

Klime Babunski, PhD
ISPJR, UKIM Skopje
klimeb@isppi.ukim.edu.mk

Goran Janev, PhD, associate professor
ISPJR, UKIM Skopje
gorjan00@yahoo.com

CITIZENS' PERSPECTIVES AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO THE DEVASTATION OF THE PUBLIC SPACE IN SKOPJE

Abstract

Public space in Skopje has been under assault for a long period and has been diminishing on daily bases since the unregulated and uncontrolled transition to capitalism has begun, but the devastating processes accelerated in the past decade. In this analysis we will cover only certain aspects of this destructive developments, mainly focusing on the citizens' perspectives and institutional responses to the shrinking public space in Skopje. We set out to find out if there are sufficient resources, capacities, will and know-how to reverse this negative trend. We will adhere to two main criteria in our analysis of the public space development in Skopje. Namely, public spaces have to be *accessible* and to be developed through *inclusive processes*. We will present the findings on the public space availability in Skopje from two vantage points: that of citizens and the institutional perspective. In comparison of these two views we will try to assess the existing conditions for public space protection and development, based on needs and capacities.

Keywords: Skopje, public space, inclusive urbanism, civic participation.

DISAPPEARING PUBLIC SPACE IN SKOPJE

Public space in Skopje has been under assault for a long period and has been diminishing on daily bases since the unregulated and uncontrolled transition to capitalism has begun, but the devastating processes accelerated in the past decade. Petrovski (2018) notes the significant “accelerated urbanization and occupation of the existing green spaces”, especially in the very center of the city, mostly to buildings from the infamous project “Skopje 2014” and to commercial objects. This process of loss of green space in the center of the city is well presented in the online platform *Skopje Grows* (<http://skopjeraste.mk>). Other recent studies and analyses *Study for Development of Green Spaces and forestation of City of Skopje Area* (2015), and the *Resilient Skopje: Strategy for Climate Change* (Markovska 2017) confirm those findings as well thus making the loss of green and open public spaces undeniable fact. In this analysis we will cover only certain aspects of this destructive developments, mainly focusing on the citizens’ perspectives and institutional responses to the shrinking public space in Skopje.

In comparison of these two views, that of citizens and the institutional perspective, we will try to assess the existing conditions for public space protection and development, based on needs and capacities. The rapidly growing field of urban studies pays particular attention to the public space as it is established as crucial aspect of the social life in the cities. The *Global Public Space Toolkit* (O’Railly 2016) developed by UN-Habitat firmly establishes the centrality of public spaces and the inclusive principles upon which the processes of their development should provide urban sustainability. The great many academic contributors are in line with this defining principle. Covering vast interdisciplinary literature on the public space Varna (2014) sums up her findings by attributing the centrality of public places for achieving urban sustainability in all of its three dimensions: social cohesion, environmental protection, and economic competitiveness.

Madanipour (2010) explains the growing academic attention to public spaces due to great structural changes in the cities, largely negative, owing to the rise of market-based paradigm. Macedonia in its post-socialist transformation and the processes of urbanization as they unfolded in Skopje are fitting examples of this neo-liberal encroachment on space and societies. Harvey’s (2005) model of neoliberal destructive practices were applied to Skopje like in a textbook where public space was misappropriated from the public and transformed into a private property with the state eagerly overseeing the process. As we will focus on the potentials to reverse these processes, in explaining the local developments we will apply Madanipour’s critical analysis. Adopting this perspective it becomes apparent that State almost completely abandoned the urban development and transferred it to the private sector. From business perspective, public space is just a liability to the private sector whose sole interest is in profit making.

