

Tbilisi as a Palimpsest

Patterns, History, and Perceptions in the formation of a reactive city



Tbilisi as a Palimpsest
Patterns, History, and Perception in the formation of a reactive city

Turan Ziaiemehr

Master Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences

Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment



Design Mentor **Alper Alkan**
Research Mentor **Sabina Tanović**
Building Technology Mentor **Piero Medici**

Table of contents

Introduction	3
Chapter 1	
Genealogy	7
<i>The Kommunalka</i>	9
<i>The Significance of the Ezo after USSR</i>	10
<i>The Ezo as Reflection of Individuality</i>	11
Chapter 2	
Problematization	15
<i>The First Struggles of Independent Georgia</i>	17
<i>Towards the European Dream</i>	17
<i>A New-Old Tbilisi</i>	18
Chapter 3	
Methods	27
<i>The Collection of Memories</i>	29
<i>The Definition of Memories</i>	29
<i>Conservation of Collectiveness</i>	30
Chapter 4	
Response	31
<i>Kibe-Projekt</i>	33
Chapter 5	
Nostalgia	37
<i>Nostalgia of Collectiveness</i>	39
<i>Tales of a Shared Life</i>	39
<i>Beyond Idealization</i>	41

Chapter 6	
Collectiveness	47
<i>Gabriel and Barbare</i>	49
<i>Dodo and Kato</i>	49
<i>Eka</i>	49
<i>Avtandil</i>	50
<i>The Opera Singer</i>	50
<i>The Spider Kid</i>	50
<i>Zaza</i>	51
Chapter 7	
A System of Vectors	57
<i>En Flâneur</i>	59
<i>Memory and Movement</i>	59
<i>Memory through the Experience of Movement</i>	59
<i>Memory through the Memory of Movement</i>	60
Chapter 8	
The Project	61
<i>The Future of the Ezo</i>	63
Chapter 9	
Process of Identification	67
<i>Allegory of Thresholds</i>	69
<i>Allegory of Movement</i>	70
<i>Allegory of Commonality</i>	72
<i>The Composition of the Sequence</i>	73
Post Scriptum	75

Introduction

There's places you have never seen before, yet you get to know once you get there. And there's places you have never even imagined before, yet you never stop imagining even once you see them. Tbilisi is one of the latter.

The image of Tbilisi has been built up by Persians, Byzantines, Ottomans, Russians and Soviets, and all have influenced its birth, death, and rebirth in an endless cycle. The result is a city that Boris Pasternak called a chimera, a fanciful beast with a Western head and an Eastern body. Pasternak also defines Tbilisi as the city that changed his life, in which he felt like everything was happening. I felt the same, everything was happening and everyone was making it happen.

The aim of this research is to put an accent on the importance of Tbilisian intangible heritage, as intended as the social dynamics, and the direct influence of the latter in the configuration of the space of the courtyard house.

Tbilisi's urban configuration may be referred to as a palimpsest, in its fullest form. Every empire's ideology has left its trace in the configuration of the city, making the urban grid possible to be read as a time line: from the narrow streets of the old town with Persian influence, to the 19th century Haussmanian grid of Russian influence, and the wide alleyways with big housing blocks from the Soviet Period, and so on. One of the only elements that has stayed constant during all powers, in my opinion, is the courtyard house.

The courtyard house, or Ezo house as it is called in Georgian, has been translated in different styles and forms throughout all Empires. To scale down the concept of palimpsest to the domestic scale, we could consider that even in the typical courtyard house we could dissect every original, added, or modified intervention by Empire. Every courtyard contains the totality of the city in itself. (See fig. 1 to 5)

Nevertheless, the city is rapidly developing, or I would better say under-developing. Neglect, poor requalification programs, real estate speculation, and a very fragile economic system, are contributing in the loss of Tbilisi's courtyard houses and the social dynamics that have shaped them. This research will go in deep into the understanding of the importance of individuality in the construction of the Ezo house, and the importance of the preservation of social

dynamics through the space of the yard.

