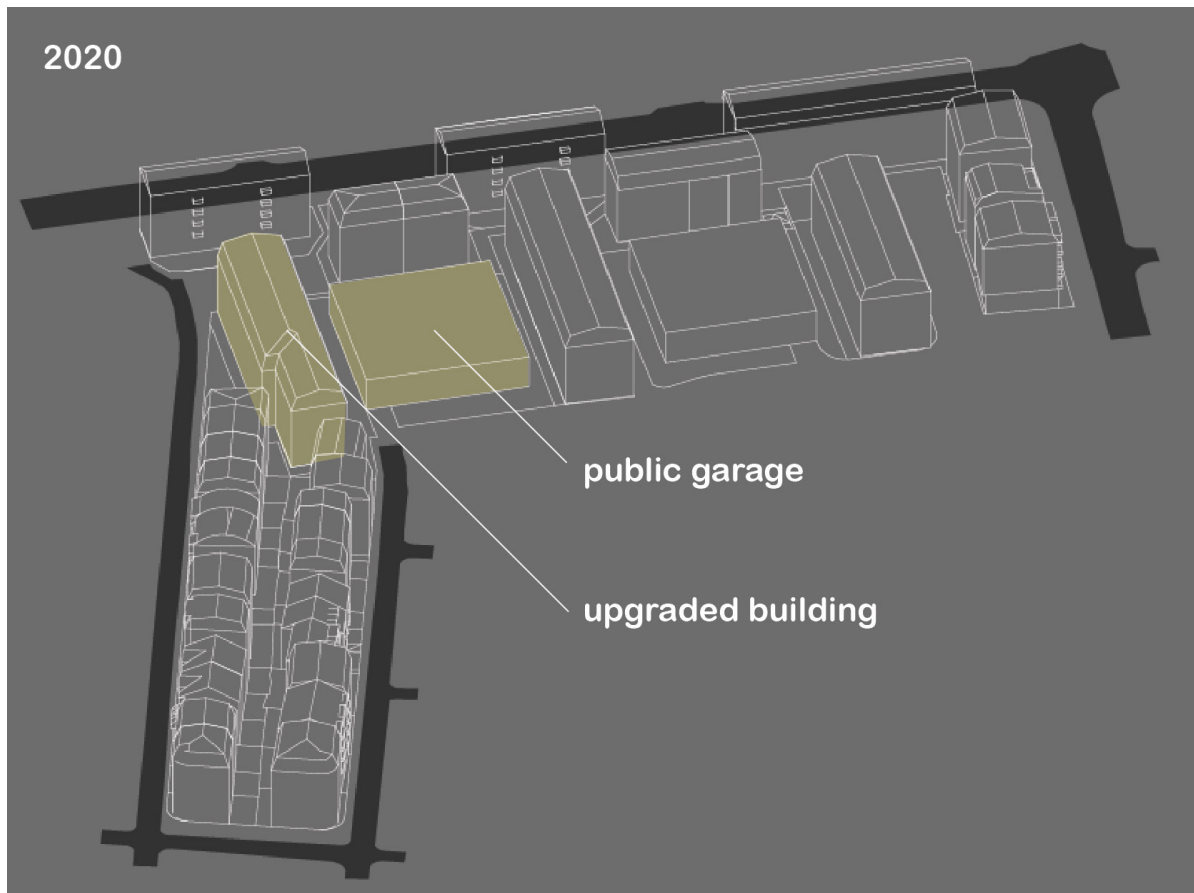


The screenshot from the website shows the negative tendencies of the green against the parking spaces between 1990 and 2020.

filling the 'void'

Where there's nothing, everything is possible. Where there is architecture, nothing (else) is possible - Rem Koolhaas (Imagining Nothingness, 1985)

The focus zone of the initiative is actually the part **Gr** of the area B. On this piece of green space and set of garages the municipality of Centar plans to build a public garage which will occupy 58% of the whole area. Acting like *an elephant in the room*, the public garage's presence in Gr will erase the green surface and the majority of the old and voluminous trees. Its height of 8 metres would certainly challenge the neighboring buildings' upgraded height of 15 meters, becoming the dominant force both in a physical and program wise. As the charts of the official plan propose, there could be only 15% of another program, bar the basic one – the public parking. The frequency of the cars feeding the garage would interrupt this rather closed system of these fine and quiet housing blocks embodied in the vast green. The documentation for such an aggressive action is already in place and the object footprint appears in all detailed urban plans going back in the last 10 years. Even with the apparent change of policy of the current municipal establishment due to the shift of the political power, the building parcel stays put and when one tries to find the owner in the cadaster, it says: *under building*.



