



# Cities of the South Caucasus: a view from Georgia

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# **Cities of the South Caucasus: a view from Georgia**

# Speaking, Building, Shopping: A Social-Anthropological Approach to the Post-Socialist Condition of Tbilisi

by Madlen Pilz

# Modernisation discourse  
# Urban reconstruction  
# Citizen participation

The concept of modernisation understood as a discursive instrument for re-ordering society offers insights into the changed representation of society's past, present, and future. In my article, I review which symbolical landscapes and patterns of social differentiation get staged within the process of urban reconstruction in Tbilisi and how it is experienced by Tbilisians in everyday life. My empirical material shows a specific post-socialist pattern of urban reconstruction that differs from that generated by modernisation discourses in postcolonial contexts. In official discourses here, the socialist is constructed as the un-modern part instead of the traditional; however, everyday life contradicts the official representation because of pragmatics or the recalcitrance of people's needs. My analysis is based on ethnographic research carried out in three urban areas, starting at the periphery and ending in the city centre of Tbilisi, Georgia.

## Introduction

The point of departure in this analysis of the post-socialist/post-Soviet urban transformation in Georgia's capital Tbilisi is the concept of modernisation. In politics, as in everyday life, 'modernisation' is usually understood as describing the transformation of a society from a traditional or less modern to a (more) modern state, based on specific measures of modernisation. In contradiction to this normative notion, in critique of persisting global power relations, postcolonial scholars developed a conception of the term as a discursive instrument to differentiate and hierarchize societies on the grounds

of the construction of something as modern and something else as un-modern (Mitchell 2000). In this article, I will apply this perspective to explain the post-socialist urban change in Tbilisi and to demonstrate that the traditional<sup>1</sup> is not necessarily the counterpart of the modern, but that rather, in a post-socialist context, the socialist is often thought of as the un-modern, backward, and corrupt. The exclusion of the Soviet past took place on nearly all levels (Manning 2009, p. 924), from official representations and discourses to the urban imaginary and in the urban space. Nonetheless, the insight into urban everyday life that I reconstruct on the ground of my exchanges with city dwellers and observations reveals a somewhat different reality: the socialist constitutes an intrinsic part of the urban fabric and of people's lives.

In order to illustrate my idea, in the next section I will outline my conceptualisation of the terms 'post-socialist/-Soviet transformation' and 'modernisation'. In the main section, I will discuss different ways that the post-socialist/-Soviet material re-production and symbolic re-construction<sup>2</sup> changed public and private spaces, exemplifying these processes in three Tbilisian quarters. The socialist high-rise district Gldani was chosen for this analysis because of its absolute ordinariness, the quarter Saburtalo was chosen because of its outstanding socialist character that in many ways contradicts the official rhetoric of the 'backward socialist', and, finally, the old city quarter because it is the elective ground for the shaping of a post-socialist Tbilisian collective identity. Using the example of three Tbilisian families in these quarters—in my experience, they represent three different but typical local households—I will give insights into individual Tbilisian environments, social perceptions of the changes, as well as the possibilities of participation in the transformation; that is to say, to be actively involved in and/or to benefit materially and symbolically from it.

Against the backdrop of my empirical material, I will discuss the role of the socialist urban materiality within this process and shed some light on the kind of transformation or modernisation of the urban fabric and of people's everyday lives that took place. Therefore, my leading questions are: through which objects and reconstruction measures has transformation or modernisation entered urban public and private spaces? Which new symbolic and social urban landscapes are emerging in Tbilisi?

### Post-socialist/-Soviet modernisation

The notion of the 'post-socialist/-Soviet' has different qualitative dimensions: a) addressing specificities of everyday change; b) functioning as a category to describe the global political order; and c) acting as a scientific-political legitimisation of research projects (Vonderau 2008, p. 23). A milestone was the debate about the long-term persistence of the post-socialist as a conceptual framework that demanded a shift towards the post-socialist as a local context of a global transformation process (Verdery 2002, p. 17). Based on this, newer approaches argue to conceptualise the post-socialist as an epistemic category that, similarly to the post-colonial, is focusing on the continuous effects of different pasts, positionalities, and dependencies on recent power relations, practices, and values (Stenning & Hörschelmann

*1* I use the terms traditional, Soviet, socialist, modern or Western and Georgian to refer to the specific construction of a set of imagined and essentialised values and imagined norms which are connected with these labels.