The specificity of Skopje is the statist assault on public space with the project “Skopje 2014”. Dozens of administrative buildings and few cultural institutions, couple of pedestrian bridges, and hundreds of monuments were squeezed in and around the main square at the expense of greenery and open public space. This project aimed at complete makeover of the central parts of the town infusing the space with nationalist symbolism on both sides

of the river Vardar with Macedonian nationalism expressed by symbolic landscaping on the southern side, Albanian on the northern side. The past few years were politically quite precarious, with three years of protests that culminated with the so called *Colorful revolution* that aimed the color filled balloons at the objects of the project "Skopje 2014" in order to deface them and to delegitimize the ruling parties and to a certain degree to liberate the public space that has been appropriated by the state.

As we set out to explore, describe, and analyse the public space in Skopje we borrowed Madanipour's very straightforward approach. In essence, public spaces have to be *accessible* and to be developed through *inclusive processes*. And we will adhere to these two main criteria in our analysis of the public space development in Skopje in particular on the sites selected for this study.

We conducted a series of interviews with local authorities administration and the decision makers in three units of local self-government, City of Skopje, and municipalities of Centar and Chair. In the municipalities we obtained interviews with all of the Presidents of Councils, we also had one mayor as interlocutor in the municipality of Centar, and we talked on average with 6 administrative officers in each municipality. Thematically, we enquired about the existing practices within the framework of existing institutional set up, division of duties and responsibilities, control mechanisms for planning, developing and maintaining public spaces, but first of all, we tried to evaluate the prioritization of public space in their practice. They were also asked about the civic participation in decision-making processes concerning the planning and development of public spaces. (More about the research in the *Acknowledgement, at the end of the this text.*)

In addition, we conducted five focus groups with citizens from five selected sites in these two municipalities. We had prepared a scenario for the conversation that explored citizens' perceptions on the availability of public spaces, accessibility and use, the flow, and civic participation in decision-making, and communication with the municipality and possibilities for civic participation in decision-making processes.

INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES TO PROTECT AND DEVELOP PUBLIC SPACE

We must first briefly provide social and political context and how the system of local self-government has developed in Macedonia. Since independence Macedonian political system has treated the local self-government as threatening to the central authorities. It is visible firstly by the politicized and contested gerrymandering of the territorial distribution of the units of local government. Secondly, the incomplete fiscal decentralization leaves the municipalities in large measure dependent on communal taxes incurred by the new buildings construction. This explains the municipalities' penchant towards the expansion of new construction on their territories and the assault on the public space and urban greenery. Finally, the administrative design without any subordination between the City of Skopje and the ten municipalities on its territory is certainly intentional to diminish the powers and influence of the mayor of Skopje.

The role of political parties in development of public space is further extended in controlling the functioning of the municipalities. The local administration is structurally subjugated to the political parties and elected figures. The Mayor is the head of the administration and the Council dictates the working program of each sector and department. Leaving this aside, but keeping it in mind we set out to explore and evaluate the existing practices regarding development, protection and management of the public space. Our primary concern was to establish the level of prioritization or negligence of the public space development. In other words, we probed how profound is the awareness about the importance of having available, accessible, open public spaces both among political actors and professional administration in the municipalities and how inclusive these processes are, especially in the planning phase.

The general impression about centrality of public space on the municipal agenda is somehow encouraging, to different degrees in each case. Some are less, some are more aware of the importance of the public space for the social cohesion and overall quality of life in the city, but all too soon, almost everyone looked for excuses and offered countless explanations about the unfavorable regulations, limited responsibilities, and factors beyond their control. However, the efforts to develop and maintain the public space in these three units of local self-government are not insignificant. In their own words, speaking directly about the issue of public space, the administration officers said that the current administration prioritizes the issue of public spaces and always tries to consult and involve citizens.

Complaints however, were mainly about their limited authorization and inadequate capacities, lack of interest and awareness of the citizens when public space is on the agenda and the irresponsible, even hooligan behavior to urban equipment. Also adding to the limited authorizations and shortage of employees, they pointed to the unequivocal and also contradictory behavior of the citizens, who in general lack interest. However, they were enthusiastic and willing to face the problems and seek solutions, including initiating changes in the law or by-law regulation.

