



## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the process of national identity formation and change. In order to do so, theories of 'narrative identity' [Ricoeur 1991] and 'invented traditions' [Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983] are used to address issues related to emerging national causes [Castells 1997], transitional countries [Szondi 2007] and EU integration [Pieterse 1991]. The main focus of this paper is the use of built environments as a signifier of national identity, alongside other signifiers such as the language, flag, emblem or anthem. While the expressive power of built environments as a signifier of social, economic or political authority during times of prosperity is widely recognised in the literature [Castoriadis 1987; Zizek 1989; Mayo 1996; Sudjic 2006; Sklair 2010], their role during times of political crisis (such as during times of critical national restructuring) has not been fully studied or theorised [Diamond 2003; Kaika 2010]. This paper contributes to this discussion and argues that built environments (e.g. urban planning and design, architecture, and monuments), when used as a form of national propaganda, can help a nation to define its identity and can project the nation's vision for the future. A particular case that will be examined includes Macedonia and the controversial 'Skopje 2014' government-funded project for the redevelopment of the Skopje city centre.

The argument will be presented through qualitative theory that incorporates hermeneutic and semiotic analysis of gathered information. This means that I will be (a) interpreting information from a historical and theoretical perspective, and (b) analysing the examples referred to, by assessing the connections between and complexities that arise from the interplay of architecture and politics. Furthermore, I will adopt an interpretative/positivist methodological approach that builds systematic and explanatory theory with concepts grounded in data generated from qualitative studies.

## Issues of national identity

One of the most complex issues for social science theory is the process of national identity change. According to Venn [2002], this issue has taken up residence on every agenda that has to do with culture, difference, power, lifestyle and subjectivity. The issue of the subjectivity of national identity is particularly interesting to explore from the perspective of place branding and public diplomacy. For example, Jaffe and Nebenzahl [2006] argue that a nation's image and identity are comprised from the subjective perceptions that people have about their nation. People's beliefs, ideas and impressions create mental images that may or may not be congruent with objectively defined attributes of the nation. In other words, the projected idea of 'reality' does not have to exist in order for the people to form a mental image of it. Social scientists in general agree that a nation is defined more in psychological and emotional terms than through more tangible characteristics. According to Smith [1986], there are six basic characteristics that constitute the identity of an ethnicity: (1) a collective name, (2) a common myth of descent, (3) a shared history, (4) a distinctive shared culture, (5) an association with a specific territory, and (6) a sense of solidarity. Oommen [1997] agrees and argues that these characteristics can also be used in the context of a nation. Venn [2002] contributes to the discussion and argues that various events, interactions and critical moments in history continually influence the process of formation and change of identity. According to Venn, this process applies equally to individuals and collectives (nations). At the end of each process of re-figuration, nations and their people have different and new kinds of stories to tell about themselves, and they are, in a sense, no longer who or what they were before [Venn 2002, 32–33]. Venn bases his argument on Ricoeur's theory of 'narrative identity' – an identity based on a fusion between history and fiction [Ricoeur 1991]. In addition, Venn argues that individuals are characterised precisely by the fact that they invent stories, or rather narratives, as a form in which various events can be configured, communicated and kept as memories. At a later stage, these memories become part of their identity [Venn 2002, 34–35]. In this case, the same analogy can be applied to a nation (a collective memory). Seen from this perspective, it can be argued that national identity is neither permanent, continuous nor a fixed entity; instead, national identity is a fiction that people choose to believe in.