The proposed garage will occupy 58% of the once free and public area.

Amid the heated debates about the parking regime in the center, the officials and planners aim to ease the problem by building 5 multi-storey public garages. Two of the planned objects are already built and functioning on the place of the old parking areas but neither of them is only a parking object. Often the investors twist the already loose spatial control system of the state and ask for several changes of the purpose of the zone in order to deceive the public and the officials and to finally build what was their real intention – commercial or residential object. The submitted parking garage enters into the detailed urban plan as such but after several attempts the program usually transforms into commercial or else. Despite this practice there has not been any particular signals that the building will be erected soon but the obvious danger is looming and if we think of the fact how the rest of the central area of the city transformed itself in the last 20 years it is surely a matter of time. In favour of the planners the garage should ease the parking problem of the new expanded capacities of the building and at the same time it should ease the parking problems of the other neighbouring parts of the quarter as well, in our case named as part A. So, the method of filling the *free* spaces as the most primitive and effective one is used frequently in the past 20 years to paper the cracks of the so called strategy and it is used again in our case study area regardless of the existing context and without a real survey and transparency to other solutions. This initiative will surely design several possible propositions for this problem which will pivot around one dilemma for both the citizens and the municipality: does the existing urban structure supports such physical, demographic and infrastructural upgrade without the necessary loss of the green space and the destroying of the urban model that existed for more than 50 years?

occupy - transform - protect

Understanding of the problem and its dissection were necessary steps in the process which should lead to a certain solution or proposal for a transformation of the green space in this particular part of the center. Our goal is to propose, articulate and execute a certain project with the local citizens and invite the municipal officials to support the initiative in order to develop a wider strategy with a larger range than this small piece of green void. The tools which we will use are a mix of informal and formal actions towards the establishing of the coherent viewpoint of the all the participants included.

Our aim is to propose several ideas for the transformation or *occupation* of the green space in front of the building without destroying the big trees and the majority of the green area. The transformation which we propose is a collaborative project with the local residents and should fill the *empty* green area with the desired program without interfering with the standards and the laws of prohibited building or construction. The role of ARHITEKTRI and REACTOR is to facilitate and articulate the ideas and problems of the citizens and to put them into an architectural framework which should be acceptable for the officials / planners and the general public. Putting additional program across the green and solving the parking problem with the upgrade are key topics of the project. This would certainly transform the amorphous nature of the public space and will embrace the reality in which the citizens hold power to change their nearest environment without specific plan or approval. The difference is that the project will give articulated framework and strategy to help the inevitable wave of individualization and *privatization* of the public space initially designed to be part of the housing typology. As this brief examines, the green spaces or the *voids* are a vital part of the urban model based on the simple dichotomy of the full and the void or the built mass and the green space in-between. It is not in our agenda to preserve the green as an utopian situation where the existing urban models of Skopje will remain intact; but on the contrary, this initiative will try to impose the realities of the contemporary context and the necessities of the management of the city in general.

As we worked on one of our most important goals of the project – to promote and spread the importance of the platform to as much wider audience as possible; the SkopjeRaste project was invited to take part in an international platform called Urban Cooks in June, 2014. (<http://urbancooks.eu/>). With a motto *city made by citizens* the platform "...seeks to integrate the knowledge and the experience of professionals from various European countries, together with local communities, citizen initiatives and other experts will develop an innovative methodology for bottom up initiatives serving for mediate between their needs and the public administration and other entities...". Having read this, we think that our project can surely work within the Urban Cooks platform; upgrading on others' experience and what is very important – to promote SkopjeRaste website as a tool for such initiatives and actions. With their already wide network of participants, finished projects and vast experience in working in different environments the partnership should benefit both projects and will create a solid base for further collaboration and network.



