

Challenging Disregard: The Case of the Telecommunication Center in Skopje

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Pre-context

The city of Skopje is an interesting urban and architectural phenomenon. Positioned at the crossroads of important trade and economic routes, going through turbulent times throughout history, it contains overlapped architectural layers, each witnessing and corresponding to various cultural influences, and carrying different ideas of urban and architectural development (medieval Byzantine, Ottoman, pre-modern, modern, late-modern, post-socialist). Within this collection of "parts," 20th century architecture – especially the one built after the earthquake of 1963 – occupies a special place and significance, both in terms of quantity and quality.

The earthquake of catastrophic proportions that hit Skopje on July 26, 1963, destroyed almost 75-80% of its urban fabric and left the city reduced to rubble. The aftermath of the earthquake propelled unprecedented international solidarity, while the post-earthquake renewal of the city brought up what is undoubtedly the most powerful segment of its recent architectural history. The trauma of the natural disaster triggered a new, even more radical type of modernization, and Skopje became a global, cosmopolitan city, where some of the world's leading architects worked in parallel with authors from Macedonia and other parts of former Yugoslavia.

Immediately after the earthquake, the local and federal (Yugoslav) government, acknowledging that the scope and complexity of the endeavor were beyond local capacities, requested UN support and assistance. The reputation that Yugoslavia possessed within the international political context of the period (the early 1960s), as well as its position within the Non-Aligned Movement,¹ proved to have crucial effects upon the future development of Skopje. Under the auspices of the UN, the formerly local and peripheral city of Skopje turned into a field of global cooperation and a late-modern urban laboratory for testing the latest urban and architectural paradigms.² The new master plan for Skopje was a strategic, visionary plan for the development of the city, which after the earthquake would have to grow into a metropolis.

The master plan intentionally left aside the city center (area of approximately 2x2 km) as a space of greatest importance and complexity both for the city and the region. It was temporarily

1 For more information about the position of Yugoslavia within the political context in the 1960s, see Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić, *Unfinished Modernisations: Between Utopia and Pragmatism* (Zagreb: UHA, 2012), 9-11.

2 The coordinator of the planning process was Ernest Weismann, chief executive of the UN's Housing and Town Planning Section, pre-war CIAM member and co-worker of Le Corbusier. The Polish urbanist Adolf Ciborowski was appointed by the UN as project manager of the developing master plan, joined by a team of local and international experts including Doxiadis Architects from Greece, Polservice from Poland, etc. More information about the process of post-earthquake renewal of Skopje in Dereck Senior, ed., *Skopje Resurgent: The Story of a United Nations Special Fund Town Planning Project* (New York: United Nations, 1970).

postponed and treated in a separate, invited international competition in 1965, launched by the UN and the Yugoslav Government. Out of the four Yugoslav³ and the four international participant teams, the prize was divided between Kenzo Tange (60%) and the Croatian architects Radovan Mišćević and Fedor Wenzler (40%).⁴ The ambitions of the UN were to promote Skopje as an exemplary global city that will transcend the current antagonism and ideological divisions between the two opposing blocks. Tange's plan fitted the UN ambitions well: it was ambitious in every sense – architectural, symbolic, economic and political. Late modern and daring in its spatial extent, the plan made a revision of the functionalist approach in urban planning, thus offering a bold, “futuristic” vision of a metropolis on the verge of utopia.⁵

On an almost square-shaped territory of about 290 hectares, organized along the river Vardar, the plan envisaged a significant transformation of the inherited (pre-earthquake) urban model and the image of the city. The plan proposed a monumental city form and introduced Japanese metabolism through two strong, symbolic elements – the “City Wall” and the “City Gate.” The City Wall encircled the city core in a ring of large housing blocks, thus physically emphasizing its pre-earthquake geometry, while the multifunctional megastructure of the City Gate was planned as a symbolic entrance to the city and a starting point of the new East-West axis that enhanced the future linear growth and development of the city center (as well as of the city in general). Along this new axis, on both riverbanks of the Vardar, Tange proposed a series of diverse building types (cultural, commercial, administrative, educational), which further emphasized the public character of the center.⁶

The plan was never realized to its full extent, thus illustrating quite clearly the discrepancies between the utopian late-modern ambitions and local conditions; however, it proved to have an immense importance as it paved the way for the future urban and architectural development of Skopje. Numerous Macedonian and Yugoslav architects were up to the given task: Georgi Konstantinovski with his design for the student dormitory “Goce Delchev” and the City Archive, Marko Mušič with the design for the University campus, Boris Chipan with the building of the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts (MANU), Janko Konstantinov with his high schools and the Telecommunication Center. Over a relatively short period of 15-20 years, a quite unique collection of urban and architectural artifacts was created; in a time when it was already evident that the modernist “dogma” was obsolete and the search for new architectural answers once again covered various architectural languages and expressions, the architectural experiments in Skopje were counter-proposals to mainstream Modernism. This appropriation and adjustment of divergent late-modern paradigms and their juxtaposition on a single, common ground became the defining characteristic of post-earthquake Skopje.

The Story of the Telecommunication Center

Janko Konstantinov's Telecommunication Center built in post-earthquake Skopje is undoubtedly one of the most important architectural and urban ensembles, representing at the same time the most significant professional achievement of the architect.⁷

3 Within the Macedonian group of architects and planners, led by architect Slavko Brezovski, was Janko Konstantinov, at the time a young architect who had just returned from his stay in the United States.

4 More information in Ines Tolic, *Dopo Il Terremoto: La Politica Della Ricostruzione Negli Anni Della Guerra Fredda a Skopje [After the Earthquake: The Reconstruction Policy in the Cold War Years in Skopje]* (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2011).

5 Tange's plan for the Skopje city center could be perceived in line with a series of contemporaneous large international competitions for city reconstructions, such as the ones for Berlin, Tel Aviv, and even Tokyo.

6 See Jovan Ivanovski et al., *Findings: Pavilion of Republic of Macedonia, 14th International Architectural Exhibition, La Biennale in Venezia* (Skopje: Youth Cultural Center, 2014), 62.