There is a global tendency for nations and cities to construct new images and new identities for themselves. This process of societal transformation has been characterised by a shift towards immaterial and experiential stimulation, which has led the nations to seek ever more stimulating experiences in order to remain competitive as cultural, tourist or business destinations. While some have looked for inspiration in their history, others have transformed in such a way that they have erased many traces of their heritage and have reached out to visions of the future as an alternative. Such transformations are usually manifested by symbolic actions and endorsed by intense marketing campaigns. Supported by new or existing cultural narratives, these major transformations have been reflected in the practice of place branding and public diplomacy in an attempt to attract attention, capital, residents and tourists [Jensen 2007, 212]. There are times, however, when new identities need to be constructed for entirely different

reasons. According to Smith [1986] and Castells [1997], the world is filled with passionately espoused 'national' causes raised by nationalities that have no territory of their own, or by states that contain more than one national identity within their borders. During times of critical national restructuring, some of these nationalities have become independent and have formed new nation-states. In the process of their transition, these countries have invested in new names, new flags, new rituals and new traditions.

Human beings, both as individuals and collectives, are identity-seeking animals. According to Oommen, the idea of belonging and having an identity does not wither away – when old identities disappear or recede, new ones are invented and constructed [Oommen 1997, 35]. This phenomenon can best be observed in the formation of new postcolonial Asian, Pacific and African countries, as well as with the former Soviet Union republics and post-communist Eastern European countries. However, in many cases the problems of creating a meaningful national identity are almost overwhelming, especially for new countries whose borders have been carved without any regard for tribal, cultural or even geographical factors, but merely as a political compromise between two or more major colonial powers.

The change of country names, such as Rhodesia becoming Zimbabwe, and of capital city names such as Salisbury to Harare, is based on symbolism. Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe and other postcolonial African leaders were inventing new traditions in order to create new nation-states and to reinstate pride in an African past that had been taken by the colonisers. The same pattern can be seen across the world. Sometimes looking deep into the past, and sometimes trying to create something completely original, the 'new' leaders of the 'new' nations have commemorated their new identities with large-scale stage productions representing historical or legendary events, especially local ones. In these scenes or representations the veracity is less important than the spectacle itself [Olins 1990]. What these leaders had in common with every other leader of every new regime in every new country was the intuitive understanding that people need to belong. Many of them also understood that a nation must first be defined in the mind of its people, and only then in legal terms. Therefore, many new nations have made conscious attempts to develop new, or bring back long-forgotten, identities in an attempt to create a feeling of distinctiveness, pride and unity – and to show the outside world that they are truly sovereign states. In this process, many 'new' countries invested heavily in building new national monuments (and bringing down old ones), introducing new government buildings (or restructuring existing ones), erecting large-scale statues and monuments, and opening new museums, memorial centres, power stations, steel mills and dams whose symbolic value is infinitely more significant than their functional or economic utility.

On some occasions, national identity changes can be extreme, as in the case of Turkey. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, in 1923 Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (an Ottoman army officer and one of the Young Turk revolutionaries) established the modern Turkish Republic and became its first President. His reforms to transform the former Ottoman Empire into a modern, westernised and secular nation-state radically changed the socio-cultural fabric of the country. He introduced a new alphabet (by replacing the Arabic script with Latin), new clothing (western clothes instead of oriental), a new name for the nation (Turkey), and a secular rather than religious state (while the Ottoman Empire was predominantly Muslim, any religious influence was removed from the state) [Kemming and Sandikci 2007].

Other excessive changes of national identities can be seen when radical, totalitarian leaders place the construction of their personality cults ahead of national identities. Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union, Benito Mussolini in Italy, Kim Il Sung in North Korea, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq are some of these leaders who have successfully merged their personality cults with their countries' national identities and made them inseparable – at least as long as they were in power [Muratovski 2010].

