

Lessons From The Past – Post-Earthquake Artefacts of Solidarity

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Abstract: After the devastating earthquake of 1963, Skopje embarked on a new path of development, one that, in terms of morphology and scale, did not align with its previous urban matrix. The natural disaster created an urgent need but also an opportunity to reshape the city's image. The reconstruction of Skopje was planned and executed in a way that, at the time, represented a kind of precedent in Yugoslav and global planning and architectural practice. It occurred at a specific historical moment, leading historians to believe that it ultimately played a significant role in preventing an entirely different kind of catastrophe on a global scale. It emerged as both a necessity and a confirmation of the universality of the challenges of city reconstruction, urban development planning, and the design of their future physiognomies.

Croatian architectural critic Maroje Mrduljaš stated that Skopje became a hub of architectural experimentation following the earthquake, with the participation of numerous architects from around the world and the former Yugoslavia, united by the innovative vision of a new city center designed by Japanese architect Kenzo Tange. "At that time, Skopje was indeed a large urban and architectural experiment, certainly progressive," he said. Simultaneously, while the reconstruction process itself was based on a top-down approach typical of communist regimes at the time, authorities took into account all social and cultural issues with a pragmatic approach to social integration and transformation. Although significant donations and massive investments, with substantial assistance from the United Nations and 90 countries worldwide, were collected over 25 years following the earthquake, the center of Skopje was never entirely completed. Tange's plan was not realized and implemented, most likely due to a discrepancy between bold, postmodernist aspirations and local (in)feasibilities, primarily due to a lack of resources. However, when carefully examining the process of urban and architectural planning at that time, can we assume that all of this happened during a crisis in utopian architecture and urbanism, a crisis that influenced the current outcome of planning and the city's appearance? Is there a better confirmation of this crisis than the existence of four different urban paradigms in eight competition entries in the international competition of 1965?

With all its shortcomings, the Skopje reconstruction plan was an experiment that bolstered the city's urban identity on the world stage, as well as its functional aspects. It belongs to a period in architectural history when the city and architecture within it were still perceived as a "collective endeavour" and a "public matter," as well as an essential tool for societal and cultural advancement; a time of grand projects and unrealized utopias. Despite everything, the fact remains that, despite possible geopolitical motives behind the mobilization of various nations worldwide, the city became the backdrop for an act of universal solidarity and symbolized global unity.

Keywords: *collective memory, City of Solidarity, Yugoslavia, Skopje, post-earthquake reconstruction*

1 26.07.1963. – 05:17:15 – Freezing the catastrophe

Frozen fragments of time found on forgotten city clocks, on their towers or historical buildings, quietly draw attention from the former rhythm of the city to the eternal pause or shock that could not be avoided. One such clock is located on the facade of the Old Railway Station in Skopje (today's City Museum), which stopped exactly at 5:17 a.m. on July 26, 1963, when the city was struck by an earthquake with a magnitude of 6.9 on the Richter scale. According to data from seismological stations in Skopje, Belgrade, Titograd, Sarajevo, and Ljubljana, the earthquake began at 5:17:15 and, with some interruptions, lasted until 5:57:56. These 50 seconds of tectonic plate movements beneath the city, followed by twenty-six minutes of minor aftershocks, were enough to forever change the urban history and image of Skopje.

In the catastrophic earthquake, 80% of all public buildings, including hospitals, schools, theaters, and the city's railway station, were destroyed. About 1,200 people lost their lives, and 3,500 were injured, while only a small portion of the city's built environment escaped significant damage. The politically non-aligned Yugoslav government immediately called for aid for its third-largest city and former southern federal capital. The call was initially answered by the Yugoslav republics, followed by more than 80 countries around the world and many international organizations, all providing aid to Skopje and its citizens after the disaster.



Figure 1 First image of the earthquake – depiction of the Old Railway Station (left)
 Depiction of the destroyed Officer's House (center)
 Visit of Josip Broz Tito on 27.07.1963 (right)

The day after the earthquake, on July 27, Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito issued a statement at a press conference organized in response to the tragedy: “Skopje has been struck by an unprecedented disaster, but we will rebuild it. With the help of our entire community, it will become our pride and symbol of brotherhood and unity, Yugoslav and global solidarity.” This statement was based on an earlier telegram that Tito sent to the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, U Thant. His response to Tito and Yugoslavia emphasized that “the United Nations is ready to offer any assistance within its resources to alleviate the consequences of the disaster” and that he had asked all organizations within the UN system “to urgently consider the assistance that could be provided.”

