

REGENERATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA'S MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY: HISTORY, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

Arbresha IBRAHIMI ¹

^{1*} *Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering,
International Balkan University – Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia
e-mail: arberesha.ibrahimi@ibu.edu.mk*

Abstract

Historical, socio-political and environmental factors have had a major impact on the establishment and functioning of the Natural History Museum in the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM). Founded in 1962 by Dr Stanko Karaman, the museum has been a focal point for the preservation, research and exhibition of the country's biodiversity. However, the 1963 earthquake decentralised the institute and led to a restructuring of its operations and infrastructure. The current state of the museum highlights the struggle to balance modernisation with the preservation of history, architecture and the urban landscape. Despite its ideal location in the Skopje City Park and its proximity to the zoo, the museum unfortunately coexists with its surroundings. To address this problem, urban regeneration, including financial, social and urban architectural sustainability, is necessary. Through urban regeneration, the museum not only strengthens and highlights its historical significance, but it also has the potential to serve as a catalyst for strengthening institutional, managerial, educational and cultural partnerships. This research examines the history of the museum, identifies its current problems and suggests solutions for its socio-cultural regeneration through architectural redemption and urban regeneration.

Keywords: Museum of Natural History of RNM, Cultural Preservation, Urban Regeneration, Socio-Political Influence, Institutional Sustainability

1. Introduction

The Natural History Museum in Skopje is one of the museums located in the city of Skopje, which was founded to preserve and present the vast natural diversity of the Ottoman lands, the geological past and the diverse biodiversity. But, despite its importance, the museum has had a difficult journey over the years, especially difficulties with the architectural structure, outdated infrastructure and the need for modernisation. This research examines the present and future of the Natural History Museum in detail.

2. Literature review

The Natural History Museum in the Republic of North Macedonia reflects the region's political climate and architectural evolution. The museum's architectural style reflects the architectural changes observed across Skopje and is shaped by the dynamic interaction of cultural and political changes.

In 1912, the Kingdom of Serbia succeeded in capturing Skopje during the Balkan Wars. Following the end of World War I, Skopje was incorporated into the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The name of this new kingdom was Yugoslavia. The National Museum in Skopje was founded in 1914 as a result of their ambitious efforts. According to a study by Bacheva, Mihajlova, and Bogoeski (Бачева, et al., 2015, p. 7), the items that were gathered and looked at were shown as part of Serbian identity, focussing on

demonstrating the historical connections between Macedonia and Serbia and arguing that the Slavic-Macedonians actually come from Serbian roots. Most of the museums that emerged during this particular time period focused on the study of history, archaeology, and anthropology. This emphasis was consistent with the notion that any falsehoods or mistakes made today would eventually be taken for granted in the future. The establishment of the academic and archaeological Museum of Southern Serbia may have been brought about by the use of a particular technique (Миљковиќ, 1982). This tactic led to the establishment of the museum on the Kurshumli Hotel's grounds in 1924. The museum grew during the course of three years (1982–1983), adding additional sections for biology, anthropology (sometimes called anthropogeography), and religion (petroglyphs). A significant gift from Dr Stanko Karaman helped construct the RNM's Museum of Natural History (Природонаучен музеј на Македонија, 2001). The founding of the museum was made possible in large part by Dr Karaman's rigorous study and collection efforts during the 1926 fauna discovery era in the Macedonian area (Fig. 33). The staff members remained stubbornly dedicated to their study initiatives despite the fact that these museums were frequently relocated to unsuitable places and reconfigured as museums until the outbreak of World War I. The museum became part of the Imperial Natural History Museum of Sofia during World War I (Ibid., pp. 21–50). Because of the violent conflicts that were taking place there, the museum displays were moved to the National Bank vaults. Additionally, once the occupation came to an end, some artefacts were taken to the museum in Sofia, while others were evacuated to nearby villages in Skopje (Миљковиќ, 1982).

