

Marija Mano Velevska, Slobodan Velevski, Ognen Marina:  
Urban Voids: A Creative Strategy and Spatial Challenge for the Cities in Transition

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## **Urban Voids: A Creative Strategy and Spatial Challenge for the Cities in Transition**

*Marija Mano Velevska, Slobodan Velevski, Ognen Marina*

### **Abstract**

*The last two decades have witnessed enormous socio-political and economic changes throughout the world which have had a considerable impact on culture. The phenomenon of transition was intensified and accelerated by the influences of a liberal market economy and new information technologies alongside socio-cultural developments, such as consumption and mass-media becoming an omnipotent machine for production and management. As a consequence the mode of transition was inevitably transferred into the city. Due to the socio-political shift the urban transition is particularly recognizable in cities in developing countries such as Macedonia. In this manner the city of Skopje represents a valuable and potent resource in the field of urban research. This paper points to spatial urban voids as a tool for restructuring and reinventing a new operational coherence for cities in transition. The concept of the urban void emerges as a creative strategy that sees the 'empty' space as spatial quality which could bring economic and social benefit to the community. Consequently, the scope and focus of this chapter is on the relationship between the formative narration of the city as represented through planning regulations and the market economy in a socio-spatial system of the cities in transition (Skopje) and the existing informal but spatially highly creative potential of urban voids as a dialectical amalgam that bridges public and private interests. The method applied follows a comparative approach that defines the limits and potentials of local realities and international experiences which are already engaging urban voids as a creative strategy. Three cases of spatial development in Skopje are compared with three spatial strategies of urban voids already carried out in a European metropolitan context in the city of Pula in Croatia, and Horde-Dortmund and Berlin, both in Germany.*

*Keywords: city; transition; urban void; socio-politics context; globalization; empty space vs. built space.*

### Cities in Transition - Global Experience

The fact that more than half of the world population today lives in different forms of urban agglomerations from the urban sprawl of the endless suburbs to extremely dense city centers makes the connection between the city and the society inevitable (Davis, 2006). This relationship strengthens and manifests itself due to the fact that the number of 'new citizens' rapidly grows each year, all over the world, thus making the city and other urban appearances the most prominent phenomenon of human civilization. Such conditions provoke a completely new nature for the city, inscribing the mode of change through the experiences of *transition* and *transformation* as fundamentals.

This chapter considers the urban consequences and complexities that the wave of globalization brings to the market by the means of the greatest fluidity ever known; this is a connectivity between places and resources, as well as the enormous flow and exchange of information. The multiplicity and the layered nature of those phenomena make it difficult to outline, map and confirm with ease those socio-spatial effects that appear as a result of such tendencies in contemporary society, including cities as their inseparable and most valuable part.

The terms on which the world of globalization as a nodal system rely and function today were set in place by the end of the 1970s (Krugman, 1979). Since then, the phenomenon of globalization has been analyzed and defined by experts on the economy and by specialists who explain the logic of its behavior and its two major rules of operation: first, the need for constant exchange between the agents of production which by default are different and unequal, and second, their interdependence of exchange that is producing perpetual impermanence in the societal system, as well as the economy, politics, cultural structures and the spatial references of the city as the very subject of urbanity (Krugman, 1979). Represented as such, the process of urbanization becomes a global phenomenon and experience which directly influences the need for the reutilization and further appropriation of the core urban instigators such as urban population growth, relationships between the socio-political system and the economic structure, spatial issues and the programmatic allocation of land - all of them aiming to reflect the existing urban dynamics. In a condition of global networks of exchange, an economy based on liberal capitalism and the evident experience of rapid urbanization, the need for a redefinition of the very nature of the physical content of the city

inevitably emerges. In other words, this situation implies the recoding of the relationship between the public and private realms of the city and moreover, a balance among these two distinctive and fundamental initiatives for 'building' the city itself (The World Bank Infrastructure Group for Urban Development, 2000).