Just as Tito had said, urgent global aid began after the earthquake, which he also referred to as a “manifestation of human solidarity that came to the fore within this great family of nations.” An impressive number of governments responded to these appeals from the UN and the Yugoslav government for help for Skopje, whose sudden, near-total destruction evoked images of aerial bombings and urban devastation from World War II, which were still fresh in people’s minds. An excerpt from the report of Maurice Rotival, a renowned French planner appointed under the UN’s Technical Assistance Program, offers a poignant example: “To a European, such a scene is familiar, as there have been two wars in which hundreds of cities were destroyed more thoroughly than by the earthquake. But this was not the same. This was the result of war, and people knew and understood the price that had to be paid for victory.” In this way, a parallel was drawn with Warsaw, and it was noted that in five seconds, “nature in Skopje nearly equaled the level of physical chaos that took the full military power of Nazi Germany five long years to inflict on Warsaw.”



Figure 2 Poster for the documentary film “Skopje ‘63” directed by Veljko Bulajić, 1964 (left)
 Front page of the daily newspaper “Nova Makedonija” – 27.07.1963 (center)
 Front page of the daily newspaper “Politika” – 27.07.1963 (right)

Massive aid began to arrive from cities and countries around the world. The following responded: Warsaw, Moscow, London, Brussels, Baghdad, Bucharest, Algiers, Ankara, Volgograd, Ljubljana, Dresden, Geneva, London, Sofia, Paris, Zagreb, and many others. The assistance provided by each of them was distributed across different

areas of the city. As new streets were built, they were named in gratitude after the cities from which the necessary aid was sent. The massive humanitarian effort to help the survivors and rebuild the city mobilized all the republics of the Yugoslav federation, as well as the international community, which at the time was divided by the Cold War. U.S. President John F. Kennedy personally intervened to expedite American humanitarian aid, while Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev visited the devastated city with Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito. A few days after the disaster, American and Soviet soldiers flew in to provide humanitarian aid to Skopje side by side, marking the first such cooperation during the Cold War.

2 Power and Background of Solidarity

Alongside preparations for the urban reconstruction of Skopje, Yugoslav authorities readily supported the international aid and assistance the city rapidly received after the earthquake. At the central level, Tito was undoubtedly the one who emphasized "the political power of the symbol that was created and that guaranteed Skopje's future." The main platforms for globally communicating the Yugoslav narrative of this reconstruction included the already established networks of the Non-Aligned Movement (of which Yugoslavia was a founding member), the United Nations (where Yugoslavia was a founding member and original signatory of the UN Charter at the UN Conference on International Organization), and renewed relations with the Eastern bloc after Stalin's death. The level of international aid and presence in Yugoslavia demonstrated that the belief that it was merely a country "isolated behind the Iron Curtain" had ended, as it succeeded in maintaining relations with both extremes of the political spectrum during the Cold War.

The United Nations took the initiative in providing planned, long-term assistance to the devastated city. They got involved on October 14, 1963, deciding to "consider both the immediate and long-term needs of the Yugoslav government regarding its plan for the reconstruction of Skopje." Given the scale of the damage to Skopje after the earthquake, seismological and geological research preceded the drafting of a new urban plan for the city. UNESCO seismology experts Nicholas Ambrasey and Jean Despeyroux were against relocating the city from its current location, particularly because the city's underground infrastructure had not suffered any damage. According to Sudhir Sen, a representative of the UN Technical Assistance Committee and the director of the Special Fund program in Yugoslavia, the city's plan was to be based "on the most modern scientific advancements in the field of seismology." At Sen's suggestion, Ernest Weissmann visited Skopje in August 1963 and prepared a report on what the UN and its organizations needed to provide. Thus, Weissmann became one of the key figures entrusted by both the Yugoslav government and the UN to oversee the reconstruction process. In his report, he recommended, first, an emergency program and, second, long-term reconstruction and development. Weissmann, a pioneer of Croatian modernism and a student of Le Corbusier, was, at the time, deputy director of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). According to him, the obvious goal of planning was to control the human environment for the benefit of the people. "And when I say people, I mean people, not planners. And when I say benefit, I mean achieving a better life for many." He supported the international team of experts and recommended to the director of the Special Fund activities that "Yugoslavs should benefit from broader planning advice than is possible from a single consulting firm." Like the UN, he advocated for re-establishing Skopje as a city that promotes peace, understanding, and cooperation amidst the Cold War.

