

## THE SKOPJE CITY WALL HOUSING COMPLEX

### A Disregarded Cultural Heritage

Matko P. Korobar, Jasmina Siljanoska

**ABSTRACT:** The 1963 earthquake in Skopje, North Macedonia, prompted an international response culminating in the Town Planning Project financed by the UN Special Fund, which resulted in a new master plan for the city. An international competition for the reconstruction of the Skopje city center was launched as part of the project. The Kenzo Tange entry, which won three-fifths of the first prize, became a representation of the new Skopje. It relied on an autofabulation approach, using elements like 'city gate' and 'city wall' as important parts of the concept. One of the major features was the City Wall housing development which encircled the central business district (CBD). This paper examines the initial proposal and the phases it passed through to become a new development plan for the center. In this process, Tange played a significant role, defining major planning aspects of the complex, which was later completed according to projects by local architects. The City Wall supported housing as permanent activity in the center and introduced a housing complex of towers and blocks, which became a prominent feature of the Skopje skyline. Although it had to be adapted to the existing conditions and some of the original ideas had to be abandoned, the City Wall complex stood the test of time. Unfortunately, especially since the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, a number of interventions and alterations have compromised its appearance and some of the basic ideas. The paper argues that the City Wall complex should be proclaimed a cultural heritage, and immediate action should be taken to prevent irreparable damage and to preserve the City Wall as an important and recognizable image of Skopje's townscape.

**KEYWORDS:** Kenzo Tange, city center plan for Skopje, City Wall housing complex, symbolic cityscape image, disregarded cultural heritage

**INTRODUCTION:** At the time of the Skopje earthquake in 1963, architecture in the world was going through a redefining period, which was simultaneously abandoning the production of space resulting from the superficial reading of the Modern idea and formulating bold new approaches to urban and architectural space, often initiated, but not limited to the technological advances of the time. The demise of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) and the succession of Team X did not lead to the substitution of the four functionalist categories with "an alternative set of abstractions... (but) searched for the structural principles of urban growth and for next significant unit above the family cell" (Frampton, 1982, p.271). The evident pluralism of Team X protagonists led to multiple approaches to establishing a sense of place by means of architecture, which resulted in a plethora of

approaches to urban issues at the beginning of the 1960s.

Following the devastating earthquake, the United Nations Special Fund launched the Skopje Urban Plan Project, a joint international effort to reconstruct the severely damaged city. An invited international competition for the city center was organized as part of the comprehensive activities that followed. Its outcome often stands out as representative of the whole planning effort, which, despite its importance, mistakenly symbolizes the complex operation of the Skopje Urban Plan Project, which resulted in a new Master plan for the entire city.

Four domestic and four international teams took part in the competition. The four teams from former Yugoslavia were led by Edvard Ravnikar from Ljubljana, Mišćević and Wenzler from Zagreb, Aleksandar Djordjević from Belgrade, and Slavko Brezovski from Skopje. The

four international offices included Maurice Rotival and Associates from the USA, Luigi Piccinato and Studio Scimemi from Italy, Kenzo Tange from Japan, and Van den Broek and Bakema from the Netherlands. The entries reflected the varied urban design scene of the time. The works of Van den Broek and Bakema, Tange, and Ravnikar echoed the initial Team X ideas reflected in some of their convergent spatial solutions. Maurice Rotival based its entry on a modified form of a megastructure, while Luigi Piccinato's work reflected the postulates of the Association for Organic Architecture he formed with Zevi, Ridolfi, and Nervi after WWII. All other entries were variations within a broader interpretation of the Modern Movement.

### THE INVITED INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION: ITS OUTCOME AND CONSEQUENCES

The International jury split the first prize between the teams of Kenzo Tange (60%) and Mišćević and Wenzler (40%). In its report, the jury noted that the entry of Kenzo Tange "has dealt with many aspects of the plan in a serious, original and inspired way," while the entry of Mišćević and Wenzler was evaluated as "modest in its proposals, avoid(ing) exaggeration, whether it be in height of buildings, size of open spaces or location of use zones" (Skopje Resurgent, 1970, p. 373). This decision obviously led towards a compromise that was to be reached among members from both teams, burdened with the obligation to prepare a development plan for the city center.

