

SAFE SPACES: HORTICULTURE'S ASCENT AMID A PANDEMIC
TOPO(IDEO)LOGIEN



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Safe spaces: Horticulture's ascent amid a pandemic

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As the progression of the pandemic started to become more evident, the sudden shift of continuous social functioning by communicating with one another has altered immensely - its turnaround point starting to emerge on the surface when distance became the most vital element of our day-to-day reality. All of the ongoing changes in terms of restrictions in movement due to COVID-19, some of them unprecedented, led to many variations of mutual communication, and by that, left each individual in a state of oblivion that has rapidly spread throughout the globe, just in the way the pandemic started to fill out all spheres of the society. The way we preserve the environment as well as the continuous creation of various urban forests are both indispensable key factors of the resilience of urbanized areas globally, reminding state executives that a long awaited preparation for emergencies that have started to

happen and are directly and inevitably caused by climate change - such as abrupt alterations in air, heat and pollution is clearly needed. Consequently, old and new forms of spending time have started to appear or reappear, some of them almost completely invigorated from the past. Stuck in different parts of the world where nature is in captivity and had undergone built-up transformations throughout the years, people started to focus on a formerly popular ways of production, finding their comfort in the beauty of natural landscape. Due to limited movement and social distancing, those who are living in urban areas found their long-lost attachment to green spaces. While trying to recapture an essence of freedom by cultivating plants and developing a habit of gardening, transforming urban landscape in a space where distancing is not inevitable, they have unintentionally revived their own profound connection with the environment. Throughout the days of strict and urgent lockdown in Spain, the necessity to revive an almost forgotten relationship between nature and humanity was seamlessly captured by Eugenio Ampudia's concert for 2.292 potted plants in El Liceu opera house in Barcelona, Spain – "A visual poem, both subtle metaphor but one which makes us smile."(Garcia de Gomar, 2020). In addition to the awakening of an impulse for spending time in green areas and reciprocally creating a sudden expansion of horticulture, the pandemic has also pointed out the percentage of insufficiency of green spaces in urban areas, as well as some already existing issues caused by unequal and inadequate access to open parks and surroundings for all citizens. Turning to parks or private gardens, nature's benefits for our well-being are clearly resurfacing as the urgency of the condition has become more severe. As a key-factor, trees and their existence in a global emergency have factually become a stipulation:

"During the pandemic, this became ever more visible: trees are key amenities and a source of enjoyment during locked-in routines; they contribute in preserving and improving people's mental and physical health; and people of all ages and conditions hold on to them as an actual lifeboat for carrying on." (Da Schio, 2020)

If we start thinking about the ways that the pandemic has managed to reshape our society, we can also see the relevance of the latest architectural typologies, as well as the progressive urbanism in certain areas - its distinctive form depending on the prior structure of the city and the cultural heritage of the country in question. The inseparability between the city's urbanistic transformation and its regular inhabitants has become apparent during times of isolation; what are people missing the most? Is it their shared green space nearby their

apartments, or the urgent need for a green place that would clearly be their own? Additionally, the modifications of architectural heritage in different areas throughout Europe have now become more visible than ever before, leaving one wondering what would be the right way to handle a situation that could have not been predicted.

Post-socialist green spaces: Deconstructing modernism

DECONSTRUCTING MODERNISM



Merely as a contrast to the general European architectural advancement and its contemporary synchronicity with 21 century needs and requirements, the presence of long forgotten post-socialistic modernism can be naturally captured on camera in almost all public spaces (*commons*) throughout the Balkans, as it has become an unavoidable part of these cities' morphology, a surviving aesthetic that became inseparable from this specific region. Inhabited

by individuals of all ages, the buildings that have been created during the modernism era have become certainly entwined with an almost forgotten concept of construction and can therefore be seen as the direct creation of a time when the Yugoslavian doctrine was simply a transformative ideal: “Processes of socialist urbanisation in Yugoslavia were marked by simultaneity of utopian and instrumental objectives, at least until socialism’s descent into stagnation and decadence in the late 1970s.” (Kulić, Mrduljaš, 2012). In terms of urbanism, open and shared spaces were the core of mutual existence and survival in a society that at one point has been struck by conflict, but still managed to leave a valuable mark on today’s architecture that serves as a reminder of its positive impact. Its value based on multi-ethnicity and diversity is still visible, if one explores its specificity, primarily focusing on commonly shared space, such as the atrium or the garden – two equally important elements that are still generally present in the Balkans. The reciprocity between brightness, light and minimal shape during the modernism era has entered a completely original phase of architectural precision, shaping an inventive path of transformation which clearly became entangled with an entire area. Although there is a certain discrepancy between the positive and negative impact that the Yugoslavian regime has had on today’s post-socialistic societies, the cultural and architectural heritage had created a predominant connection amongst the Balkans’. The sociological aspect of post-socialistic urbanistic planning, along with the predominant politics of past times have managed to become integrated in the entire peninsula, affecting our ways of perceiving open spaces – through the lens of a time left behind, but still visible and relevant in the architecture that is still present:

Here enters the re-evaluation of the cultural heritage from the socialist period as a harbinger of inclusive, supranational values that could be reintroduced in the public sphere. After the collapse of the universalist narratives maintained with the Cold War and the reduction of the ideological battles to particularistic populist movements around the globe (Laclau 1994), there could be a moment of reflexion for revisiting the positive aspects of the socialist past. This process should be opened not for the sake of nostalgia for the period of relative stability and prosperity enjoyed during the socialist period, but for the ideals of solidarity that transpire nationalist boundaries. (Janev, 2018)