As UN experts began arriving in Skopje, the message coming from the UN headquarters was: "Skopje will be a monument to human solidarity. A record of man for man. A monument to international understanding." Thanks to their support, over the following years, some of the most renowned contemporary architects and urban planners were invited to design and plan their vision of the future Skopje. At the initiative of Weissmann, Maurice Rotival, Kenneth Watts, and other UN experts, the International Advisory Board for the Reconstruction of Skopje was formed. Its first meeting was held in Skopje from March 26 to 30, 1964. Blagoja Popov, the then mayor of the city, welcomed the UN representatives and expressed confidence that Skopje would become a city of international solidarity.

It was expected that upon the completion of the reconstruction, with the involvement of these eminent planners, the city would provide solutions to the modern "urban crisis," prescribe a remedy for "sick cities," and demonstrate a path for the "humanization" of the built environment. Although largely unrealized, these ambitious goals fueled an international debate about the future of cities and planning, which was crucial for defining subsequent UN interventions.

3 Urban artefacts of solidarity

From December 1964 to June 1965, the International Advisory Committee for the Reconstruction of Skopje announced an international competition for the urban design of the city center by invitation. From today's perspective, this undoubtedly represented the pinnacle of the entire post-earthquake reconstruction process in Skopje. On behalf of Yugoslavia, planning institutions from Belgrade (led by Aleksandar Đorđević), Zagreb (Radovan Mišćević and Fedor Vencler), Skopje (Slavko Brezovski from Makedonijaproekt), and Ljubljana (Edvard Ravnikar) participated. The UN decided to invite renowned teams, including Kenzo Tange (Japan), Luigi Piccinato (Italy), Van den Broek and Bakema (Netherlands), and Maurice Rotival (USA). The international jury, chaired by Ernest Weissmann, evaluated the projects and announced the results on July 26, 1965, the second anniversary of the earthquake.

