





ANDREW GRAAN + ALEKSANDAR TAKOVSKI
LEARNING FROM SKOPJE 2014
ARCHITECTURAL SPECTACLE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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+ ANTHROPOLOGY, DESIGN MARKETING, URBAN STUDIES

Rome wasn't built in a day. During the past decade, however, it appears that many cities have been. Places like Dubai, Baku, Astana, Kuala Lumpur, and Shanghai have been built, or rebuilt, seemingly overnight and with spectacular flair. Amid this frenzy of building and promotion—of building as promotion—lies Skopje, the capital city of the Republic of Macedonia. Beginning in 2010 and continuing to the present, the city has been the subject of an extraordinary architectural makeover that its government sponsors named Skopje 2014. The project has brought a deluge of new buildings and monuments—most in baroque and neoclassical style—that obscure and replace the mid-century socialist and Ottoman-era architecture that once lent the city its architectural identity.¹ The project's centerpiece, an eight-story tall monument to Alexander the Great, inspires the sense that one has stumbled into a fantastic landscape that desperately wants to be noticed.

And, indeed, Skopje 2014 has caught people's attention, both inside and outside Macedonia. Project supporters praise both its strong statement on Macedonian national identity and also its potential to advance Macedonia's international image and attract foreign investment and tourism. Project critics, however, rail against its massive expense, the exclusionary ethno-nationalist narrative that it presents, and the secretive manner in which such a city-redefining project was planned and executed. Furthermore, with its excess of monuments and infatuation with the neoclassical and baroque many critics have derided the project as kitsch, as a collection of already outdated copies of European elsewhere, and as some strange Balkan analogue to the simulacra city of Las Vegas. Yet, like Las Vegas before it, Skopje 2014 has drawn new audiences to marvel and gasp at its scale and extravagance.

In this essay, our goal is not to analyze, explain, or critique Skopje 2014, although we perhaps do all of those things. Rather, finding inspiration in Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's classic of architectural theory, *Learning from Las Vegas*, we seek to mine Skopje 2014 for lessons on the contemporary.² Our task is not to repeat a strand of criticism that blindly valorizes modernist orthodoxies on originality and progress in order to dismiss architectural projects that appear to reside far from the cutting edge. We agree with the Venturi, Brown, and Izenour that "roadside copies of Ed Stone are more interesting than the real Ed Stone."³ We also hold that Skopje 2014 is more interesting than that which it purportedly mimics. Thus, with *Learning from Las Vegas* as a guide, we work to understand Skopje 2014 not as copy or kitsch but as a testament to its time and place.

Toward a Political Economy of Architectural Spectacle

Architecture, as Umberto Eco states, is the art of shaping space, of making it both functional and meaningful, and it is a process that is necessarily governed by political and economic forces.⁴ The authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* understood this. One important contribution of their intervention was to link architectural form and communication to larger political



economic conditions. According to Venturi, Brown, and Izenour, Las Vegas exemplified developments in American consumer capitalism but, in order to see how, one needed to attend to the city's architectural symbolism. In contrast to modernist principles, which held that architectural form should follow from building function, Las Vegas' architecture, they argued, elevated popular appeal, symbolic persuasion, and commercial utility over stoic functionalism and so signaled new varieties and scales of consumerism.⁵ The structures of communication incorporated into architectural projects reflect and perpetuate their underlying conditions.

Similarly, we see Skopje 2014's embrace of ornament, excess, and imitation as symptomatic of a broader political economy and of shifts in how nation, state, and economy are conceptualized and enacted in the early 21st century. We contend that careful attention to the project's design and symbolism elucidates the logic behind these shifts. In its realization, Skopje 2014 combines unabashed nationalism with marketing savvy, presupposing a global economy and a political milieu in which identity is understood as inherently competitive.⁶ The result of this formula is a historically specific exercise in architectural spectacle: a form of urban planning that features signature architectural landmarks as a means to advance identity claims, to demand political recognition, and to catalyze economies. As we elaborate below, contemporary practices of architectural spectacle further hold that these goals are inextricably linked. Skopje 2014's monuments and buildings therefore warrant an analysis in terms of what, how, and to whom they communicate and how the city's social landscape is transformed in the process.