7 Architect Janko Konstantinov (1926-2010) is one of the few young architects who has worked outside the borders of socialist Yugoslavia ever since the 1950s, gaining professional experience and, more importantly, working and developing his ideas in countries of the Western world of that time. He is also



Fig. 1: The Telecommunication Center in Skopje, 2006

The design process started more than half a century ago, back in 1968, but it took more than two decades to be completed. Unlike other important structures built as part of the post-earthquake renewal of Skopje – where the design process was relatively linear and the construction time-span short⁸ – in the case of the Telecommunication Center, both the design and the building processes were subject to constant polemics, controversies and conflicts of various natures that ultimately led to frequent disruptions and modifications of the designs. While working on the Telecommunication Center, in collaboration with his colleagues from the Institute for Research and Design of the “Beton” – Skopje Construction Company, Konstantinov met numerous resistances and oppositions, and developed several alternative design solutions. As it stands today, the Telecommunication Center came as a result of long, intense and heated professional discussions. The process of its construction was extensive and complex, and eventually remained incomplete, with a series of revisions and alterations of the original design concept. (Fig. 1)

Location

After the earthquake, the Telecommunication Center was granted an exclusive location within the city center – on the right riverbank of the Vardar, on the corner of two busy boulevards, facing the Medieval Fortress. The decision to choose such a prominent position for a building of predominantly technical and administrative character was primarily connected with the memory of the place and the possibility to rationally exploit the extant complex systems;⁹ nonetheless, the choice owed much to the strong belief in technology and progress of the 1960s.

one of the few highly educated experts who, after the devastating earthquake in Skopje in 1963, decided to return to Macedonia and contribute to the rebuilding of the capital, with all his acquired knowledge and experience. As soon as he returned to Macedonia, Konstantinov upgraded his American experience of restrained brutalist narration in concrete with the emerging metabolist ideas (introduced in Skopje by Kenzo Tange) and engaged in the turbulent processes of experimentation with expressive, figurative architectural forms. As a result, in the late 1960s (which coincide with the beginning of the work on the Telecommunication Center project), Konstantinov built his two architectural masterpieces – “Nikola Karev” Pedagogical High School and “Dr. Panche Karagjovov” Medical School.

8 The only exception was the Transportation Center: due to the colossal size of the undertaking, as well as lack of funding in the mid-1970s, it was under construction for a long period of time.

9 Prior to the earthquake, the central city Post office – *Poshta 1* – occupied the same position. In the earthquake, the facilities of the central post office were damaged to the extent that their destruction was

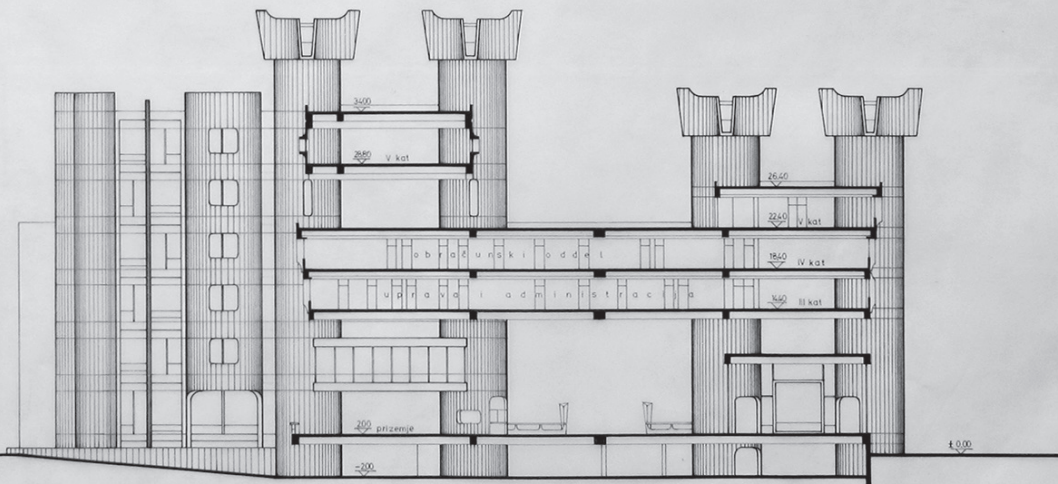


Fig. 2: Telecommunication Center. First design proposal, cross-section

The design for the Telecommunication Complex started in October 1968. Until 1972, the design team led by Janko Konstantinov prepared several different design proposals. In each of them, the complex was divided into three buildings following the main programmatic demands: the Telecommunication Postal Center, the Counter Hall and the Administrative Building – all placed on a unifying platform.

The First Design Proposal

The first design proposal for the Telecommunication Center was completed between October 1968 and the end of January 1969.¹⁰ In its overall conception, the influence of Japanese Metabolism,¹¹ brought to Skopje by Kenzo Tange's plan for the city center, is clearly visible. Already in his Tokyo Bay Project from 1960, Tange proposed floating structures suspended on vertical cores, while Arata Isozaki (who was part of Tange's competition team), presented similar ideas in his Joint Core System. These are precisely the ideas that may be considered essential for the first proposal for the Telecommunication Center. (Fig. 2)

In the first project for the Telecommunication Center,¹² Kostantinov designed an open spatial structure that exceeds the traditional composition layouts. The complex was supposed to have impressive dimensions, covering an area of approximately 95x86 m. Several segments can be discerned within the enclosed, high-tech organism: the dominant part is the central one, supported by 16 vertical cylindrical towers (mainly intended for circulation and services), grouped in 4x4 formations on the principle of joint cores.¹³ These strong vertical elements

inevitable. On the other hand, the growth of the city after the earthquake, both in size and in number of inhabitants, required further increase and modernization of the postal network. For that purpose, a complete program and technical documentation was made for the new buildings of the Telecommunication Center in the city center, while the main postal traffic was moved within the premises of the Transportation Center.

10 Janko Konstantinov, "Telekomunikaciski Objekt Skopje" ["Telecommunication Building Skopje"], *Čovjek i Prostor (ČIP)* (January 1975): 4-6.