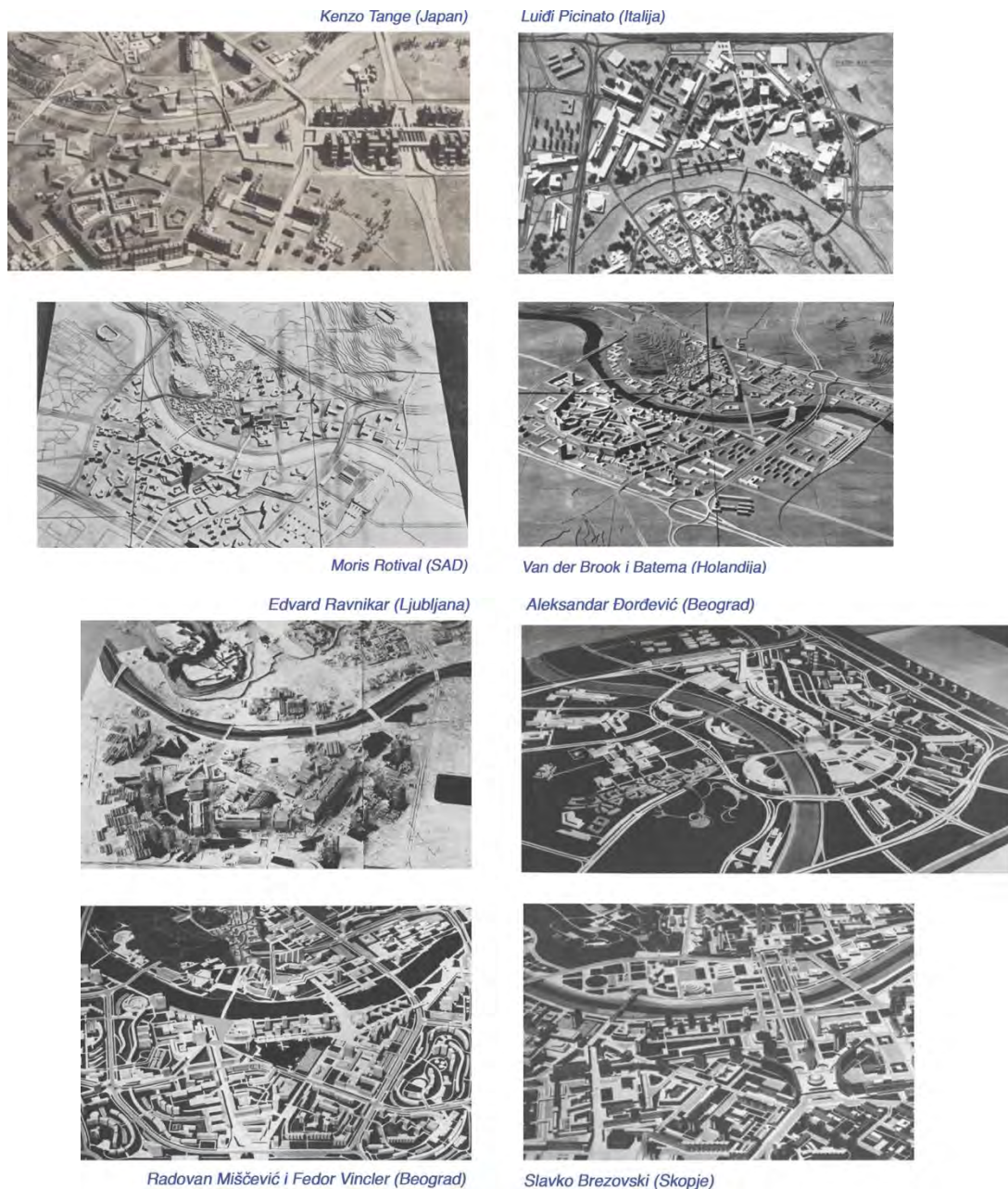


Figure 3 Models of competition proposals

The submitted solutions presented an intriguing combination of four distinct urban paradigms. At two opposite poles, representing these different approaches, were Maurice Rotival's plan from the USA and Luigi Piccinato's plan from Italy. The former placed almost all central city functions within a three-sided pyramidal megastructure, oversized relative to its surroundings. The latter altered the submission to encompass a broader area that, at least

morphologically, resembled the pre-earthquake structure of Skopje. The plans of Tange and the team of Van den Broek, Bakema, and Edvard Ravnikar shared similar characteristics, which with some imprecision, could be labeled as early 'late modernism.'



Figure 4 *Models of Kenzo Tange's competition entry*

The competition's outcome was dual: 40% of the first prize went to the Zagreb team of Mišćević-Vencler, while 60% was awarded to Kenzo Tange's team. The jury declared that the winning projects would be combined into one—known as the "Ninth Version"—which would integrate the best solutions from the competition. However, given the differences between the two winning projects, the merging process seemed quite difficult, if not impossible. From the standpoint of balancing different sides, it was already evident by 1965 that the winner of the competition was Tange, the name that became synonymous with the reconstruction itself. One of the two key elements of Tange's metabolist project for the center was the City Gate, an oversized administrative and commercial hub comprising "shops, offices, hotels, meeting rooms, cultural centers, and a cinema," which was meant to serve as the city's entrance point. Organized as an 'open structure,' it would allow for (infinite) expansion across the regional territory. Architecturally, the City Gate was based on a modular prefabricated system, with its units ("cells") organized around huge vertical tubular elements containing services and connections. While this mega-structure was allowed to expand eastward, on the opposite side it concluded with the main city square. A building dedicated to the City Assembly and a more generic 25-story office tower were positioned on this square, connected to the northern bank of the Vardar River by a bridge with shops. The second major element of the project—the City Wall—was conceived as a residential complex designed to "embrace" the old city center to protect it from future disasters. Both project elements followed the logic of metabolist architecture, leaving open possibilities for future growth. The project spanned both banks of the Vardar River, encompassing 2,200 residential units, while the lower floors housed various types of commercial functions. The City Gate and City Wall appeared to evoke an idealized medieval past of the Old Skopje Bazaar, revealing Tange's sensitivity and awareness of Skopje's local history.

From 1966 onwards, when the final master plan for Skopje was completed and presented, featuring Tange's proposal—modified and largely adapted to local economic possibilities—a mild sense of disappointment began to spread among both citizens and international observers. Tange himself remarked that what remained of his vision for Skopje was "just a shadow, barely visible in the moonlight." A large number of reductions in the ninth version of the project eventually made it almost unrecognizable: both the City Wall and City Gate were only partially realized, while work on the main city square never commenced. Despite this, the city's master plan and the realization of international architectural symbols of reconstruction over the following two decades became a testament to 'developmental modernism' and the internationalist modernist paradigm in urban and architectural

design. These emerged from the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM), not only because key figures involved in Skopje's project, including Weissmann, Meyerson, Tange, Doxiadis, and Bakema, were connected to CIAM at various stages of their careers.