### **Cities in Transition – Local Realities**

The determining course of globalization reflected in the socio-spatial organization of the cities affects every section of contemporary Macedonian society as well. The existing spatial strategy for urban development (most notably Skopje) is part of these encompassing processes. The specificity of the 'Macedonian case' is that besides the impact of globalization in the last two decades, the country has experienced a parallel process of political transition from a centralized economic system to a free market economy. This socio-political shift has necessitated an entire redefinition of property law in the country that has implied a transfer of land property from state to private ownership. In exceptional situations such as when the institutional instruments of the state (central government and local municipalities) were still weak at their very beginning of their formal experience, the building industry, the free market economy and real estate profits became the major stakeholders in defining the spatial environment. This meant that they directly influenced the planning strategy and structuring of planning laws reflecting the changeable need of building speculation, thus making them completely unstable and impermanent. As a result, since the 1990s building regulations in Macedonia, the actual engine behind any spatial transformation, have changed more than twenty times which means that sometimes they have been performed even several times per year (Zakon za prostorno..., 2013). Skopje as a major city is a role model of such a planning reality.

This spatial impermanence which has had an enormous impact on the social dynamics of the city is deeply inherited and historically rooted in Skopje. Especially, in the last hundred years when the city was constantly treated as an urban visionary test-ground, where the model of a tabula-rasa has been confronted by each successive ideological and political regime or belief system where previous approaches and developments have usually contested and denied by each successive regime. In a typo-morphological sense the initial spatial references in Skopje could be traced from the medieval remnants of Byzantine fortifications, further layered with an urban tissue of oriental origin,

converting itself under permanent modernization throughout the 20th century. So that the picturesque Camilo Sitte planning at the beginning of the century, was introduced to the recognizable remnants of the Ebenezer Howard garden city, only to be followed by the early modernistic attempts of Miljutin's rational linearity revealing the mechanical creation and functionality of the city, successively recognized in plans for Skopje made by Dimitrie Leko, Josif Mihajlovich and Ludek Kubes (Bakalcev, 2004).

The period after the Second World War is marked by three distinctive occurrences that have had a direct impact on the socio-spatial character of the city of Skopje. The first one is the extensive migration of people into the city from the rural areas of the country. The second one embodies the strong urbanization of the city that subsequently began at the end of the Second World War and has continued in the aftermath of the highly destructive earthquake in 1963. The third and the last period that still deeply influences the socio-spatial structure of the city refers to the change of the political system following the break-up of Yugoslavia.

### **Urban Voids – Genealogy of Contemporary Space**

The current global reality of the liberal capitalist market economy has also contributed to the already complex spatial condition of Skopje as a vibrant city in transition that emerged as a result of socio-political change. Transition in Skopje recognizes two key aspects that further influence its spatial character. The first aspect has been the introduction of a loss of provision by the state as a result of the general political and economic shift, whilst the second aspect refers to the impact of the market economy on the processes of creating a competitive and speculative environment. As an effect on the spatial level Skopje faced an enormous shift from public to private land ownership that further deconstructed the general balance between the public and private realm and its contribution to the urban quality of life. The situation was, as such, supported by an absence of legislative control that would have prevented the pressure of privatization on the public space. The most obvious examples of this change of the use of space can be traced in the erasure of open public areas and their conversion through building initiatives. Furthermore the inability to maintain existing free green space directly impacts on the quality of the environmental condition. The aim of this chapter is to acknowledge the importance of open public space for the city through the phenomenon of the *urban void* as such.

Thus, the notion of *urban voids* in this chapter appears as a tool that is part of the broader strategy for the city and refers precisely to the open space in the abovementioned contemporary urban context. The essence of understanding the spatial notion of an *urban void* lies in the smooth sensibility it possesses in explaining the multiple natures of the imaginary deliria of the contemporary city. Empty space or the absence of space which the *void* offers is actually building the reality with the non-architectural presence. In the twin brotherhood of politics and economy in which the society of late capitalism is saturated with messages, symbols, emblems and images of hidden significations, it is exactly the hollowness of the blank, empty space itself that is becoming a possibility, as a new superstructure of the city. The *void* is not about the lost that should be simply replaced and in-filled again by something else, but it is the actual existence in itself of a kind of post-architectural city. It holds the character that can preserve the spatial qualities of the place which on the other hand is simply being lost by the extensive re-building or re-planning of an emptiness in contemporary urban environments.

The latent modernity incorporated in the character of the *urban void* is revealed in its nature that can support a bigger congestion in the meta-spatial structuring of a certain *place*, thereby revealing a density more frequently than any other physical presence does. Hence, the *void* is a ready-made product, a field of hidden potential capable of generating programmatically even greater and denser urban conditions. The *void* is prepared to open itself up and accept the condition of hyper-reality as part of the current need, ready to immediately offer and transform itself.