11 Emerging in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Japanese Metabolism was one of the important and avant-garde movements of the postwar architectural scene, which called into question the principles of functionalism and CIAM. As Hans Ulrich Obrist argued, Japanese Metabolism was probably the last avant-garde movement in architectural history. See Rem Koolhaas et al., *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks...* (Köln: Taschen, 2011), 18.

12 The project design was developed in the Institute for Studies and Design of the "Beton" – Skopje Construction Company. The working team led by Janko Konstantinov comprised architects Marija Serafimova, Ljupcho Gogov, and Dushanka Balabanova, as collaborators; engineer Risto Tuntev was the technology designer, while architect Risto Galic was the co-author of the urban design.

13 The concept of the Joint core system is designed as a three-dimensional spatial network composed of multiple units – cylinders that carry the branches of the new urban system. The vertical cores in their

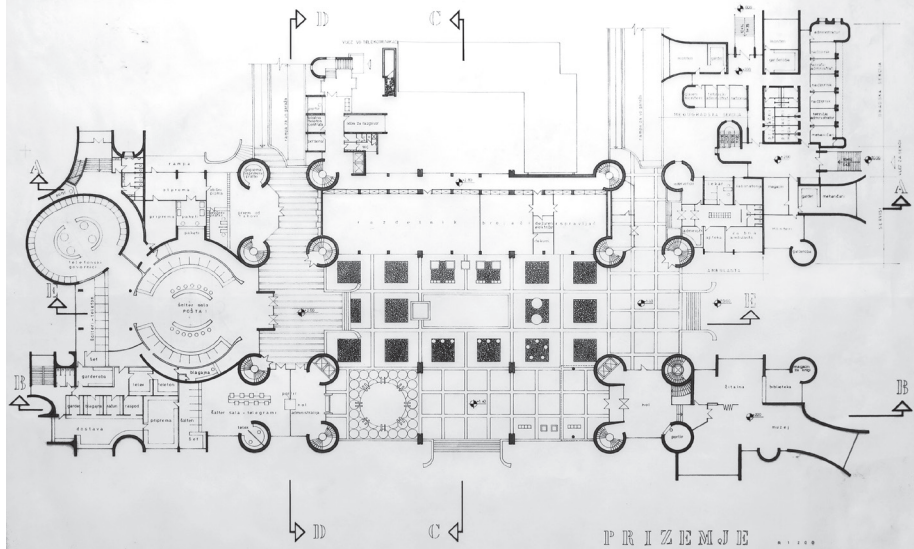


Fig. 3: Telecommunication Center. First design proposal, ground floor plan

constitute the main structure that supports the floating horizontal platforms. The overall spatial structure gives the impression of openness; also, it should not be perceived as fixed, static and unchangeable in a traditional sense (one from which nothing can be taken away and nothing can be added). On the contrary, according to its strong metabolic character, it is an open system prepared for changes and modifications following its present and future needs. Considering the potential growth and development of the communication systems in directions and with an intensity difficult to foresee, its seemingly incomplete configuration suggests the possibility for future growth, depending on the requirements of this rather uncertain process.

In terms of functional division, as a result of an extensive research in the technology of telecommunications buildings, the Telecommunication Center encompasses several entities. The central part of the complex is dominated by the technological segment and the premises intended for the administration. Konstantinov clearly separates the technological segment with all the postal equipment and the employees who operate it in a slab positioned on the southern side of the complex.¹⁴ The administration premises are placed high above the ground, starting from the third level (+14.40 m) on the East and West sides, and respectively fourth level (+18.40 m) on the north side (towards the Vardar river); together with the technological segment, they enclose a rectangular area.

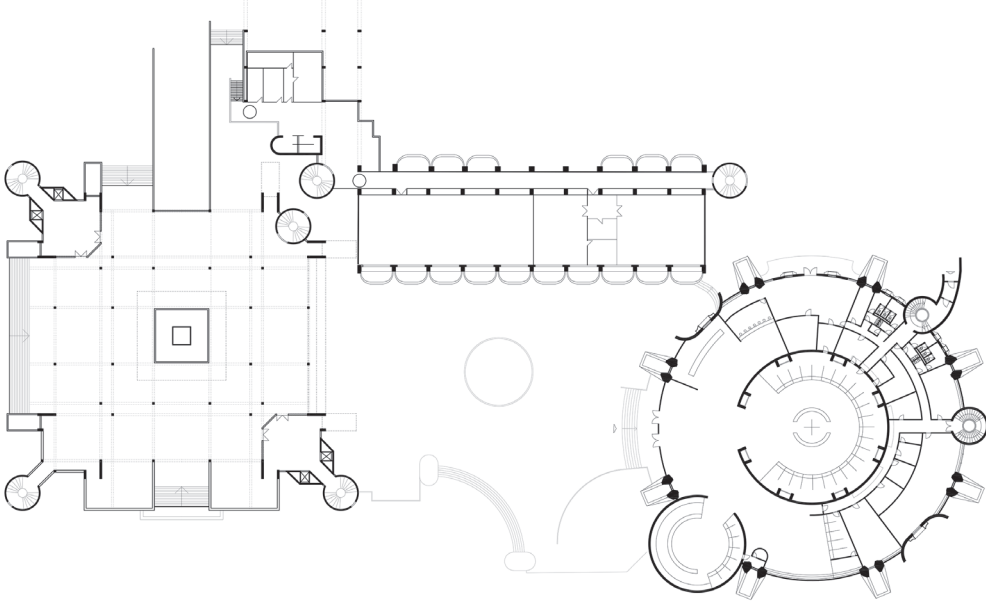
In this way, most of the building is suspended over a large public space – a kind of an “urban room”¹⁵ for outdoor public life – envisioned by Konstantinov as a unifying platform generously equipped with greenery, water, and sculptures. To the East and West of the central structure, Konstantinov designed lower volumes which develop mainly on one underground level and two levels above ground. The large Counter Hall, together with other public services, is placed facing East, towards the main city square, while the area facing West is divided in two areas – the maintenance section (on the street) and other public facilities (library with reading room, museum, restaurant, etc.) oriented towards the river Vardar.¹⁶ (Fig. 3)

circulation role can be perceived as “vertical streets,” while the horizontal spaces that connect them resemble different buildings aligned along the city street – a kind of urban plan rotated 90 degrees. (Koolhaas et al., *Project Japan*, 360). This spatial concept appears earlier, in the administrative mega-structures from the 1960 Tokyo Bay project, on which Kenzo Tange worked together with Arata Isozaki, as well as in Isozaki’s drawings for the “City in the air,” also from 1960, and finally realized in the Yamanashi Press and Broadcasting Center in Kofu in 1967.