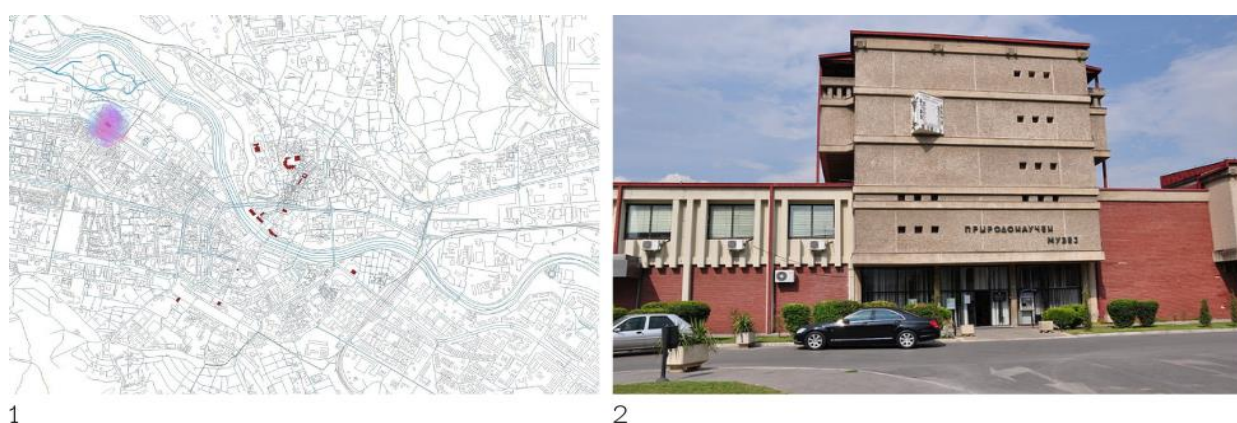


Figure 1. Museum of Natural History of the RNM (1. The location of the museum, 2. The museum current view) (Ibrahimi, 2024)

3. Research design

3.1 Critical Perspective: Like other cultural establishments in Skopje, the Museum of Natural History of the Republic of North Macedonia finds it difficult to deal with the state's continuous identity problem. The museum's objective to showcase the region's varied natural heritage is made more difficult by this situation, which is driven by political unrest and nationalistic ambitions. The museum's significance in a heterogeneous city like Skopje is undermined by institutional neglect and political intervention, notwithstanding its instructional purpose (Ibrahimi, 2024). Communities impacted by nationalist policies are further alienated by the lack of ethnic variety in its exhibitions and administrative procedures, which is indicative of a larger problem among the nation's cultural institutions. The state's funding approach, which depends on political alignment rather than cultural value, has failed, as seen by the Museum of Natural History's dropping visitor numbers. The museum's capacity to maintain its facilities and organise inclusive, representative exhibitions is directly impacted by this political manipulation.

In the end, the museum struggles to carry out its instructional mission in a city where history and identity are still up for debate, reflecting the dysfunction of the state (Ibid.).

3.2 Current State: Museums are not an exception to the long-lasting effects of the socio-ideological political climate on cultural institutions. An excellent illustration of how sociopolitical concerns have impacted not only the internal operations of the organisation but also the design and environmental integration of the Museum of Natural History in the Republic of North Macedonia. An analysis of the data reveals no obvious connections between the museum's activities and nearby establishments, such as the zoo, municipal park, and barracks stores. The Museum of Natural History appears to be cut off from the busy activities all around it. Despite being adjacent to Ilinden Boulevard, Franklin Ruzvlet Street, and the joint park with the zoo and municipal park, there appears to be a gap that hinders a seamless integration with the greater neighbourhood. This division encompasses the inner spatial structure of the museum in addition to its external limits. The museum's interior spatial layout is a notable outcome of this isolation, as it exhibits a branching circulation that impedes the museum's cohesive experience as a continuity of feelings. It is challenging to present the gripping tale that museums frequently attempt to convey due to the disjointed layout of the museum space. Geographical fragmentation is a symptom of a broader societal issue where cultural institutions may face marginalisation or a detachment from the everyday lives of the people they serve (Fig. 2). To solve these socio-political concerns, a holistic approach is required that goes beyond mere rearrangement of physical space. It demands a reassessment of the museum's role in the neighbourhood, one that actively engages in the sociopolitical discourse of the region and cultivates deep connections with its surroundings. By doing this, cultural institutions might play a critical role in fostering mutual understanding, bridging divides, and creating a more cohesive and interconnected society (Ibrahimi, 2024).





