

# The Encounter at the Margins of City and Society: the Case of the Aerodrom Housing Area in Skopje

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## Introduction

The intricate interplay of social and physical space is always at the center of the urban condition. It defines not only the transactions in the major parts of an urban territory, but particularly at its margins. Urban margins often take different roles. They can serve as residual indicators of major urban processes, reflect the spillover effects of current urban policies or, become the most vital part of an urban territory where initiatives and alternative ways of development can take place, which would otherwise be impossible in the city core area.

Urban margins are essential parts of an urban area. At the periphery, they provide the initial impression of a city when approached by surface transport. Sometimes those images can stick more intensively to a visitor's memory than the preferred "official" image of the city. Yet, the processes at the urban margins are often overlooked with the greater importance given to other and more "inner" areas of a city. They are still perceived primarily through the center-periphery dichotomy, although many aspects of this relation suggest that this approach is not only oversimplifying the actual condition but, even more importantly, inhibiting the potential of the margin as a vehicle of urban change.

It would be a mistake to limit the concept of margins only to the periphery of urban areas. Margins of different kinds are inseparable parts of the social and spatial tissue of the entire urban territory, often defined not only by spatial features, but also by cultural, ethnic, and social diversities. The diversities and irregularities of marginal areas question the central and consolidated parts of the city as the accepted urban norm. Through the daily transactions among the dwellers of these disparate areas and through their interactions, the borders, boundaries and margins in a city are constantly being scrutinized.

"Movement of the urban dwellers across those borders of commercial, administrative and residential segregation shakes daily the established borders. As we move around the city, we carry along our identities and lifestyle preferences, often determined/limited by our economic opportunities, and thus challenge the established urban order. The social construction of space is not determined only by urban planners' decisions, but also by the direct users of urban space, their daily routines, habits and customs performed in the city."<sup>1</sup>

These daily routines, habits, and customs often constitute the underlying difference among urban areas, which only reinforces the differences that exist between distinct areas of the city. Thus, it is not only the spatial or physical form that visibly shows the difference, but also the differing atmospheres of urban spaces stemming from the different ways of everyday conduct and ways of living. These differences often present themselves in dichotomies which are essentially urban features, regardless whether they are related to issues of inclusion/exclusion, mainstream/alternative, planned/informal. It is exactly these dichotomies that are the roots of formation of margins that present the existing separation, but at the same time bear the roots of future

1 Goran Janev, "Borders within: embodying frontiers in Skopje" (paper presented at the 14th EASA Biennial Conference 'Anthropological legacies and human futures', Milan, July 20-23, 2016).

mediation between discrete urban areas. That is why margins should be considered as “standing both for isolation and alterity, as well as for connectedness, communication, and creativity”.<sup>2</sup>

Orsini suggests that the present condition should not lead to contemplate “the disappearance of the margin but, rather, to new contexts upon which to reflect, as well as new and proper relationship maps making possible to design the contemporaneity”.<sup>3</sup> She calls for exploration of paths “useful to a design culture of encounter able to deal with the exasperated autonomy and introversion at the base of the contemporary city, deepening the margin as a tool at the different scales and the fragmentation as a purposeful *substratum* apt to distribute also minutely and democratically urban collective values in contemporary urban environments”.<sup>4</sup>

The case of the Aerodrom housing area,<sup>5</sup> the biggest housing development in Skopje built after the earthquake of 1963, bears many of these socio-spatial attributes, as it is a conglomerate result of legal and illegal planning/building practices, official and alternative planning processes, the encounter between the different social groups and the changing societal values and priorities.

Although it is often assumed that spatial margins are more persistent than the social ones, which are often subject to turbulent social processes, in this case we recognize the fluidity of spatial margins versus the solidity of social margins as a distinctive feature of the Aerodrom housing area. While the social groups inhabiting the Aerodrom area have remained stable over the decades, it has been the spatial features that have succumbed and given way to many changes both in planned and built form. One could further develop this dichotomy to the physical structures themselves, and argue for the stability of the informal versus the instability of the planned, similarly to the case of Belgrade and the relationship between its planned and its informal settlements.<sup>6</sup>

The case of Aerodrom shows the inability of current planning practices to embrace the actual physical and social conditions and to respond to the contemporary needs by not recognizing the potential of the processes emerging at the urban and social margins in a time of uncertainty and change.