14 In a slightly modified form, this segment will be built as Telecommunication Center – tower and slab.

15 The perspective drawings of this space much resemble Fumihiko Maki’s City room and City corridor, as open frameworks for indoor/outdoor urban space. See Koolhaas et al., *Project Japan*, 306.

16 In all its phases, the design had to incorporate and adjust to a residential building, already existing on the southern side of the building plot.



Konstantinov's complex is designed in times of immense fascination with progress, technology, transportation and communications – times when buildings and cities were expected to “be able to adapt, to grow, to rise into the air (...) in order to survive the double pressure of rapid modernization on the one hand and the inevitable environmental changes on the other.”¹⁷ Intended for the modern communication of people and the circulation of goods in the post-functional city, the Telecommunication Center advances a way in which architecture could function as a mediator between the human scale and the scale of the city infrastructure. Despite being consistent with the current architectural paradigms and in apparent coherence with Kenzo Tange's plan, Konstantinov's original design did not enjoy a positive reception. The center's level of complexity, its potential cost or the obvious similarity with Tange's work could be just some of the possible explanations. The first design proposal of the Telecommunication Center was obviously by far too radical for the local context.

“The design project for the Telecommunication Center is one of the most discussed projects in Skopje. Committees of experts and the wider public have been meeting for more than a year and the final decision has not yet been taken. The unusual sculptural treatment of the building, intended to be built at an important and highly delicate location in the city, has resulted and still results in a wide range of views that are difficult to reconcile into a single, common position.”¹⁸

The Second Design Proposal

In the period that followed, Konstantinov developed a new design proposal for the Telecommunication complex. Considerably rationalized and simplified in its expression, the second design suggests three clearly differentiated units, each placed in a separate building: the Telecommunication PTT center (a rectangular slab and a tower as a vertical dominant), the Counter Hall (a sculptural rotunda), and the Administrative Building (a floating square volume). The personal testimonies of the author extensively inform us about the duration and the difficulties within the design process, which suffered constant alterations under the influence of changing urbanistic parameters and frequent variations in the technological requirements.

In the accepted design proposal, the PTT center (tower and slab) holds the same position as in the previous proposal, partly modified in dimensions. Upon the planners' request, the administration building is oriented towards the square, with its volume lifted in the air, while

17 Rem Koolhaas et al., *Project Japan*, 175.

18 Janko Konstantinov, “Objekt Telekomunikacionog centra PTT u Skopju” [“The Building of the Telecommunication Center in Skopje”] *Čovjek i Prostor (ČIP)* (April 1970): 12.

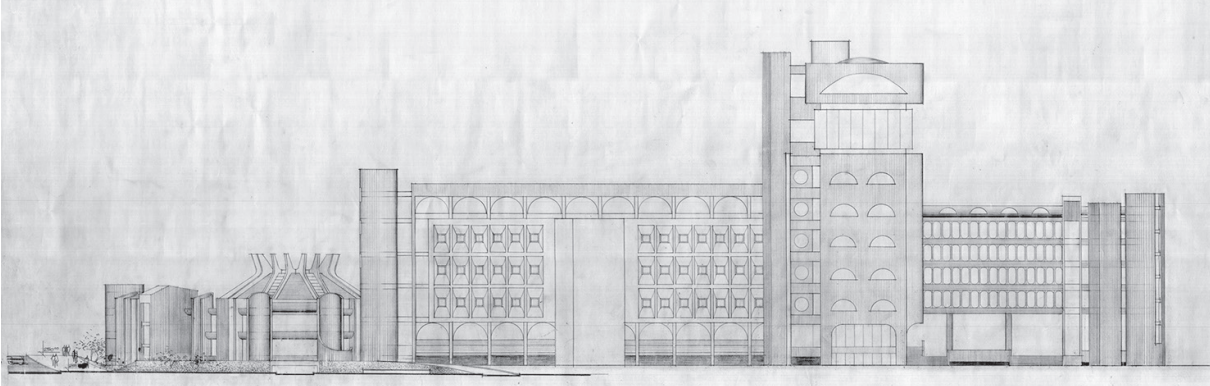


Fig. 4: Telecommunication Center. Second design proposal, ground floor plan (opposite)

Fig. 5: Telecommunication Center. Second design proposal, southern elevation (above)

the Counter Hall receives the opposite, Western position. Organized in this manner, the masses obtain continuous and uninterrupted connection with the city square, the riverbank and the main platform of the complex. At this stage of the project's development this platform is an important integrational element, as well as a carefully designed public space within the otherwise enclosed technical complex.¹⁹ (Fig. 4)

As a reminiscence of the previous design phase, the PTT has two cylindrical circulation cores, as well as four circulation cores in the corners of the square volume of the administration. At this stage of design, in its overall appearance, the complex is much closer to the brutalist aesthetic and to the influences from the American architectural scene, which the author had been directly acquainted with during his professional practice in the late 1950s and early 1960s.²⁰

Due to the size and complexity of the Telecommunication complex, the construction process was divided in several phases: firstly, the construction of the PTT tower and slab; secondly, the construction of the Counter Hall; and, at the end, the Administrative Building (which will not be built according to the author's design).