*2* According with readings of Lefebvre, Bourdieu and de Certeau, Setha Low differentiates between the processes of spatial production and construction that are both social techniques to spatialise culture and human experience. Production means here "the historical emergence and political/economic formation of urban space", meanwhile construction entails the perception and interpretation through practices of 'social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use of the material setting' (Low 2000, p. 128).

2008, p. 317). Further developing this approach, Tuvikene reclaims the necessity to counterbalance specific global hierarchies and to de-territorialise the narrative 'post-socialism' as a regional container, addressing whole societies or cities, and rather to understand it as a focus on certain aspects of cities (Tuvikene 2016).

Departing from these discussions, I conceptualise 'post-socialism' heuristically as a specific dynamic of an accelerated process of change that means an assemblage of practices of modernisation and of distinction from the socialist/Soviet past.<sup>3</sup> In the past, post-socialist (urban) literature worked intensively on the aspect of reinventing and glorifying a pre-socialist past in Georgia and elsewhere (Borén 2009, Fuchslocher 2010). Meanwhile—and in contrast to anthropological literature—studies about 'how the "less welcomed" Soviet past resists forgetting and return to unsettle, disrupt the dominant contemporary narrations of post-socialist identity formation' (Young & Kaczmarek 2008, p. 55) were described as lacking in urban studies. The topic of modernisation was touched upon in several studies (Brandtstädter 2007; Svašek 2007; Fehlings 2014) discussing people's feelings of the loss of modernity grounded on a socialist perception of modernity and on a specific imagination of the West associated with expectations of material well-being and freedom. These accounts are grounded on a normative understanding of modernity. In order to understand the social effects of such understanding, I propose to analyse the changes through the lens of Mitchell's (2000) critical elaborations of the concept.

Mitchell describes modernity as a specific way to think about the past, the present, and the future and to generate a coherent narrative which is centrally grounded on the modern-traditional dichotomy. Based on the considerations of the colonial interaction between the 'West' and the 'non-West' elaborated by others, Mitchell describes the categories of 'modern' and 'traditional/colonial' as discursively constructed, unfolding a 'reality effect' and therewith forming powerful comparative tool of self-description: 'The production of Modernity involves the staging of differences [...] The modern occurs only by performing the distinction between the modern and the non-modern, the West and the non-West, each performance opening the possibility of what is figured as non-modern contaminating the modern, displacing it, or disrupting its authority' (Mitchell 2000, p. 26). For transferring this notion of the modern to explain the Georgian situation, some specific characteristics of the local transformation process need to be reconsidered. In order to study the local conceptualisation of the un-modern, I will focus on different practices of spatialisation and materialisation, as well as places and objects in the urban landscape and in everyday life. As I will show in my analysis, in Georgia it is not the traditional that is exposed as the backward and un-modern, but rather, the socialist/Soviet. Therefore, the Georgian tradition as represented in urban places, such as churches or the old city, was connoted with resurrection and prospects and was tightly entangled with new flagship developments. That means that both the new architecture and the national heritage formed intrinsic parts of the new/modern Georgian collective identity. Furthermore, what has been observed in

<sup>3</sup> I consider it important to differentiate conceptually between the terms post-socialist and post-Soviet. Referring to the ideological and systemic change, I use the term post-socialist; for focusing on its local and everyday specificities, I use the term post-Soviet (Milerius 2008, pp. 38-48).



**Fig.1** M. Pilz, Street scene in Gldani.

Georgia seems consistent with the view that within elaborations in colonial and post-colonial contexts, the modern—un-modern opposition is centrally aimed at legitimising new established social hierarchies (Houben & Schrempf 2008, p. 11).

#### Methodical approach: Transect through the city

The empirical data that form the ground in the following sections was collected on the ground of a mix of different methods:<sup>4</sup> in participant observations, talks, and interviews and the study of different materials like real estate sales announcements, city maps, and tourist guides. For interrelating the collected individual stories and different places, I consistently applied a kind of anthropological urban transect.<sup>5</sup> Grounded on that, I developed a heuristic kind of catalogue of global and local markers for changes in public and private spaces: (a) of building or furnishing practices; and (b) of practices of speaking about and representing different objects to decipher urban up- and downgrading, new or old trends, and lifestyles (Krebs & Pilz 2012). This forms the analytical guideline for my descriptions in the next sections.