The city is a network, and like any system it is responsive to its surroundings. The spatial *urban voids* are contextual phenomena. Their presence emerges directly as a result of the spatial regulation and planning of their surroundings. Namely, they are spatially designated only when the immediate areas around them are spatially regulated, or more precisely over-regulated (Doron, Dehaene & De Cauter, 2008). Therefore *urban voids* are coded as places of the in-between, or the 'planned' city. In other words, places which are not defined by means of the existent planning strategy for the city. Their nature of being, with the emergence and existence of being 'out and beyond' the system of planning, designates their non-utilitarian and transformable character. As such they represent places of resistance toward the domination of the present culture of consumption in today's highly materialistic society. The novelty of the *void* reacts on the tendency of the global. This relationship is like the camouflage concept in nature, where embracing means to sustain and survive.

## Urban Voids – Local Challenges vs. International Experiences

As we indicated previously in this chapter the tendency towards over-regulation and spatial control of traditional ways of planning in market driven economies leads to the evaporation of open urban space (*urban voids*) and a diminishing of public activities in cities that are in transition. Furthermore, such an urban development produces new spaces for the sort of consumption and economic proceedings that aspire to replace social activity and interaction. In addition to that, citizens are being seen and treated as mere consumers rather than as active participants and creators of their own living environment.

The urge to regulate and urbanize every piece of land results in the complete erasure of vacant lots which are the only reserve of free space inside the territory of the city. On the contrary, this chapter underlines the importance of free space as a model that challenges the turmoil of cities in transition. In order to identify the creative and strategic potential of *urban voids* we point out three examples of unoccupied urban areas in Skopje where the existent quality of the 'vacant' is not recognized as a spatial resource. Furthermore, we draw a parallel with three other cases and project initiatives in three different European cities which have taken place over the last decade in which existing *urban voids* are considered as valuable resources for the urban development of the city and open completely different planning approaches engaged with the quality of the 'emptiness' of the *void*. In that sense the concept of *urban voids* argued for in this chapter is closely related to the notion of *terrain vague* described in an essay by the Spanish architect Ignasi de Sola-Morales, as an empty and abandoned space in which a series of occurrences have taken place, but also as a space that assumes the status of fascination- the most solvent sign with which to indicate what cities are and what our experience of them is (De Solà-Morales, 1995). The concept of *terrain vague* or *urban void* for that matter is based on understanding vacant spaces as a hidden potential and precious opportunity for creative and spontaneous interventions in contrast to the predictable (over)programmed and (over)regulated places in our cities.

Although urban voids could be found in the most subtle breaks in the dense urban tissue, this chapter focuses on the large scale ruptures that appear as part of a reprogramming and requalification of existing capacities, whether due to the change of ownership, land use, or the transformation in political and economic conditions. The cases exposed in this chapter refer to the requalification of industrial, agricultural and military areas in the 'post'-era of a contemporary urban context.

In this research we recognize three model principles under which the *urban void* could operate on the level of strategy. The recognition of the spatial tactics of the *revaluation*, *re-evaluation* and *preservation* of land as a tool for the rethinking of planning activity actually represents the socio-spatial impact of the strategy of an *urban void*.

Firstly we will explore the urban voids that appear as a result of abandoned industrial capacities due to changes in the production line or market reorganization, taking the example of the former Treska furniture factory. Located in the broader central area of Skopje, the former industrial plot covers less than 10ha (fig.1), and it is surrounded by a densely populated residential area. The factory has been out of work for the last decade, but due to its central location the area it covers is used for various purposes related to small-scale businesses, varying from storage and light industry production lines to office space.

The planning proposal (Institut za urbanizam soobrakjaj i ekologija, 2013) for this area changes the land use and converts the existing industry into housing blocks, thereby erasing any possibility for a *revaluation* of the surrounding area (fig. 2). What this proposal does is following the model of the surrounding buildings with no critical examination of the origins of the built morphology and spatial practices and no creativity and vision in overcoming the problems that already exist in neighboring sites, caused by an extensive densification and an inherited yet hardly adequate infrastructure. Therefore it is expected to contribute only in producing a more complicated and devastating situation and the further decline of open space per capita as a general tendency in the city of Skopje (Reactor research in action, 2013).