### Housing in the urban margin: the becoming of Aerodrom

When natural disaster of an immense magnitude strikes a city, its subsequent evolution is often and quite normally viewed in a binary fashion, as pre- and post- disaster development. This is the case with the city of Skopje, struck by a catastrophic earthquake in 1963, which led to the demolition of 80% of its housing stock, leading to one of the most comprehensive and internationally supported reconstruction efforts carried out by the United Nations and financially supported through its special fund established for this purpose.<sup>7</sup>

In the course of only several years the city literally exploded spatially, covering a territory several times bigger than the initial urban area and appropriating smaller existing settlements in the process. This was primarily the result of the construction of new settlements of prefabricated houses for urgent accommodation. However, a parallel process of piecemeal and partial reconstruction of existing areas was undertaken, especially in places which were not designated for major public buildings or areas, and so the actual development was a mixture of completely new

2 City Margins, City Memories Conference, Bangor, April 7-8, 2014.

3 Martina Orsini, “City Margins as Spaces of the Becoming. Inclusions, Exclusions and Intersections” (paper presented at the City Margins, City Memories Conference, Bangor, April 7-8, 2014).

4 Ibid.

5 The paper uses the name “Aerodrom” which was the initial name of the housing area, as it was built on the location of a former airfield. Later, it was renamed as “Jane Sandanski” housing district.

6 Although under completely different overall conditions, The ETH Studio Basel study of Belgrade shows exactly this condition of the stability of the informal versus the instability of the planned (cf. ETH Studio Basel, Contemporary City Institute (Ed.), *Belgrade. Formal Informal: A Research on Urban Transformation* (Zürich: Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess AG, 2012).

7 The most comprehensive account of the reconstruction effort to date is still the UN publication *Skopje Resurgent – The Story of a United Nations Special Fund Town Planning Project*, published in 1970 and largely compiled by Derek Senior, although this has not been acknowledged in the colophon.

settlements built on virgin land; it readapted existing areas which were not heavily affected and older existing settlements which became parts of the city.

This alone was a sufficient reason to depart from the unifying vision of the new city that was to be, as there were too many existing and visible ruptures in its structure, which acted as boundaries or borders growing stronger as the pace of the implementation of the post-earthquake master plan slowed down. Employing the concept of the city as archipelago, even in the central area of Skopje, Bakalčev recognizes numerous morphological “islands” which generate a map of voids. Considering them as margins and “having in mind their history and dynamics, they become a constituent element of the dynamics of urban form, providing a potential for different scenarios of the urban processes”.<sup>8</sup>

This situation was an obvious indication that margins would play an important part in the development of Skopje, although the official planning authorities, who were preoccupied with pursuing the “heroic” vision of the new city, did not recognize it.

The post-earthquake development of Skopje is colloquially related to Kenzo Tange, as his plan for the city center won the bigger part of the split first prize at the invited international competition, while the seductive entry images for the new center visually epitomized the immense international effort. However, the story behind the entire redevelopment effort is a complex one, with a number of important and well-known protagonists whose contribution often goes unmentioned. This holds especially true of the entire field of housing development, which included the emergency pre-fabricated housing areas, the concepts for their future redevelopment, the research to support and justify proposed new housing areas and the consecutive developments that constitute a challenging research area, which has not been fully investigated.<sup>9</sup>

In order to understand the wider professional context of the time, it is important to mention that the planning profession in Yugoslavia in the late sixties and the seventies was open and exposed to international influences and to the most current developments in the field. After the vast internationally sponsored planning exercise in Skopje, several other projects followed: the American-Yugoslav Project in regional and urban planning studies resulting in the Demonstration Study of the Ljubljana region, the Master Plan for Titograd, the Regional Planning Exercise for the Southern Adriatic and others, all completed within a framework of international collaboration. Thus, the urban planning profession in the country was well informed and in tune with the latest international developments.<sup>10</sup> This openness coincided and was a result of the early stages of development of the concept of the self-management socialism, internally, and the founding role in the non-alignment movement, internationally.

### *The master planning*

The Master plan for the redevelopment of Skopje was the result of a joint effort of Polservice from Warsaw, The Doxiadis Associates from Athens and the Skopje Institute for Urbanism and Architecture. It was a fortunate coincidence for the city and the profession that both the United Nations and the Yugoslav government viewed the plan as a vehicle for advancing their political goals. The United Nations wanted to show its capability to act in the Cold War environment

8 Минас Бакалчев [Minas Bakalčev], “Домување како урбан фрагмент на примерот на Скопје” [“Housing as urban fragment: the case of Skopje”] (PhD diss., University Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Skopje, 2004), 98.