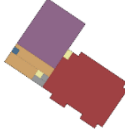


Figure 2- Museum of Natural History of the RNM, analysis of the museum's location and the surrounding area, as well as its circulation system, architectural layout, floor plans, and images. Photos of existing conditions- source of materials from the archive of the North Macedonia Museum of Natural History (Ibrahimi, 2024)

3.3 Redemption process: A crucial component of the architectural renovation of the Museum of Natural History of the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM) is ensuring spatial coherence through a variety of flexible techniques. When a museum room's layout, organisation, and structural makeup are carefully thought out and intentional, it becomes

coherent. Enhancing visitor involvement, promoting deeper knowledge, and establishing a cohesive and friendly atmosphere are the main objectives of this coherence. Beyond the museum's boundaries, spatial coherence affects the interactions between natural and cultural aspects in the larger setting. As a major gathering place and a driving force behind the continuous transformation of the city, the Museum of Natural History is essential to Skopje's identity. The spatial dualism of the museum is manifested through its architectural design as well as its historical representation of scientific and cultural development. Based on Michel Foucault's (1984) theory of heterotropy, dynamic interactions within the museum are generators of spatial heterotropy (Fyfe, 2006, p. 35) (Çalışkan et al., 2019, p. 31). The museum's potential for reinterpreting social norms under architectural spaces and social integration across a wide range of times, civilisations and ideologies fosters the museum's potential for regenerating alternative living universes within the museum space. It is an essential strategy that a range of activities are simultaneously included in the museum, with an emphasis on cultural and social inclusiveness and interests. This integration is a powerful regenerative weapon within the natural history museum to address current environmental issues. This integration is similar to the Japanese art form of kintsugi, a method that involves the harmonious union of different architectural, urban and cultural aspects. The tensions and transformative processes resulting from socio-cultural, identity and environmental crises have a direct impact on the interaction between the natural history museum, its exhibits and its visitors (Table 1). The connection between nature, society, culture and architecture, brought together by self-reflective interpretations, abstract techniques and the poetic and tectonic approaches of the exhibitors, is a method of redemption. In a society facing environmental and social issues, the concept of museum regeneration becomes crucial in order to promote social cohesiveness, question conventional museum interpretations, and attain spatial tranquillity. This revolutionary approach is anticipated to have a substantial influence on public resources, improving the space's complexity and vibrancy while also serving as a catalyst for urban revitalisation. It promotes interspatial movement and the adaptive utilisation of space by facilitating rhizomatic development. The museum's renewal method guarantees the production of places that are both temporary and accumulative by incorporating glocalisation—the mingling of local and global cultures, traditions, rituals, and social activities. These areas will be flexible, fostering the development of innovative, interdisciplinary methods. Reviving urban identity requires controlling these spatial processes, sometimes referred to as heterotopias. The Museum of Natural History adds to a vibrant, changing community experience by embracing artistic and metaphysical elements. The restoration of its architecture has enormous potential to stimulate the creation of a new and lively urban environment in Skopje, strengthening the museum's position as an important centre for culture and education.

3.4




Table 1- Application of an experimental scenario for the regenerating of the spatial composition of museum architecture to the museums of Skopje, which are part of the group of museum buildings in operation during this time – exhibition spaces, vertical communications, horizontal communication, sanitarium's, amphitheaters and administration (Ibrahimi, 2024)

Museum	View of the museum	Building form	Space composition	Spatial configuration	Architectural redemption
Museum of Natural History of the RNM					

3.5 *Museum as generator* : Skopje's broken urban fabric might be transformed by the Museum of Natu

3.6 ral History of the RNM through a strong synergy between nature, culture, and public life (Table 2). This is why it is being positioned as a generator. The museum has a rare chance to spearhead a regenerative development model that fosters environmental responsibility, re-establishes people's connection to nature, and fortifies cultural identity because of its location next to the City Park and the River Vardar. Political manipulation, poor environmental integration, and fragmented planning have long plagued Skopje's urban growth. These elements have lowered the quality of public spaces and led to a lack of a cohesive identity. The Natural History Museum is located in a space where the architectural and natural environments merge and where visitors can reconnect with the local ecology, history and each other. This landscape is the continuation of an educational, entertaining, ecological awareness project that can be created through the integration of the museum with the city park and the Vardar River. This urban regeneration will not only affect the improvement of walking as a daily behaviour and the urban beauty of Skopje, but also this extended area will become a living museum, a path of environmental and intellectual development. With this strategy, the museum becomes more than just a physical structure; it becomes a driving force for urban sustainability. This conversion integrates nature monitoring, gardening, ecological walks, nature exhibitions, climate education seminars, etc., which are some of the examples that offer regenerative potential. These encourage involvement and fortify the residents of Skopje's common identity based on cultural continuity and environmental responsibility. Additionally, the museum may establish a standard for inclusive and multidisciplinary urban initiatives as a catalyst for social and spatial change. New forms of accessibility—not only physical, but also cognitive and emotional—are made possible by its interaction with the city and environment. Multisensory experiences, interactive storytelling, and cutting-edge technology may increase the museum's appeal to a wider range of visitors and serve as a platform for creative museum design and public involvement. The museum's curriculum and strategic position can promote collaborations between public institutions, educational institutions, non-governmental organisations, and the creative industries, which can have a wider urban influence. The surrounding region would be transformed into a thriving ecological and cultural zone—a new hub that creates identity, economics, and quality of life—by this networked approach to urban regeneration. In the end, making the RNM Museum of Natural History a generator means giving it the authority to actively create a more resilient, inclusive, and environmentally connected urban future in addition to conserving the past (Ibrahimi, 2024).