In opposition to that we argue that the former Treska factory site, being located within such a dense residential area, has enormous potential as an urban void that would *revalue* the district and the city as a whole. Numerous international cases go in favor of this statement, one of which being the former iron and steel works in Dortmund suburb of Hoerde, Germany (fig. 3, fig. 4). The pioneering new Phoenix development (fig. 5) spreads on a much wider surface (200 ha) compared to the Treska site, which makes it also a much more difficult and uncertain task in terms of finance and politics. Namely, the fact that the whole ecologically devastated landscape resulting from long term heavy industry usage has been transformed into a new urban landscape working hand in hand with nature, thus creating a whole new living and working experience (fig. 6, fig. 7).

Although much more complex and extensive, the Phoenix development generally evolves over the Phoenix Lake as an urban highlight, or an oasis in the city which was made possible after dismantling factory buildings and a variety of processes with regard to the decontamination of the soil in the eastern part. That is accompanied with the site intended for new industries in the west which has been transformed into a hi-tech park for micro and nanotechnology, IT, production technology and sector-related services (Mager, 2010). Notwithstanding the indisputable prosperity of the technology clusters for startups as well as the attractiveness of lakeside housing, on this occasion we would stress the effect the new Phoenix development has over the existing urban structure. Not only that the Hoerde district has added new leisure impulses from its 'natural' landscape, but also that it has been revitalized by new businesses, shops and events which stop the phenomenon of shrinking as Hoerde was an explicit case of a shrinking city less than a decade ago. On a larger scale the city of Dortmund has reclaimed lost urban areas and injected them with a new life and vitality that is raising the value of the district down to the scale of each housing or working unit. It speaks of *revaluation* as a truly sustained structural change.

What the detailed urban plan (DUP) for the Treska site anticipates, can be seen in action on an entirely diverse location - at the Eastern fringe of the city of Skopje, where the Aerodrom settlement meets the Lisiche semi-rural areas. Here, we are referring to a territory of approximately 30 ha mostly (over 90%) agriculture land accompanied by detached housing (fig. 8). The green open-air fields with the highest soil quality had been actively used for agricultural production until a new plan was imposed (Institut za urbanizam soobrakjaj i ekologija, 2010) completely erasing the site-specific lots and substituting food production with housing blocks and a new shopping center (fig. 9). During the last three years, 25% of the proposed developments have been realized with building activities still going on at the time of writing. The outcome is altogether a different condition that has no relation with the previously active agricultural tradition, but shares the real-estate logic whereby landowners are being transformed from cultivators into mere consumers.

We argue that it is necessary to recognize the spatial, economic and social qualities of the site before acting upon it, which calls for a *re-evaluation*, alongside a profound reconsideration of the need for such pervasive building activities when generally-speaking the population of Skopje is actually shrinking (State Statistical Office, 2002).



On the other hand, Berlin is an exceptional example of a European city that has been marked by population growth during the past few years, mainly due to new incomers, which has resulted in an increasing number of individual households. One of the biggest urban development projects aimed at responding to such a demand for residential units is taking place on the ground of the historically important site of the Tempelhof Airport in the southern downtown area of Berlin (fig. 10).

The Master Plan *Tempelhofer Freiheit* (fig. 11) illustrates the strategic basis for the future development of urban districts in the tradition of a typical European city. Located on the outskirts of a central park landscape in conjunction with the airport building, the *Tempelhofer Freiheit* development presents an opportunity for combining residential and commercial sites along with culture/leisure activities in a special site with a unique identity. The project of Tempelhof Park forms the very core of the entire site's development. It will not be 'developed', but rather will remain an ecologically important open space in the middle of the city and simultaneously act as the driving force behind the careful structural and architectural development at the park's perimeter belt (Tempelhof Projekt GmbH, 2009).

The proposed plan is the outcome of a long process of interim use and represents the epitome of participatory planning, in which interim and creative uses are directly integrated into planning the future of the park. In other words, when the Airport was shut down for flights in 2008, it was opened to the public as a park while the planning process was going on. Given the opportunity to participate (pioneer and use), people were creatively using and developing the site: from biking and rollerblading on the perfectly flat runways, with BBQ and picnic zones in the grass, alongside camping out with family or friends, and taking evening walks, or working on community garden plots scattered between the two runways.