Nowadays, the majority of the population in the Balkans live in collective housing units, since most individuals do not own private land in urbanized areas, but have a stringent need for

their own green space, and by that, their way of finding tranquillity in a secluded part is still present, altered into a necessity during times of rigorous policy measures and limited movement. When we think of a landscape in the city, the first thought that enters my mind is the garden – shared or private. The garden, as a formal illustration, has been known to us since the beginning of time, whether it was the Garden of Eden, the Persian garden - the Iranian traditional garden or the Classical Arcadia. (Gjorgjievski, 2020). Serving as an extension in terms of architecture, gardening's historical value is letting us define it as a captured territory¹ with an ability to adapt to its surrounding. During the highest restrictions of movement in some of the Balkan countries (Serbia, North Macedonia, Croatia etc.), spaces without restraint to free movement have become limited to the point of seclusion and complete social isolation. On the other hand, the other part of the problem that became visible is the lack of free, green spaces throughout the city. More specifically, if we take Skopje as an example – a capital city where most urban areas are inhabited by more people than the city can handle, we can easily notice the lack of modern urban transformation, or at least proper preservation of commons from the past. Considering the negative impact from all of the inexplicable transformations the city has gone through in the past few years, we come to a conclusion that creating an urbanistic chaos seems easy, but getting out of it is almost impossible:

“In the wider area of the location there is not a single parcel of greenery that makes this area "the only free island" in Debar Maalo. The central core of culture in the city - Debar Maalo is a hyper-built urban area. The lack of public green space in this part of the city is not only a spatial problem, but also an environmental problem.” (Mano-Velevska, 2019)

Certainly, lack of shared green spaces causes a continuous disconnection between inhabitants and nature, creating possible situations where commuting can become a real issue, especially when one would like to leave their confined homes during quarantine. One of the ways to do that is by full transformation of deserted atriums, filling them with greenery.

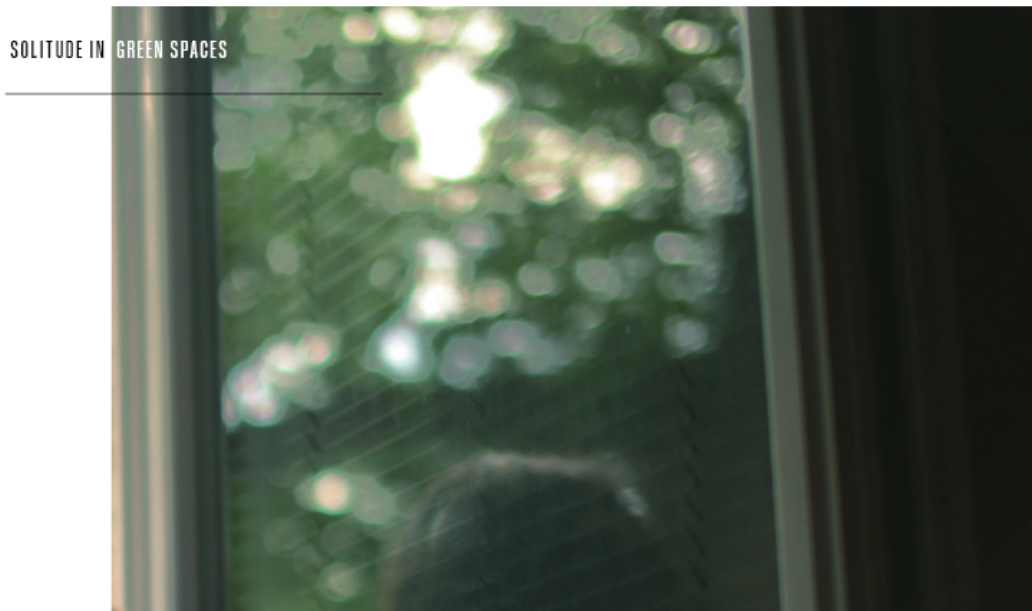
¹ *Hortus conclusus: Indoor garden*





Skopje's atriums; city centre (spring, 2020)

Redefining solitude



“The brand of holist ecological philosophy that emphasizes that ‘everything is connected to everything’ will not help us here. Rather, everything is connected to something, which is connected to something else. While we may all ultimately be connected to one another, the specificity and proximity of connections matters — who we are bound up with and in what ways. Life and Death happen inside these relationships. And so, we need to understand how particular human communities, as well as those of other living beings, are entangled, and how these entanglements are implicated in the production of both extinctions and their accompanying patterns of amplified death.” (Van Dooren, 2014)

After the pandemic’s rapid development, inhabitants in urban Balkan areas that were left in confinement in their apartments were stuck in a loophole that seemed destructive in the beginning, but also managed to make them change their mindset on creating their own greenery. Reminding them of their temporality, their daily tasks became to vary. This has been the primary sign of understanding that a period of abrupt social transformation can also lead to unexpected changes in one’s own utopia. As inhabitants started to acknowledge their

personal solitude, the need to rejuvenate their surrounding emerged and started to develop fast, consequently giving them space to recreate, reuse and reclaim spaces that were merely symbolic, deserted and used during past times. Their inclusiveness made them think of many ways of converting their private surroundings, opening a certain possibility to extend specific imaginative behaviours of reproduction and transformation by starting to gain more knowledge on horticulture. This way, their singular memory of a time when seclusion and solitude went hand by hand will did not stay limited to restrictive policies and unavoidable governmental scrutiny. Instead, by finding their own ways to transform common spaces nearby their homes, but also their own homes, their priorities have changed. The importance of an inexplicable need for conception of an indestructible link between a city's inhabitant and nature appeared. After all – that link has not been created solely to dwell on the need for colour and flora during hard times. It has always been present, although at times diminished to the point of being almost dissolved, but It has still managed to reappear in times of need. Its peculiarity left a new mark on the Balkans' urbanism – awakening its urban morphology and opening new possibilities to strengthen the bond between human and nature.

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