

# Regimes of forgetting and homogenization of memory: from erasure of socialist symbols towards collective amnesia and *urbicide* of the spatial – historical landscape of the city of Skopje

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## Introduction: silencing of individual memories

Erasure of socialist symbols, collective amnesia and identification with selected segments of the history are some of the societal changes that Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, is facing in the past few years. The reinvention of the past and the evocation of self-defining nationalistic affiliation has nourished irritable narratives, generating new collective memory, symbols and meanings. In this turbulent political context the city has undergone retrograde dialogue with the past throughout reproduction of mental maps: the reconstruction of the buildings has reconfigured destroyed monuments from the earthquake (1963), but most of the monuments proclaim nationalistic (even gender allusions). The obliteration of the cultural nomenclature was a first step towards collective amnesia of the common Yugoslavian past leading to an *urbicide* of the Macedonian capital city. This transition in Skopje, overlapping with these urban palimpsests from the past, has profoundly mutated the individual and collective memory compelling the city dwellers to a memorial *non-lieu* where urban identification is continuously blurred, smuggled, re-created and re-invented, nourishing fragmented memory, feelings of loss, detriment of public goods, ontological uncertainty and cognitive anxiety.

## Macedonian Architects: Youngsters of Transition

The research project is based on social qualitative methods, applying empirical semi-structured and structured non-structured interviews conducted with architects from Skopje that have lived in the transition and witnessed the urban transformation of Skopje towards new collective memory. I encountered the outcome of detachment, de-creation and deconstruction of memory in their statements: **“I am feeling lost in this city”, “I no longer recognize my city”, “This used to be my hometown”, “When walking downtown, I skip the main square”, “They cannot reproduce nationalistic grandeur with cheap materials and questionable artistic values”, “Skopje is faking excess constructing fancy restaurants by the waste floating in the river Vardar and producing aesthetic plagiarism”,** evoking even ancient Roman Imperators who glorified their preponderant power throughout architecture and the tendency to imprint new memory to the future generations.

## Urban reinvention of the past



## Ideological role of architecture

Memory implies redemption as an act of remembrance against the denial: if the city is an outcome of a thought project, then architecture should reinterpret not reinvent history, nourish closeness not conflict, proximity not removal, foster the sense of togetherness not the intrusion of power narrative of usurpation. For this reason, I ponder on the role of architecture in building dangerous ideological patterns and creating emotional cartographies within the arbitrary matrix maps.

As the interviews state, Skopje is today a city of an exotic journey behind plastered luxuries, vehicle of sensations or a hidden ideology, of architectural excess consisting of giant monuments, extravagant buildings, fantastic ornaments, imposing bridges with relevant historical personalities (recalling the Charles Bridge in Prague), restaurants on boats (recalling those in Vienna), spatial gaps, zones emptied of meaning, contrasts and discrepancies between the former Yugoslavian – socialist architecture and the intrusive baroque and antiquity revocation of distant historic-geographical epochs; a city which has profoundly changed its face, introducing kitsch decoration, instigating anxiety of power and ideology behind the sybaritic architecture of **Disneylandification**, or as someone tourists called it the *Las Vegas of the Balkans*.

*Space in general is only an activity of the mind*  
Georg Simmel

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