The participatory approach involved cooperating with more than twenty years of spontaneous and informal temporary use of undeveloped land that has been typical in many parts of Berlin. But as the notice board at the entry of the park points out, Tempelhof Park marks the first phase pioneering and interim use as being specifically integrated into the planning process – as the driving force behind a procedural and participatory approach to urban development. Thus, through processes of *re-evaluation*, the airport ground that was separated from the city for 100 years is now growing together with the city and its citizens.

The last example that we will examine in this chapter concerns the controversial plans for new developments taking place on the territory of a

former military area as in the case of the Skopje military base at Ilinden and the one in the bay of Pula in Croatia.

The Ilinden military facilities in Skopje (the largest in Macedonia) span an area of almost 100ha that spreads on the border line of the inner city (fig. 12). The military infrastructure has been hidden in something that was taken for being a natural landscape although it had strict restrictions regarding access. With the recent shift in military practice of the state and Macedonia's application for NATO membership, those vast lands were given back to the city and local municipalities and immediately put on the drawing board, providing the state and institutions of local governance with the opportunity for turning what was once a piece of wilderness within the cityscape into yet another building site.

According to the detailed plan for urban development of the site (Agencija za planiranje na prostorot na RM, 2011), the former Ilinden base is to be transformed into a new residential area, ranging from single family housing through to social housing, up to high-rise (80m high) residential buildings, followed by commercial and administration facilities, and services in the sphere of education and culture (fig. 13). Although announced almost three years ago this mega-development has since ceased to be realized, mainly because of the high cost of land (Valjakova, 2014). The Government is ready to reconsider the rate, but it comes as a surprise that no one has thought of reconsidering the very plan itself which does not offer anything special in comparison with other so-called elite-residential developments which already exist in the city (Zlokukani, Olimpisko selo, Sonce Grad).

Keeping in mind the previously elaborated examples in this chapter, we argue for one more possible way of dealing with *urban voids*, namely the spatial tactic of *preservation* as a planning tool that would protect the site from the harmful actions of colonizing and imposing form and order and thus turning the wilderness of the landscape into the uniformity of the prevailing cityscape.

Coming from a similar cultural and political background, the case of the former military area in Pula follows a similar tendency. By the demilitarization of the restrictive area that has cut off the city from the sea for 100 years, the city has finally been given the chance to reconnect with the sea (fig. 14). Nevertheless the latest developments that the official planning system is proposing are intended primarily for expanding tourism (fig. 15). Despite the general description of proposed projects as public space these new developments tend to privatize the area and once again cut the citizens of Pula off from the seaside in the name of the great tourist industry as the leading

engine of late capitalism. Under these circumstances, in 2006, an informal group of architects and concerned citizens of Pula (named the *Pulska Grupa*) started up the Katarina 06 project with the main goal of creating a strategy for the revitalization of the bay, above all relating to public interest and local needs. By means of recognition, re-appropriation and the defense of common urban spaces, the project, or even better, the Katarina 06 movement attempts to develop a bottom-up model of planning as a reaction to the top-down planning methods used by the state. In such decision-making processes temporary uses are of primal importance, given that the revitalization of a former military zone is to be founded on planning through utilization (Jurcan, Mladinov, Percic, & Strenja, 2006).

The extensive discussions between municipal authorities and citizens raises a great challenge to re-inventing the sea-side for other activities besides tourism being the obvious one. Whether it would be extension of the University facilities or a program that reinforces the local fishing tradition, the citizenry is striving to *preserve* the openness of the Pula shore so that the city can be reconnected with the sea as in its present condition after the process of demilitarization. *Preserving* the existing condition would mean keeping the process unfinished – fulfilling the concept of an *urban void* with endless possibilities, and making the approach of an open end a valuable planning strategy.

### **Conclusion**

The context of growth and transformation in dense and contested urban environments as described on the case of Skopje are not exclusive to that particular city, nor to the region but are rather the results of the general condition of rapid urbanization which is expected to continue over the next few decades. Cities worldwide are constantly faced with transformation processes rooted in economic growth or the decline and demographic fluctuations that greatly affect urban infrastructures which become a major issue in the sphere of politics, planning and design.

In the vibrant environment of market driven globalization and its urban consequences there is an obvious necessity for the reassessment of a city's resources and potential. What the current planning practice exposes is a clear tendency to fill up every open space, and to continually densify the built environment in the name of urbanization and progress in what are understood as quantitative rather than qualitative properties of cities as living

environments. Moreover the community has been marginalized in planning and decision-making processes which are dominated by capitalist forces. As opposed to that position this paper aims to challenge a sustainable, healthy and livable urban environment both in economic and social terms where *voids* are not at all empty but full of potential, places where life is not at all absent but on the contrary- where lively (urban) relations are being created.