The text will be divided into ten chapters, in which I will use my empirical experience in Tbilisi as a main tool to analyse the social dynamics and their direct relation with space. After a brief introduction on the genealogy of the Ezo house, I will dedicate a chapter to explain the political background, which is necessary to comprehend the context and its complexities; this chapter serves also as a first stage to introduce the topic of heritage preservation and its link to politics. After explaining my methodology and the way I have structured the research from the very first perceptions to the design phase, I will introduce the event that brought me to start this research in the first place: Kibe Projekt.

Kibe Projekt has been a conservation effort that I have been carrying out together with a group of fellow students and professionals, about the conservation of a spiral wooden staircase in a courtyard house in Tbilisi, from early 2021 to the summer of 2022. From this chapter on, the research will develop as a collection of tales, narrations, personal accounts of all the people I met in Tbilisi. A diary of my collective and embodied experiences and memories, that have been the pillars of both my research and my design.



Fig. 1
Tbilisi. Loggia of a Ezo house in Asatiani St., Sololaki neighbourhood



Fig. 2
Tbilisi. Loggia of a Ezo house in Asatiani St., Sololaki neighbourhood



Fig. 1
Tbilisi. Internal façade of a Ezo house in Asatiani St., Sololaki neighbourhood



Fig. 4
Tbilisi. Interior façade of a Ezo house in Asatiani St., Sololaki neighbourhood



Fig. 5
Tbilisi. Interior of a Ezo house in Asatiani St., Sololaki neighbourhood

Genealogy

The Ezo Houses, mainly built between the 19th and 20th centuries as single-family dwellings and owned by the bourgeoisie and aristocracy, plays an important role in the characterization of Tbilisi's heritage. Many of these houses represent significant examples of art-nouveau expression, (see fig. 6 and 7) built by Georgian, German, Armenian, Polish, Italian, and Russian architects (Mania, "German Architects in Tbilisi").

The Kommunalka

Nevertheless, with the Bolshevik annexation,¹ the Soviet Union suffered an invalidating housing deficit, already in the period between 1920 and 1930. This led to one of the most significant reforms of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR): the *kommunalka*. With the *kommunalka* law, families were relocated and compelled to live communally in single apartments after being purposefully selected from various socio-economic classes. The old bourgeois apartments were distributed among the intelligentsia and the elite close to the party. When classified as workers, the previous residents had to share their houses with other working-class families. Aristocracy, Bolshevik Intelligentsia, and lower classes shared the same yards, where the first had single flats and apartments on the upper floors, and the workers' families lived in single rooms that served both as bedrooms and as living rooms, sharing corridors and services with other families. The Ezo house features, such as wooden balconies, corridors, staircases, and a yard, could afford this change from private to collectively shared use.

Nonetheless, the major goal of the *kommunalka* law, besides finding a fast solution to demographic increase, was to maintain control over the population through a spy network: it was estimated that one out of every ten people was an agent for the Committee for State Security, known as KGB.² Even within the confines of their own homes, the USSR was always under control of its citizens. Given this likelihood nobody really trusted their neighbour, despite the fact that everyone always helped one another when they were in need, as Messana depicts in her book "Soviet Communal life". We could probably assert that this was the biggest paradigm of the *kommunalka*: preserve ones own individuality while sharing everything else with a possible KGB agent-neighbour.

As Boym (2012) mentions, with the establishment of communal living in USSR,

ideology becomes a nostalgic way of retracing the Russian people's nomadic beginnings, with the goal of emancipation from daily life. In fact, a local Soviet newspaper launched the "Down with the Domestic Trash!" Campaign in 1929. Any object, from tiny ornamental ceramics to paintings, vases, and everything superfluous was considered "domestic trash." This campaign could be seen as a real war against everyday life, any form of its representation and fetishization, and of course any form of individuality. All furniture had to be basic and portable, ready to be taken in case of military campaign, political offensive, or economic drive. This fight against everyday life was the ideal justification to revive the romantic image of Russian nomadic existence. (See figure. 8)

The Significance of the Ezo after USSR

Even though the Ezo houses accommodated even more than six people at times in their limited single-room composition, they helped to create the break between the private and the common life. The existing balconies, corridors, and loggias were now forcibly fractions of common life. The yard was the confluence of all commonalities, and the boundaries of the house were completely torn apart.