From the very beginning, due to Yugoslavia's desire to retain control over the reconstruction process, it was almost obvious that any proposal not aligning with the country's real local capabilities would not be adopted, and Skopje would never become a realized utopia like Brasília or Chandigarh. Yugoslavia simply did not aim to build a monument to utopia; rather, as can be concluded, the goal was to best adopt elements of expert economic and urban planning on a broader scale and create conditions for the self-sustainability of Skopje and the Republic. The final protagonist of Skopje's post-earthquake reconstruction was Yugoslavia itself, operating in line with Cold War politics, attempting to balance media strategies and real possibilities, Eastern and Western political aspirations, local needs and global ambitions, avant-garde architecture and economic realism. Above all, an original process of modernization was promoted, which, due to rising tensions that would eventually lead to the breakup of the Federation in the 1990s, remained unfinished.

4 Architectural artefacts of solidarity

The post-earthquake reconstruction of Skopje remains undoubtedly the most powerful segment of the city's recent architectural history. The half-forgotten architectural artifacts provide insight into a utopian late-modern city. Although modern architecture in Skopje was modestly introduced in the pre-war period, followed by intense modernization after World War II, the post-earthquake reconstruction transformed the previously unknown Skopje into a zone of global cooperation, becoming a large-scale testing ground for utopian architecture. The internationalism of urban planning was also mirrored at the architectural level, turning this previously peripheral city into a premier late-modern urban and architectural laboratory.

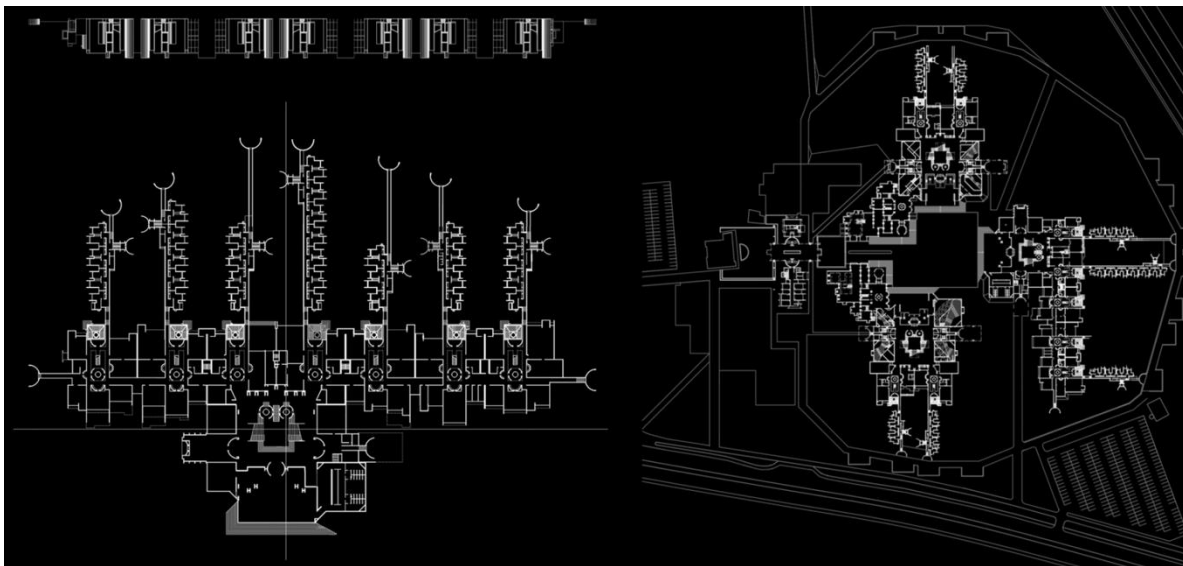


Figure 5 *University Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje – architect Marko Musić, Slovenia*