The PTT Tower and Slab

The construction started on October 19, 1972. At this point, only the rectangular slab with a total height of 29 m (five stories) and a tower with a total height of 54 m (eight stories) were built, representing the technological segment of the complex. They contained all the telecommunication equipment for city and intercity telephone and telegraph traffic, together with the premises for the technical personnel, all accommodated on over 12,000 sqm of floor area. The complex programming and design were a result of a long and in-depth study of the technology of the telecommunication facilities, as its long-term goal was to anticipate and meet the needs of the telephone and telegraph traffic for the next 30 years. (Fig. 5)

The building introduced a new silhouette on the right riverbank of the Vardar, and in the forthcoming years became one of the new architectural symbols of the city, a status which would be further reinforced with the construction of the Counter Hall. With its powerful spatial structure, the Telecommunication PTT Center is yet another confirmation of the widespread acceptance and affinity towards sculptural forms in reinforced concrete built in Skopje in the late 1960s and early 1970s, also present in the works of other architects, such as Georgi Konstantinovski, Boris Chipan, Marko Mušič, Radomir Lalovikj, Krsto Todorovski, etc. Dominantly brutalist in its architectural language, it consists of powerful, introvert volumes. The exclusive use of exposed concrete as a material, in a way that overthrows the traditional

19 By contrast, today, the platform does not have the once envisioned character of public space: the MEPSO building interrupts the connection with the city square; the recently built parking garage occupies most of the area once supposed to be open and public; and after the fire of 2013 the Counter Hall is out of use.

20 The author himself emphasized the fact that the experience gained in the United States would play a significant role in defining his relation with the architectural form, which, turned into sculpture and along with the plastic possibilities of concrete as a material, became an unavoidable mark of his architectural expression.

distinction between structure and cladding, leads towards ascetic reduction in terms of materiality and color. The author compensates this reduction with plenty of elements that enrich the architectural expression: the walls are perforated with windows that differ in geometry and size (square, semi-circular and circular, segmental); the communications and part of the services are separated in distinct cylindrical volumes that further emphasize the fortress-like character of the building; the window openings are outlined with repetitive three-dimensional concrete frames.

This architectural language carries the distinctive mark of Janko Konstantinov's vocabulary from the 1960s and 1970s.²¹ In itself, it has a double creative code. On the one hand, it comes as a continuation of the postwar modernist tendency to react to the impoverished meaning and expression of the 1950s functionalism by designing powerful and complex forms and spaces. On the other hand, this spatial structure relates in a distant way to the idea of permanence, to history, carrying different references to tradition ("medieval" or perhaps transhistorical overtones) – an enduring theme in Konstantinov's artwork.²²

For this first phase of the Telecommunication Center – the PTT tower and slab – the author received the "Borba" award for architecture of the Republic of Macedonia in 1974 and the 1975 national award for best architectural achievement in Macedonia.²³

The Counter Hall

Although the design had already been developed several years earlier, the second phase of the Telecommunication Center – the construction of the Counter Hall – began in 1979, and the building was officially opened at the end of December 1981.²⁴

Located in a prominent position, with its circular shape, the building complements the figurative play of elements – the already existing rectangular block, the vertical telecommunication tower and the proposed square volume of the administration building. Inside, on approximately 4,000 square meters, the postal mail services are accommodated: the large counter hall in the central, double-height space and the other services on the perimeter (reception and dispatch rooms for administrative offices, archives, etc.) (Fig. 6)

21 Croatian architectural historian and critic Maroje Mrduljaš would say: "Konstantinov is an architect with a very interesting biography, somewhat atypical for postwar Yugoslav architects, whose education and professional lives in most cases were mainly connected only to the local environment. Educated in Belgrade and Copenhagen, he worked in Finland, Sweden, as well as the United States with Victor Gruen, an influential architect and planner. It is difficult to imagine a more eclectic selection of working and cultural environments, the influences of which Konstantinov brought back to Skopje after the earthquake. Obviously open to different inspirations, Konstantinov soon assimilated the principles of Metabolism, at the same time building his own distinctive architectural language in which modern architectural techniques meet extravagant formal solutions." In Jovan Ivanovski, Ana Ivanovska Deskova, and Vladimir Deskov, *Biografija na edno arhitektonsko delo: Telekomunikaciski Centar – Skopje, Arhitekt: Janko Konstantinov* [Biography of an Architectural Work: Telecommunication Center Skopje, Architect: Janko Konstantinov] (Skopje: Museum of the City of Skopje, 2016).

22 The constant (re)turn towards tradition, an idea that in the PTT center could be felt in a more intuitive manner, is clearly visible in Janko Konstantinov's watercolors and, in a more narrative way, in his later architectural work.

23 "We should especially pay attention to the fact that this kind of architecture is in line with the overall picture imagined for the future Skopje, which in my opinion is of great importance. By accepting Kenzo Tange's design project, one of the most modern and daring ones that have showed up in the last decade, our Yugoslav milieu has also undertaken certain responsibilities and obligations that this idea would be eventually realized. It is well known that Tange's design received much publicity worldwide and that the experts on international level pose the question whether we would be able to realize such a complex idea. Konstantinov's design, although written in an architectural language inherent and individual for this author (...) gives a positive answer to the prior question. Yes, we have the power, within one of the most modern solutions of our time, not only to catch up with the imposed pace but even to contribute with our own creative personality..." Bogdan Bogdanovic, member of the Revision Committee, in Konstantinov, "Telekomunikaciski Objekt Skopje."