A particularly interesting and not widely documented case is that of post-Soviet Turkmenistan under the rule of Saparmurat Niyazov. Niyazov, in an attempt to build his own personality cult and to make it inseparable from its country, commissioned a string of grandiose and peculiar memorials and buildings to be erected in the capital Ashgabat. These buildings include the Arch of Neutrality, on top of which stands a giant golden statue of himself that rotates 360 degrees every 24 hours following the sun so that during the day it is continually bathed in golden rays, and Central Asia's largest mosque – the Mosque of Turkmenbashi's Soul, which is a reference to himself, as he is also known as Turkmenbashi, the 'father' of the Turkmen people. These memorials are simply testaments to his power as a ruler. They are accompanied by many other mega-buildings of unidentifiable architectural style, such as the Ministry of Health, the Independence Monument, the Earthquake Memorial and the Ashgabat Trade Centre (also known as Five Legs) [Rowat 2008]. Then again, Niyazov's personal ambitions and demonstrations of power have not been affixed solely within the architectural domain. Cities, airports and even a meteorite were named after him. His book, the *Ruhnama* – a collection of his thoughts on Turkmen identity, history, and destiny – was required reading in the curriculum of schools and universities, and it even serves as a 'spiritual guide' in mosques. In addition to this, Niyazov named some of the months and days of the week after himself and his family and introduced increasingly personal laws, such as a ban on young men wearing beards and long hair, and a ban on make-up for female news reporters and anchors [BBC News 2006].

## Identity by design

The development of national identity in a modern context embraces a complex network of disciplines pertaining to social behaviour, marketing, communications, research, and always design in various forms. Even though design is

not always the primary or the central element in this process, it is usually the primary means by which the identity is presented [Olins 1995]. For example, the flag, the emblem, coins and bills, the postage stamps, government buildings, and military and police uniforms are some of the visible national identity elements that need to be created and require design expertise. Other obvious and recognisable ways in which national identity is presented, or rather enacted, can be seen during various national ceremonies, when the nation and its symbolic attributes are elevated in public display. Various governments and regimes throughout the years have resorted to the creation of new traditions as an attempt to establish continuity with a 'suitable' (desirable or subjective) historical past, or to commemorate moments of national significance. In highly choreographed performances during such events, the military, the police, marching bands, government ministers, honorary officials, and various functionaries and dignitaries work as a cast of actors carrying out specified manoeuvres. Such theatrical events are mainly developed as a display of legitimacy, power, military might, and the institutional apparatus of the nation-state [Muratovski 2010].

According to Hobsbawm [1983], ritualised ceremonies that aim to depict the historical grandeur of ancient empires re-emerged during the era of nineteenth-century Romantic nationalism (especially between 1870 and 1914), along with the erection of national monuments, establishment of museums, collections of folklore and canons of national literature, the instalment of public holidays, and the 'scientific' classification of cultures and races. With the use of carefully designed and orchestrated 'occasions', specific costumes, a rigid order of events, pseudo-antique carriages, and artefacts associated with ancient rituals, such proceedings are intended to symbolise timelessness. Such actions ground a nation in history by implying continuity with the past, thus symbolising community, legitimising the current state authority, and inculcating an aura of tradition. Then again, when it comes to public ceremonies, nothing appears more ancient and linked to an immemorial past than the pageantry surrounding the British monarchy – yet the modern form that is present today is the product of the late nineteenth and twentieth century [Hobsbawm 1983, 1]. The effect that the British monarchy has achieved, in such a remarkably short time if seen from a historical perspective, is so great that, with the possible exception of the Papacy, no head of state is surrounded with more public ceremonial and popular ritual than Queen Elizabeth II [Cannadine 1983, 102]. Such 'invented traditions' – as Hobsbawm [1983] describes them – seem to be devised by almost all nations. According to him, invented traditions are a 'set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past' [1983, 1–2]. Furthermore, it can be said that there seem to be three overlapping types of invented traditions: a) those that establish or symbolise social cohesion or membership of groups (real or artificial communities); b) those that establish or legitimise institutions and status or relations of authority; and c) those whose main purpose is socialisation, inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour [1983, 9]. Today, invented traditions embodied in manifestations such as independence days, presidential inaugurations, flag raisings, the singing of anthems, religious occasions, funerals of important figures, military parades and quasi-archaic customs are common events across the world and tend to follow the same pattern year upon year, inscribing history on space [Edensor 2002, 72–73].