SkopjeGrows – the Initiative – as part of the Urban Cooks platform was one of the possible transformational solutions for the chosen area.

Phase 1: Learning

The project started with the informational and educational briefs with the local residents concerned. We used the common communication techniques like the meetings of the House Council and door to door informative chats, change of ideas and mapping of the possible strong and weak points in the process. This has already been done in the past few months and since we share the same space and we are residents of the building, the insider and terrain work has been done simultaneously with the logistical work from the data collected and the recent promotions of the website. The feedback from the locals will be used to establish a clear agenda and a program proposal of the necessary transformation of the green space in front and the rearrangement of the garages.

Phase 2 – Design

This phase will provide the logistical and the design part of the process. Within the extended framework of the process, we will organize a workshop in which the students of architecture will work on creating the designs and collecting data from the terrain. With the input from the SkopjeRaste project and the collaboration with the citizens, the teams will produce several possible scenarios for transformation of the Gr area. The focus of the workshop will be thrown

on three main points: 1] to design project proposals for the future upgrade of the building. The origin of the desired change of the existing model derives from the idea of extending the existing housing capacities of the building. The individual need for an upgrade of the apartment units is a reality which has to be articulated. Being powerless to stop the trend of upgrading in the past 15 years; the workshop will tend to provide some benefits to all the parties involved. First, it will provide some ideas for more articulated and cohesive approach to the current problem, which is severely lacking at the moment. The diversity of individual necessities and ideas for a possible transformation are a fine learning curve for the young professionals. Creating a cohesive solution of the individual problems and ideas will be a big task but also a big help to the citizens as well. Most of the citizens have a need to articulate and express their ideas and this occasion will be a perfect stage for collaboration. 2] The project will propose an advanced parking scheme – a possible solution for future upgrade of the existing garages and the parking regime. The upgrade of the housing capacities will ignite an urgent upgrade to the parking as well. Since the detailed urban plan proposes the huge parking block, the initiative will try to oppose the plan with a counter project of different ideas of a possible transformation which will support the existing urban model instead of breaking it. The project will also offer a temporary idea for a multipurpose use of the existing structure and the space in-between the garages, as it already informally used for different purposes other than the parking. 3] The green space transformation. This text examined the possible scenarios, the background problem, the planned projects and other experiences in the city but the real transformation will be done when the area will be actually occupied; with additional program, of course. In this phase the students will design the possible variations of disposition of different temporary program. The designs derived from the needs of the citizens will be processed and articulated through the standard architectural practice and research methods. The SkopjeRaste website (tool) will be essential for the dynamic analysis of the area through the different layers and the presentation to the citizens. The different approaches to the problem will hopefully give the final frame for the actual action and realization of the project.

Phase 3 – Action

After the competition of the logistical work and the design, the transformation of the green space should finally take place. The projects nature is to be collaborative, inclusive and to serve as a helping tool to articulate citizens' needs. The 'building' of the eventual temporary structures and landscape patterns will be a done with the approval of both the House Council and the authorities from the Municipality of Centar. Since the outcome of the process is not yet predetermined by the standard urban planning methods or architectural practice, we will monitor, archive and advocate the collected data and experience from the initiative within the framework of the project SkopjeRaste and further.

CONCLUSION

In an environment of constant transformation, this platform investigates the nature of the transition processes and the informal logic behind, trying to help both the planners and the citizens to catch up with the pace of the transition. This text also expresses the necessity to inform, initiate and to force the local citizens and municipal authorities to save the remaining green and public spaces in the center of the city and to retain the balance between the built and un-built urban mass. The way we perceive the *empty* spaces, could also bring healthy evolution of the architectural legacy and to support the much needed continuity of the urban form. Finally, what we propose is an initiative to change our strategy of preserving the voids with transforming the green in order to survive. The chosen urban block as a case study for the initiative is a typical urban situation of contemporary Skopje and the eventual effects of a successful project could exceed the territory of our website's areas Debar Maalo and Bunjakovec. We also hope that it will be the pin point of our long term strategy of spreading the project of SkopjeRaste to the other parts of the city and the country.



The children from the neighboring houses are rejoiced for their newly-made micro garden