The Tbilisian yard, as it exists today, is the result of all these events and changes in the ways of living. As it will be discussed in the following chapters, this forced commonality was a double-sided medal, and still is. It is important to highlight that besides the commonality of the living itself, the buildings became integral in the lives of the individuals and that taking care of the yard was (and still is) seen as a communing tool among the neighbours.

On the other hand, as some of the personal accounts that I have collected in the following chapters will demonstrate, the shared character of the courtyard house typology is felt anachronistic; sometimes it is even seen as a material validation of the nostalgia for the Soviet days. Dreaming for a more private apartment or not willing to share everything with your neighbours, consciously or unconsciously, is not uncommon practice among Tbilisian youth. Besides the social sphere, many other layers add up to the obsolescence of the courtyard houses, from the reduced dimensions of most houses, to the sometimes unusual composition of the space, to low maintained infrastructures. Nevertheless, the Ezo house is widely recognized by the Tbilisians as what characterizes the city's social dynamism, as well as its urban-scape and historical-architectural value.

As a consequence to the morphological changes into the original floor plans of the Ezo houses to comply to the kommunalka law, once the residents had the chance to become owners of their houses,³ the result was a cadastral mess. Every room, including the windowless spaces, storage rooms, and garages, were acquired by a different person, that is to say, whoever was compelled to live there, or was assigned to use that space. This real estate turmoil makes it hard most of the times to trace back to the owner of some of the unused or abandoned spaces in the yards.

The Ezo as Reflection of Individuality

Despite the objective of removing class distinctions, Kommunalka brought about a fundamental change in how people used to live. The demonization of individuality in domestic life during the USSR, as seen as a consumerist amass of bric-a-brac, led to an incentive in the way people would appropriate the space, what I would define as a search for self-expression and individuation. For example, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, when residents slowly started to buy the properties they were living in, they began to add prosthetic volumes to the existing buildings, mainly kitchens and bathrooms, the once-shared facilities. These additions formalized in “kamikaze loggias” protruding from the façades of the building.⁴ Sometimes the house itself was expanded by closing parts of the balconies and loggias (see fig. 9). Renovations, modifications, and evolutions of these houses became part of the search for the individuality of each family living in the yard.

The Tbilisian courtyard house is currently configured with numerous sequences of thresholds, ranging from corridors to staircases, balconies, and entrances. As Maia Mania, art historian and professor at the Tbilisi Academy of Arts, suggests “the room spills over into the yard via the bridge of balconies, the yard spills over into the open public space, the street is a corridor, resembling the corridor of the private space): Room – Balcony – Courtyard – Public space/Street/River.” (Mania, “What creates the specifics of the architectural type of Tbilisi?” 116). Any attempt to identify an architectural typology would be an oversimplification. The Tbilisian courtyard is an organic phenomenon of informally accumulated accidents, constructed over the years through infinite interactions. The space is in constant flux and keeps evolving as time and

necessities change.

Notes

¹ Georgia gets annexed to the Soviet Union in 1921, by orders of the Soviet-Georgian leader Stalin, not in approval with Lenin. The Georgian Democratic party persisted in the country, but a rebellion was brutally suppressed by Stalin in 1924. The annexation brought huge repression of all expressions of nationalism and regional diversity, with a big impact on small rural areas and agriculture, and most of all on the language.