#### Gldani: From ‘natural reserve’ to urban periphery

Gldani was constructed between 1968 and 1981 on green land at Tbilisi’s periphery. Tamuna and her family<sup>6</sup> have lived in Gldani since its early days and in several ways, they represent a quite common Tbilisian household: first, for their multigenerational structure—six persons of four generations lived in four rooms— and second, for their mix of income profiles. Two of the women were the main breadwinners in the family.<sup>7</sup> Parts of the extended family lived in Moscow and Israel and supported the family occasionally.

Gldani had a good reputation in the Soviet press: it was depicted in tour-

*4* I carried out my research between 2008 and 2012, the last years of the government of Mikheil Saakashvili. This was an incisive period in the process of post-socialist change for Georgia, as well as for Tbilisi. Under his government, a lot of trendsetting decisions were taken regarding the post-socialist/Soviet and neoliberal reconstruction of the country, as well as the urban redevelopment of Tbilisi.

*5* The idea of the anthropological transect is based on the works of Andres Duany and other members of the New Urban Planner group (Duany & Talen 2002). I carried out the walks through the city partly with the help of students from the Department of Anthropology of the TSU, therefore I am very much indebted to Prof. K. Khutsishvili, I. Pipia, and G. Meurmeshvili.



ist maps and mentioned as a project of Soviet friendship in tourist guides (Tbilisi 1981, p. 89). The high-rise district offered to new residents comfortable and healthy living conditions in a green zone. As Tamuna told me, her mother expended a great deal of effort in obtaining their flat in Gldani and to leave their two-room, underground flat in the old city. The change was perceived as a relief by the family, as it provided a more comfortable living space.

In contrast to the Soviet past, Gldani does not appear in tourist booklets and maps in the years of my research; in the official public representation, it ranged between a blind spot and critical zone. Tbilisians from other city areas emphasised Gldani's bad image in several discussions, whether for its peripheral location, its homogenous building fabric, or its high number of ethnic minority members. Tamuna also complained about the distance from the centre and the lack of cultural life. In any case, she admitted that she would not move back to the old city unless living conditions changed for the better.



**Fig.2** M. Pilz, Street fountain in Gldani.

Official and common ways to speak about Gldani changed incisively from representing socialist modernity to a negative image. In the public opinion, (socialist) modern living conditions seemed to lose their attractiveness, but, as Tamuna's statement confirms, this is not in fact true for the people living there. The upside of Gldani's decline was that flats here were affordable, which, in return, enabled multigenerational households from the central quarters to leave their overcrowded living conditions and gain more private space and comfort.<sup>8</sup>

The urban fabric of Gldani was almost of Soviet origin. Yet there were several private interventions from the late 1980s and 1990s, such as building extensions to different houses, privately fenced gardens in public areas, and benches and drinking fountains in the yards. This individual engagement was regarded as partly improving the quality of public space and partly as post-Soviet disorder. The activities of the government in the public space of Gldani were evaluated as scarce but positive, as in the case of the reconstruction of the roads, the construction of football and play grounds decorated in the colours of the Georgian flag, and the Rose Revolution Amusement Park.<sup>9</sup> Tamuna's mother loved the park's lights, describing them as heart-warming, especially when compared to the darkness of the 1990s, when electricity would be often cut-off. Tamuna commented: 'Bread and games for the poor, the Rose is a symbol of Georgia's integration into the West. It means there is hope for us. I will not condemn him [Saakashvili, *authors note*] for the park, something needs to be offered to the poor, and it helps.'

**6** All names of non-public persons are changed. The talks with Tamuna and her family were carried out between January and March 2009, in March 2010, in July and August 2012.

**7** The family lived on around 1,500 Lari (≈590 Euro) plus irregular remittances and gifts.

**8** Flats with 3-5 rooms were offered for 30-50,000 USD, meanwhile comparable flats in the inner city were offered for 100-150,000 USD, documentation G. Meurmeshvili, January-April 2009.

**9** The Rose Revolution—led by M. Saakashvili—took place in November 2003, and as a consequence of this event the former president of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, resigned. During the years of his government, Georgia turned increasingly into a failed state.