9 For an account of the international team of experts who contributed to the preparation of the plans for Skopje, refer to Mirjana Lozanovska. “*The Intriguing and Forgotten International Exchanges in the Masterplan for the Reconstruction of Skopje*”, European Architecture History Network (EAHN) Conference Proceedings, Brussels, June 2012. For a more recent account of this effort viewed through the Actor Network Theory, refer to Igor Martek and Mirjana Lozanovska. “Consciousness and Amnesia: The Reconstruction of Skopje Considered through ‘Actor Network Theory’”, *Journal of Planning History* (November 2016).

10 For a challenging account of the Yugoslav experience in urban planning and architecture, refer to Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić (eds.). *Unfinished Modernisations: Between Utopia and Pragmatism* (Zagreb: UHA/CCA, 2012).

as a leading force in bringing the international community together around the higher goal of solidarity. The Yugoslav government saw the redevelopment of Skopje as an opportunity to advocate the advantages of its own path of self-management socialism. Under these circumstances, the preparation of the Master plan involved a number of features that were rather novel to the profession of urban planning. It had to accommodate simultaneously the day-to-day reconstruction and the long-term vision of future growth. The Master plan had to be prepared

“in less than a year, starting in many ways from scratch. It had, in fact, to be at once flexible and formative, down-to-earth and far seeing, a bureaucrat’s rulebook and policy-maker’s bible. Its authors were obliged not only to improvise a new plan-making methodology, but to make the product serve new purposes”.<sup>11</sup>

This situation led to a process later known as “convergence planning”, while other examples also showed the innovative nature of the entire process. For example, the thorough sociological survey which was conducted not prior to, but during the decision making process for the Master plan, “gave the planners a much deeper, more objective and more discriminating appreciation of Skopje’s social problems”.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the conclusions of the social survey bore direct spatial consequences which were to alleviate the existing division of the city in two distinct parts on the banks of the Vardar River.

It was predicted that by 1981, 160,000 out of the 350,000 inhabitants would live in the so called retained housing, 36,000 infilling or “rounding-off” sites, while 154,000 would need new homes on virgin land. Over half of this population was to be located in the Aerodrom housing development.

The decision on the areas that would be occupied by new housing development was based on the so called “expansion barriers” method, related to a threshold that could not be passed without incurring a substantial increase in development costs. A vast area of land was under consideration. The analysis of expansion barriers coupled with the proposed road and railway layout, together with the decision to have a maximum thirty-minute journey-to-work time delimited an “search area” of 9,000 hectares. This area was reduced to 4,200 hectares by excluding those areas unsuitable for building because of seismic, topographic or climatic reasons, as well as areas with retained or already planned development in the early stages of the process. All areas of existing industrial development and their future extensions were excluded for the purpose of “full employment”, which reduced the area of possible residential development to 3,300 hectares.

At the density and service standards adopted, the housing program that was to be completed by 1981 required 1,000 of these 3,300 hectares. The idea was to allot the thousand hectares in areas where the development would be carried out with the lowest possible cost, and then take into account non-economic considerations in order to decide where exactly to place the development, knowing the additional cost of the decision that would depart from the least expensive option. This was done by an optimization analysis, which divided the “area of search” into “280 “land-area units” of varying size and shape, so that their boundaries followed existing lines of demarcation in respect of factors with an influence on development costs”.<sup>13</sup> The resulting land value map showed that approximately 25% of the land with the lowest cost of development was mainly in the Aerodrom area. Thus, the process of selecting the exact sites for the future housing development became one of the earliest cases of application of the “threshold analysis”.

Finally, the Master plan included a provision that 81,000 inhabitants would live in this area (the maximum possible at the accepted gross density of 200 inhabitants per hectare), and that was how the story of Aerodrom started to unfold. The decision was further supported by the idea that the future development of housing beyond the end year of 1981 would be an extension of the Aerodrom housing area to the East.

11 \*\*\*, *Skopje Resurgent – The Story of a United Nations Special Fund Town Planning Project* (New York, United Nations, 1970), 162.

12 *Ibid.*, 165.

13 *Ibid.*, 186.

