

The House is Never Complete!

A Cartography of Idiosyncrasy in Sociopolitical Maelstrom

Tbilisi, Georgia

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Once when a man wanted to build a house, he would launch into some of the most complex and prolonged decision making of his life... this continuous interest of the owner in his house would continue indefinitely, for there was a superstition to the effect that once the house was quite finished, the owner would die; so the prudent house-holder would go on for ever altering and adding to the structure and putting off the laying of the fatal last brick.

-Hassan Fathy

INTRODUCTION

Before the Soviet Union collapsed, and Georgia gained ‘independence’ from the Russo-centric empire, the artist Zurab Tsereteli was *utilized* in the production of the famous *Chronicles of Georgia Monument*.¹ The monument, based on Persepolis (in Iran), and rich with Georgian religious mythology, has been traditionally attributed to signs of imminent Soviet collapse, and the foundations of Georgian national independence. However, this production of ‘pure’ national identity,² would serve as a new point of entry of control and political subversion³ in the imminent post-Soviet collapse.⁴ This political subversion has become deeply integral in the production of Georgian national identity from both Mikheil Saakashvili’s⁵ United National Movement (UNM) Party and the incumbent Georgian Dream Party, effectively allowing all Georgian politics to orbit towards Russia.

In 2007, Saakashvili catalyzed a process of systematic ‘Haussmannization’ which has been appropriated by the current government, to the effect of destroying local cultural heritage, removing layers of inhabitation and social embeddedness in the historic districts, and bazaars which were formed after Soviet collapse. This desire to formalize the country with the supposition that it will promote economic growth through the development of the tourism industry, has had little effect other than the destruction of micro-scalar economic exchanges, displacing citizens to the peripheries of the city.

In the decade after Soviet collapse, the formation of bazaars on former public lands which were privatized by ‘thugs-in-law’ and ‘*Mkhedrioni*’ micro-scalar social ecologies were formed, and the result in the production of the *Eliava Bazaar* and many similar structures across Tbilisi. The goods that are sold in these markets vary from those metals which are scavenged, and products that were imported from Turkey, Iran, and Russia. The method of

¹See Tsereteli’s sculpture of Vladimir Putin (2018), and The Russia-Georgia Friendship Monument (1983)

² Ethno-nationalist sentiment was rife in Georgia in the 1980s. Populations from the northern region of Svaneti were brought to the region of Bolnisi to seize the property of the local Azerbaijani population, pushing them to the bordering region of Marneuli. (Arjevanidze, 2019, Interview)

³See Yuri Bezmenov: Psychological Warfare Subversion & Control of Western Society (1983)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gnpCqsXE8g&list=PLddfeJXFHp05syja20v5l1CKfVnZs31O7>

⁴ Žižek, Slavoj. “Slavoj Žižek: Nationalism Is a Way for Communists to Survive in Ex-Communist European Countries.” 10 Dec. 2017.

⁵Though the United States financed the Rose Revolution and creation of the Saakashvili government, causing issues for Russian State security and provoking calculated Russian response. See Putin Interview, 2009:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iP1ZzcSjIDA>

commerce in the produced reality, however, is consonant with forms of micro-scalar commerce that can be found in photos and depictions from the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁶

The false binary of ‘*formalization or poverty*’ that has been produced by the consecutive governments is actually a demonstration of creeping totality. That an individual cannot affect their immediate reality and space, in supposed compliance with *new* aesthetic standards; or the argument that constructions and appropriations are not compliant with international standards, only effectively eliminates the individual freedoms: that someone wishes to produce an effect on their immediate space.

IMPROVISATION AND ECOLOGY

The production of the *Eliava bazaar* should not be reduced to the binary opposition of ‘*formal and informal*,’ there is a wealth of information in the social dynamics that produce, and continue to produce the space. Without a bias towards materiality, the bazaar in its production is the materialization of social dynamics and spatial configurations, which are telling of the context. The same sinuosity, and idiosyncratic details of the bazaar can be found in the historic districts of Tbilisi. The final layer of appropriations which were produced in the 1990s out of imminent need (and desire), and in the face of privatization of property, resulted in new manipulations to the historic district that demonstrate a clear continuity with the methods of the production of the earlier layers.⁷