In their apartment, the kind of post-socialist reconstruction they experienced is better understood through the concept of 'low-cost consumption'. Due to their financial situation, the family could not afford a general modernisation of their flat, but they managed to repaint it and to buy a new sofa while the rest of the Soviet furniture remained in use. In the same limited way, the digital age entered their home: their mobile phones were old and counterfeit products purchased for little money. Tamuna's niece owned the first computer in the family—thanks to her father's remittances—while sometimes they received parcels with second-hand clothes from relatives in Israel. Their situation was comfortable in terms of space and stability, but it did not allow for luxury.

To sum up, in the public realm the symbolical impetus of the construction activities in Gldani seemed much higher than their functional impetus, marking the territory with the signs of the new political regime and thereby identifying Gldani symbolically as a part of the new Georgia.

In the private realm, while Tamuna's family fully benefited from socialist modernity in terms of comfort and healthy living conditions, their level of participation in the post-socialist modernisation was negligible, largely realised through second-hand or no brand-name products often financed with money earned elsewhere. The objects required a permanent struggle with the natural signs of abrasion, malfunctioning, and outdated, and therefore represented a kind of failed modernisation. Their participation through modernisation of the public realm is also limited to the necessary (roads), the symbolic (games), or to the negative (lost image of Gldani).

#### **Saburtalo: From socialist 'general urban' to post-socialist 'urban centre'**

Saburtalo's construction started in the 1930s and was continued after the Second World War. Therefore, the quarter is a very heterogeneous apartment block area with numerous buildings in the 'Empire style', as well as with different blocks from the Khrushchev period. Nowadays, it is one of the quarters with a very high and visible concentration of post-Soviet developments and with real estate prices that were among the highest in Tbilisi.<sup>10</sup> I will present the micro-cosmos of the quarter, drawing from the case of a young couple who had recently moved into the vacant apartment of some relatives who had relocated to Russia for work. Nato and her husband represent a younger generation with few memories of the Soviet past and manifold connections to the West, thanks to their jobs.<sup>11</sup>

In the Soviet period, Saburtalo was a quarter with a high representational status and, accordingly, it was included in tourist guides as representing a showcase of Soviet modernity in Tbilisi (Tbilisi 1985, pp.177-194). During the post-socialist transformation, the quarter lost its status – it no longer appears in tourist guides or maps; however, it became one of the hotspots of the urban (re-)construction. The symbolical message of the post-socialist flagship projects—in contrast to Gldani—was transcending to the urban and national scale. In everyday life, Saburtalo gained popularity, as I heard frequently from my interlocutors, because its flats of Soviet origin were

<sup>10</sup> 100-150,000 USD for a flat with three rooms, documentation G. Meurmeshwili, January-April 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Talks with Nato and her husband took place in August 2010, July 2011, and 2012.

considered to be better designed than in other quarters (Gldani) and because of its many newly emerged shopping facilities.

Highly symbolic flagship projects were built at Saburtalo's entrance, like the Heroes Monument and the Hotel Adjara. The Monument is a tower of 51 meters, representing a bookshelf, that was designed by the Spanish architects CMD Ingenieros. The marble panels put in this 'shelf' bear the names of 4,000 heroes who died for Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union from 1921 onwards. Some of the marble panels were reserved for the names of future heroes. The Hotel Adjara—a former socialist premium hotel—was completely rehabilitated and hosts one of the many casinos in the city visited by tourists from Azerbaijan and Middle Eastern countries, where gambling is illegal. Among Tbilisian residents I was talking to, the new sites were not very popular. A lot of my interlocutors were stressing how nice the old Hotel Adjara had been. Moreover, it was perceived as a sign of exclusion, as most people did not feel that they belonged to the target group. The Heroes Monument seemed completely to miss its purpose as a collective unifier. The developments turned out to be sites of dispute between the government and groups of residents about the right way to redevelop the city. Ultimately, this has to be understood as a debate about the right interpretation of Georgia's past and present.

Additionally, many changes occurred at the street level: the roads were reconstructed and equipped with a new traffic management system. At the sidewalks, a large variety of shops, restaurants, and bars was opened. Saburtalo became the shopping area for everybody in the city, as it offered products of all price segments and options for all tastes. Above street level, three different façade styles were dominant: old socialist ones, the patchwork façades of (un)authorised building extensions consisting of brick-, wood-, cardboard-filled or empty steel skeletons,<sup>12</sup> and new Western-style glass and concrete façades.