24 See "Nova Poshtenska Shalter Sala" ["New Post Office's Counter Hall], *Nova Makedonija*, December 9, 1981.

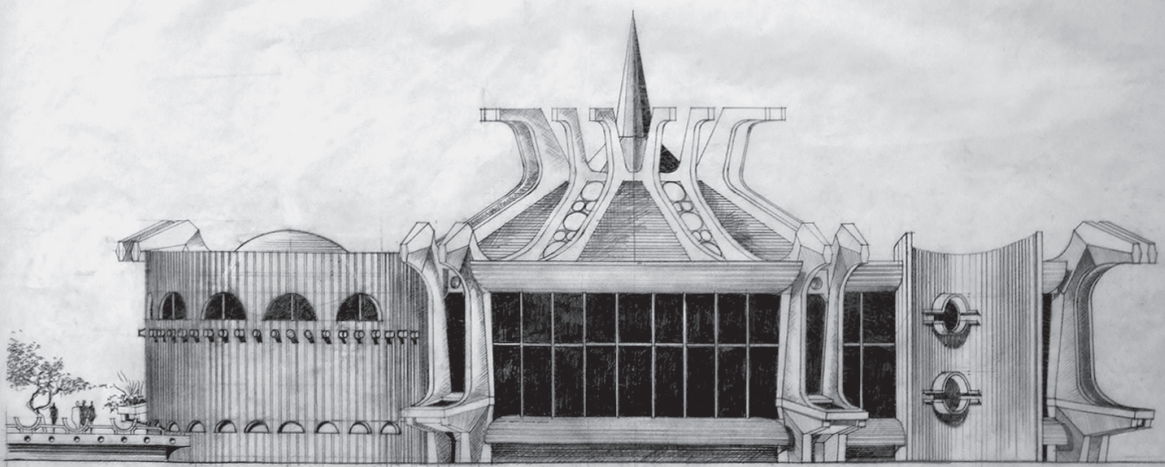


Fig. 6: Telecommunication Center. Second design proposal, Counter Hall, elevation

The expression of forms already conceived in the PTT tower and slab is even more noticeable in the Counter Hall. The author used the prominent location to place an architectural sculpture – complex, poetic and expressive. To the monumental, in a way restrained architecture of the previously constructed segment, he opposes the curvilinear profiles of the lower structure. Although built entirely in a single material – reinforced concrete, the Counter Hall evolves towards richness of textures, decorative, curved, even capricious shapes that experiment with the plastic properties of the material used in its raw, natural form.²⁵ The author used an abundance of architectural elements: curvilinear concrete surfaces, closed cylindrical volumes, large glazed planes, repetitive sculpturally treated decorative elements, structural ribs and beams in reinforced concrete which form a ring that supports the central dome. The roof lighting transfers the expression of the exterior inside the building. The artistic treatment was further enhanced by the large frescoes of the modern artist Borko Lazeski.²⁶

The Administrative Building

The Administrative Building, planned for the final phase of the Telecommunication Center, was never built according to Konstantinov's design. Object of several design solutions from 1972 until the late 1980s, appropriating different compromises that the author obviously had to make under pressures of various natures, in the end it was built as the Republic's Dispatch Center according to the design of architect Zoran Shtaklev (1987-1989).²⁷

Although designed by a different architect, the influences of Janko Konstantinov's concepts are quite visible. Fully respectful of Konstantinov's original intentions, Shtaklev continued the previous idea in such a way that the new facility constructs a logical entity with existing ones.

25 In the years that followed the construction, there was a polemic over the appropriateness of the architectural expression of the building – its sculptural exterior and the representative treatment of the interior versus its utterly prosaic purpose. Nowadays, when the program of the Counter Hall is obsolete, one could easily imagine its adaptation for a new purpose.

26 Borko Lazeski (1917-1993) is an academic painter who advocated the idea of a synthesis of arts, their democratization and creation of public art that belongs to the people, an art that would adorn the buildings with which people are in constant contact. To this end, Lazeski specialized in Paris in monumental art techniques – fresco painting, mosaic and stained glass. In the Counter Hall of the Telecommunication Center, Lazeski translated the idea of "exploitation of the artwork through its socialization" into five large Cubist frescoes painted in acrylic technique, with motifs from the Peoples' Liberation Struggle in the WW2. In the fire in 2013, the frescoes were completely destroyed.

27 The first design proposal envisions a square geometry of 58x58 m. Four strong cylindrical cores at angles allow for a completely free ground floor above which four administrative levels are stacked. In the middle, the building has a square atrium 15x15 m. Already in the next phase of development, the main volume transformed into an L-shaped structure, since it became obvious that the extant building – once considered only a temporary structure – had meanwhile become permanent.



Fig. 7: View towards the Telecommunication Center, 2016

As envisaged in Konstantinov's initial drawings, the new building resembles a modern peripteros, with a body wrapped in glass standing behind a concrete colonnade. The once powerful cylindrical verticals in reinforced concrete hold their position, this time wrapping the vertical circulations in a glass skin. The building ends with a heavily curved cornice in exposed concrete, identical with the one of the Counter Hall.

The Transition

In the years that followed, the buildings of the Telecommunication Center continued to lead a complicated life. Built in a specific context and with a distinctive materiality, in the 30 to 40 years after their completion they faced numerous factors leading to their accelerated degradation. In the case of the Telecommunication Center, the unavoidable natural ageing of materials and equipment was complemented by a functional and programmatic obsolescence due to the process of digitization, the emergence and rapid expansion of mobile technology, the liberalization of the postal services market, etc. Furthermore, the socio-political and cultural changes that the country underwent led to inherent transformations in the system of values.

The belated crisis of modern architecture and the search for new directions during the 1980s, were followed by the long period of transition from a socialist to a capitalist society, starting in the 1990s. After the collapse of the socialist system, the Republic of Macedonia and Skopje as its capital entered a highly uncertain process of transition. Along with other challenges, linked to the political, economic, social and cultural life, this political process launched dynamic, dramatic and controversial spatial transformations, brought to extreme with the "Project Skopje 2014." Strongly politicized, it exploited the "historical" narrative to shift the focus towards a quest for a new identity, by any means different than the previous, "socialist" one. This socio-cultural re-traditionalization affected the architectural and urban field in several ways: erection of new, eclectic buildings; alterations of façades of the existing buildings (some modern and late-modern masterpieces); deliberate destruction of the existing architectural and urban ensembles, etc. Instead of a synergy in which all urban layers coexist while maintaining their integrity, the architecture of Skopje, along with its open public spaces, started to disappear under the layers of polystyrene and clusters of new, culturally and architecturally irrelevant buildings. (Fig. 7)

Inappropriate densification through the erection of new buildings on areas previously intended for public use became a trend that did not miss the Telecommunication Center. Firstly, a new facility for the marketing center was built at the southwest side of the complex, near the Counter Hall; later, consciously ignoring the unifying role of the open space expressly conceived in the original design (an idea that was important for all the development stages of the project) the space in front the Counter Hall was transformed into a parking garage. Neither in its relation to the specific qualities of the existing space, nor in its architectural language, does this entirely prosaic program even attempt to establish a dialogue with the valuable historic context.