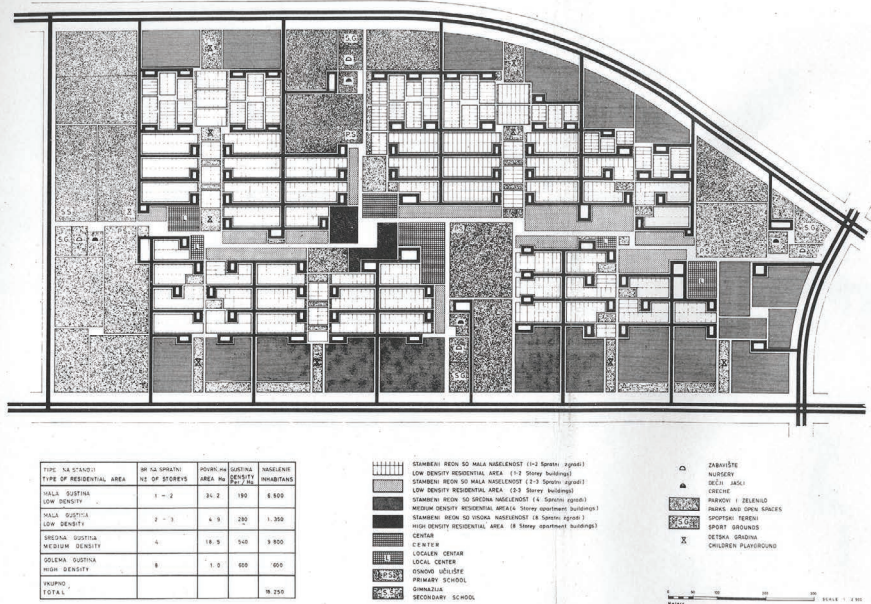


Fig.01: Skopje Master Plan: Sector 19F, Layout of Community IV

All of the above go to illustrate the fact that the entire planning approach and all the decisions taken were grounded in the leading planning paradigm of the time, and despite the extraordinary time constraints imposed by the urgent need for redevelopment, the entire planning exercise was exemplary in nature. Hence, the allocation of the Aerodrom housing area at the eastern boundaries of the city, on a virtually virgin land between two existing industrial zones, was the result of a careful planning exercise. Still, one cannot help but assume that the fact that this area was in an opposite direction from the pre-earthquake zones of modernist housing played a role in the “non-economic factors” for selection. It was to be a new part of the city, housing a quarter of its population and supplying the new vision of the city which was to extend in the outskirts according to the theoretical works of Doxiadis on the directional expansion of the city structure from a core area.

### Detailing the development

The planners who worked on the Master plan felt they had a mission to fulfill and their work did not end with the allocation of the residential area and the proposed land use plan. They felt that they should do more and give rather precise guidance for the future increase in the standard of living in terms of usable floor space per person, the provision of services and the entire concept of structuring a residential area, including the layouts of different types of dwellings and residential buildings. The entire section on housing and the proposed guidelines were developed by the office of Doxiadis Associates — consultants on development and ekistics in collaboration with the Skopje Institute of Urbanism and Architecture.<sup>14</sup>

At the time, in planning terms, the basic residential unit in Yugoslavia, as in many European countries, was organized around a primary school or, being, as the Master plan called it, a “mother and child” neighborhood with a primary school, nursery school and crèche. On the basis of the proposed four-level system of centers (or the “four distinguishable levels of social activity”, as the planners referred to them), of the size of a primary school and the economy of the layout of the road system, two alternatives were tested: the first one with neighborhood units of 5,000, four of which would form a local unit of 20,000 and four of which in turn would make up a district of 80,000; and the second one with neighborhood units of 4,000, three of which would form a local unit of 12,000 and four of which in turn would make up a district of 48,000. (Fig. 01)

The transport problems and their economic implications proved to be critical, and a modified version of the second option was accepted, with a local unit of an average population of 13.500

14 \*\*\*, Становање, (Основен урбанистички план, кн.13, Скопје, 1965).





and a preferred axial model of structuring. It was also established that the local units could vary from the average, and that not more than six units should form a district. (Fig. 02)

Another important feature of the housing development studies were the occupancy standards based on the premises that all families would have a flat of their own, no room should be smaller than the minimum prescribed, only sleeping rooms would have beds, and children of different sex above the age of ten should be in separate rooms. A considerable number of concrete designs for different types of houses and apartment buildings was proposed, ranging from single-family houses to apartment blocks and towers. (Fig. 03)

The entire exercise was essentially a piece of evidence to the still prevailing “end state attitude” in planning and to the perception the planners had that they could act as social engineers; that was coupled with the mistrust in the capacity of the local government to implement the plan and in the capacity of the local professional community to respond appropriately to the general proposals at the expected professional level. In contemporary terms, the entire process leading to the housing development proposal could be labeled as a “capacity building exercise”.

#### *Turning the master planning into reality*

Having defined all the aspects of the new Aerodrom residential area, the Master plan set the stage for an invitation-based Yugoslav urban planning competition, taking place in 1974. All major urban planning institutions in Yugoslavia were invited, seven responded and the first prize was won by the Yugoslav Institute for Urban Planning and Housing in Belgrade.