World leaders throughout history, whether intuitively or consciously, have understood that an effective identity manifested symbolically in visual or tangible form not only makes the nation recognisable, but it also serves as the first level of communication between the nation and its people [Olins 1990]. Many historical key figures, from Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, to Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolf Hitler, understood only too well that national identity is not a static phenomenon and that identity could be pre-defined, managed, designed and communicated in such a way as to serve their immediate political needs. In the process of inventing identities, more important is the invention of the emotionally and symbolically charged signs of 'club membership', rather than the dry statutes and regulations of the 'club'. In this context, the national flag, the national anthem and the national emblem are the three key elements through which an independent country proclaims its identity and sovereignty. These symbols, significant precisely because of their undefined universality and symbolism, command instantaneous respect and loyalty. If constructed with an emotional appeal in mind, they can in themselves reflect or re-create the entire background, thought and culture of a nation [Hobsbawm 1983, 11]. However, the role of architecture has rarely been examined as a key part of this process [Kaika 2010].

## **Architectural propaganda**

In a never-ending historical cycle, countries and empires have built monuments, temples, buildings of symbolic or political importance, and new capital cities (or reconstructed existing ones), in an attempt to demonstrate their power, claim a right to a territory, establish a national identity, or express their visions for the future – often in salute to existing political or religious powers. While architecture as propaganda can praise or mythologise the past when used for revivalism, or promise a better future when used for socioeconomic development, it can also pave the way for expanding political authority, regional dominance, cultural superiority or nationalism [Mayo 1996, 81]. While the spectators of this 'theatre of progress' [Koolhaas 1994, 13] often assume that this is a true testimony of power, the reality can often be somewhat different.

According to Diamond [2003], there are numerous historical examples of newly established elites using architectural propaganda to conceal their lack of real power. Some of the earliest examples of this can be seen in Ancient Egypt with the Great Pyramids of Giza. The largest of the three pyramids was erected by the Cheops dynasty – an early

Egyptian dynasty. With a base area of 5 hectares, a height of 146 metres and a mass of 6 million tonnes, at the time this was the largest single building erected in human history – and for over forty centuries it remained the tallest. This, however, was not because Cheops commanded more resources than any other leader in history; it was because he needed to create an illusion of power. Some of the later Egyptian dynasties were more powerful than Cheops's, yet they did not feel the same need to monumentalise their power. They dramatically reduced the scale of their pyramids and invested their resources in other ways: launching long-distance trading expeditions, military campaigns of conquest, maintaining big garrisons, constructing fortresses, irrigation works and ship channels – all of which were far beyond the capabilities of Cheops. Ancient Egypt was not alone in using architecture for propaganda purposes: Mexico, Peru and Japan have similar examples. The Pyramid of the Sun, built by the Teotihuacan civilisation in the Valley of Mexico, was never matched by the later Aztec Empire which was much more powerful. Instead, much like Cheops's successors in Egypt, the Aztecs invested in long-distance trade, outlying colonies, military conquest, garrisons, intensive agriculture and crafts production. The story is similar with Peru's earliest state – the Moche – and with Japan's first state – Yamato. The Moche built Peru's largest pyramid, the House of the Sun (*Huaca del Sol*), yet their more powerful successors, the Chimu and the Incas, who enjoyed unquestioned actual control, never saw a need for such ostentation. Instead, the Incas constructed a vast road system, storehouses and irrigation canals, and invested in their military capacity. Yamato's Emperor Nintoku constructed the largest kofun (a megalithic tomb in the form of a large, keyhole-shaped earthwork mound) in Japan. As this structure was built in the early years of the Yamato state, the kofun had no other purpose than to impress Yamato's neighbours [Diamond 2003, 891].

