



This journal provides immediate open access to its content under the [Creative Commons BY 4.0 license](#).
Authors who publish with this journal retain all copyrights and agree to the terms of the above-mentioned CC BY 4.0 license

DOI: 10.2478/seeur-2025-0064

THE ETHICS OF ATTRIBUTING NATIONALITY TO ARCHITECTURE

Betim Zeqiri

Faculty of Technical Sciences, South East European University

Tetovo, North Macedonia

b.zeqiri@seeu.edu.mk

ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the ethics of attributing national identity to architecture, focusing on how built form becomes a medium of cultural representation. While architecture often reflects collective memory and tradition, assigning it an exclusive ethnic or national label risks obscuring its pluralistic origins and shared authorship. Through theoretical reflection and firsthand experience, the study explores how monuments, motifs, and civic spaces can be appropriated into political narratives, often undermining inclusivity and nuanced interpretation.

Drawing on global examples and nationalist framings in the Balkans, the paper highlights how identity becomes embedded in form, reinforcing symbolic boundaries. Particular attention is given to Skanderbeg Square in Skopje, where its transformation from an inclusive civic platform to an ethnonational site illustrates the fragile balance between cultural specificity and public function. This case reflects wider trends in which public space is instrumentalized to serve dominant narratives.

The paper argues for reflective design practices that engage with history and culture without collapsing into exclusivity. It calls for recognizing the layered and transnational character of architectural meaning as essential in pluralistic societies, especially in contexts marked by ethnic or political division.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative, theoretical-analytical approach combining critical literature review with reflexive case-based analysis drawn from the author's professional involvement, offering an original ethical perspective on architectural representation in multicultural contexts.

Keywords: Architecture and identity, cultural representation, ethics of representation, public space and symbolism, shared heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Does architecture have a nationality? This question, while seemingly rhetorical, exposes a deeper conflict at the intersection of cultural representation, power, and ethics. Architecture is often labeled with national terms such as “American architecture”, “Albanian architecture”, or “Japanese architecture”, implying a direct correlation between a nation’s identity and its built environment. However, the notion that architecture can possess a fixed nationality is far more complex, and such categorizations often obscure the richness of architectural diversity.

Architecture evolves through cultural, historical, and environmental exchanges. For instance, traditional Japanese architecture, with its emphasis on wood, minimalism, and harmony with nature, is commonly tied to Japanese culture (Fazio et al., 2008). Yet Ottoman-era buildings found across the Balkans, from North Macedonia to Albania and Greece, reveal a shared architectural heritage that transcends modern national boundaries (Kuban, 1974). These examples demonstrate that while architecture may reflect local contexts, it is rarely confined to the political constructs of a single nation-state.

Architectural styles and techniques have historically spread across regions, shaped by trade, migration, colonization, and global intellectual currents. Baroque architecture, though Italian in origin, became a dominant style across Europe, evolving uniquely in each region (Blunt, 1978). Similarly, the global reach of Bauhaus modernism illustrates how design ideologies resist national containment (Whitford, 1984).

Labeling architecture by nationality can therefore oversimplify internal diversity. It can also marginalize the contributions of minority communities or immigrant populations whose influence often enriches the architectural landscape (Leach, 1997). In some cases, this labeling serves political purposes, reinforcing narratives of cultural dominance or symbolic exclusion. A more accurate and inclusive terminology might focus on geographic, climatic, and socio-cultural contexts. For example, referring to “architecture in North Macedonia” or “architecture of the Ottoman era” preserves complexity and multiplicity (Vale & Vale, 1983).

Given these tensions, this paper asks: What are the ethical and cultural implications of attributing national identity to architecture in multicultural societies, and how can alternative frameworks promote more inclusive architectural narratives?

Through three illustrative cases, the 100-denar banknote, the Skopje 2014 project, and Skanderbeg Square in Skopje, the paper examines how architectural form and public representation are mobilized to reinforce or contest dominant narratives. The discussion is informed by interdisciplinary scholarship on identity, ethics, and spatial politics, and it evaluates how national labeling shapes inclusion, heritage interpretation, and symbolic power.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The analysis is conducted through a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in critical architectural theory and interdisciplinary scholarship. The analysis combines conceptual reflection on national identity, ethics, and spatial representation with interpretive readings of selected architectural and urban case studies.

