

Choreopolitics of Public Space: Resistance and the Right to the City

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1. What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (A, U, BT, LA, MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?

My master thesis stands firmly at the intersection of the fields of architecture and urbanism, and the social-political realities in which they exist. My thesis poses the fundamental question; how can architecture represent society, and how can architecture be a tool for change? This question directly connects to the MSc Architecture, Urbanism & Building Sciences program, and the lens by which it conceptualizes architecture as a practice separate from formalist representations, but rather an act of authority that can both embody and critique the world. Within the Borders & Territories studio—where the themes of space, politics, rightful space, and overlapping territoriality are rampant—I was able to further engage in inspecting and critiquing how power operates in the public sphere, and how people reclaim the public sphere through resistance and collective presence.

Tbilisi became the lens for this exploration. Its turbulent histories and ongoing political struggles made it the perfect ground for asking the bigger question: what role can architecture play in places where conflict and transition define daily life? In that sense, my project isn't just design; it's a response to the programme's demand for critical, research-based, and socially engaged architecture.

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

The dynamic between research and design in my project has been a mutually reinforcing and iterative process. Rather than being linear, my approach developed into a dialogic relationship whereby research continually informed design speculations, while design inquiries illuminated new possibilities for research.

My initial scaffolding for my design tactics was my analysis of Tbilisi - historical and spatial - from counter-mapping of informal resistance spaces to archival cartographies. I analyzed how power structures and acts of resistance get inscribed, challenged, and re-ordered in urban space using critical lenses that arise from theoretical frameworks, particularly those of Foucault, Butler, Deleuze, and Lepecki.

Yet as I engaged in the design process, new questions surfaced that complicated and radicalized my research perspective. The very act of speculating about spatial interventions revealed the inadequacy of a purely inadequate sense of space, for example, the latent potential for underground spaces to become places of transience and escape. This incited a call for a deeper understanding of the choreographic dimensions of civic agency and performative urbanism.

Through this iterative process, design transformed into both a mode of research and a critical inquiry in which I was able to put the theoretical underpinnings of my work into practice, realise the consequences of that practice, and think back on the research. Because the borders between research and design were broken down and methodology became practice, each was able to constantly interrogate and build on the other.

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

By utilizing a layered, reflective process that oscillated between speculative imagination and analytical rigour, I intentionally departed from the traditional linear process of architectural design. With this approach, I could work across different temporal, spatial, and sociopolitical contexts and scales without losing sight of the overarching project aim of treating architecture as an emancipatory practice.

Through the combined acts of historical research, counter-mapping, performative theory, and design experimentation, I was able to arrive at an understanding of Tbilisi's urban fabric—not as a static object—but rather as a palimpsest of negotiations, contestations, and resistances. In particular, my engagement with choreopolitical theory provided an entirely new methodological point of departure where spatial agency and bodily movement became tangible mechanisms of rethinking the design of public space, rather than just a theoretical concept.

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

My project adds academically to the more general debate about the role architecture plays within contested urban contexts by offering a critical lens on the potential of public space as a site of negotiation between state regulations and civic agency. This work challenges dominant urban design paradigms that prioritize control, order, and stability by foregrounding transience and performative practices. It suggests spatial practices that are inherently inclusive, adaptable, and responsive to social change.

The social power of my work lies in its engagement with pressing issues of Tbilisi, and in turn, other cities that have been confronted with similar conflicts. The degradation of public space, dislocation of civic voice, and social inequities are not limited to Tbilisi, but rather the performances of larger neoliberal urban trends and transitions. My project walks through spatial frameworks that facilitate collective action, enable democratic participation, and resist the occupation of public space by existing power structures.

I have a very firm ethical consciousness of the delicate balance that needs to be achieved when constructing places of resistance. There is always the possibility that I might aestheticise dissent or further empower the very control structures I am trying to work

against. My design strategies - which are based on the lived experiences of residents of Tbilisi and are necessarily open-ended - draw on subtlety, adaptability, and communal agency to mitigate this. Rather than solutions, this project offers the spatial conditions for collective expression and bottom-up appropriation.

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

While my project is undoubtedly tied to the historical, cultural, and political realities of Tbilisi, the design principles and methods I developed can be applied in many contexts. The critical frameworks I used—performative urbanism, choreopolitical analysis, and counter mapping—can apply to many urban contexts where civic agency is suppressed and public space is contested. My design ideas are based on the notion of transient urbanism, which offers a lens for reimagining public space in urban areas experiencing rapid sociopolitical instability. Further, the spatial strategies I propose—flexibility, modularity, and informal appropriation—can be adapted to all types of urban environments, from the streets of Hong Kong to the squares of Beirut. My project extends beyond its geographic context and contributes to a broader dialogue around how architecture can facilitate social justice, community empowerment, and resilience within the urban fabric when power dynamics shift.

6. My Reflection Questions

1. How can architectural interventions symbolically embody resistance without succumbing to the commodification and spectacle that often accompany the appropriation of activist spaces by dominant power structures?

My graduation project's primary focus is to investigate the paradox between permanence and transience. The challenge comes in accepting the friction of permanence and transience as a productive condition of design rather than seeking to eliminate the paradox. The nature of architecture involves temporal situations that are significantly more expansive than the brief instances when the public congregates, or civic protest is lost. Nevertheless, sociopolitical change is founded, and collective agency crystallises, during that ephemeral moment.

I have appropriately employed layered design principles to address this paradox. First, I devised a strategy that recognises the need to create an impactful space that provides lasting physical and symbolic anchoring of civic agency within the urban fabric (material interventions, urban voids, infrastructure elements), as they are designed to be spatial armatures that will shift and accept change as opposed to being static monuments. Although they are permanent, they nurture the collective memory of civic agency and resistance, allowing a continuity of place.

At the same time, I introduced systems of flexibility and openness to these armatures, such as repositionable surfaces and spatial elements, which the public may choose to engage

within an entirely different, if not surprising, use of placement. The design does not impose function, but instead creates a field of potentiality that allows for spontaneous meetings, active events, and engagements of occupation—an inherent architectural condition that allowing rather than an appropriate response to the changing nature of urban life, rather than a notion as an afterthought.

2. In designing for transience and performativity, how can architecture maintain its relevance and adaptability in the long-term, without diluting the immediacy and urgency that characterize spaces of civic resistance?

The adaptability of power relations in contested urban situations calls for a concomitant flexibility and responsiveness in the design process, to engage with the socio-political energies that the response is catalyzing. However, it requires a careful negotiation of this openness, so that architectural agency isn't reclaimed as mere facilitation. The question has become a redefinition of architectural authorship as a collaborative, iterative act, not whether the designer relinquishes control.

To do this, my project recasts the architect as a choreographer of spatial conditions — somebody who creates the conditions for forms of occupation and use that is necessarily unpredictable, instead of being a master planner imposing form and program on a site. This articulation opens up a way for formal participatory processes to be integrated into the project, without compromising the original design intentions.

I sustain a coherence in the design outcome by developing spatial systems that inherently have a conceptual strength, but a fundamentally open-ended character, as I am presenting architecture itself as a medium of enabling involvement, instead of an object of determinism.

Moreover, I am advocating for a kind of critical curation of the use of participation — in which the act of engaging with communities, activist groups, and civic actors becomes a meaningful co-production of spatialized knowledge instead of an act of consultation. The project integrates various viewpoints while preserving a unified architectural vision by using techniques like scenario-based design, public workshops, and counter-mapping.