Similar patterns can be seen throughout history. Castoriadis, in *The Imaginary Institutions of Society* [1987], describes architecture as essential in sustaining the socio-political fantasy of each historical epoch and its elites. Castoriadis argues that iconic architecture produced during times of national restructuring can be seen as part of a wider system of signifiers and symbols (such as language, territory, flag, anthem, coat-of-arms, public discourse and so on), necessary for producing new national identities, or reinventing existing identities. Architecture produced within this context contributes to the configuration of the new order and institutes new significations for societies and institutions [Kaika 2010, 458]. Sudjic holds a similar opinion, that architecture developed in this context becomes an 'instrument of statecraft' [Sudjic 2006, 8]. Along the same lines, Zizek [1989] argues that architecture can become more than just an objectification of the patron's desires. If symbolically developed, architecture can be used as a tool for 'teaching' society what to desire, and how to desire it. While the most obvious examples of architectural propaganda can be found in imperial, totalitarian and colonial societies of the past, Kaika [2010] and Sklair [2010] argue that the practice is still in use today.

A most recent example of this can be found in the Middle East. Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Qatar have ventured into ambitious architectural campaigns in an attempt to improve their images and the world ranking of their cities [Fattah 2007; Ouroussoff 2007; Walker 2010]. While Abu Dhabi and Qatar are using architecture as a sign of their economic power, Dubai is using built environments as a 'fix' for its economy [Kaika 2010, 458]. Even though Dubai commanded the least financial resources of the three, it commissioned the grandest projects of them all. Unfortunately for Dubai, projects such as the world's tallest skyscraper (Image 1), the first luxury underwater hotel, the world's most luxurious hotel (Image 2), and an artificial archipelago of private, residential islands – the biggest development of its kind in the world (Image 3) – caused an opposite effect by draining the state budget and bringing the country to economic collapse instead [Jana 2006]. This in turn forced Dubai to seek financial assistance from its wealthier neighbours to complete at least some of the planned projects [Lewis 2009; McIntyre 2009].

At the same time, in another part of the world, the Republic of Macedonia presents an equally ambitious attempt to reinvent its national identity through the use of architectural and monumental propaganda – but for entirely different reasons and done in an entirely different manner to that used in Dubai.

### Skopje 2014, Macedonia

In Macedonia, in an attempt to strengthen the nation's identity and portray the nation's vision, the government under the leadership of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski uses architectural and monumental propaganda on a grand scale [The Economist 2010]. In an ambitious and almost uncanny revivalist attempt, the government has commissioned the reconstruction of the entire central district of the capital city (Skopje) in a quasi-baroque style. On 1 February 2010, when the government announced 'Skopje 2014', as they have called the project, their opening words were: "Remember the look of the capital's centre today. It will never be the same again" [Nova Makedonija 2010]. The project included the commission of over thirty statues of historical figures (Image 4), a wax museum dedicated to the Macedonian struggle for independence (Image 5), new theatre (Image 6), new archaeological museum (Image 7), a constitutional court (Image 8), Crystal Palace-type domes on top of Parliament House (Image 9), an Arch of Triumph (Image 10), and a colossal statue of Alexander the Great (one of the largest statues in Europe) (Image 11), among the rest. Not only has each of the new buildings been given an instant 'heritage' look, which is neo-classical or





baroque style in appearance, but the surrounding buildings that were built in a modern 1970s style have also been given a similar-looking 'facelift' by incorporating



baroque elements on their facades (Image 12). In addition, in order for the 'look' to be complete, the



government has ordered the replacement of the ordinary single-platform public buses with a new fleet of custom-made, vintage-looking double-decker buses (Image 13) [Taleski 2011]. The hastiness of this project, conducted

without proper consultation with architectural historians and urban designers, has led to some unusual initiatives such as the commissioning of a baroque-inspired multi-storey car park [Smilevska 2010] and a baroque-inspired Ferris wheel [Denkovska, 2010]. What historical references the architects and the constructors will try to use for these structures remains to be seen. The overall project is due for completion in 2014.