The material for analysis consists of symbolic and spatial examples, including architectural imagery on the 100-denar banknote, the Skopje 2014 urban intervention, and Skanderbeg Square in Skopje. Particular emphasis is placed on reflexive analysis derived

from the author's professional involvement in the design of Skanderbeg Square, allowing insight into the ethical tensions between design intention, symbolic representation, and political reinterpretation.

This methodological approach enables an examination of architecture not as an isolated object, but as a cultural and ethical construct shaped by power relations, contested identities, and public narratives.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: IDENTITY, ETHICS, AND ARCHITECTURAL REPRESENTATION

To critically engage with the ethical and cultural implications of attributing nationality to architecture, it is essential to establish a theoretical foundation grounded in interdisciplinary thought. Concepts of national identity, cultural representation, and spatial ethics are particularly relevant when architecture is used to convey or consolidate ideologies in contested or multicultural environments. This section introduces the theoretical perspectives that guide the analysis presented in this paper.

Constructed nature of national identity

Benedict Anderson's seminal concept of the "imagined community" offers a foundational perspective on the nature of national identity. According to Anderson (1983), nations are socially constructed communities, imagined by people who perceive themselves as part of a group. This imagination is often reinforced through symbols, language, and cultural production—including architecture. Nationalist narratives thus gain material form in buildings, monuments, and urban plans that serve to materialize a sense of belonging and shared history.

Stuart Hall (1990) expands on this notion by emphasizing that cultural identity is not fixed, but instead a continuous process of positioning. For Hall, identity is formed through representation and difference, making it inherently fluid, dialogical, and contingent. This approach allows us to question architectural works that are labeled as "national" and to consider how these labels obscure the hybrid, multilayered origins of built forms.

In both Anderson's and Hall's views, identity is not a given attribute but a cultural and political project, making its manifestation in architecture a potent site of ideological construction.

Space, power, and representation

Architecture does not merely house social life; it shapes and reflects the power structures embedded in society. Henri Lefebvre's theory of "the production of space" (1991) offers a critical framework for analyzing how spatial practices both express and enforce dominant ideologies. Lefebvre argues that space is socially produced and embedded with meanings that serve the interests of those in power. This means that architectural forms, urban planning, and public symbols are not neutral—they are political instruments that can affirm or exclude certain identities.

In the context of multicultural societies like North Macedonia, this understanding is crucial for evaluating projects such as "Skopje 2014" or Skanderbeg Square. These spaces do not merely commemorate; they actively shape public consciousness by promoting one narrative over others. The ethical question, then, lies in whether architecture can (or should) be used to impose identity, and what responsibilities designers and institutions hold in these acts of representation.

Ethical pluralism and cultural respect

From an ethical standpoint, the imposition of singular national identities onto complex architectural heritage can be analyzed through the framework of ethical pluralism, which acknowledges that multiple cultural truths may coexist. Martha Nussbaum's "Capabilities Approach" (1999) emphasizes dignity, inclusion, and the fostering of environments where individuals and groups can flourish. When applied to architecture, this ethic entails a responsibility to recognize the layered, often contradictory histories embedded in the built environment.

In multicultural states, attributing fixed national identities to architectural elements can marginalize minority voices or oversimplify historical realities. Ethics, in this sense, is not merely about intention, it is about consequence. Who is included in the symbolic representation of public space, and who is excluded? Does the celebration of one heritage obscure the contributions of others?

By applying Nussbaum's framework, we can understand inclusivity not as a vague moral good but as a tangible architectural and representational obligation.

Critical regionalism as alternative

Finally, Kenneth Frampton's concept of "Critical Regionalism" (1983) offers a compelling alternative to both internationalism and nationalist essentialism. Frampton advocates for an architecture that is rooted in local culture, climate, and tradition while remaining critically aware of global influences. In contrast to identity-based appropriation, critical regionalism promotes contextual responsiveness without falling into the trap of nostalgic nationalism.