Skopje 2014: A Visual Text on Macedonian National Identity

With its parade of monuments and neoclassical facades, Skopje 2014 deploys architecture to craft a particular narrative on Macedonian national identity and also presents an image of the past that has been designed to be consumed both by foreign and domestic audiences. What shape does this narrative take? How does the project inscribe a chosen 'competitive identity' on the built environment, and to what effect? To answer these questions, we examine the visual grammar that emerges from the project's use of space and symbol, and the way that its elements combine into a readable text on Macedonian national history and identity.⁷

Although the Skopje 2014 'improvements' range across the Macedonian capital, the project centers on the city's main plaza, Macedonia Square. In the square alone, the following statues of historical figures, listed in chronological order, have been added: Alexander the Great (356–323 BC); Justinian I (483–565 AD), a Byzantine emperor born in what is now Macedonia; Tsar Samoil (958–1014), a medieval ruler of Macedonia; Dimitar Berovski (1840–1907), Dame Gruev (1871–1906), Goce Delchev (1872–1903), and Dimitrija Chupovski (1878–1940), fin-de-siècle revolutionaries who fought the Ottomans; the Gemidzii, an anarchist group who organized a famous terrorist attack in

pursuit of Macedonian independence; and Metodija Andonov Chento (1902–1957), the first president of the Anti-Fascist Assembly for the National Liberation of Macedonia, which successfully led the resistance to the Axis occupation of Macedonia during World War II. Representing different and discrete historical periods, these statues claim to portray the core of Macedonian national history. [As critics have remarked, this core reflects an exclusively ethnic Macedonian and masculine view on Macedonian history, despite the country's diverse population.]

Within this pantheon, the place of honor is reserved for the Alexander statue. Rising to 24.5 meters, the monument depicts Alexander on a rearing horse with his sword drawn. His pose signifies a fearless readiness for battle. In contrast, the two other statues of horsemen on the square, those of Goce Delchev and Dame Gruev, are smaller and placed on much lower pedestals. While Gruev holds a gun, Delchev points to the horizon. Their horses are not represented in a battle position, but are shown in a slow walk. Together the Delchev-Gruev pair represent ideals of continued struggle and visionary leadership in the march of Macedonian history. By design, then, if Alexander and Bucephalus lead the endless charge of Macedonian history from ancient times, Delchev and Gruev calmly carry its spirit forward into the modern era.

Elsewhere around the square can be found the other key, if supporting, characters in this grand story of Macedonian history. The two emperors Justinian and Samoil each sit on thrones. Calmly looking ahead, they signify rule rather than battle. The Gemidzii monument depicts six of the group's members. While remembered for their revolutionary terrorist activity, the six men are portrayed as urbane and dispassionate: one reads a book, one wears a fedora, another sports a bowtie. The Chento statue stands with his right hand stretched and index finger pointing, as if further directing the forward path of the Macedonian nation.

The statues each represent a different type of prized engagement in history – warriors, rulers, leaders, and intellectuals. Through their placement on the square, they present Macedonian history as an idealized, spiritual, whole. Each of the supporting figures faces the center of the plaza with a line of sight that rises above the head of spectators, presumably toward the ever-glorious horizon of Macedonian nationhood. The gazes of each statue then meet at the Alexander monument, which appears as the apotheosis of the national ideal, one that literally rises above all else.