The reasoning behind the architectural style that the Macedonian government fosters is questionable. While it appears to be a common practice for nations to look forward in stylistic terms when they try to establish themselves or their cities on the world stage (e.g. Bilbao, Singapore, Taipei, Kuala Lumpur, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Qatar, Shanghai and Beijing), Macedonia is clearly doing the opposite. However, the government claims that there are two key reasons behind this behaviour: a) defence of the national identity, and b) EU integration [Arsovska 2010]. In turning to the past, Macedonia aims to strengthen its national identity, which has been in crisis since Macedonia's independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, while at the same time presenting itself as a quintessential European country that 'naturally' belongs in the EU, regardless of how artificial this may look. This is also in alignment with the city council's ambitions to position Skopje as a European capital [Vreme 2010]. In this case, Macedonia clearly looks backwards in an attempt to revive its 'lost' history by inventing a new identity infused with history and fiction.

This architectural transformation becomes even more intriguing if the city's history is taken into consideration. In a curious twist, a fake neoclassical city is being built on top of what used to be a twentieth-century ultramodern city that was built on top of an original neoclassical city. In 1963, a devastating earthquake destroyed between 75 and 80 per cent of the city. At the time Macedonia was part of Yugoslavia, and after an extensive debate on whether the city should be reconstructed as it was, or rebuilt entirely, with Marshall Tito's explicit approval a decision was made that Skopje should be rebuilt as a utopian, futuristic metropolis. In an international competition, the Japanese architect Kenzo Tange, famous for his award-winning urban plan for Tokyo, was selected to apply the same design principles to Skopje [Tange and Kultermann 1970]. This was also the first time during the Cold War that western and eastern nations joined forces under the banner of the United Nations General Assembly, and so Skopje became known as the 'City of Solidarity' [BBC News 2008]. In a true utopian spirit, different nations from all around the world joined forces and reconstructed the surrounding suburbs of the city in contemporary variations of their own national styles, while selected architects constructed some of the most dominating examples of futuristic architecture in the central district. Particularly impressive works are the Macedonian Post Headquarters, the Macedonian Telecom, the Government Building, the Skopje City Shopping Centre, the State University accompanied by the similarly styled high-rise solar-powered student accommodation complex, the aboveground central train station designed by Kenzo himself, the Catholic Cathedral reminiscent of the works of Le Corbusier, and the brutalist style of the Macedonian Opera House which in its own iconic architecture rivals the Sydney Opera House.

Skopje 2014 is an initiative of the prime minister himself, who apparently believes that a baroque-infused neoclassical style will not only give the city a more 'European' look, but it may potentially secure him the support of the capital city residents who constitute nearly half of the country's population. For the local residents it is obvious that Skopje 2014 is based on the urban nostalgia that many older residents have for the old city of Skopje, prior to the 1963 earthquake that brought the city to ruins. Before 1963, the central architecture of Skopje was neoclassical in style (but vastly different from the proposed plan) and the city actually had genuine double-decker buses. With time, a sense of nostalgia for the 'old Skopje' has been transferred to the younger generations as well, even though they have never experienced the city as such. This imaginary reconstruction of 'old' Skopje is an illustration of what Shields [1991] calls the 'place myth'. In this myth, localities have their own stories to tell and they should communicate something that is expected of them. In other words, if a place is radically changed, a new place myth needs to be introduced – otherwise the original place myth will try to re-emerge [1991, 255–256]. Julier [2000, 125] supports the idea of the 'place myth' and argues that such myths can be appropriated and even developed in an attempt to position a city, region or even a nation against their competitors (in terms of place branding). In the case of Skopje 2014, it seems that the original place myth is still prevalent even though intense efforts were invested in the establishment of an alternative myth in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

## Fortress Europe

At first glance, it appears that there is no logic in spending hundreds of millions of Euros on a project such as Skopje 2014 that has no investment value or potential for economic development – especially for a country like Macedonia that is not rich in natural resources, and does not have a particularly strong economy. The critics of Skopje 2014 have raised this issue numerous times, with the main argument being that the money could have been better invested in strategic production facilities capable of increasing the country's exports and providing ongoing work for the country's large number of unemployed, instead of monuments and construction sites that cannot produce any real economic benefit for the country.