In the Balkans, where identity politics often shape architectural discourse, this approach encourages a deeper reflection on how place, memory, and cultural specificity can be represented in thoughtful and inclusive ways. It also reinforces the central idea of this paper: that architecture does not have to be used to promote narrow national agendas, but can instead foster dialogue, respect, and shared cultural understanding.

NATIONAL IDENTITY IN ARCHITECTURE

National identity in architecture is a complex and historically contingent concept, tied closely to processes of cultural representation, memory construction, and ideological projection. Architectural styles have often been used as visual expressions of national narratives, functioning not only as aesthetic choices but also as strategic tools in the production of collective identity. As Benedict Anderson (1983) suggests, national belonging is imagined through shared symbols, and architecture, as one of the most visible and permanent forms of cultural production, has frequently served this symbolic function.

One prominent example is the Gothic Revival in 19th-century England, which illustrates how architecture was harnessed to assert moral and cultural authority. Augustus Pugin (1836) framed Gothic architecture as a return to spiritual values lost in industrial modernity, aligning it with England's Christian medieval past. In doing so, he helped foster a national architectural language rooted in an idealized historical identity. However, John Ruskin (1849) offered a more universalist interpretation. While equally committed to Gothic craftsmanship and honesty, he critiqued narrow nationalist appropriation of styles, suggesting instead that architecture reflects broader human values transcending borders.

In the United States, the adoption of Neoclassicism after the American Revolution similarly linked architecture to national ideology. Drawing on the legacies of ancient Greece

and Rome, early “American architecture” visually aligned itself with classical ideals of democracy, liberty, and civic order (Vale & Vale, 1983). Buildings such as the U.S. Capitol and Monticello not only reflected stylistic preferences but also embodied Enlightenment values foundational to American identity (Pevsner, 1976; Fazio et al., 2008). Yet even these examples show the inherently hybrid and borrowed nature of supposedly “national” styles.

These cases highlight a central point: national identity in architecture is not an inherent quality. It is constructed, selective, and often retrospective. By elevating specific styles as “national,” other influences and contributors are excluded. This process aligns with Stuart Hall’s (1990) view that identity is not fixed but continually produced through representation and difference. What appears as architectural heritage is often a curated narrative, omitting complexity in favor of cohesion. As we move toward examining post-socialist contexts such as North Macedonia, the ethical stakes of this selective attribution become particularly visible.

THE PROBLEM OF ATTRIBUTING NATIONALITY TO A BUILDING

Attributing nationality to architectural elements creates a reductive and problematic understanding of their origin and meaning. This practice often ignores the layered, shared nature of architectural heritage, particularly in multicultural societies where identity is not singular but interwoven. A telling example can be found on North Macedonia’s 100-denar banknote, which features architectural motifs such as a window and ceiling woodwork described as belonging to “Albanian houses.” At first glance, this may seem like an inclusive gesture, acknowledging the Albanian community’s presence within the national narrative. However, by categorizing design elements within an ethnic framework, such representation risks fragmenting shared cultural space into fixed identity markers.

Architecture, by its nature, emerges from diverse cultural, geographic, and historical exchanges. Labeling a feature as distinctly “Albanian” minimizes this complexity and obscures the collective contributions that shape built forms. While the symbolic intent may be to affirm ethnic or cultural identity, the result is often a narrowing of architectural meaning, turning fluid heritage into static cultural property. Instead of fostering inclusivity, such framing can perpetuate essentialist stereotypes and deepen divisions.



Figure 1. Obverse of a 100 denar banknote. Central theme: Attic rosette from an Albanian house



Figure 2. Reverse of a 100 denar banknote. Central theme: Skopje, engraving from 1594. Window of an Albanian house

Considered within the framework of ethical pluralism and spatial representation, this banknote exemplifies how even seemingly well-intentioned acts of symbolic inclusion can reinforce rigid ethnic narratives. By privileging a national or ethnic label over historical context, such representations overlook the potential for architecture to express shared experience and cultural continuity.