The results showed a “catalogue” of current concepts of housing developments. All of the competition entries related to one or another of the major issues in urban planning of the time, such as the spaces for pedestrian movement as generators of urban form, inclusion of the aspect of choice in the areas for provision of services or centers and especially the planned space as a facilitator of social communication. For example, in the proposal of the Institute of Urban Planning of Slovenia, which was presented at a very general level without adaptation to the local circumstances, the district center was located along with non-polluting industry and services, the pedestrian and vehicle traffic were completely separated and all blocks were proposed to be different and designed involving a competition procedure.

The winning proposal altered the initial concept of neighborhood units of 4,500 and organized the entire area in seven units of similar size (12,000 inhabitants), corresponding to the then major territorial units of self-management related to the place of living. These units were further divided into housing units (6,000) and neighborhood units (3,000), serving as vehicles for introducing concepts of various overlappings that were to enhance the coherence of the local community.

For example, the neighborhood units were organized around kindergartens, while two of them spatially overlapped “over” an elementary school, providing the needed number of pupils. Each of these units overlapped with a different neighborhood unit “over” the service areas and the local centers. The central functions were split in two locations in order to provide “the possibility of choice” that was a topical issue of the time.

As the housing area was located between two industrial areas, special attention was given to the environmental conditions. The green spaces were interconnected to form a continuous green area, while a man-made creek was to run through the entire area and improved the environmental conditions. (Fig. 04) The major feature of the winning proposal was the use of the pedestrian street as a generator of urban form and a vehicle for improvement of social communication. The authors insisted that the entire concept supported and enhanced the possibilities of frequent and spontaneous encounters, while facilitating the process of identifying oneself with its immediate neighborhood environment. (Fig. 05)

This comprehensive account of the planning efforts involved in the development of the new Aerodrom housing area was needed to document the intentions of the profession and its belief in the instruments at its disposal. It is beyond any doubt that Aerodrom started as a major project with the intention to design a contemporary urban space reviving the pedestrian spaces as