Hegemonic Nationalism and Skopje 2014

Of course, all nations and nationalisms are historical constructs, despite their claims to eternity.⁸ And, many a nation-building project has created monuments to its vision of national history and identity. However, in its particular melding of political and economic aims, Skopje 2014 exemplifies a growing affinity between nationalist politics and national

promotion that targets global publics. As we see it, both conservative nationalist politics and global promotion initiatives are united by efforts to control how and by whom the nation can be represented and therefore often feed into one another.⁹

As a nationalist project, Skopje 2014 does more than concretize its narrative of national identity on Skopje's built environment, it also asserts this narrative as exhaustive. Here, it is important to note that, as Atanas Vangeli describes, the narrative of Macedonian national identity that harkens back to Alexander the Great is a relatively novel one that first gained traction in the 1980s.¹⁰ Previously, and in parallel to many other European nationalisms, Macedonian national histories had centered on the so-called age of national awakening and specifically on the activities of late 19th- and early 20th-century revolutionaries, like Goce Delchev and Dame Gruev, who struggled for independence from the Ottoman Empire. The Alexander narrative thus marks a major shift in the popular historiography of Macedonian identity, a shift that is closely linked to Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and his own brand of Macedonian nationalism. Significantly, the Alexander narrative presents a Macedonian claim to autochthony that aggressively confronts Greek and Bulgarian challenges to the Macedonian identity as well as ethnic Albanian agitation for greater inclusion and autonomy within the Macedonian state. Yet, critics of the project inside Macedonia, and there are many, including ethnic Macedonians, ethnic Albanians, and others, have derided Skopje 2014 as an imposed program of nationalist artifice. In many senses, Skopje 2014, and the narrative of nation that it elevates, reflects a narrow political project despite the ambition to memorialize a total vision of Macedonian identity.

Given this aspect of Skopje 2014's nationalist project, perhaps not surprisingly, supporters portray it as a long overdue celebration of Macedonian national identity that "opens the forbidden, hidden pages of Macedonian history" that previous political regimes had denied.¹¹ In classic nationalist fashion, this logic positions the nation as a timeless spirit, or even libido, that yearns for consummation. However, considering the novelty of this particular narrative on Macedonian identity, the project is performative in nature: its visual statement on Macedonian national identity is itself a social accomplishment. It presupposes as accepted fact an account of Macedonian history that it actively creates and propagates through its displays.

In a more mythopoetic sense, the project can be seen as an invitation to its spectators not only to witness, but also to participate in its historical narrative. The project forms a site of immersion that seeks both to evoke politically motivated feelings of national pride among ethnic Macedonians, and also to secure world recognition. Capturing this mixture of national pride and the assumption of world historical meaning are statements like that offered by talk-show host Milenko Nedelkovski who declared of the project, "We have built a new Alexandria."¹² For many ethnic Macedonian nationalists and Gruevski supporters the newly designed city center functions similarly to a shrine. It is a myth-making space where the devout followers of the government's discourse on national identity come to experience it in a densely articulated material fashion.

One result of this, we contend, is a project that materializes nationalist myth in a way that is hegemonic. Through the sheer density, scale, and spectacle of Skopje 2014, the project has overtaken public space in central Skopje such that it limits any other signification outside of its nationalist narrative. As the project has unfolded, one is left with the impression that it casts a total vision for the city, that the project aims to leave no corner of the city untouched. In consequence, Skopje 2014 actively restricts what Roland Barthes described as the eroticism of cities, the dimension of cities that is experienced as "an exchange site of social activities" and as "the space in which certain subversive forces act and are encountered, forces of rupture, ludic forces."¹³ Skopje 2014, in its aggressive statement on national identity and its effective grip on public space enacts an architecture of control. Under

¹ See Armin Linke & Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss, *Socialist Architecture: The Vanishing Act* (Zurich: Codax, 2012), and Vladimir Kulic, Maroje Mrduljas, & Wolfgang Thaler, *Modernism In-Between: The Mediatory Architectures of Socialist Yugoslavia* (Berlin: Jovis, 2012) for recent studies of Yugoslav architecture that include notable profiles of Skopje's modernist structures. See also Milan Mijalkovic & Katharina Urbaneck, *Skopje: The World's Bastard* (Vienna: Weiser, 2011) for a review of Skopje's modernist heyday in light of the Skopje 2014 project.

² Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, & Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977). Thanks go to Morgan Liu for mentioning *Learning from Las Vegas* in response to Graan's presentation on Skopje 2014 at the 2014 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, DC.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ Umberto Eco, "Function and Signs: The Semiotics of Architecture" in Neil Leach [ed.], *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 173-93.

⁵ Venturi, et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 7.

⁶ Melissa Aronczyk, *Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Cf. Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions* (London: Palgrave, 2007).

⁷ On the concept of visual grammar, see Gunther Kress & Theo van Leeuwen, *The Grammar of Visual Design* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

⁹ Andrew Graan, "The Nation Brand Regime: The Semiotic Regimentation of Political Communication in Contemporary Macedonia," *Signs and Society* 4 (2016): S70-S105.

¹⁰ Atanas Vangeli, "Nation-Building Ancient Macedonian Style: The Origins and the Effects of So-Called Antiquization in Macedonia," *Nationalities Papers* 39 (2011): 13-32.

¹¹ A statement by Todor Petrov, leader of the nationalist World Macedonian Congress, quoted in Kurir, May 5, 2013, "Macedonians proud of Skopje 2014," <http://arhiva.kurir.mk/makedonija/vesti/115071-SMK-Makedoncite-gordi-so-proektot-Skopje-2014> [accessed February 8, 2016].

¹² Milenko Nedelkovski, "We have built a new Alexandria", Faktor, April 28, 2013, <http://faktor.mk/2013/04/28/za-skopje-2014-milenko-nedelkovski-izgra/44878> [accessed February 8, 2016].

¹³ Roland Barthes, "Semiology and Urbanism," in *The Semiotic Challenge* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988), 199-200.

¹⁴ Aronczyk, *Branding the Nation*.

¹⁵ Nikos Chausidis, *Project Skopje 2014: An Outline for Future Research* [Skopje: Nikos Chausidis, 2013], 76-79.

the auspices of enhancing Macedonia's competitive identity, Skopje 2014 actualizes a partisan colonization of public space.

From Nationalist Shrine to Tourist Attraction

Remarkably, despite Skopje 2014's intensive regimentation of public meaning inside Macedonia, the project also declares Macedonia as open for tourism and investment from abroad. Indeed, Skopje 2014's design and aesthetics register this lamination of bold nationalism and global promotion. Like many nation-branding projects, Skopje 2014 combines signs of distinctiveness with signs of familiarity when issuing an appeal for global recognition.¹⁴ Tellingly, as art historian Nikos Chausidis argues, although the project attempts to accentuate "the ancient roots of the modern Macedonian nation," the styles used on the new structures do not actually draw on archaeological knowledge about ancient Macedonian architecture.¹⁵ Instead, Skopje 2014's presentation of an ancient Macedonian past is mediated by much later 'European' reconstructions and imitations of antiquity, namely, the neoclassical and the baroque. The project thus presents a version of Macedonian identity and of ancient history that has been prefigured as recognizable to outside observers in Europe and beyond.

In one light, the 'European' draping that the project places around Macedonian history can be seen as an aesthetic and political effort to reclaim a pre-socialist past that locates Skopje and Macedonia within the perceived mainstream of European history. It is thus a claim for European belonging in the age of European integration. Such projects are not unique to Macedonia. For example, as Gendelman and Aiello show, similar strategies have been

undertaken in Dresden and Sibiu.¹⁶ In these cities too, building projects that ostensibly 'reconstruct' a missing past work to invent, by way of celebrating, a glorious pre-communist, European past.

Such projects thereby advance a revamped historical narrative to locals while also packaging place-based identity for consumption by foreign tourists. The architectural spectacle functions to combine folklore and marketing, to link mythic pasts to future ambitions. In these contexts, monumental landscapes of overdetermined historical meaning and tourist paraphernalia commingle, reminding, as Michael Pretes states, that it is "through tourist spaces such as commemorative monuments that all national tourist organizations promote national ideologies and foster national identities."¹⁷ Urban renewal projects like Skopje 2014 strategically tailor presentations of national distinctiveness to also attract outside recognition and capital. Thus, it is through its pretensions as a nationalist shrine that Skopje 2014 also sells itself as a tourist attraction.