On the other hand, it has to be understood that transitional countries such as Macedonia are politically 'peripheral' and they rely on the moral, financial and political support of more developed regions or nations – or the so-called 'centre nations' [Szondi 2007]. In their transition, peripheral nations aspire to become centre nations and in the process they often employ various public diplomacy efforts that are aimed at justifying this 'move' and justifying (or attracting) the support of the centre nations. In the first instance, these types of activities are inner directed and they often facilitate the question of identity – Who are we? – and the question of image – How do we want to be seen by others? If the country appears to be inefficient in answering these questions in an immediate and effective manner, then their images and identities will be defined by the centre nations instead [2007, 10–11].

Therefore, the question that arises here is whether an aspiring EU member country (or 'peripheral country' as Szondi would have described it) such as Macedonia has any other alternative when facing what Pieterse [1991] calls 'fortress Europe', referring to the EU. As the EU becomes stronger and its internal borders become lower, its external borders become higher, especially for countries that do not resonate well with the 'European' identity. To an extent, this is an understandable policy as the EU already has problems imposing its 'umbrella' identity over the plethora of independent states that it represents, each with its own distinctive cultural identity. This in return includes a search for common core values and a 'European' culture. However, what is being recycled as European culture is actually a nineteenth-century 'imperial myth formation' that is elitist in nature, as Pieterse argues [1991, 5].

Modern European identity has developed an image of itself as the 'cradle of civilisation', the 'seat of reason' and the 'inheritor of the Enlightenment' – in contrast to other parts of the world that are seen as 'monocultural', 'lacking', 'impoverished' and 'unsophisticated', as Julier points out [2000, 134]. This ethnocentrism thrives on the existence of 'barbaric' others (*sic.*), usually identified as the Islamic world of North Africa and the Middle East, the belligerent ex-Yugoslavian states and the corrupt Eastern European states (even though some of them are now EU members) – as it is only in the face of such cultural diversity that the EU can celebrate its own European identity. Unquestionably, this for the EU has become an issue of 'us' against 'them' (not to go as far as saying 'good vs. evil').

In turn, this Europeanisation has triggered a 'voluntary' change even within the EU itself. For example, cities such as Leeds (UK) underwent a massive transformation as the United Kingdom integrated with the EU in 1992. Leeds transformed itself from a typical industrial Victorian city to a modern European city no different from Düsseldorf (Germany) or Rotterdam (Netherlands) – to its detriment as some architectural critics have argued [Julier 2000, 117–119]. Even large and well-established cities such as Athens (Greece) and Barcelona (Spain) underwent urban 'facelifts' in an attempt to align themselves with the expected standard of what a European city should look like.

## Hyperreality

At this stage – as an EU candidate member – it seems that Macedonia has no other alternative than to create a new identity in which the country will present itself as a 'genuine' but forgotten European state, and not as just another 'barbaric' state lurking outside the EU's borders. In this case, the use of architecture is clearly at the forefront of Macedonian national identity formation, and many of the locals enthusiastically accept this idea [Economist 2010]. There is no doubt that the same recipe worked for many of the European nations that established this practice in the nineteenth century [Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983], but can the same practice be applied today and what kind of reactions might this evoke? CNN, for example, describes Skopje 2014 as a 'theme park' [Davies 2011], and this is probably not far from the reality of the situation [see Muratovski 2013].