² <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/housing-kommunalkas.htm>

³ NOTE ON ACQUISITION OF APT BY RESIDENTS AFTER USSR COLLAPSE

⁴ The Kamikaze Loggia has been the theme of the Georgian Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale of architecture, designed by multimedia artist Gio Sumbadze. Sumbadze has been documenting these parasitic additions for years, starting from the 90s, when he was just a teenager. This definition comes quite literally from the meaning of Kamikaze, a suicidal soldier, and becomes even more meaningful when looking at these structures often structurally very precarious, hanging between life and death. “Loggia” comes from Italian but is widely used in Russian to define a room.

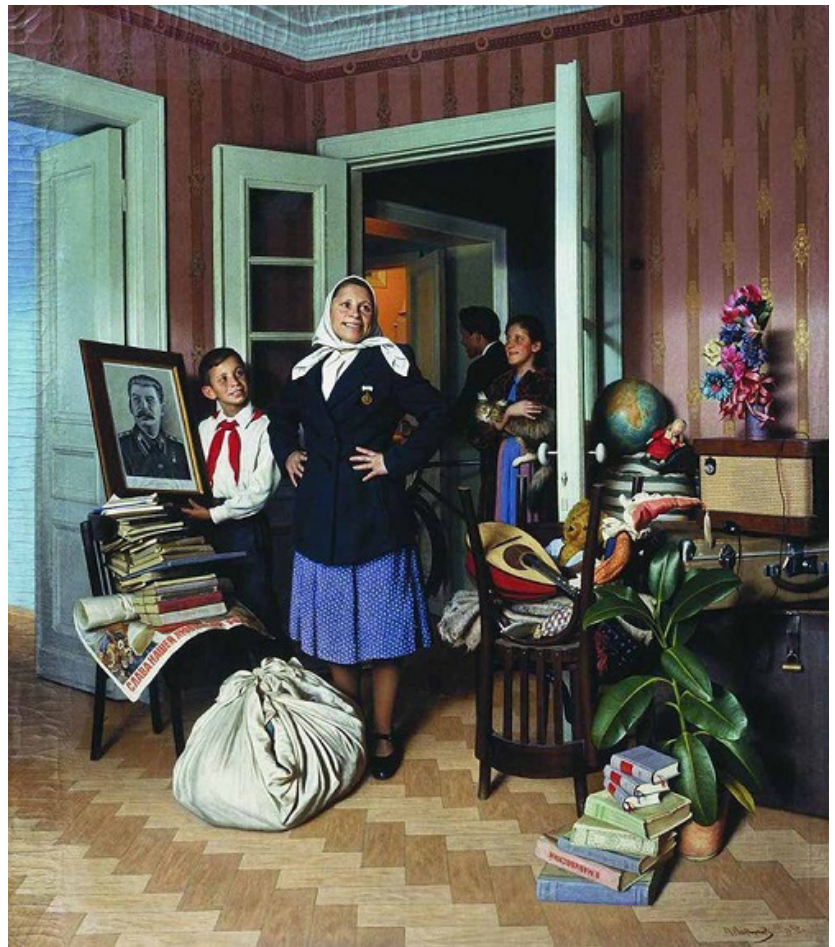


Fig. 6

Alexander Laktionov, Moving into a new apartment, 1952. A family moves in their new Kommunalka apartment. Only essential item with them: a portrait of Stalin, books, a few bags, and a happy and serene expression. The back story of this propagandistic painting, is the eviction of other families from their homes to comply to the new Soviet housing program. Boym meticulously describes this painting in “Soviet everyday culture: an oxymoron?”, Breaking apart every element of the painting, from the globe on the right side showing USSR, to the medal of honour on the mother’s jacket, and the absence of a father, proudly replaced by the kid with a Stalin portrait.