While local experiences as shown in this chapter on the case of Skopje speak for an explicit neglecting of potential of *urban void* as an urban strategy, we reveal international urban redevelopments that seem to be going through similar transformation processes, but where the transitory stage of the place is playing a crucial strategic role in rethinking the process of urban planning and decision making as well as redefining the public space.

Although acknowledging the value of spatial *urban voids* leads to understanding their existence as a workable urban strategy, the reality still holds open the question whether we are capable of accepting such spatial indeterminacy as a constitutive part of urban morphology and whether we are able to grasp the opportunity to creatively imagine and program space without architectural presence. Raising this question is especially important in the contemporary urban condition of intense building and extreme density on the one hand, and the shift of a city's public realm towards the 'privatization' of space, on the other. We argue that in the ambiguous and transitory conditions of contemporary society, the concept of an *urban void* represents a dialectical amalgam that bridges public and private interests and critically rethinks the role of community as a ground that provides a common good and brings back the ethical dimension of the city.

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Fig. 1 Treska factory area Skopje, existing situation 2013 (Google maps)

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Fig. 2 Treska factory area Skopje, DUP Bunjakovec 2, 2013  
([www.opstinacentar.gov.mk](http://www.opstinacentar.gov.mk))



Fig. 3 Iron and steel works area Hoerde-Dortmund, situation 2002 (Google maps)



Fig. 4 Iron and steel works area Hoerde-Dortmund, situation 2006 (Google maps)



Fig. 5 Phoenix Project for Hoerde-Dortmund, 2010 ([www.phoenixdortmund.de](http://www.phoenixdortmund.de))



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Fig. 6 Phoenix Project for Hoerde-Dortmund, 2010 ([www.phoenixdortmund.de](http://www.phoenixdortmund.de))



Fig. 7 Phoenix Project for Hoerde-Dortmund, 2010 ([www.phoenixdortmund.de](http://www.phoenixdortmund.de))



Fig. 8 Agriculture area Novo Lisiche Skopje, situation 2006 (Google maps)

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Fig. 9 DUP Gorno Lisice UE "A" Skopje, 2010 (aerodrom.gov.mk)



Fig. 10 Airport Tempelhof Berlin, situation 2006 (Google maps)



Fig. 11 Tempelhofer Freiheit\_Master Plan, 2013 ([www.tempelhoferfreiheit.de](http://www.tempelhoferfreiheit.de))

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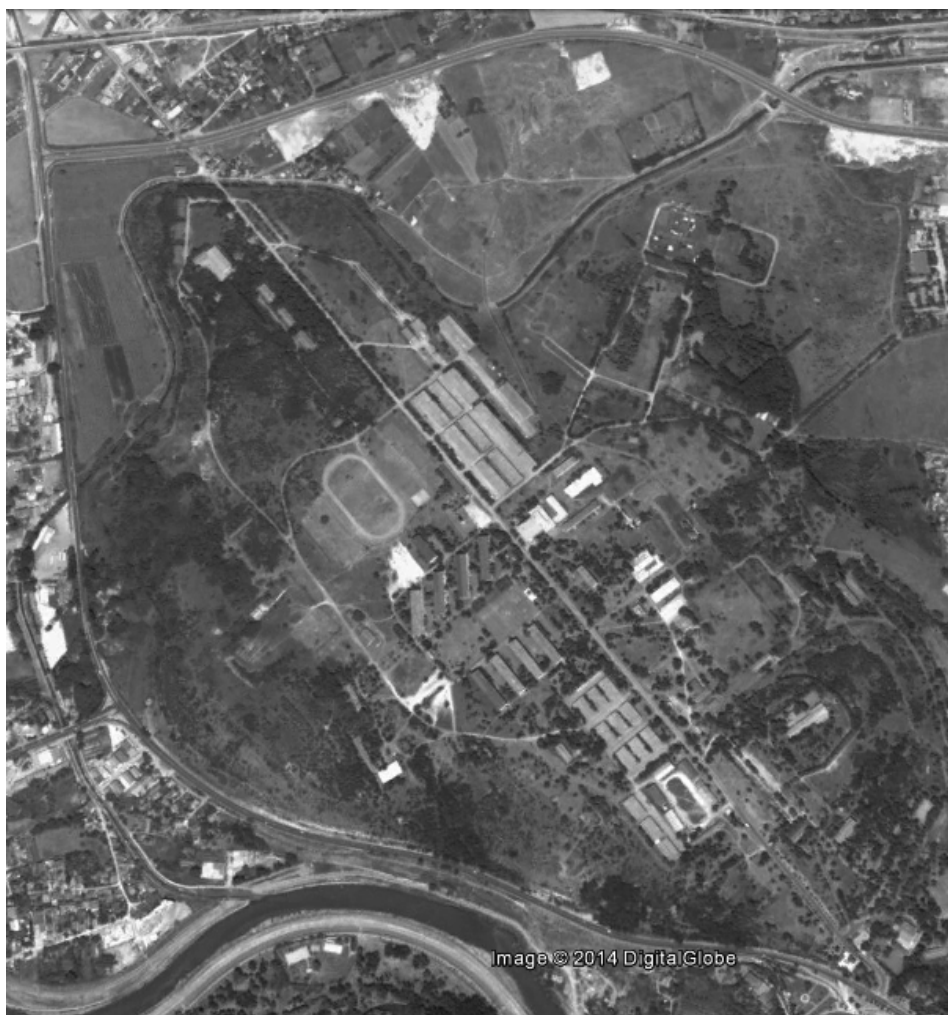