Nato and her husband decided not to continue to live with his parents and moved into the unoccupied flat of her relatives, consisting of one and a half rooms, a kitchen, a toilet, and a bathroom, and due to a building extension, a balcony of the size of a room. They fully renovated the flat, removed the greying Soviet wallpapers and afterwards, in order to save money, they just painted the walls. They took out the old carpet and kept the old parquet flooring, although some parts of it were loose. As they did not have their own furniture, they selected some of the Soviet-made furniture that had remained in the flat. For Nato, the economic reconstruction of the flat was a tactic to save money. Although both had a regular and respectable income, they were both supporting their parents, and Nato additionally paid her sisters' educational fees.



Fig.3\_ M. Pilz, Heroes monument in Saburtalo.

<sup>12</sup> Like a flat in Gldani, building extensions symbolised a strategy to compensate overcrowded living conditions and the immobility of flat-owners due to financial hardship (Bouzarovski, Salukvadze & Gentile 2011, pp. 2700-2711).



**Fig.4** M. Pilz, Shop window in Saburtalo.

The flat, as well as the reuse of Soviet furniture, was also a way out in terms of individual rights. Young couples living in the husband's parents' house<sup>13</sup> is a phenomenon of growing frequency due to increased living costs. Nato perceived it as a step backward, as a re-traditionalisation of the young women's position and of gender relations in general. During the time they had lived together with her mother-in-law, Nato had a hard time accepting to be under her control and to live according to her conceptions.

That is to say, the post-Soviet renewal in Saburtalo was introducing new materials, designs and odours, and clothes and food, which in everyday life existed side by side, thereby generating a space that, in contrast with the official rhetoric about the Soviet legacy, was not grounded on the exclusion of the Soviet as something alien or un-modern. For Tbilisians, Saburtalo is still a Soviet quarter, and the meaning of the post-Soviet flagships is not more than highly symbolic. The backdrop into 'really' traditional cultural practices in private lives and the socially exclusive character of many key symbols of the 'new modern' crisscrossed the dichotomy that was established in official discourses of the Soviet as the 'backward' and the Georgian and Western as the 'modern'.

#### The old city: From 'urban centre' to 'urban core'

Tbilisians call 'old Tbilisi' an ensemble of several quarters erected in different historical periods by different ethnical and social groups, like Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Jews, and the Russians during the imperial period. During the Soviet period, the territory was marked from the very beginning by different reconstruction activities. Therefore, the historical urban fabric of Tbilisi was a nested ensemble of local historical, Russian imperial, and Soviet-modern construction forms. Tamara and her husband were, for the longest period in

**13** Traditionally, in Georgia the wife, after the wedding, would move into the husband's house. During my research in Georgia between 2008 and 2012, I met just one couple living with the parents of the wife and I was explicitly informed about the unusual circumstance and the inconvenience the situation meant for the man.

their lives citizens, of Soviet Georgia and spent all their lives as residents of the old city and felt strongly attached to it.<sup>14</sup>

The post-Soviet urban renewal consisted of building practices like the construction of developments in a global postmodern style, the recovering of the historic building fabric and the closing-down, abandonment, and demolition of Soviet representative elements such as the statue of Lenin, shopping centres, and the IMELI (Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute). The closed and vacant buildings became so-called 'left overs of socialism' (Czepczynski 2008, p. 131). As elsewhere, this process did not remain uncontested by Tbilisians, as the case of the statue of Mother Georgia shows. In the 1990s, several public calls to remove the statue referring to her 'Soviet-ness' were made, which affected her transformation into a site of critical examination of the Soviet past as well as of the post-Soviet reconstruction.<sup>15</sup> Some of my interlocutors, due to the change of gender relations, interpreted the statue as a symbol for hardworking Georgian women, because of the conception that those who make wine are working hard, in contrast to Georgian men.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the socialist statue offered the ground for debates over post-Soviet intra-family labour relations and the growing polarisation between genders. In return, in these debates the meaning of the statue was reinterpreted and, as a consequence, the urban landscape was reconstructed in a dissenting way.