Fig. 7

Tbilisi. An example of one of the many Art-Nouveau buildings around the city.
<https://grandeflanerie.com/portfolio/tbilisimodern/>

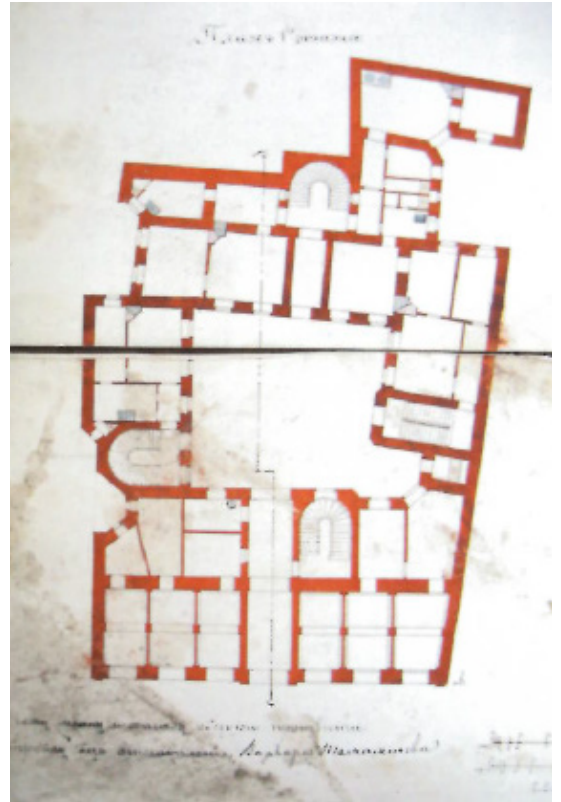


Fig. 8
Tbilisi. Plan of Barbare Tamamshev's tenement house, by German architect A. Salzman, 1876.
 (Mania, "European Architects in Tbilisi" p. 84)



Fig. 9
Tbilisi. Some fractions of the loggias have been closed to enlarge the space of the house in a typical courtyard house.

Problematization

The first Struggles of Independent Georgia

Importantly, both practically and philosophically, the contemporary housing reality differs dramatically from the Kommunalka concept. Georgia has gone through various stages of political instability since the demise of the Soviet Union. The independence declaration was stipulated in 1991. However, independence ushered in a protracted period of political and ethnic strife.⁴ The filo-Russian separatist movement in South Ossetia, which had been seeking independence and incorporation into the Russian Federation since 1989, resulted in civil war (1991-1993). The Abkhazian region, which was seeking independence from the central government,⁵ was in a similar situation. Tensions between regions and ethnic communities did not assist the country to stabilize its political and economic framework, which was now dealing with tens of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

In 1995, after years of unstable governments as collateral of the fall of the Soviet Union, Eduard Shevardnadze was appointed as president of Georgia after a period of working as Prime Minister. Nevertheless, Shavarnadze's leadership follows many criticality by the people of the newly independent Georgia. In fact, Shevardnadze was seen by most Georgians as a continuation of the Soviet leadership: he was Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Soviet Union and he was considered a key character in many of the Gorbachev Era reforms. Therefore, the country was still under the rule of an 'undercover' Soviet leader. The political switch happened with Mikheil Saakashvili, a populist former minister, who rose to prominence with The United National Movement (UNM) party, after the Rose Revolution in 2003.⁶

Towards the European dream

The UNM's neoliberal and filo-western policies resulted in numerous changes in the country's urban planning and housing policy. New initiatives attempted to make Tbilisi look European, as it would represent progression and economic growth. The seek for a European appearance was not only aesthetic: the European Union was on its verge of economic growth and expanding towards eastern countries.⁷ UNM's objective was, and still is, to join the EU, as it is seen as the only way to break the chain of coalition and corruption of the Georgian political opposition with the Russian Federation.

One of the most controversial reforms to make Tbilisi look more like a

European capital, concerned the restructuring of the police stations. (See fig. 10) The police force was reviled and mistrusted by the public, both because of its large corruption network and because of its use of unorthodox punitive methods. President Saakashvili dismissed 80% of the police in charge to restructure the main body and “clean” it from corruption. He rebuilt every police station in the country to ensure clearance and transparency using glass and steel structures.