In the period after the earthquake and to this date, Kenzo Tange's proposal has been almost solely connected with the comprehensive planning effort for the reconstruction of Skopje.<sup>1</sup> This was a result of its clear concept and the powerful structures and imagery of the project. It was a physical representation of both former Yugoslavia and the UN striving to show what a joint international involvement of this magnitude can produce; in the case of former Yugoslavia, as a leading country of the "third world" and in the case of UN as a unifying international force in a divided world.



01 Model of the competition entry of Kenzo Tange. © Skopje Resurgent, UNDP.

Kenzo Tange and his team made a bold statement about the city's future. It followed Tange's credo that he later formulated clearly in his acceptance speech when receiving the Pritzker prize: "...there is a powerful need for symbolism and that means that the architecture must have something that appeals to the human heart" (Kenzo Tange, 1987).

Before being involved in the Skopje competition, Tange already had connections to and participated in some of the activities of Team X (Frampton, 1982, p.274) but was better known for his Tokyo Bay project of 1960. This project initiated the entire Japanese Metabolist movement, which, reacting to the pressures of constant growth and overcrowding of Japanese cities, turned to constantly growing and adapting megastructures.

Tange's Skopje proposal has several main features, including the City Gate, acting as an important urban interchange; the City Wall, encircling the inner ring of the center; and the Old and the New Axis, two distinct axes, facilitating the structuring of the city center clearly and unambiguously. In Tange's words:

*the City Gate is the Transformer. It is the physical system which transforms the scale and speed of an ever-developing civilization to consistent human scale. The City Wall is the Vessel, determined by walking distance, which contains the heterogeneous mixture of old and new and stimulates them to create the higher urbanities. The City Gate and the City Wall will become the symbols of the New Skopje.*

(Report on City Centre Planning, 1966, p.19)



02 The City Wall housing complex in the model of the competition entry. © Report on City Centre Planning, ITPA.



03 The City Wall Housing complex as part of the model of the final version of the City Gate complex. © Skopje Resurgent, UNDP.

The New Axis extending in the East–West direction comprised a raised pedestrian deck and connected clusters of important state, cultural, and commercial spaces. At the main city square, it intersected with the existing Old Axis, which became the new pedestrian spine of the center. The introduction of the new axis complemented the planned development of the entire city, which was transformed from a central to a linear layout extending along the Vardar River [FIGURE 01][FIGURE 02].

### PLANNING REALITY: TURNING THE WINNING PROJECT INTO A WORKING DEVELOPMENT PLAN

The completion of the detailed urban plan was entrusted to a mixed team comprised of representatives of the two awarded entries and local representatives. Separately, the Kenzo Tange team was involved in planning the City Gate area, which was part of the detailed plan of the city center.

This plan became known as the “ninth project” (or variant) following the eight competition projects. It was recommended that the ninth project should utilize the valuable ideas from all entries, but it should mainly follow Tange’s project. During the process, a number of changes were made, as the city center plan was superseded by the master plan, and the competition brief was deemed outdated with a number of new buildings added.

The design of the City Wall took several forms during the process as a result of wind-tunnel testing and critical reports regarding “the obstruction of transverse views and air currents by the height and continuity of the ‘city wall’ apartment blocks, (and) the incongruous scale of some proposed developments” (Skopje Resurgent, 1970, p. 314). This led to a complete abandoning of the part of the City Wall on the left bank of the Vardar River, as well as a transformation of the initial chain-type layout of

apartment blocks of various heights, which still incorporated the raised pedestrian deck.

Finally, the City Wall was transformed into a housing development with towers and apartment blocks, without the proposed pedestrian deck, with shops at ground level and green areas within the individual segments. In his later recollections, Tange expressed his astonishment at the fact that their 1:500 drawings soon became construction projects for the City Wall without their involvement, which in his view, would have resulted in a subtler urban ensemble [FIGURE 03]. In its present form, the City Wall incorporates old buildings which were not planned to be part of the development but became its permanent feature, as the financial means for full completion of the project were no longer available.

### THE CITY WALL HOUSING: THE IDEA, THE SYMBOLISM, AND THE BUILT STRUCTURE

Tange treated the City Wall as a defining element of his competition proposal. It stretched on both banks of the Vardar River, opening the possibility for growth according to future needs. On the contrary, the old quarters in the city center were not expected to grow but to “continue their metabolic change inside the wall” (The Japan Architect, 1967, p. 38). Inserting housing within the City Wall was seen as an expression of permanence in the city center. It contained a row of housing blocks of the same height, with residences on the upper floors and shops and neighborhood facilities accessible from a pedestrian deck in the lower, trapezoid-shaped part. The residential blocks were connected by bold vertical cylindrical shafts containing the entrances to the dwellings. They strongly resembled the cylindrical tower of the old Skopje Fortress, symbolizing the connection with the city’s distant past. Pairs of shafts formed entrances to the inner quarters. Coupled with the



04 Model of the "Ninth Project" or the final version of the city center plan. © Skopje center – Gradski zdid, ZSKS.

design of the blocks in the City Gate, the City Wall was a clear expression of the Japanese Metabolism of the time.