Architecture often transcends borders, blending local traditions with external influences. However, in contested multicultural contexts, it can also be instrumentalized to reinforce selective narratives. A prominent example is the “Skopje 2014” project in North Macedonia: a large-scale urban intervention intended to visually consolidate Macedonian national identity. Featuring neoclassical-style monuments, facades, and public spaces, the project imposed a homogenizing aesthetic that evoked a fabricated sense of continuity with classical antiquity.

Framed as a cultural revival, the initiative was widely criticized for marginalizing the region’s Ottoman, Yugoslav, and Albanian architectural legacies. Rather than reflecting the city’s layered history, “Skopje 2014” presented a curated vision rooted in political symbolism. This approach aligns closely with Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of space as a medium through which power structures are expressed and reproduced. In this case, public architecture functioned less as an inclusive civic framework and more as a top-down spatial narrative that prioritized national coherence over pluralism.

The project’s visual language, including grand columns, imperial statues, and uniform facades, aimed to overwrite the existing urban identity with a retroactive myth of uninterrupted Macedonian presence. As such, it exemplifies how state-sponsored architectural interventions can serve ideological ends by reconfiguring the public imagination. In multicultural societies, such practices raise ethical questions not only about representation but also about exclusion, erasure, and historical revisionism. Havik (2019) similarly describes Skopje as a city of “multiple faces,” where the layering of modernist, Ottoman, and contemporary interventions is often obscured by the stage-set urbanism of Skopje 2014.

Skanderbeg Square in Skopje offers a nuanced example of how architecture and public art intersect with identity politics in contested urban spaces. The design team, of which the author was a member, pursued an “anti-design” approach that emphasized openness, adaptability, and neutrality. The concept deliberately avoided rigid formality in favor of

flexible civic use. Located adjacent to Skopje's historic Old Bazaar, the square was conceived as an inclusive platform, both physically and symbolically, for a diverse urban population.



Figure 3. Skanderbeg Square, Skopje, 2024. Left: Fragment of the central mosaic. Right: Skanderbeg Monument.

At the heart of the square stands a statue of Skanderbeg, intended as a respectful acknowledgment of the cultural presence of the Albanian community. However, a later intervention, the installation of a large mosaic portraying overt Albanian historical themes, significantly altered the space's symbolic orientation. The mosaic includes figures such as Skanderbeg and Mother Teresa, along with depictions of Albanian fortresses and landscapes. While powerful in its iconography, this exclusive focus raises important questions: Whose history is being represented and at what cost to a shared urban identity?

As Henri Lefebvre (1991) reminds us, architecture and public space are not neutral containers, but spatial texts inscribed by power. The mosaic's thematic singularity risks transforming a civic square into a site of ethnonational symbolism, narrowing its role as a unifying public space. This tension between inclusive design intentions and politicized reinterpretation complicates the ethical role of architecture in multicultural societies.

These dynamics resonate with findings by Mojanchevska (2019), who argues that public spaces in Skopje reflect not only physical arrangements but also deep-rooted symbolic struggles. Her study reveals how co-ethnic spatial preferences are shaped by overlapping narratives and exclusions, reinforcing the notion that architectural representation, when filtered through ethnonational constructs, can deepen social divisions rather than bridge them. While Mojanchevska focuses on everyday spatial practices, the case of Skanderbeg Square illustrates how similar forces operate at the representational level, particularly through state-sanctioned artistic interventions.

In this context, the square becomes a site where ethical dilemmas emerge for architects and planners working in pluralistic environments. Although the mosaic may stand as a legitimate artistic expression, its dominant narrative challenges the square's function as a space of civic inclusion. The episode deepens the need for critically reflective design practices, ones that acknowledge cultural specificity without allowing it to harden into exclusivity.

RETHINKING ARCHITECTURAL BELONGING

Architecture holds the potential to transcend the limitations of national labeling, functioning as a spatial language shaped by shared human needs and intercultural exchange. Rather than serving as an emblem of national exclusivity, architecture can operate as a medium for common values, plural histories, and inclusive futures. This perspective aligns with

Kenneth Frampton's (1983) theory of critical regionalism, which proposes a design approach that synthesizes local traditions with global influences, resisting both cultural homogenization and nationalist nostalgia.