The interviewed officers made it clear that they are aware of the gap between the regulation on paper and the real life, when it comes to public space. On paper: needs and interests of urban communities are provided to the municipality administration and are main guidelines for planning of public spaces. In the real life: the citizens, the public spaces get very little attention from the administration in comparison to the areas for building and investors, who are “the stars” because through local taxes they are the main source of income for municipality.

Regarding their responsibilities, duties, and scope of authorization we got a mixed bag of answers. The administrative duality between City of Skopje and the ten municipalities quickly came to fore and both sides claim to have lost control over processes to the other side. Persistently pointing out these inconsistencies makes them look more like excuses rather than explanations. At the same time, the “good news” is that the changes are on the horizon: there is readiness to look at the public space, based on a changed regulation, firstly as an element that humanizes the municipality or the city, and only after that as source for income for private investors and for the budget of municipality.

The President of the Council in municipality of Centar apparently shakes the existing order. This particular case deserves special attention as it shows that it is possible to stop the

private interests that neglect and endanger public interests and to force the administration to take concrete actions about fulfilling their role to protect the public space. All of the Detailed Urban Plans (DUP's) for the municipality of Centar were put on hold until revised by independent committee composed of external experts and internal staff. It is now called the Moratorium for new construction in Centar. There are numerous other initiatives, but keeping it short we can conclude that a strong and clearly articulated political will with responsibility that is primarily oriented towards the citizens can at least provide for implementation of existing regulations for protection of public interests.¹

The practice of civic participation in decision-making processes is again negatively scored. Numbers of reasons were provided, perhaps most of them true and real about disinterested citizens, discouraging procedures, slowness of processes that further decreases civic participation. It is true that the citizens are passive and most often are not taking part in decisions regarding public spaces or DUPs. But the real question is who condition such passivity or non-participation. Disenfranchised from the processes citizens feel powerless and choose passivity. The role of the administration is to change this. However, we noted that there is a process of change in the awareness and even in the behavior and these changes in the local administration are necessary precondition for increasing the citizens' participation in decision-making processes.

PUBLIC SPACE DISAPPEARANCE IN THE EYES OF CITIZENS

Perceptions and experiences of consulted citizens about the public space functionality are highly negative in any aspect. Whether it is the assessment about the availability, activity and use of public space, access to it, or is it about their participation in decision making processes or attention and responsiveness of the local authorities they are clearly dissatisfied. The citizens think that the public space is devastated and keeps on disappearing regardless of their opinion or actions to prevent this.

Participants pointed out the continual densification with new buildings taking the available space away from them and describe it as "*suffocating*", "*squeezed*", "*difficult to breathe*" and like. Commercial interests are prevailing over public interests. Many small business, especially bars and restaurants are appropriating all available space making traffic, parking, and pedestrian movement absolutely troublesome. In every focus group the most frequent words used to describe the reasons for such situation is "*occupation*" and "*usurpation*". They blame the municipality for allowing the "interest of the capital to come before the interest of the people". Participants in all focus groups were quick to come to this conclusion as well, that municipal administration and leadership are prone to corruption and look after the interests of private investor at the expense of the quality of life of the citizens. The access and flow of public spaces is troublesome as well, The remaining public space is overcrowded and discouraging for many participants to use it. Parking is the worst enemy to all. Everyone pointed that they have no parking for themselves as residents and pointed that

¹ In this context it is worth to mention that the President of the Council of the Centar has no political background but is civic activist.

there are too many cars now. The local authorities unfortunately do not provide the remedy.

The evaluation of **the civic participation in decision-making** is equally strongly negative overall for number of reasons. Firstly their assessment of the care and responsibility of the local government is very low, actually the participants were very critical in their assessment of the local authorities. They blame them for allowing such densification and issuing new approvals for construction of buildings. They repeatedly pointed that for the local authorities the profit is more important than humans and that is the greatest problem. They have given numerous examples to point out how unresponsive are the institutions that hide behind unfavorable legal regulation. They see the often mentioned lack of clearly defined competences and responsibilities just an excuse for inaction.