In the next stage, the City Wall was reduced in length and shape and was planned as a chain-type layout with parallel blocks enclosing an inner space. Tange felt that "Though the concept of the City Gate and City Wall and of the old and new axis as presented in our competition plan has changed considerably, the effect of a symbolic image for the people of Skopje remains intact" (The Japan Architect, 1967, p 45).

The final stage in which Tange's team was involved saw yet another change in the shape and organization of the City Wall complex, although its position within the city center remained unchanged [FIGURE 04]. The position of the "residential wall" rests along a ring road planned at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, its wider area coincides with the territory where two different

development concepts for the city met, one with a radial-concentric and the other with a linear street network. These two concepts represented two different periods of city development, one before and another immediately after WWII. The City Wall area tried to respond to this situation by defragmenting the existing urban fabric, connecting the temporal layers of the city center, and proposing visual and physical enhancement of the area where the two planning urban matrices overlapped.

As soon as the detailed plan for the center was completed, the Institute for Housing and Communal Management of Skopje, responsible for the construction of new housing areas in the city, commissioned major local architectural and construction firms to complete the City Wall complex. The architectural projects of the blocks were completed by a team that included N. Bogachev, S. Gjurič, Lj. Malenkova, A. Serafimovski, S. Simovski,

and V. Kjoseva. The projects for the two types of towers were completed: for tower “M” by A. Serafimovski, V. Ladinska, D. Dimitrov, R. Mincheva, and S. Gjurič from Makedonija projekt and for tower “B” by A. Smilevski from Beton. The four largest construction companies, Beton, Granit, Mavrovo, and Pelagonija, were involved in building the City Wall complex.

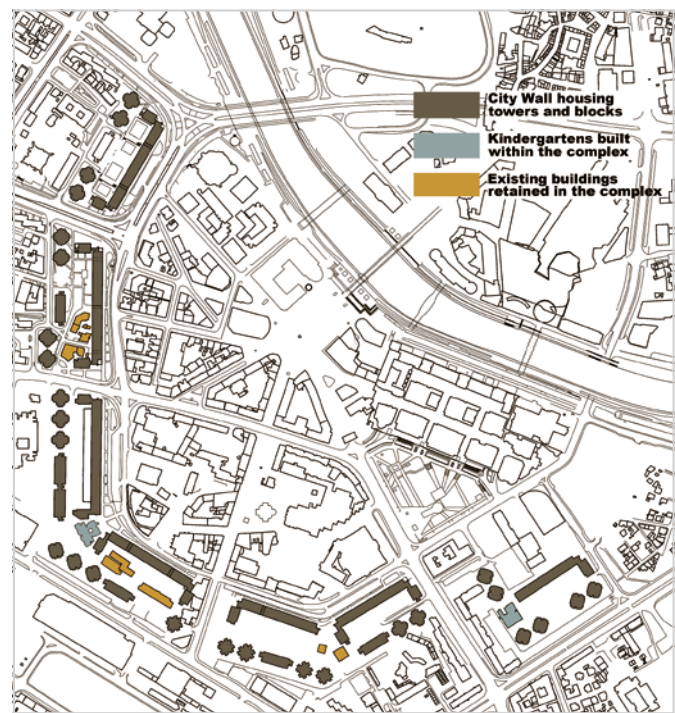
The Institute for Housing and Communal Management of Skopje was also responsible for distributing the completed housing units and acted as an intermediate organization between the general housing policy and the end users—the “working people.” All companies and employees were obliged to set aside 4% of their net income for housing investment. Usually, the companies bought the apartments and distributed them according to established criteria, enabling their employees to purchase apartments by giving them housing loans or redirecting them to banks for affordable long-term housing loans. Most of the apartments in the City Wall were bought by their occupants using the latter option.