Reframing architecture in this way shifts the emphasis from origin to contribution. The central question becomes not who architecture belongs to, but how it participates in broader conversations, about sustainability, resilience, identity, and justice. In an era of global crises and multicultural realities, attributing architecture to singular national identities obscures its capacity to unite across differences.

Moving beyond nationalist frameworks allows architecture to serve as a connective tissue between communities, not a line of symbolic demarcation. This shift calls for a more nuanced architectural discourse, one that respects cultural specificity without essentializing it and that values shared environments over bordered narratives. This perspective resonates with Havik's (2019) portrayal of Skopje as a city of "simultaneous faces," where plural narratives and contested histories coexist rather than resolve into a singular national frame.

CONCLUSION

This paper sets out to challenge the casual use of national labels in architectural discourse and practice. Through a critical reading of symbolic representations such as the 100-denar banknote and the Skanderbeg Square mosaic, it has shown how built form can be mobilized to sustain ethnic or national claims, often at the expense of architectural complexity and pluralism. Rather than denying cultural specificity, the argument has emphasized the need for greater ethical and conceptual precision when attributing identity to architecture.

These concerns are not abstract. In projects like Skanderbeg Square in Skopje, the stakes of representation are tangible and highly charged. The experience of contributing to such a project has illuminated the delicate balance between design intentions and their reception, especially in post-conflict, multicultural contexts. It amplifies how quickly open civic symbols can be reinterpreted through narrower perspectives, and how design decisions, no matter how neutral or inclusive in conception, can be appropriated for singular narratives.

The cases explored here affirm the importance of critical reflection in both the interpretation and production of architecture. In settings marked by overlapping histories and contested identities, architects must navigate not only material and spatial constraints but also symbolic and political expectations. The hope is that this contribution, grounded in practice yet oriented toward theory, offers a modest but timely provocation: that we move beyond simplified categories and attend more carefully to the fluid, shared, and often uncomfortable realities that shape architectural meaning.

REFERENCES

1. Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
2. Blunt, A. (1978). *Baroque and Rococo: Architecture and decoration*. Penguin Books.
3. Fazio, M. W., Moffett, M., & Wodehouse, L. (2008). *Buildings across time: An introduction to world architecture* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
4. Frampton, K. (1983). Towards a critical regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance. In H. Foster (Ed.), *The anti-aesthetic: Essays on postmodern culture* (pp. 16–30). Bay Press.
5. Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.
6. Havik, K. (2019). Skopje: The multiple faces of the city. *Writingplace Journal for Architecture and Literature*, 3, 58–75. <https://doi.org/10.7480/writingplace.3.4348>
7. Kuban, D. (1974). *The mosque and its early development*. Brill.
8. Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Blackwell. (Original work published 1974)
9. Leach, N. (1997). *The anaesthetics of architecture*. MIT Press.
10. Mojanchevska, K. (2019). Diversity and the difficulty of living it: The case of public spaces in Skopje (North Macedonia). *SEEU Review*, 14(2), 30–50. <https://doi.org/10.2478/seeur-2019-0012>
11. Nussbaum, M. C. (1999). *Sex and social justice*. Oxford University Press.
12. Pevsner, N. (1976). *A history of building types*. Princeton University Press.
13. Pugin, A. W. N. (1836). *Contrasts: Or a parallel between the noble edifices of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and similar buildings of the present day*. Charles Dolman.
14. Ruskin, J. (1849). *The seven lamps of architecture*. Smith, Elder, and Co.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Figure 1. Obverse of a 100 denar banknote. Central theme: Attic rosette from an Albanian house..... 134
- Figure 2. Reverse of a 100 denar banknote. Central theme: Skopje, engraving from 1594. Window of an Albanian house..... 135
- Figure 3. Skanderbeg Square, Skopje, 2024. Left: Fragment of the central mosaic. Right: Skanderbeg Monument. 136