Table 1- The development of four integration models for the museum's setting (Ibrahimi, 2024)

Museum site environment- Model 1	Museum site environment – Model 2	Museum site environment- Model 3
		
Museum of Natural History of the RNM	Museum of Natural History of the RNM and part of the city park	Museum of Natural History of the RNM, city park and part of River Vardar

4. Results

If the redemption process is carried out, it is expected that the RNM's Museum of Natural History would successfully blend in with its surroundings. This will make the most of the museum's infrastructure, historical relevance, and prime location inside a city park. By doing

this, the museum intends to actively engage in initiatives pertaining to environmental sustainability, urban planning, and restoration while also making a substantial contribution to research on biodiversity, education, and cultural enhancement (Fig. 3) (Ibrahimi, 2024).

The ability to blend in and blend in with the environment:

- **Use of Historical Legacy:** Utilise the rich historical legacy that stretches back to the early 1900s and is found in the collections and scholarly studies that Dr Stanko Karaman has put together to attract tourists who are curious about the local animals. Utilising the cutting-edge museum complex, which was meticulously planned by renowned architect Trajko Dimitrov, provides the opportunity for infrastructure growth. Numerous features of the facility, such as study rooms, repositories, and social and exhibition areas, all contribute to the entire experience of visitors.
- **Strategic Alignment:** Benefit from the excellent position within a city park, which blends in perfectly with the zoo nearby. By providing a distinctive and all-encompassing educational experience, the aforementioned position greatly advances the institution's overarching objective. Policies that promote participation, coordination and continuous efficiency in museum administration are more than necessary. in order to reduce the risks of decentralisation and passivity.
- **Disaster preparedness:** It is a necessary strategy considering that Skopje is a seismic zone and considering the previous experiences from the 1963 earthquake, where the city did not even possess a strategy for the reconstruction of key institutions.
- **Financial sustainability:** a strategic financial plan is necessary to ensure the long-term existence of the institute, both in terms of management and research.
- **Joint ventures:** institutional cooperation with educational structures, other cultural structures and other organisations to support and enrich the research process to improve the interpretation and exhibition of exhibits.
- **Increasing community involvement:** Promoting and integrating visitor contact, not only with the museum and exhibits but also with the city park and zoo. This has a direct impact on the visitor experience at the museum. It is simpler to combine urban planning and regeneration when the museum's distinctive features—such as its numerous projects pertaining to urban planning, regeneration, landscape design, green technology, historical preservation, and social responsibility—are used. By making it easier for indoor and outdoor spaces to merge together, these activities greatly aid in the development of a distinctive city identity.
- **Redemption Process:** In keeping with the museum's dedication to urban renewal, take advantage of the redemption process to breathe new life into the neighbourhood and offer a chance to add elements that bring vitality back to the region.