The City Wall was designed as a double residential structure for nearly 8,000 dwellers, occupying 1,814 apartments of different typologies, ranging from studios to five-bedroom apartments, with an area of 25 to 150 m<sup>2</sup>. The housing development consists of 45 meters high towers and blocks with a height of 24 meters. They are placed parallel to each other, enclosing an inner space that serves as a green refuge for the dwellers, safeguarding them from the busy city center activities.

The two types of buildings added diversity to the composition, but the real reason for introducing towers was the need to improve the cross-aeration of the area. The towers were placed in groups of two or three, located on either side of the streets intersecting the extended structure of parallel blocks along the ring-road.

The ground floor and the mezzanine were planned for various commercial activities and business premises, with entrances mainly from the pedestrian areas along the main road. In addition, the towers and blocks had common premises such as a room for house council meetings and children’s activities, a two-room apartment for the housemaster, a workshop with storage, a room for bicycles and baby carriages, a common drying room, etc.

The double structure on the outside mainly faces the inner ring road, towards which all entrances are oriented, while the inner space is a predominantly pedestrian area. Both sides and experiences are well integrated by pedestrian passages which are often placed so as to connect the remnants of the old street network. They also allow an easy transition from the public to the semi-public space of the residential community.



05 Existing state of the City Wall housing complex with buildings that have been retained.  
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This open semi-public space is used for greenery, playground corners, walkways, mixed-use zones, parking, small urban parks, etc., while several kindergartens and an existing primary school were incorporated into the complex [FIGURE 05]. Within this space, several service streets were introduced, providing motorized access to the housing and commercial units. Parking of vehicles is organized as surface and underground parking space. Unfortunately, the promenade that was supposed to stretch from one end to another within the complex was never fully implemented.

At present, the area in which the City Wall is located accommodates a large number of citizens and activities. This is a result of its immediate vicinity to the central business district and to major public institutions and amenities. The morphology of the physical structure, which is permeable and open to the city and the mixed-use of the ground floors, provides a high level of interaction of the residents with the adjacent public spaces and easy transition of pedestrians through the City Wall area.

In fact, the City Wall housing area serves a double purpose. It clearly separates the CBD from the rest of the wider central area and provides a full daily cycle of activities in the center, while the notion of a “wall fortress,” in its contemporary interpretation, provides a meaningful image and becomes a symbol of the city form [FIGURE 06] [FIGURE 07] [FIGURE 08].

## THE CITY WALL AS A CULTURAL HERITAGE

The City Wall mass housing development manifested itself as a supreme exponent of the conceptual, ideological, and social ideas of the time it was created, the mid-1960s and early 1970s. Changing paradigms on the



06 General view of the City Wall housing complex. © Maja Janevska-Ilieva, 2023



07 The inner semi-public space of the City Wall housing complex. © Maja Janevska-Ilieva, 2023

international scene, generally conceived as a revision of the principles of the functionalist city, heavily influenced the city redevelopment of Skopje after the earthquake and the organization of housing complexes.

The City Wall housing complex represented a completely new concept of housing development of its time. It is one of the two most striking structures in Tange's plan and the only structure that was implemented according to the plan. Kenzo Tange's urban design signature of the project enhances its value. Although the original concept underwent many alterations during its implementation, its symbolic and metaphorical image is still preserved today. It remains to be an irreplaceable defining element of the city center urban form.

The city redevelopment after the earthquake has always been associated with the idea of human solidarity. The City Wall stands as an iconic image of that period, which symbolizes the city's resilience supported by impressive international aid.

At the same time, it is a narrative of nostalgic utopia because the complex represents the period when public mass housing was a prevailing model of housing construction, stemming from the basic ideological and social aspirations of the time. This nostalgic narrative is further enhanced by the fact that it was among the last housing complexes built before they became a feature of the past, replaced by the speculative building of individual high-rise buildings and incremental urban changes in the 1990s.

These are the main reasons why the City Wall, as a valuable urban and architectural complex, should undoubtedly be considered a cultural heritage of both urban design and architectural value.

For the first time, recommendations for the City Wall to be granted a protection status as cultural heritage, relevant to urban planning and development of the city, were presented in the Conservation Outlines completed in the initial phase of preparation of the General Urban Plan for the City of Skopje in 2012. On the basis of the recommendations of the Conservation Outlines, it was proposed that the City Wall should be protected as a cultural site and urban area, a significant cultural heritage



08 The pedestrian area along the City Wall housing complex, facing the inner-city ring road. © Vlatko P. Korobar, 2023

with a second-level protection regime. Unfortunately, no further legal actions were undertaken to valorize the City Wall; thus, even the status of potential cultural heritage had to be repeatedly elaborated in all consecutive Local Development Plans.