Not much better is their assessment about the communication with the local and central government authorities and responsible services. In the eyes of the participants from all focus groups, nobody is there to listen to them, nobody cares, and local authorities are only responsive and present during election campaigns. All the groups reported negatively about ever being communicated in the decision-making process for the urban planning in any phase, or about anything at all.

The participants from both municipalities reported privileges being granted to those with political connections. Participants complain about this connections and influences in the same time pointing that their complains, demands, and initiatives are always neglected. So, these lost cases discourage them completely from making any further efforts. They know that there is no one to hear them and this results with their passivity.

There was no enthusiasm about the potential success of civic initiatives, except in “Krugche” where some participants praised the work of the informal group “Defending Debar Maalo”, which gave the current President of the Council in Centar. But they still think that there are no open communication channels between them and the local administration. In Chair, participants reported few cases of protesting and organizing against the plans for new buildings at the existing green space that finished successfully. But they assess this as sporadic and temporary as there is no organization behind this initiative that got strong popular support in defense of the living space in the municipality. By and large, all participants were very negative about the communication with the local authorities and their responsiveness as they see them heavily under influence of party and business interests and not in the service of the citizens.

CONCLUSION

Citizens are very dissatisfied with the availability and access to the public spaces that are sparse and overcrowded and often poorly maintained. There is minimal, negligible participation of citizens in these processes, which makes them exclusionary and far from the ideal of inclusiveness. There are some improvements and positive examples, but much is left wanting. Citizens participation is unsatisfactory low. In general, citizens are passive and are not included in the decision-making processes. This leads to mutual mistrust. Institutional perspective claims that citizens are only interested when it comes to

personal, individualized interests. The citizens see the local institutions as closed, lacking transparency, unresponsive, and having no will to help them out to solve their problems even when they approach them.

Citizens accuse local authorities of protecting business interests and neglecting theirs. They are alarmed at the speed and scale of densification in their neighborhoods that happens at expense of public space and available living space in general. Almost all complained about poor maintenance and frequent vandalism of the urban equipment that renders designated public spaces unusable. The overcrowding was another big problem that hampers the use of public spaces. Municipalities are aware of these problems but are quick to note that they put maximum efforts within the limits of their responsibilities that are often unclear.

Ineffective division of responsibilities, duties and scope of work between various levels of local administration and with central government institutions leads to confusion, inactivity and overwhelming sense of helplessness. In Skopje, the duality of authorization of responsibilities creates great number of difficulties from planning, development and management of the public spaces. The discrepancies in perspectives, but also mutual awareness about the differences points towards the increasing realization that radical changes are needed in which accessible public space will become primary social space where communities can come together and be created by inclusive processes of development, management and protection of public spaces.

Acknowledgment:

This research was a part of the UN HABITAT study: “Enhanced right to the city for all”: SKOPJE PUBLIC SPACE PROFILE – Institutional framework for public space planning, development and management. Public space in-depth analysis”. The research was carried out from the Faculty of Architecture, University “Ss. Cyril and Methodius” in Skopje and was financed by the UN HABITAT office in Kosovo.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Harvey, D., 2005, *Spaces of neoliberalization: towards a theory of uneven geographical development*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden

Madanipour, A. (ed). 2010 *Whose public space? : international case studies in urban design and development*, Routledge, Abingdon

O'Reilly, D. (ed). 2016. *Global Public Space Toolkit: From global principles to local policies and practices*. UN-Habitat

Petrovski, D. 2018. “Return of the public space and greenery in the centre of Skopje”, *MARH*, January 09. <http://marh.mk/враќање-на-јавниот-простор-и-зеленило/> (last accessed on 05.06.2018)

Markovska, N (ed). 2017. *Resilient Skopje: Strategy for Climate Change*. City of Skopje, Skopje

Study for Development of Green Spaces and forestation of City of Skopje Area (2015)

Varna, G. 2014. *Measuring public space : the star model*, Ashgate, Farnham