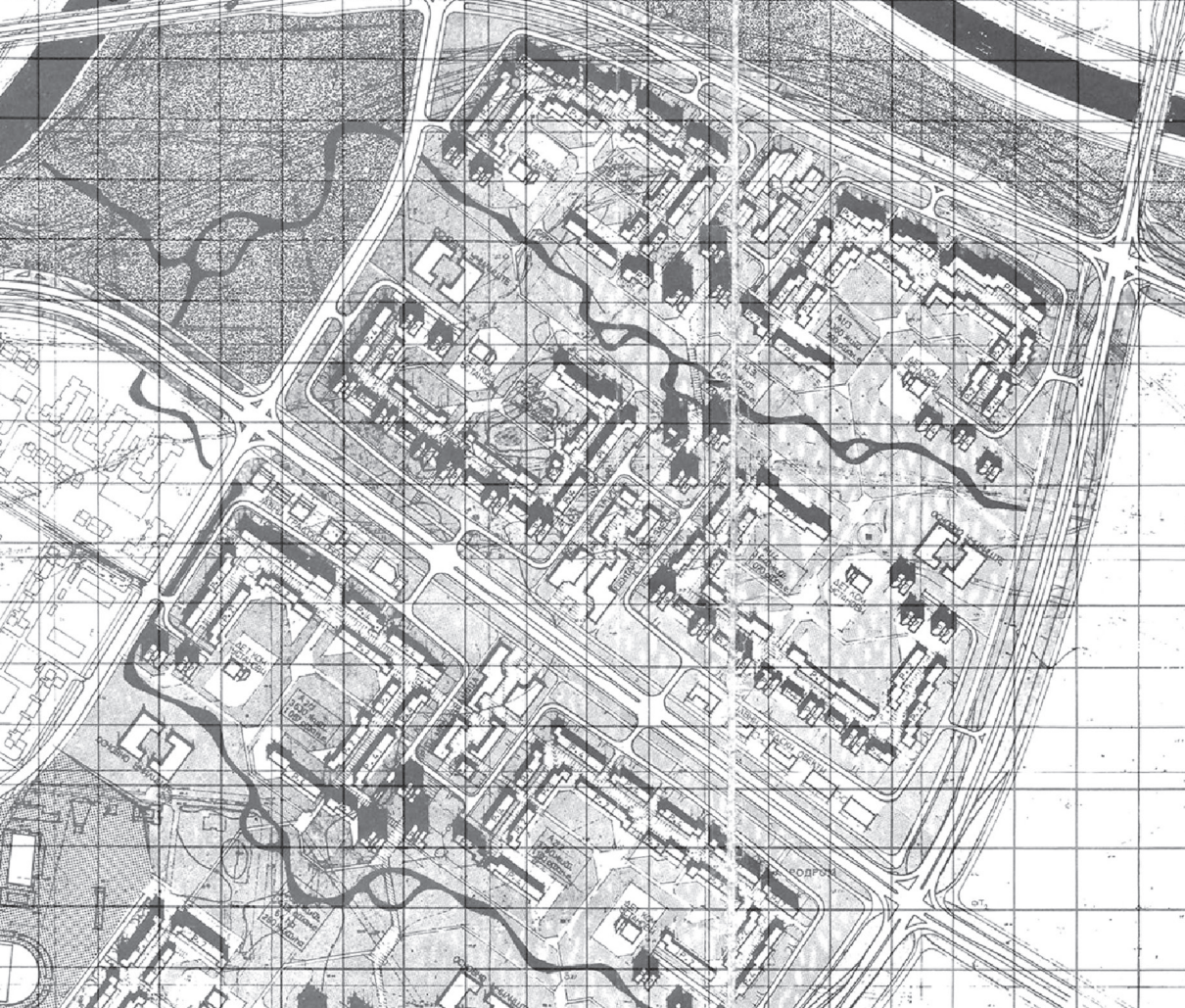


Fig. 04: Aerodrom. Development plan of the first phase

generators of urban form; another goal, as utopian as it may sound, was to enhance the scope and quality of social contacts and human communication through the organization of public space.

Building such a big new housing area, that was to house one fourth of the entire population of the city, in many aspects resembled earlier attempts of building new towns. However, the newly employed concepts did not prevent the shortcomings of similar earlier developments elsewhere. Today, the famous “new town blues” slogan has been transformed into “the green ghetto” graffiti in Aerodrom, a response to the current quality of life in the area as perceived by younger inhabitants. Thus, as in many other cases, the intentions and the reality went separate ways.

### **Altering the proposed development/altering the margins**

When the Aerodrom housing area started to be developed, a departure from the initial concept immediately took place. Because of reasons connected to the failures of the overall policy of housing, the number of inhabitants in Aerodrom was increased from 80,000 to about 100,000. Other major ideas from the initial concept, although included in the development plans, were not completed: the idea of a man-made creek was immediately abandoned for cost reasons; the major features of the “mother-child” neighborhood were not built simultaneously with the residential buildings and thus, for a long period of time, the built areas lacked even a primary school; the





Fig. 05: Aerodrom. A characteristic pedestrian street

centers were not completed as planned, hence the planned services were not fully provided. Similar cases of incomplete housing developments lacking new services elsewhere in the city were “covered” by nearby existing service facilities. However, the Aerodrom housing area did not have this “privilege” as it was built in a fringe area with no pre-existing service facilities.

One of the biggest disruptions in the development of Skopje happened immediately after the development of Aerodrom started. As if mirroring the “island-like” structure of the central area of the city, this territory at the urban fringes was simultaneously occupied by two different housing zones, forming a spatial margin that separated them. As soon as it became clear that Aerodrom was to be the next major building ground in Skopje, a vast area of illegal building, or in more recent terms an informal settlement, started to approach and invade the territory where future segments of Aerodrom were to be developed.

Informal settlements are usually viewed as a consequence of the post-socialist development of cities in South Eastern Europe. Tsenkova, for example, relates the developments of informal settlements to the post-socialist development of cities in SEE as being a result of the need to accommodate thousands of economic migrants, refugees, and internally displaced people locating the process in the 1990’s.<sup>15</sup>

15 Sasha Tsenkova, “Urban planning and informal cities in Southeast Europe”, *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 29:4 (2012), 293.



Fig. 06: Aerodrom. The margin area before being occupied by the new development, looking towards planned development (top), looking towards informal settlement with 'urban agriculture' (bottom)

In the case of Skopje, this process started much earlier, e.g. in the mid-seventies. Although some of the reasons for the appearance of illegal/informal settlements in Skopje coincide with the general causes for appearance of informal settlements, some are specific to this case. These Skopje specific causes are primarily related to the urban development policy and the inertia of the urban planning system.

Skopje was the only capital of the six Yugoslav republics in which, after the earthquake, almost 70% of the population lived in single-family houses, and the post-earthquake urban development policy was focused on the increase of housing areas with apartment blocks and towers in order to increase the overall housing density. This led to an extreme shortage of opportunities to legally build single-family houses, as most development plans within the city limits provided for areas of multi-storey apartment buildings.