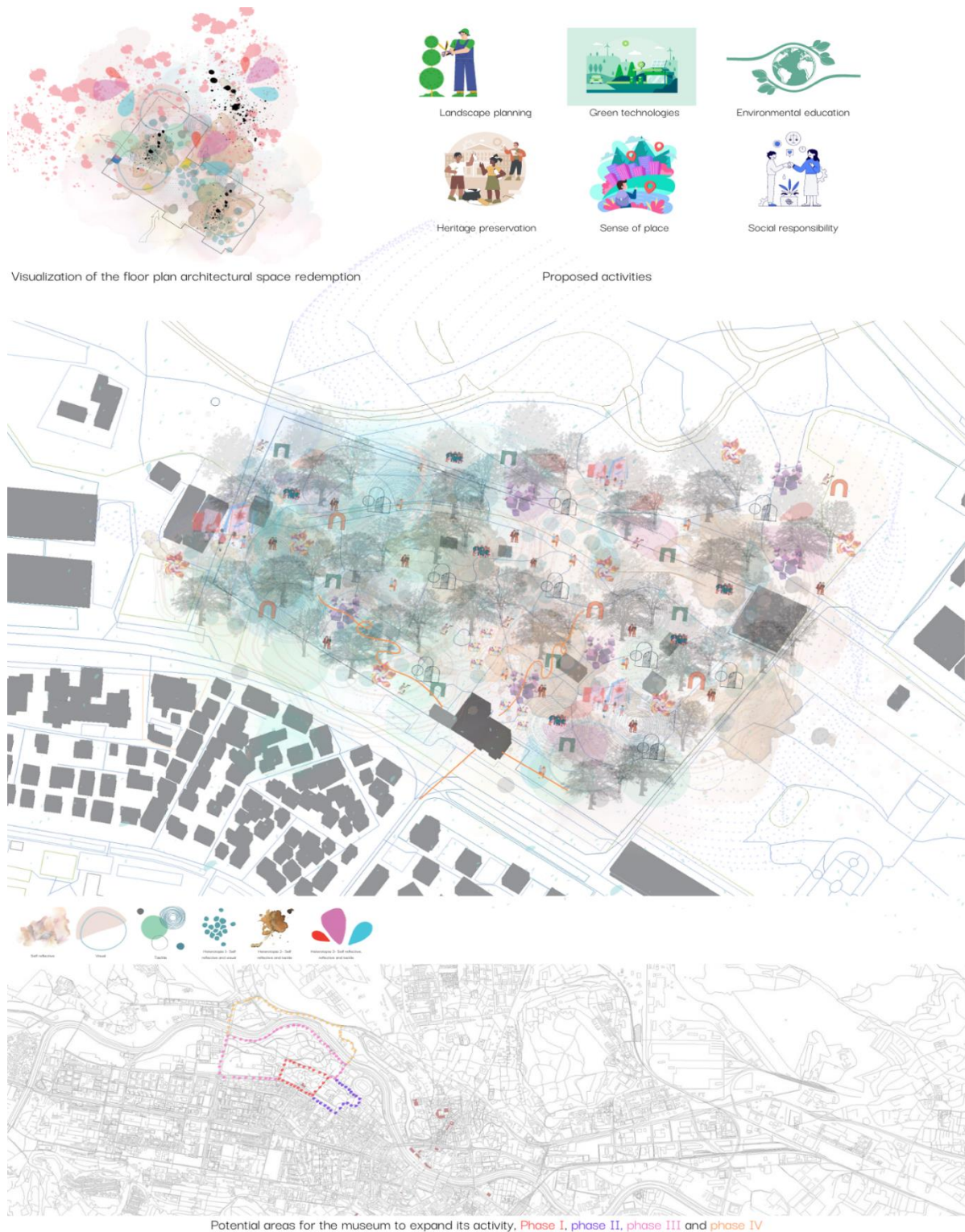


Figure 3. Visualization of the potential of converting the Museum of Natural History of the RNM into a generator of Skopje's identity (Ibrahimi, 2024)

5. Conclusions

The redemption of the Museum of Natural History in the Republic of North Macedonia is a call to balance the past and the future, as well as a task. This study has shed light on the museum's complex historical background, contemporary architectural and conceptual fragmentation, and sociopolitical entanglements. The museum represents the country's larger historical and cultural

storylines, from its inception to the tenacity displayed in the wake of the earthquake and political changes. Its promise is yet unrealised, nevertheless, because it is both geographically and symbolically isolated from Skopje's social and urban structure. More than only physical changes are needed to revitalise this institution; the museum must be rethought as a welcoming, instructive, and culturally vibrant environment. The museum may become a heterotypic cultural centre by implementing intentional spatial reconfiguration, institutional reform, and community participation. These strategies should be based on historical awareness and guided by modern ideas like heterotopia and spatial coherence. In addition to giving the museum its former prominence, this makeover supports Skopje's larger urban renewal and underscores the importance of cultural institutions in forming memory and communal identity.

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