The problem with this architectural 'make-up' is that the originality and authenticity of the location are becoming progressively more 'packaged', resulting in the production of an imitation that exceeds the original to the point that the original no longer matters [Julier 2000, 149]. Baudrillard [1986], drawing parallels with the 'imaginary world' of Disneyland, argued that this is a hyperreality supported by an apparatus that tries to bring imagination and fiction together as reality. Even though this is clearly an illusion, according to Baudrillard [1986], the Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false. Eco [1986], on the other hand is more specific, and describes Disneyland as an absolute fake. The castles of Disneyland may appear to be real when seen from outside the walls, but once there the visitor discovers that they are made from plastic. In the same way, many people outside the walls of 'EU-land' see life within it as much better than life in their own reality. Skopje 2014 can be described in the same way. Realistically, Skopje 2014 cannot bring Macedonia into the EU but, at the very least, it can bring Europe to the Macedonians – just as Disneyland brings mythical places and distant exotic lands to its visitors.

Within this discourse we can also raise the question whether the creation of hyperreality can be justified and eventually transformed into a reality. In other words, can Skopje 2014 eventually become a success story? The short answer would be yes: a precedent exists and the 'master' of hyperreality – the Walt Disney Company – has already done it. The Disney Corporation has built a town in Florida called Celebration, which like Skopje 2014 is based on the concept of nostalgia for 'days gone by' – a time when things were better, life was easier and people were happier. Even though such sentimental longings are always based on an idealised version of the past, and not on an actual historical past, Celebration is a living concept town, with its own school and city council, and here the imaginary ideal has become a reality. This has enabled Disney to sell a 'dream come true', as their marketing slogan colourfully puts it [Jhally 2003]. With Celebration, Disney has created a 'brand nirvana' and has given thousands of families an opportunity to escape from 'reality' and live their life inside a 'dream'. The key to Disney's success with Celebration is that there are virtually no other marketing messages inside the town competing for attention [Klein 2000, 154–156]. No other brand except the brand of Celebration is allowed to engage with the town residents inside the town limits, making this a 'perfect, synergized, cross-promoted marketing moment' [Jhally 2003] – the highest level of accomplishment that any corporate brand has ever achieved. The widespread use of urban branding today (branding of cities through architecture), ranging from Beijing to Qatar, shows that this is a concept that many governments are keen to follow.

## Conclusion

According to Hansen [2010], places become popular only if they express values that are meaningful to people, and these values are expressed through narratives. In a similar manner, Jensen [2007, 216-217] argues that narratives are central to any form of urban intervention, regardless of whether this refers to regional or town planning. Narratives, as Jensen argues, are constructed to motivate and legitimise the intervention. In terms of urban interventions, narratives always have a spatial dimension. As such, they can make a geographical claim or make the place inhabitable. This is important to note, as according to Jensen, no urban plan can be made without a narrative element and a spatial referent.

One way in which such a narrative can be communicated is through built environments. While architecture can be used primarily for providing shelter, it can also be used for revivalism or it can serve as a sign of economic and/or cultural progress. Architecture can also be seen as a promise of a better future when used for socioeconomic purposes, or as a signifier of national identity. For example, Skopje 2014 exhibits a multitude of these possibilities. Through a narrative identity based on invented traditions, Macedonia has developed a new identity grounded in political crisis. In this case, the hyperreality that followed as a result is simply an unwanted effect and not a goal in itself.

In this paper, I have examined the use of built environments in the formation and change of national identities. This has been done through a theoretical and descriptive analysis supported by current and historical examples. The presented cases provide empirical evidence that national identities are neither permanent, continuous nor fixed entities, but fictional narratives that people choose to believe in [Smith 1997; Oommen 1997; Jaffe and Nebenzahl 2006], or are persuaded to believe in [Zizek 1989; Mayo 1996]. Therefore, it has been argued that with the help of built environments, national identities can be changed or altered to suit the political needs of the governing elites [Sudjic 2006; Sklair 2010]. Skopje 2014, in particular, supports this argument and provides a relevant case study that contributes to the existing literature.

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