One particular aspect concerns the architectural aid offered to Skopje by both socialist and capitalist donor countries, revealing the existing international "social" consensus—a shared set of values that transcended the Cold War divisions of the time. This was an investment by socialist and Western governments in institutions that embodied social justice and maintained welfare, serving as a testament to the still-existing post-war consensus surrounding the "modern welfare state." This consensus is evident in the material assistance provided by the United States and Great Britain for the construction of two secondary schools, a modern elementary school—pioneering experimental seismic foundations—"Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi," donated by the Swiss government; the state-of-the-art secondary chemical school "Marie Skłodowska-Curie" from the Polish government; a modern maternity hospital from the Czechoslovak trade union; a children's lung hospital from the Norwegian government and Swedish Red Cross; and the polyclinic "Bucharest" from the Romanian government. In addition to these, theaters, concert halls, and entire residential neighborhoods (such as the "Dexion" quarter, named after the British company that supplied materials for building frameworks, and the "Taftalidze" neighborhood, consisting of prefabricated structures from Finland, Norway, Czechoslovakia, France, Mexico, Italy, Poland, and Switzerland)

were financially supported by both socialist and Western governments, becoming the embodiment of the spirit of international solidarity mentioned in the original United Nations resolution.

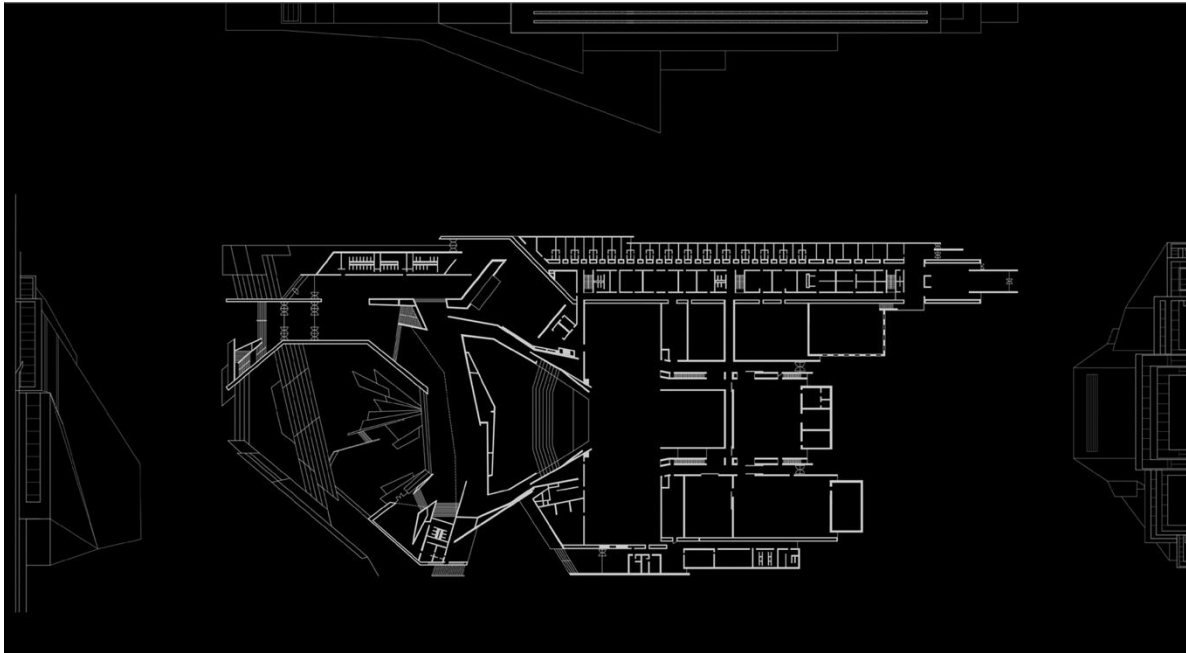


Figure 6 *Macedonian Opera and Ballet – Buro 71, Slovenia*

During the planning and organization of the urban reconstruction, Yugoslav authorities established July 26 as Solidarity Day, an initiative announced in the early 1970s and formalized in October 1973, further capitalizing on the symbolic capital of the solidarity trope to rethink the state's disaster management policy.

After the tragic events of July 26, 1963, French existentialist and activist Jean-Paul Sartre said: "Skopje is not a movie, not a thriller where we guess the main event. It is a concentration of man's struggle for freedom, with a result that inspires further struggle and rejection of defeat." In the midst of the tragedy, Sartre's words called upon the international art community. Names like Pablo Picasso, Alexander Calder, Christo, and Victor Vasarely were among the long list of painters and artists (a total of 61 countries) who participated in the action for Skopje, sending 1,760 artworks to the new Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje. Although the new building, designed by the Polish team Tigers and the Warsaw Bureau for General Construction Design, was only completed in 1970, the first exhibition of donated artworks was held in 1965 under the title "Solidarity/Meeting/'Rencontre de Solidarité'." The fact that a special catalog was printed in three languages (Macedonian, English, and Russian) is yet another manifestation of the bipolar neutrality that underpinned Yugoslav non-aligned internationalism and many of the internationalist constellations actively shaped by Yugoslav elites.