The (re)-construction of the old city involved different actors, like local private business, the state, global investors, and architects such as CMD Ingenieros or Michele De Lucchi, and International organisations like ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites). Their activities consisted of different practices: repairing, recovering, and replacing, and were aimed at preserving and/or modernising the old city, at re-nationalising it, or making it more attractive for tourists. As in Saburtalo, the construction and meaning of the new signature architecture were highly debated. Although—unlike in Saburtalo—many of the projects were for public service and to foster the new national identity, like the House of Justice or the Rike Park, some of the Tbilisians I talked to perceived them as signs of social segregation. Here, the rejection was often explained by the high costs they had for the national budget, often at the expense of social programs, and by their failure to generate an economic impact for the majority of people. Moreover, for some of these projects, old residents had to abandon their homes, a circumstance that did not help to increase their acceptance.

Tamar's house—due to the earth quake in 2002—was assigned the second level of emergency status by the city administration. In exchange for their damaged house, the owners were offered one at the outskirts: an offer that divided the house community. Some of the owners wanted to move out quickly, while others, like Tamara, advocated for waiting for a more acceptable offer in the familiar surroundings of the old city. She interpreted the offer of homes at the outskirts as a smart strategy to relocate 'normal people' from the centre and to make money at their expense. For sure, the apartment owners would lose the sense of familiarity, the proximity to important services, and the financial security that a flat in the centre represents.

<sup>14</sup> Talks with Tamara and her husband took place in August 2010, July 2011, and 2012.

<sup>15</sup> The statue of Mother Georgia of the Sculptor E. Amashukeli combines Georgian cultural elements (wine for friends, sword for the enemies, and the figure of the mother replacing men if necessary to protect the homeland) with elements of the socialist modernity: its materiality and size.

<sup>16</sup> A point of debate was that more women in contrast to men accepted work below their qualifications on the tertiary labour sector and still fulfil their household responsibilities (Talks with Nato, I. Pipia, and Ija in August 2011).



Fig.5\_ M. Pilz, Rike Park in the old city

In Tamara's flat, little had changed in the past 25 years, although their income was stable: her husband was still working while she got one pension from Georgia and one from Israel, and sometimes a little income in relation to a collaboration with a newspaper. Additionally, her children were always willing to help—they bought a new washing machine in a name-brand shop, which ran smoothly in sharp contrast to the so-called Chinese electric water kettles, which she used to buy on the market (*bazroba*) and which needed to be replaced frequently. Tamara and her husband always tried to save as much money as possible so as not to bother their children and to be able to replace their old computer models when they 'died'.

In sum, the old city is the territory with the highest number of urban renewal projects in Tbilisi. Many of the developments were perceived as exclusive, because on one side, the national budget was plundered, and on the other, because the residents were reduced to the role of spectators. In particular, private projects, like shops and restaurants, were focused on well-off consumers and tourists. In this way, tourists started to play a growing role in the re-imagining of the old city, perhaps a greater role than the common resident. This was also the case for Tamara and her husband, who felt reduced to spectators in front of the new locations even though they could rely on a stable income. Nonetheless, their household appliances and digital devices—washing machines, electric water kettles, mobile phones—might be signs of successful modernisation had they been genuine branded products. But this requires an investment that can be managed only with a good Georgian income or income generated elsewhere.

## Conclusions: the emerging symbolical and social landscape of contemporary Tbilisi

In this paper, I focused on the relation between practices, like speaking about or representing, building and furnishing or shopping, and the quality and quantity of the modernisation process in three Tbilisian quarters and in three Tbilisian households. My descriptions showed that in contrast to official political discourse about 'the Soviet', actual urban reconstruction reveals a nested pattern encompassing the co-existence of socialist, Georgian, and new forms and styles, such as functional constructions or postmodern signature architectures. In Tbilisi's public realm, the transformation advanced with different qualities and quantities, variably contributing to a new symbolic landscape throughout the city. Several state-driven developments in the urban space were catching up with global urban development trends (old city), meanwhile the significance of other projects was merely national (Saburtalo) or even local (Gldani).



Fig.6 M. Pilz, Street scene in the old city

Gldani—because of its dominant socialist building structure—can be read as a space that is still Soviet. Meanwhile, the shift of its representation—from being a modern high-rise area in a natural reserve to a downgraded area at the periphery—turned Gldani discursively into a post-Soviet space. The scarcity of new constructions and recovering works developed a symbolical impact on individual lives within the area, but no symbolical impact on Gldani's image within the city. Gldani's new characteristics (image, low real estate prices) are very typical for Western, urban, peripheral quarters under the neoliberal condition. Ultimately, this means that modernisation took place in Gldani in an exclusively discursive way, excluding it from the new 'urban national scene'.