Other relevant works revolve around the Sololaki and Avlabari districts and are also part of the Saakashvilian dream for a transparent, European, and trustworthy governmental structure,⁸ like the Public Service Hall in Tbilisi. (See fig. 11) This work, as all the other following examples, have been financed by public funds; that is why it is important to highlight the costs of these oeuvres to understand the scale of the vane interests of those in power. The Tbilisi Public Service Hall was meant to be the heart of any public service of the country. It was designed by Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas, costing 54 million Euros. The Tbilisi concert hall, (See fig. 12) another structure designed by Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas, is housed in the Rhike Park just across from the Public Service Hall. The building was never completed, and thus never opened,⁹ and cost just a 40Million Euros. The last example of a very long list is the Bridge of Peace, (See fig. 13) which the ex-President Saakashvili referred to as “Georgia’s bridge to Europe”, designed by Michele de Lucchi and cost roughly 10 million Euros.¹⁰ Gleaming skyscrapers and shopping malls, as well as the eviction of IDPs from the formerly inhabited buildings they were living in the city center of Tbilisi, were all geared at making the city appear “clean” and western. (See fig. 14)

A New-Old Tbilisi

With the political switch in 2012, when the Georgian Dream party winning the elections,¹⁰ the trend continued. As a result, the “New Tiflis Project”, a large-scale re-qualification project for Tbilisi’s Old Town began. During the Saakashvili presidency, the ‘re-qualification’ of another old neighbourhood of Tbilisi, this time on the left bank of the Mtkvari river, had already started. (See fig. 15) In both cases, the goal was to “preserve” and “restore” the city’s cultural legacy while also making it more appealing to tourists and businesses. Basically,

different rhetoric but not too different aims.

Politically, socially, and aesthetically, the New Tiflis Project represents a sea change for the city. The proposal calls for the demolition of entire neighbourhoods, with no regard for the preservation of materials or construction methods. Large areas have since been rebuilt, and the works are ongoing.

The reconstruction program did not consider the cultural heritage-listed sites, and protests and petitions were ineffective in halting the project. Day by day, the city's oldest quarter, Sololaki, is being razed and rebuilt from the ground up, in the form of a cheap mimic of the original buildings. (See fig. 16 and 17) The historical, social, and cultural layers that have built up over generations are wiped away, to give space to a Disneyfied copy of the original old town. Residents were forced to leave their old homes since the new buildings function as ideal Airbnb accommodations,¹⁰ with much higher market values.

The government and its associated networks have a habit of implementing inadequate cultural heritage preservation programs that completely sterilize the complex ecosystem of entire districts. As a result, the shoddy construction projects are only attractive for tourists, or foreign investors, and the claimed goal of these grotesque reconstructions is to boost the tourism business. This aesthetic territorialization, which has been converted into abstract Europeanization, has obliterated the city's biodiversity and technicities.

Notes

⁴ The mixed nationalist front that had led the country to independence broke up, and opposition to the President Z. Gamsakhurdia resulted in civil war. After the election of E.A. Shevardnadze as president, the followers of Gamsakhurdia were overwhelmed by the Russian intervention. The approach to Moscow was promoted by Shevardnadze, which led to Georgia's entry into the Commonwealth of Independent States (1993).

⁵ The region of Abkhazia declared independence in 1992 by reinstating its 1925 constitution. Nevertheless, it never was recognized by the international community. It will officially declare its independence in 1999, and it remains recognized as a State only by Russia. Mainly Christian, Georgia was also affected by the growing conflict with the autonomous Republic of Adjara, of Muslim religion on the Black Sea.

⁶ "In 2003 former justice minister Mikheil Saakashvili, the head of the United National Movement (UNM), lead a peaceable uprising—termed the "Rose Revolution"—that drove Shevardnadze from power. Saakashvili was elected president the following year and immediately opened a campaign against corruption, sought to stabilize the economy, and attempted to secure the country against ethnic strife." (See "Independent Georgia")

⁷ In May 2004, ten new countries join the European Union, namely Czechia, Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia. The Euro to USD exchange rate peaked to 1.34€ to 1\$ in December 2004 (Millington).