Further immense and irreversible damage to the original structure and materiality of the Telecommunication Center was exerted in 2013, when a fire broke inside the Counter Hall. The authentic interior of the building irrevocably disappeared together with five cubist frescoes by Borko Lazeski – an author renowned for his large format works (wall murals, stained glass and mosaics). Several years after the fire, the main part of the building is still out of use, without any notice about its future.

Moreover, the trend towards reshaping the existing buildings into a grotesque scenography did not miss Zoran Shtaklev's building. Once elegant in its glass façade framed in a heavy concrete structure, it was "dressed up" in cheap materials (gypsum and polystyrene), with awkward historic references.

The Initiatives: The Experimental Preservation

All that we have said so far about the complex process of creation of the Telecommunication Center – the values of the visionary concept that was never built (1) and particularly the importance of the structures that were built (2), the poor, almost non-existent, legal protection (3), the misconceptions about the meaning and values (4), and especially the widely disseminated prejudice against postwar architecture in general (5) – led us to numerous questions. What is to be done when the social and aesthetic values of heritage are under attack? What can be done when the official institutions are not only ignorant, but at certain times in favor of this violent erasure of personal and collective history? How to demonstrate that a building is significant enough to be considered heritage?

We believed it was highly important to build a substantial knowledge base and then to pose and insist upon the question of values and the future of the Telecommunication Center. The initiative started with a thorough research of all the available information as a basis for further critical and analytical valorization. The main initial hypotheses were that:

- the Telecommunication Center is a valuable architectural artifact and one of the symbols of post-earthquake Skopje;
- the Telecommunication Center is an example of modernist architectural legacy which should be protected as an architectural and cultural good;
- the Telecommunication Center in Skopje is important for the history of Macedonian architecture because of its authorship — a major work of architect Janko Konstantinov;
- the Telecommunication Center is an example of endangered built heritage.

Through a process of "experimental preservation,"²⁸ the authors of this paper use the case of the Telecommunication Center as a trigger for future promotion and reevaluation of modernist heritage.

28 In the book *Experimental Preservation*, Jorge Otero-Pailos defines experimental preservation as: "...a practice that critically reevaluates and sometimes challenges preservation conventions (...) Experimental preservationists choose objects as a way of testing their potential as a heritage; that is to say, to verify, refute, or validate hypotheses about their capacity to become heritage: those valued objects and associated qualities that we cannot imagine future generations living without." See Jorge Otero-Pailos, Erik



Fig. 8: Photo from the exhibition "Biography of an Architectural Work: Telecommunications Center – Skopje, Architect: Janko Konstantinov," Museum of the City of Skopje, November 13 – December 13, 2016

The research process gained pace and became even more interesting when, in a rather unexpected turn of events that would later prove crucial for the course of the research, we discovered fragments of the hitherto unknown, but extraordinarily carefully guarded, personal archive of architect Janko Konstantinov. The richness of the discovered material could not have left any researcher indifferent. As the survey went on, it became increasingly clear that with each further discovery we established an emotional relationship with the subject; the motivation to find out ever more information about the work and its author and thus to gain a deeper understanding of the design and building processes of the center grew stronger every day.

The research confirmed our initial conviction that in the background of the historical facts various relationships are often concealed, as well as a range of complex facts and circumstances of diverse nature (social, political, cultural, emotional, personal...). All the information collected during the extensive research phase unequivocally led to the conclusion that in the center of almost all turbulences was the personality of the architect. In his fight and commitment to the project's completion – which extended over more than two decades – although hindered on many occasions, Konstantinov never lost his will or motivation. On the contrary, with incredible faith in the design (and in himself, accordingly), he fought for his views and beliefs until the very end. In this sense, the Telecommunication Center can be considered the architect's lifetime project, and concomitantly, the biography of the Telecommunication Center as a biography of the author.²⁹ (Fig. 8)

Langdalen, and Thordis Arrhenius, *Experimental Preservation* (Zürich, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016), 20.

"Conscious of the risk, the practitioners defend the need to experiment with objects as a necessary method for advancing knowledge about those very things, and indeed for protecting their future. (...) They put forth experiments that interrogate conventional ways of preserving objects without being dismissive, and offer new alternatives that, while practicable, reach beyond institutionalized modes of practice." See Otero-Pailos et al., *Experimental Preservation*, 11.

"However precarious, experimental preservation has come to play an important role in contemporary culture. Experimental preservationists gently frustrate the illusory belief by choosing and introducing objects into heritage that are institutionally unrecognizable, that appear too imaginary, too fantastic, too subjective to appear as real heritage. But it is precisely by insisting on the illusory nature of heritage objects that experimental preservationists can legitimately open the question of the reality of heritage, as an open-ended process of social negotiation." See Otero-Pailos et al., *Experimental Preservation*, 39.