Furthermore, the historic districts and bazaars of Tbilisi do not produce *capsularized* models of living, as opposed to the Soviet Modern housing blocks,⁸ but produce a close-knit network of neighbors. Entering a Georgian courtyard house, reaches the point of invasiveness, blurring the lines of public and private. This phenomenon of blurred interiority and exteriority produces several distinctive communal rituals (i.e. carpet cleaning, supras), and also produces shared responsibilities and care towards seemingly stray animals. The care for animals becomes the shared responsibility of neighbors in courtyards and districts, and the shared responsibility of vendors at the bazaar.⁹

NECESSITY, INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY, AND PLASTICITY

The old adage “necessity is the mother of invention” is challenged by Alfred North Whitehead with the statement: “The basis of invention is science, and science is almost wholly the outgrowth of pleasurable intellectual curiosity... necessity is mother of futile dodges.”

If pleasurable intellectual curiosity can only exist in a place where there is a robust economy, then what is to be said about the expression and technicities which are produced in poorer contexts? What if the production of a courtyard house in Tbilisi, because of the cultural assemblage results in intricate architectural objects that are nearly indistinguishable from Piranesian speculations?

Hassan Fathy documents the work of Nubian craftsmen who built a whole vault from mud bricks “straight out of the air, with no support or centering, with no instrument, with no drawn plan,” with only an adze.

“They worked rapidly and unconcernedly, with never a thought that what they were doing was quite a remarkable work of engineering, for these masons were working according to the laws of statics and the science of the resistance of materials with extraordinary intuitive understanding. Earth bricks cannot take bending and shearing... engineers and

⁶ See Adolf Derr Photos (Bakradze 2021)

⁷ Again, avoiding material hierarchy.

⁸ Which were also later appropriated with kamikadze loggias, and in some cases, producing similar familial dynamics among neighbors.

⁹ In the exterior reality, animals act as they would domestically, and without fear of approaching people. I take this as an important cultural indication of respect and care for animals.

architects concerned with cheap ways to build for the masses had devised all sorts of complicated methods for constructing vaults and domes.”¹⁰

Much in the same vein, working alongside Georgian contractors, I have noted the cleverness and plasticity of movement. Georgian architect Nika Gabiskiria, demonstrates a high level of skill and precision in bodily movements around the objects that he is working on. His quick movement and interpretation of material are both intuitive and precise.¹¹

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In Tbilisi, Georgia, national and economic myths of ‘development’ are used by governmental authorities and the private sector, leading to the destruction of historic buildings, the undermining of individual economic agency, and preventing future economic viability by destroying the urban ecology. The myth of adopting Western European or American models of commerce and building, are met with the lack of material and financial availability, as well as a shortage of skilled labor, and results in the uglification of the city.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTIONS

How can cultural and social erosion which is a result of political and economic exploitation be mitigated? Which interventions can be made by an architect to embrace the existing ecologies of a city, to produce a work (i.e. a building, infrastructural intervention) which is deeply embedded, and reiterating locality?

Can the present urban dynamics and technicities of the city be preserved with economic growth? Which methods are needed to reiterate locality and further energize the dynamics of the bazaar and the historic district to prevent further loss of cultural heritage and idiosyncrasy? To what degree can the relationship between the bazaar and historic district produce this reiteration of production of idiosyncratic details? How will the (micro-scalar) economy be affected by what will be built?

METHOD

Conversations with vendors in bazaar and residents of historic district:
Inquiry into works, details, myths, urban legends, and the details that they take pride in

Cartography and Details:
Mapping of Eliava Bazaar and Sololaki/Mtatsminda districts, drawing details

Identifying actors and stakeholders:
Who needs to be active in order to produce an effect?

EXPECTED RESULTS

1. Speculation into the layering of the bazaar and the historic district and the technicities which are encompassed.

¹⁰ Architecture for the Poor, Hassan Fathy, 1973.

¹¹ But this capacity is not emerging from nowhere; his father built a 30 meter telecommunications tower from scrap metal in the 1990s.

When I explained this hypothesis to him on the Eliava Bazaar during a procurement visit, a contractor agreed to the point with a great deal of pride.

2. An alternative form of graphic representation that further enables the capturing of the complexities of the city.
3. Proposal of residential and commercial modifications which is emerging from, and embedded in, the context.
 - a. Which focal intervention can be made in the bazaar/ historic district which will enable further inhabitation and reinforcement of the local ecologies of the city?

4. Collective building of a small-scale physical intervention in both the bazaar and historic district, accompanied by a public workshop.