The second reason relates to the inertia of the urban planning system that could be labeled as the "fetish syndrome" of the post-earthquake master plan, which was deemed "untouchable" and unobjectionable, although the actual circumstances had departed immensely from the ones assumed in the preparation of the master plan. Vast areas of land were kept undeveloped in waiting for the planned buildings to appear, and people were denied the possibility to invest, improve, and enlarge their houses, as they were located in areas where other uses were planned. The inefficient building control and the fact that, for a considerable segment of society, illegal building was the cheapest way to own a dwelling fueled the process. All this led to a situation in which informal settlements appeared not only at the city margins but also in the central areas





Fig. 07: Aerodrom. The margin area in 2002 (top) and 2017 (bottom) showing the "urban margin myopia" through its inappropriate development over the last fifteen years

of the city where existing houses were held hostage by the hoped-for-development. This was the consequence of the non-recognized need to settle down within the confines of the overall conditions, which exposed the gap between the desired and the possible, between the normative and the actual and, especially, between the institutional and planning thinking and conduct, on the one hand, and the practical thinking and acting, on the other.

The informal settlement in the Aerodrom area does not have the usual characteristics of a "slum area". On the contrary, the houses are well built, local services are provided to the inhabitants through their local businesses, while communal services are provided at an acceptable level. Over time, the settlement grew to such an extent that it made the implementation of the initial Aerodrom plan impossible without a very high social cost that no local government dared pay.

The population of this area was representative of socially marginal groups, although not belonging to the most deprived ones. Thus, in an unexpected way, a population from the social margins halted the planned extension of the urban margins. In this case, it was the spatial margins that gave way to change and accommodation, while retaining the initial social divide. While the inhabitants of the newly developed Aerodrom area represented the more affluent social groups, the extension of the perceived development of the housing area was impaired by the actions of a socially more marginal group of inhabitants. It is important to note that in terms of services provided, there was a reverse expectation ratio between the informal settlement, which received more services than initially expected by its inhabitants, and the formal settlement where the planned services were supplied at a much later stage, or never at all. In the Aerodrom proper, the



major district center was never completed and some of the planned primary schools and nurseries are still missing. The green spaces are giving way to large parking areas and pressure has been growing to turn the green areas into built-up areas.

The subsequent master plans refused to recognize the new reality. The master plan of 1985 showed the area as a mix of single and multi-family housing, without supplying a clear vision of how it would be implemented. The preliminary studies for the master plan of 2002 suggested that the informal settlement should be left outside the city limits, thus turning a blind eye to the issue. The final version of the master plan from 2002 surrendered to the reality, opted for possible retaining of the areas of single-family houses and sealed the fate of the big Aerodrom project.

While master plans were prepared and adopted, the actual condition depicted an abrupt halt to the development of the initial Aerodrom project and a continuous expansion of the informal settlement. The large area of their encounter represented a margin of counter-positioning of different social groups and of two different concepts of spatial development. For a while, this marginal area was unbuilt and used by the inhabitants of the informal settlement as an area for agricultural production. Without any official policy incentive, there appeared an area of urban agriculture in the city. However, this condition was short lived. (Fig. 06)

Recently, the larger part of this area has been turned into a mere object for attracting investment without a clear vision or control of the quality of space these new investments produce. Unfortunately, the potential of this marginal space between the formal and informal areas of Aerodrom has not been recognized by the local government. It has been subject to an ill-conceived neo-liberal urbanism, which places profit before civic values, clearly wasting the potential of the spatial margin, which lent itself to a loss of opportunities for the area. (Fig. 07)

Throughout the years, the initial plan for Aerodrom and the basic elements of its concept were never seriously reconsidered or reevaluated for the purpose of its improvement or that of learning from its experience. Unfortunately, Skopje has long been neglecting its housing areas belonging to different periods and is losing important layers of its urban history, because it does not acknowledge them as built heritage, but rather as mere building stock.

### **The urban margin myopia and what to do at the urban margins**

The Aerodrom housing area depicts the complex reality of the last forty odd years, in which ideologically driven actions, international efforts and expertise, incapacitated societal mechanisms for development control and the changed priorities in spatial development have all contributed to the present state which clearly shows the initial intentions, but also the resulting inability to implement them and to embrace the changes that have occurred.

“Recent processes in the built environment show the collapse of institutional and professional practices of urban planning and their inability to carry out the task of arranging and mediating between individual and public good. This phenomenon primarily reflects the character of the dominant politics and the change of the social context, in which institutions in charge of the public good are losing their operational and even nominal autonomy.”<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, the latest approved development plans for the margin area in Aerodrom support the opinion that

“both the physical remains and the lessons of previous uncompleted modernizations seem superior to the current situation, which relates to both concrete concepts of urban development and realizations, as well as the dominant politics of space that are ever more narrowing the realm of public good”.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Mrduljaš, Kulić, *Unfinished Modernisations*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

This condition is most vividly represented at the margins, the areas that have remained unbuilt and trapped between the planned and the informal settlements. These areas show that the old approach is not working, but also that a new one has not yet been appropriated. It is a condition that could be termed as urban margin myopia, demonstrated by the actions taken by the local government and the planning profession. One can hardly find a more suitable example for this condition than the case of Aerodrom.