Fig. 12 Military area "Ilinden" Skopje, existing situation 2013 (Google maps)



Fig. 13 DUP Kasarna "Ilinden" Skopje, 2011 ([www.karpos.gov.mk](http://www.karpos.gov.mk))

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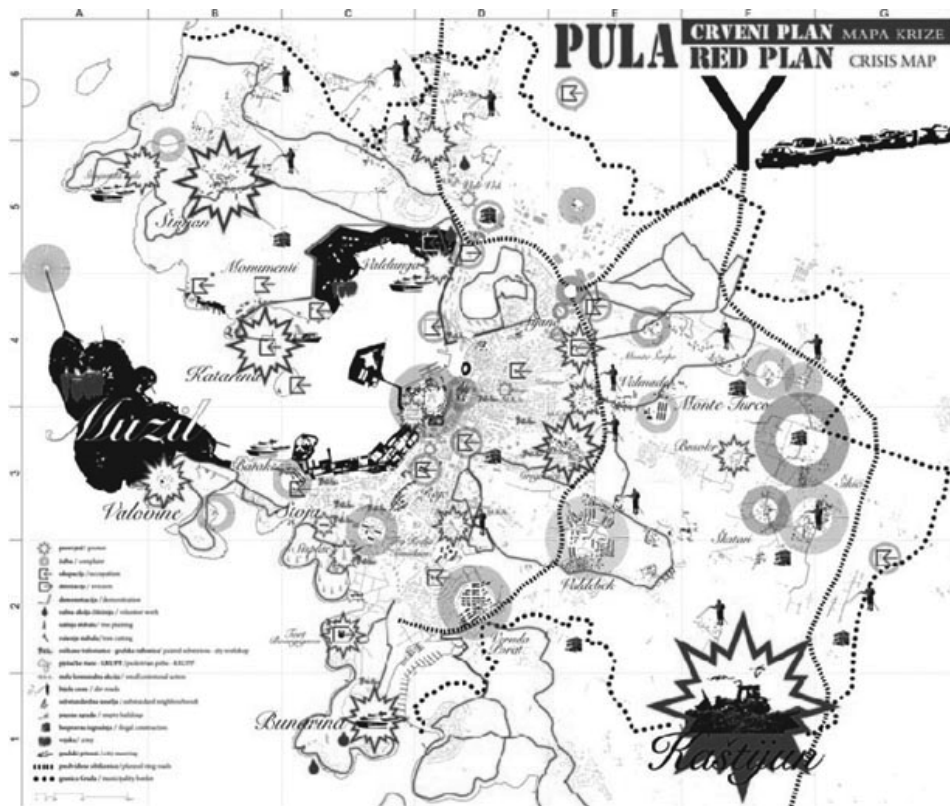


Fig. 14 Military area in relation to the existing city of Pula, 2006 (Pulska Grupa)



Fig. 15 New developments for Pula seashore, 2011 (De\_Arhitecten Cie)