Hopefully, the new General Urban Plan, which is in the early stage of preparation, will be more sensitive to the significance and value that the City Wall complex has for the city and its memory.

## THE CITY WALL AS HERITAGE IN DANGER: CURRENT STATE

All housing complexes from the 1970s and 1980s have been exposed to major alterations after the system change in 1991 and the transition from social to private property. This process created problems in maintenance and

especially reduced the quality of common spaces and premises. The original plans and buildings went through transformations which generally increased the density. The City Wall's coherency as an urban site and area of specific values was compromised by inserting new buildings in its vicinity or by widening the original footprint with additional structures and vertical communications, alternative roof constructions, façade alterations as well as insertion of parking areas in the common space in-between the blocks.

The City Wall still remains the main symbolic city image structure of good urban life quality and social integration, even though some original ideas have been corrupted with spaces appropriated or not well maintained. The continuity of pedestrian circulation throughout the inner green and semi-public spaces has been interrupted and "invaded" by increased motor circulation and higher parking standards. The original idea of having a continual promenade along the entire length of the City Wall, entirely immersed in greenery, was compromised at the very beginning of its completion.

The quality of the inner open, semi-public space within the City Wall is continually jeopardized by new investors and their need for additional infills. Unfortunately, the tendency of gray public spaces to overcome green areas is growing daily. Analyses for the western segment of the City Wall record a high total of surfaces for pedestrian and vehicle movement (62,97 %), while the proportion of the total surface of open public space for use as parks and green areas, children and sports playgrounds, etc., is only 11,36 % (Korobar, Siljanoska, 2018).

A specific feature of the housing areas and big mass housing complexes built immediately after the earthquake was that they were conceptualized and evolved around the concept of pedestrianized areas and streets. Generally, a problem persists with their quality maintenance, preservation, and improvement, which presents a threat to the wide variety of public spaces. The City Wall experiences this same problematic situation as most of the complexes developed in that period. Negligence in preserving the City Wall built structure and maintenance and subsistence of the semi-public spaces puts this complex—a potential cultural heritage—in danger [FIGURE 09].

09 Alterations carried out by the dwellers, including sloped roof cover, enclosing parts of the terraces, adding new balconies, turning bay windows into balconies and other changes and additions to the façades  
© Vlatko P. Korobar, 2023.



## CONCLUSION

The aftermath of the Skopje earthquake saw an unprecedented international relief effort led by the United Nations at the beginning of the Cold War period. Promoted as a city of international solidarity, Skopje became known as the place where American and Soviet soldiers met for the first time after the Elbe in WWII. In many respects, the comprehensive town planning project, supported by the UN Special Fund, represented a groundbreaking exercise involving well-known planners and architects from around the world.

As a result of the invited international competition for the Skopje city center, Kenzo Tange and his team, as winners of 60% of the first prize, were fully involved in preparing the plan for the center. Two defining elements of their competition entry were the proposed City Gate and City Wall, which were to establish the new city structure representing the city's new image as a result of its post-earthquake reconstruction.

The City Wall is the only segment of Tange's proposal that has been almost fully completed, thus, signifying the important period in the city's development, which began in the mid-1960s. This makes it a complex of special importance, which should be preserved as a significant part of the recent history of Skopje. Special attention should therefore be paid to the urban design and architectural integrity of the City Wall, but also to the developments that take place in its vicinity and might compromise its intended status within the center and impair the context it provides.

Unfortunately, the significance of the City Wall complex has not been recognized by the city's authorities, and despite the efforts to proclaim it a cultural heritage, its status has remained unchanged. This has led to further actions which produce, in some cases, irreparable damage to the complex due to inadequate development control.

The current condition calls for immediate action and recognition of the City Wall complex as cultural heritage, which would preserve its status as a defining element of Skopje's skyline and its symbolic value for the city.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The sentence comments on the fact that Tange's proposal has been THE epitomization of the entire reconstruction project for Skopje, although in fact, the UN Town Planning Project was a much larger undertaking which apart from the city center competition and project, included a master plan for the entire city which involved Polservice from Warsaw, Doxiades Associates from Athens and ITPA from Skopje. In other words, it is a simplification and reduction of the comprehensive planning exercise which took place after the earthquake.

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