Saburtalo—previously a showcase of socialist modernity—experienced a development in the post-Soviet period, which on the local scale meant a transformation of the quarter into an urban centre with a high concentration of functions of the urban scale (shopping area, city administration).<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, on the international scale, it started to figure as an important development area (Tbilisi Guide 2008). Saburtalo's socialist urban fabric, as well as its building extensions and bazroba, did not provoke an image of post-Soviet disorder, and the new developments differentiated Saburtalo's 'Soviet-ness' from that of Gldani and produced a post-Soviet landscape where the Soviet and the capitalist are nested in each other and the symbols of 'the national' appear as mounted symbolically on top. Hence, modernisation entered Saburtalo in manifold ways: as neoliberal capitalisation, infrastructural improvement, and westernised consumer culture, which altogether provoked the discursive effect of a modern, dynamic quarter, with people participating in the transformation as happy consumers of Western goods.

17. The classification system of the urban zones established by the New Urban Planners is a Western model and is therefore not always fitting to describe socialist cities, as in the case of Saburtalo. Due to its living and local administrative function, it would have been classified as 'general urban', thereby neglecting its national and urban importance as educational centre.

The redevelopment of the old city can be categorised as a shift in meaning from an 'urban centre' to an 'urban core'. In the Soviet past, the quarter was defined by its high mix of functions: housing and shopping on the local scale and political representation and tourism at the national and Soviet scales. In recent days, the residential function was in decline, and incipient gentrification could be observed. The old city turned into a key symbol of the Georgian national identity and into an urban brand of growing global significance. Therefore, it became a place of heated debates about the meaning of the new architecture and the emerging restriction of citizen access to many places in the old city, regulated by financial capabilities. Here, modernisation entered in a nested configuration that combined global forms and Georgian forms, excluding the Soviet as well as the common resident.

In the three households the situation, regardless of their different living places, was comparable. Modernisation did not enter here in the form of an encompassing reconstruction or refurbishing of flats. The measures were limited to scarce renewals on the ground of the manual skills of the people, shopping practices, or of objects received as gifts or remittances. The products decided the degree of factual modernisation in the flats, which could exclusively be performed by Western products from branded shops and not by no brand-name products from the markets or second-hand products. The situation, in the case of the three households I have presented, demonstrated that the degree of the flat's modernisation was independent from the income of the direct members of the household, as the income was shared between the members of the extended family. In accordance with official rhetoric, the Soviet landscapes of private spaces should be interpreted as a lack of modernity, but this view would ignore people's creativity to organise their lives on the ground of scarce possibilities. Nevertheless, building and shopping/furnishing practices in the households can hardly be called 'modernisation practices' in the normative sense of the phrase. Symbolically, they represented a kind of westernisation (branded goods) that very often was supplemented by an 'as-if' modernisation through counterfeit goods. For the modernisation/westernisation, a certain investment was needed that for many Tbilisians required a creative assembling of different income sources from in and outside of Georgia.



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## **Cities of the South Caucasus: a view from Georgia**

After the collapse of the USSR and the regaining of independence, Georgia has experienced a dramatic set of political, economic and social changes which have had marked impacts on Georgian cities that further intensified with the early 2000s, political and economic stabilization and the greater role assumed by the state in leading urban restructuring initiatives. While similar developments in some other parts of the former Socialist Bloc have attracted much interest among urban scholars, the attention towards Georgian cities has been limited. With this special issue we make a step towards bridging this knowledge gap by providing contributions on topics such as spatial hierarchies and restructuring, urban regeneration, tourism, urban memories and lifestyles. But first, the editorial text by the editors of this special issue first introduces the reader to the broader transformations in Georgia and its cities since 1991, an overview of the topics treated by the authors and some conclusive points on further research on Georgian and South Caucasian cities.

### **QU3 - iQuaderni di U3**

QU3 is a peer-reviewed scientific journal promoted by scholars working in the urban studies area of the Department of Architecture of Roma Tre University (Italy). The journal is edited by Giorgio Piccinato and has a Scientific Board of Italian and international scholars and an Editorial committee of lecturers, researchers, PhD students and department staff. QU3 provides space where current research on urban and territorial transformations could be shared. QU3 is part of UrbanisticaTre an online platform that gives researchers, PhD students and professionals an opportunity to present emerging research in a variety of media such as scientific articles, photoreportages, videos and other.