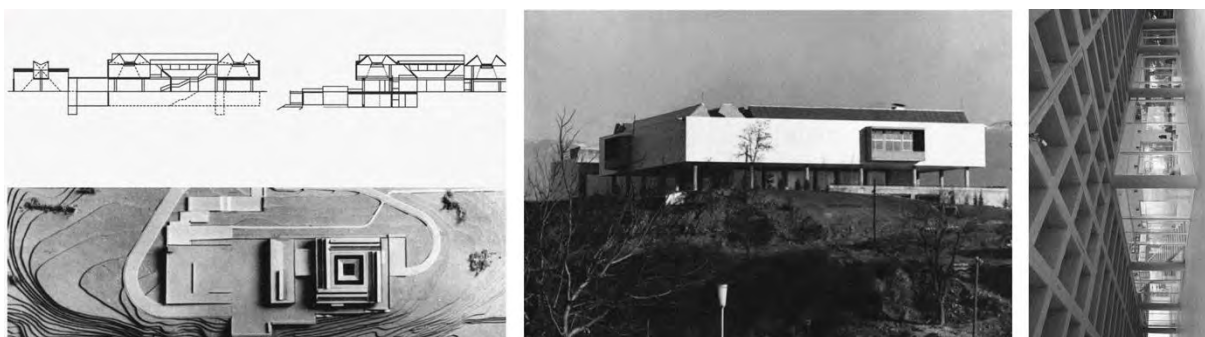


Figure 6 *Museum of Contemporary Art - Warsaw Tigers Bureau, Poland*

5 Conclusion

In Yugoslav architecture, the concept of solidarity was expressed even in the country's main ideological tenet—brotherhood and unity. The sense of brotherhood and unity was understood as the solidarity of people in their struggle against imperialist rule, and particularly the brotherhood and unity among the "kaleidoscope of cultures" that existed in Yugoslavia. As historian Vladimir Kulić noted, the role of architecture became extremely significant in the post-war period, and "the ideology of brotherhood and unity sought to reconcile this kaleidoscopic image with the universality of socialist modernization."

Unique in the sheer scale of the reconstruction effort and the long-term development plan, as well as the participation of multiple local and international actors from both sides of the Cold War divide, the case of Skopje is a testament to the brief convergence of liberal and socialist internationalism, which created a temporary global consensus around the universal paradigms of modernism, welfare, and solidarity. Yugoslavia's exceptional visibility and active engagement on the international stage during the 1950s and 1960s shaped the United Nations' response, as well as that of individual countries, to the reconstruction of Skopje after the earthquake. On one hand, this was due to the emerging international consensus on development and the vision of post-war and post-colonial modernization. The experts brought in from the developed West and the state socialist East reflected the visions of hybrid modernity common in Yugoslavia and the developing world. Western concepts of technological achievements, planning, and construction were easily translated and adapted to local, national contexts. On the other hand, the Skopje reconstruction project fits into a broader list of post-war urban projects designed to embody a near-utopian social order through the realization of the architectural avant-garde's dreams. Technological advancement was meant to enable the realization of urban visions filled with optimism, egalitarianism, and architectural modernism. Thus, the Museum of Contemporary Art was then presented not only as a symbol of Polish-Yugoslav cooperation and a "sign of a better future" but also as a "monument to the technical capacities and capabilities of Polish architecture."

The entire process of planning and construction lasted less than 20 years; it concluded sometime in the early 1980s when most of the funds were exhausted and the political context began to change. The reconstruction project was carried out swiftly and, to some extent, pragmatically, though it was often slowed by economic or technical constraints. The architecture of Skopje's post-earthquake renewal was fundamentally aimed at achieving a utopian horizon of a better future (in the long term), directed at all segments of society. This architectural outcome certainly cannot be described solely as an interpretation of a universal language or paradigm of modernity. Alongside the general drive for modernization, both socially and programmatically, it absorbed and generated various influences and architectural paradigms, some modest, others new, radical, and visionary.

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