²⁹ It seems that both biographies – the one of the Telecommunication Center and even more the one of its author, Janko Konstantinov – remain insufficiently known and inadequately valued both by the

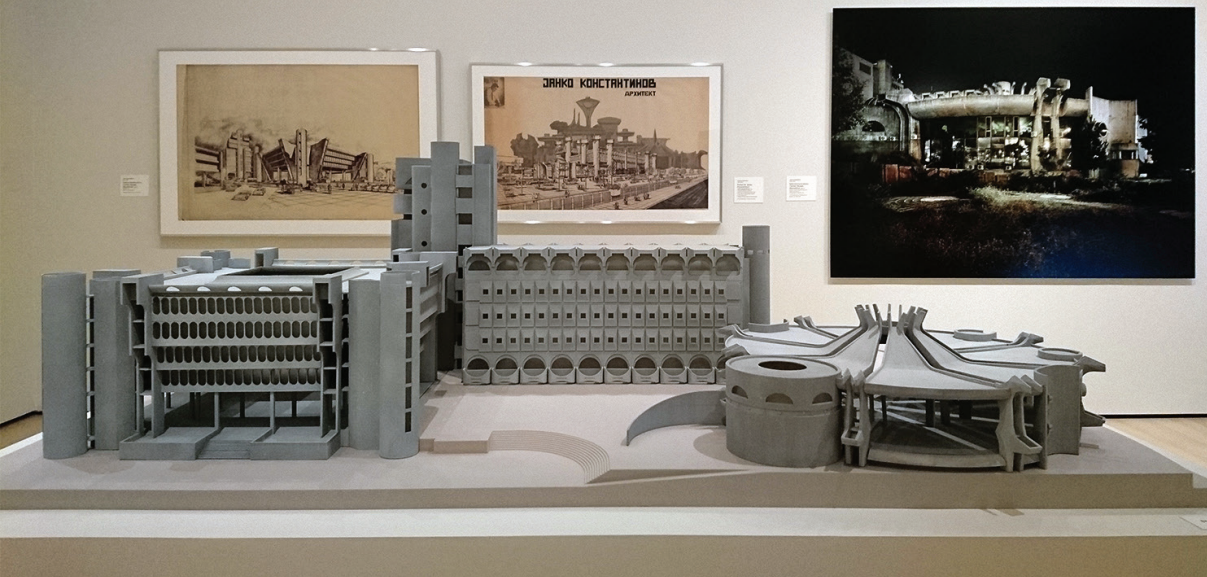


Fig. 9: The Telecommunication Center in the exhibition “Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980,” The Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 15, 2018 – January 13, 2019

This long and extensive research phase resulted in a public presentation — the exhibition entitled “Biography of an Architectural Work: The Telecommunication Center – Skopje,” at the Museum of the City of Skopje in November 2016. The exhibition presented previously unseen original drawings, facsimiles of drawings and important documents, as well as models of the most important phases of the design process. Followed by a publication, extensively illustrated with drawings and other materials from Konstantinov’s abundant archive, this initiative intended to trigger a wider discussion about the future of the complex. With a strong belief that greater public visibility could lead towards greater professional and public acceptance and appreciation (local as well as international), segments of the material were further exhibited on several thematic exhibition displays: as an integral and unavoidable part of Skopje’s post-earthquake architectural collection, in the exhibitions “Skopje, Macedonian Architecture in Context,” held in the Ringturm Gallery in Vienna in November 2017, and “The Future as a project: Doxiadis in Skopje,” held at the Benaki Museum in Athens in December 2018. However, by far the most prestigious and internationally relevant was the substantial attention that the Telecommunication Center received within the exhibition “Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia 1948-1980,” held at MoMA, New York, July 2018 – January 2019.³⁰ (Fig. 9)

In a different narrative, dedicated to the unprotected and underappreciated architectural heritage of the 20th century in Skopje, the Telecommunication Center was part of the exhibition display “Endangered Species,” held in the Museum of Natural Sciences in Skopje in December 2018.

Throughout this research – production – exhibition process, another challenge arose: using pedagogy as a powerful tool for disseminating ideas, we continued the intellectual conversation within a design course at the Faculty of Architecture, this time directly working on adaptive reuse of the building to different functions and potential users. Obsolete, to a great extent damaged after the fire, and almost completely out of use, the Counter Hall became an inspiring topic for rehabilitation. The basic goal of this research-by-design process was to test a whole variety of architectural strategies, ranging from the very pragmatic and feasible to extremely

professional milieu and the general public in Macedonia. Despite the fact that Konstantinov was awarded the highest professional awards in Yugoslavia and Macedonia, and his most valuable work was published in the prestigious architectural journal *L'Architettura* (at a time when the editor was Bruno Zevi), his work struggled until recently to find his rightful place in the history of Macedonian modern architecture.

³⁰ In the aftermath of the exhibition, several original drawings were acquired by the MoMA to be part of the museum collection – probably the most important international appreciation this author would ever get.

radical, almost utopian ones. Each design scenario was focused towards investigating the capacity of the building to adapt and change. Pushing the experiment to its limits (both in a programmatic and a physical sense), at times even questioning the conventional ways of preserving buildings was a necessary method in order to advance the knowledge about the building and its potential. At the beginning of 2019, selected design proposals were publicly exhibited together with several other modernist buildings. Located in a frequently visited cultural institution, this exhibition was envisioned as a starting point for a wider interpretation and public discussion concerning the possible futures of this and many other exemplary, but seasoned modernist architectural achievements.

At a time when the question of the future of late-modern buildings becomes increasingly important worldwide, both the architectural and the general public should be able to accept that taking sides is already excessive and outdated. The question of the late-modern architectural works in Skopje should become a matter of education, recognition, evaluation and upkeep of something that can already be considered cultural history and a distinctive characteristic of the city. The research that we conducted, on the one hand, provided justification for further research, and on the other, convinced us that there is a huge gap of missing knowledge that has to be filled – in terms of thorough historical research, artistic and architectural values, possible links and connections between them, as well as in terms of documentation, conservation and upkeep.

The protection of the cultural heritage cannot be a matter of a few individuals; it is dependent on doctrines, institutions, legislation, etc. and individual efforts by themselves can hardly ever protect buildings. However, in this particular case, individual efforts have led to creating a better knowledge base, better understanding, and raising (or in certain times even creating) public awareness. The recent global process of re-evaluation of postwar Modernism goes in favor of this collection of buildings; casting light upon them might be crucial for their spatial and symbolic re-definition, for their protection from complete devastation and for finding their proper use in the contemporary context.

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ILLUSTRATION CREDITS:

Fig. 1: Photo by the authors.

Fig. 2-6: Personal archive of Jovan Ivanovski.

Fig. 7: Photo by Maja Ilievska.

Fig. 8: Photo by Elena Fidanska.

Fig. 9: Photo by Vladimir Deskov.