

BATHING IN LIMINALITY.

A REFLECTION TO ACCOUNT
FOR THE RESULTS OF THE
RESEARCH AND DESIGN

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This reflection is about the graduation project, *Bathing in Liminality: from Ground to Water to Buildings to Bodies*, from Luna Ghislaine van Arendonk. Which is part of the *Borders & Territories* studio, with the theme *Transient Liquidities along the New Silkroad IV*, of the Architecture Master track 2024/25 at TU Delft.

The project began with a collective research phase, focusing on power regimes and bordering practices in Tbilisi, Georgia—a city shaped by successive ideological paradigms. Our group findings showed that external/opposed forces are deeply inscribed into Tbilisi's architecture and urban spaces, since architecture acts as a physical manifestation of political agendas and cultural identity, reflecting shifts in power, ideology and aspirations. We translated our research in a mapping of the urban fabric of these regimes in time.

Building on this foundation, I pursued an individual theoretical interest in *liminality* (in-betweenness). My theory paper traced how the impact of ideological oscillation (political, spatial and psychological transitional states) is inscribed in the Georgian landscape and manifest as trauma in the built environment, particularly through the city's post-Soviet residues. By exploring the connection between the large geopolitical scale and the smaller urban scale, the essay reveals how global forces reshape local environments.

The sanatoria and bathhouses, scattered concrete structures across the country, became central case studies in my research. These decaying structures tell the story of a country caught between rejecting its past and moving forward. There is currently a huge pressure on Soviet infrastructure since Georgians don't perceive Soviet heritage as their own heritage. Georgia's transition from a socialist state to a capitalistic market economy caused the rejection and neglect of its Soviet past and the shrinking of those heritage places and a lost in ancient bathing culture. In my essay, I found that the constant reshaping of narrative can result in the erasure of historical structures. I therefore argue that by addressing trauma through reinterpretation rather than erasure or mere preservation, societies can craft more inclusive narratives and layered identities.

The site investigation and Soviet bathhouse case study research I then translated into a mapping series where I tried to link the geological conditions of Georgia to the health tourism during the Soviet time, going from large scale to small scale (the region with its fault lines; the city with its hot spring deposits, rivers and Soviet road network; the last-standing Soviet bathhouse, *Gogilio Abano*, sunken into the ground; a bathhouse room with its multi-sensory environmental conditions such as light and humidity; and the last scale is the bodily experience from

the mineral water). During the Modi Operandi workshop that followed, producing a series of 2½D models focused on site, programme and form, I tried to translate my mapping into form.

My design phase started with the desire to break the Soviet connotation to bathing in Georgia, dating back over 1,500 years, and propose a new way of bathing. Which brought me to my design questions: *How does a bathhouse behave if its sequence is non-linear? What does it mean to design care without hierarchy or prescription?* My design proposal seeks to revitalise the bathing tradition within the Georgian context by reimagining the bathhouse as a liminal space and a place of transformation. I try to reach this while working together with the natural context (outside of everyday life). The architecture functions as mediator to foster deeper connections between people and place and bridge dualities of past and future, permanence and impermanence, human and natural, urban and rural and individual and communal.

The existing sandstone mass is being moved and different metals that our won in Georgia (secondary to the stone) are added to form a landscape that ages over time due to the hot sulphur water flowing downwards, to purify and cool off, towards the river. The visitor that enters the project from different paths and takes part in this new bathhouse typology by undressing, can form their own sequence of movement and rituals (without predetermined time or order) while experiencing the change of bodily states and participating in the circulation of matter.

What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (Architecture), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?

My graduation project, *Bathing in Liminality*, sits at the intersection of architecture, geopolitics and cultural identity. The project reflects the *Borders & Territories* studio's core concerns: power dynamics, urban and historical transformation and territorial imaginaries. Situated in Georgia, a post-Soviet country on the border between East and West, the project engages critically with questions of historical change, collective memory and historical care through the lens of a bathhouse typology.

How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?

The convergence of theory (liminality, power regimes, abandoned structure), method (mapping, model-making, writing, case study, site investigation) and design (new typology, site specific, routing/sequence) exemplifies the programme's ambition to craft spatial propositions that respond to complex socio-political and ecological conditions.

My theoretical research on liminality (including texts from van Genep, Turner and Arendt) provided the conceptual grounding for understanding Georgia as a country caught in ideological and territorial oscillation. The mappings, on its term, generated spatial questions around infrastructural residue, thermal geologies and embodied rituals of healing. The design phase has been equally reflective: the process of drawing, model making and simulating bathing sequences in the landscape challenged me to put theoretical themes (like trauma or oscillation) into material form and bodily experience. The design thus becomes an act of translation, giving tangible form to abstract transitions. A big jump from conceptual design to technical detailing happened during the Corner Workshop. Here we were 'forced' to further develop a part of our project which helped me to further materialise the whole.

How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods and used methodology)?

The layered methodology of the *Borders & Territories* studio has been both productive and demanding. The use of theoretical writing, site-based observation, mapping across scales and model-making allowed me to construct a multi-dimensional understanding of my interest and desires. Particularly valuable for me was the inclusion of a post-humanist lens from the beginning in my process, which invited an attention to non-human forces (such as thermal geology, mineral flows and atmospheric conditions) as active design participants.

The explorative and open possibilities also presented challenges. Finding an appropriate location for my project did not come automatically, but with guidance and pushing to improve from my tutors I managed to (after changing multiple times) find the appropriate location. This pushing of my tutors to keep on looking critical at my project also made sure I did not unconsciously mimicked past (Soviet) typologies but rather designed a bathhouse that seeks to establish a new architectural language.

How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

By confronting questions of heritage, ideology and post-Soviet trauma, I have developed an understanding of how architecture participates in collective memory and nation-building. I've learned that ambiguity and uncertainty (core to liminality) do not have to be obstacles but can take form in opportunities for speculation.

How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?

The societal relevance of this work lies in its attention to cultural erasure (despite embodied memory). In Georgia, as in many post-Soviet contexts, certain public heritage infrastructures (in my case bathhouses) are under threat, not only due to neglect, but because of active ideological alteration in the urban fabric. This project argues for the relevance of these spaces, not by preserving them as ruins, but by translating their values (for the bathhouse these are equality, bodily care, slowness and connectivity to one another and the environment) into new forms.

Ethically, the work resists simplification: it does not romanticize the past, nor blindly embrace Western notions of progress; it proposes a typology that is neither both.

We also expect you to develop 2 reflection questions yourself which relate to the content of your work.

The final phase of the graduation will focus on refining the architectural proposal at multiple scales: from tectonics and detailing to experience and storytelling. I will deepen the atmosphere of the design through section drawings, material studies, models and perhaps moving atmospheric renders or a drawn narrative sequence. A key ambition is to communicate the free sensorial journey of bodily experience and connecting with the earth as a central architectural element.

1. *Looking back, how did my use of mapping move from simply revealing power regimes to reshaping them?*
2. *To what extent can liminality be intentionally designed and are the possibilities it provides worth the obstacles?*
3. *In my design, how successfully does the architecture revive forgotten culture and infrastructure of care without slipping into nostalgic reconstruction, and what evidence supports that assessment?*
4. *Is a bathhouse more inclusive if its rituals are self directed rather than prescribed, and how might this be evaluated?*