What escapes the attention of both local government and planners is the dual nature of the margin. Even when conceived as a boundary or border, along with the risk of exposing the otherness or isolation, it also offers opportunities for communication, encounter and connection. Unfortunately for urban planners, the creative interpretation of these opportunities cannot rest solely with them.

Urban margins, regardless of their position in the city structure, are often residual areas of actions in space that have been taken over for longer and different periods of time and by different actors. They are pregnant with meanings, memories and potential. Any productive attempt to act at the urban margins must be developed through complex and multidimensional analysis of socio-spatial relations that reach beyond one-dimensional thinking, which is frequently the case in urban planning. As margins are often spaces where different and even contradicting interests meet, there is a need for an approach that would be inclusive and participatory in nature.

Although public participation has long been on the planning agenda, the results are uneven, and the actual scope and influence of public participation are very limited. The profession of planning, while searching for novel and inclusive participatory approaches, is still locked in its old practices, especially in the countries of South Eastern Europe, where one type of rigid planning has been replaced with another. The neo-liberal attitude, which puts emphasis on market forces and private ownership, results in new spatial inequalities that are producing new margins.

It is obvious that the existing mechanisms of the planning process are missing the *raison d'être* of urban planning – the safeguarding of public interest through reconciliation of public and private interests and agendas. Although the entire legal procedure for adopting the new plan for development of the “margin area” of Aerodrom was followed, including public exposition, insight and debate, the final result is utterly discouraging, suiting only the newly promoted developers and the construction companies.

One could only imagine what the result would have been if the local government and the planners were more sensitive to the possibilities of citizen participation, which could have taken place much earlier than the prescribed legal planning procedure. There is a good reason behind the tenth principle of the Copenhagen Agenda for Sustainable Cities, stating that we need to develop a new mindset, institutional frameworks, partnerships and strategies, but we also need more highly skilled, courageous and passionate urban leaders who are ready to listen.

“They must be committed to participatory leadership and open source management as a basis for governance. Urban leaders are responsible for developing the institutional structure to support such processes.”<sup>18</sup>

Urban margins are prone to actions of co-creation involving the ones who are most immediately concerned. Although urban margins always have a wider urban significance, they are the everyday living condition of the neighboring social groups designating them as the most appropriate actors who should be involved in the process. The existing form, which embraces this situation, is known as urban living lab. Although living labs escape a clear-cut definition and a strict form of organization, this is exactly where the biggest strength and potential of a living lab resides. By taking different forms, urban living labs can adapt to the circumstances, accommodating participatory efforts that have previously been excluded.

The four major principles of urban living labs: co-creation, exploration, experimentation and evaluation “offer an analytical and theoretical framework for understanding and positioning

<sup>18</sup> Copenhagen Agenda for Sustainable Cities, <http://psa2.kuciv.kyoto-u.ac.jp/lab/images/stories/users/kobayashi/others/10principles.pdf> (21.05.2017).

various informal self-organizing initiatives in contemporary urban development”,<sup>19</sup> although Karvonen rightfully notes that “to date, the rhetoric of co-creation in urban living labs seems to be racing ahead of the reality”, he also notes that their democratic potential is “their most exciting and most challenging attribute”.<sup>20</sup>

The Aerodrom housing development was built according to an adopted plan, it was occupied by an informal settlement, it was infilled with new planned development in complete contradiction with the initial concept, but there are still margin-like areas that have not been occupied; they are the spaces where new approaches should be employed, grounded in what is becoming to be known as “soft governance”, while nurturing the culture of encounter.

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#### ILLUSTRATION CREDITS:

Fig. 01, 02, 03: *Становање* (Основен урбанистички план, кн.13, Скопје, 1965)

Fig. 04: Leaflet for the Development Plan of Sections A1 and A2. ZUAS, Skopje

Fig. 05, 06: Author’s photograph

Fig. 07: Google Earth (30.08.2017)

<sup>19</sup> Likas Smas, “Exploring new forms of inclusive urban governance”, <http://www.nordregio.se/Templates/NordRegio/Pages/PublicationPage.aspx?id=4831&epslanguage=en> (24.05.2017).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.