As we see it, this combination is not incidental but inheres in the project's logic. Skopje 2014 posits tourist consumption as a primary way in which its claims on a Macedonian identity that is equally ancient and European will be ratified. Such is the condition that Derya Özkan and Robert Foster describe as "neoliberal nationalism," which "promotes the integration of the national economy with the global marketplace; and it seeks the signs of this integration in the sphere of consumption."¹⁸ With Skopje 2014, it is the nation itself that is presented as a luxury commodity to be celebrated by locals and validated by outside consumption.



Conclusion

The excesses of architectural spectacle, as shown here, can lend themselves to odd combinations: Skopje 2014 imbricates virulent nationalism, cosmopolitan pretense, and tourist promotion across the city's built environment. In doing so, the project addresses Macedonian citizens, divisively demanding that they participate in its nationalist vision, while also seeking to appeal to imagined tourists and investors. The project claims to be both sacred, a shrine to Macedonian national identity, and profane, a tool to attract outside capital. In this miscegenation of principle, the project appears grotesque to some, brilliant to others. We see it as symptom of its time; of a world in which global competitiveness rankings include assessments of country "attractiveness."¹⁹ Of a world in which the nation-state is being remade rather than abandoned by globalized finance capital. Of a world in which investment has displaced industry as the driver of economies. Such developments create the conditions for a patently 21st-century architectural nationalism, one that sees spectacle as a way to vindicate the nation while also peddling it to publics abroad.²⁰

Where does this all leave us? Venturi, Brown, and Izenour said of Las Vegas and Rome that each city is "an exaggerated example from which to derive lessons for the typical."²¹ We see Skopje as following suit. The Macedonian government's embrace of urban renewal, as we have argued here, throws into relief the political and economic dynamics of national competitiveness in an age of finance capitalism. Yet, as Denise Scott Brown wrote in the preface to the revised edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*, the overarching moral of their study was "to reassess the role of symbolism in architecture, and, in the process, to learn a new receptivity to the tastes and values of other people and a new modesty in our designs and in our impression of our role as architects in society."²² Architectural spectacle that is designed to amaze citizens and attract investment naturalizes the necessity of competitive identities in a globalized world. If Skopje 2014 is indeed any indication, this is a world in which nations are often narrated, enshrined, and branded from a narrow set of perspectives and goals. The extravagant populism of Skopje 2014 thus leads us to echo Brown's conclusion, and to imagine a city and a world that is more receptive, more modest, more plural.

¹⁶ Irina Gendelman & Giorgia Aiello, "Faces of Places: Facades as Global Communication in Post-Eastern Bloc Urban Renewal," in Adam Jaworski & Crispin Thurlow (eds), *Semiotic Landscapes: Language, Image, Space* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 256–73.

¹⁷ Michael Pretes, "Annals of Tourism Research," *Annals of Tourism Research* 30 (2003), 126.

¹⁸ Derya Özkan & Robert Foster, "Consumer Citizenship, Nationalism, and Neoliberal Globalization in Turkey: The Advertising Launch of Cola Turka," *Advertising and Society Review* 6 (2005).

¹⁹ Aronczyk, *Branding the Nation*, 47–52.

²⁰ E.g., see Bruce Grant, "The Edifice Complex: Architecture and the Political Life of Surplus in the New Baku," *Public Culture* 26 (2014), 501–28; Laura L. Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) and Aihwa Ong, "Hyperbuilding: Spectacle, Speculation and the Hyperspace of Sovereignty," in Ananya Roy & Aihwa Ong (eds), *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global* (London: Blackwell, 2011), 205–26.

²¹ Venturi, et al, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 18.

²² *Ibid.*, xvii.



The new Museum of the Macedonian Struggle with the reconstructed Nation Theater [destroyed 1963] in the background.