⁸ The Sololaki and Avlabari districts are located on the Southern edge of the city, one on the East side and the other on the West side of the Mtkvari river. They both represent Old Tbilisi, and the first settlements date back to the 11th century. Nevertheless, Sololaki has been razed to the ground multiple times during the centuries by Persians, and Avlabari, also known as the Armenian neighbourhood, has undergone innumerable changes too.

⁹ The building has been recently sold by auction, (March 2022) for less than 3 million Euros. The previous six attempts to sell the buildings had failed. The buyer, namely "Global Victory Trust", will arrange a museum of arts, wine, and multimedia within 3 years. Little information can be found about the buyer online.

¹⁰ Georgia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita for 2022 was about 4.748,67 €, with a population of nearly four million people. This means that the wealth per inhabitant produced in Georgia in 2022, is less than 400 € a month. At the same time, the Georgian Lari (GEL), the official currency, is extremely unstable, being incredibly influenced by its two largest trade partners' currencies: Turkish lira and Russian ruble, that following the Russo-Ukrainian war have been significantly affected. This influence, in addition to many other factors, makes the Georgian currency to swing its value from month to month. To give a very concrete example, mortgages, rents, and any other substantial expense or bank related affair, are calculated

in USD, to not incur into unexpected currency value drops with the GEL. Given this short economic context, it comes without saying that the millions of Euro of public money spent for the construction of the listed buildings, is an absurd amount of money.

¹¹ The Georgian Dream is a filo-Russian party owned by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. The party's description mentions "fulfilling Georgia's European & Euro-Atlantic aspirations" from their official channels and websites to the Wikipedia definition. Nevertheless, their position concerning Russia has always been clear to most Georgian people. The apex was reached with the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war, where the government decided not to sanction Russia; the move also comes from the security that Georgia is Russia's fiscal paradise. At the beginning of the war, unofficial sources talked about 500 businesses registered every day at the revenue service by Russian citizens.

¹² Although there is no official record of it is widely known in the city that many people living in the old neighbourhoods, not being able to afford the renovation costs, were forcibly moved to the city's outskirts. The renovation cost, consisting in a tax to be paid by square meter, could have been considered trifling by many but was significant for the low-income families or pensioners living there. That is why walking in the newly renovated Sololaki, none of the elderlies and families who used to live there can be found. It feels more like a ghost town, with a few souvenir shops and Airbnb.



Fig. 10

Tbilisi. An example of one of the police stations wanted by Saakashvili. Any other police station, from the furthest village in the Caucasus to the Black Sea, follows the same aesthetic.
<https://georgiaphotophiles.wordpress.com/2013/01/30/106/>



Fig. 11

Tbilisi. The Public Service Hall by Studio Fuksas.
<https://www.dezeen.com/2012/10/15/tbilisi-public-service-hall-by-massimiliano-and-doriana-fuksas/>



Fig. 12

Tbilisi. The concert hall by Studio Fuksas and Rhike park. ©Dennis Esakov

<https://www.archdaily.com/789123/music-theatre-and-exhibition-hall-massimiliano-and-doriana-fuksas>



Fig. 13

Tbilisi. The Bridge of Peace by Michele De Lucchi.

<https://www.advantour.com/georgia/tbilisi/bridge-of-peace.htm>



Fig. 14

Tbilisi. Previously known as Hotel Iveria, a modernist building from the '60s, later occupied by IDPs from early '90s to 2004. The building was then evacuated to become the Raddison Blue Hotel.



Fig. 15

Tbilisi. Mass renovation project on Aghmashenebeli Avenue, part of "New Life for Old Tbilisi" program launched by President Saakashvili.

<https://georgiaphotophiles.wordpress.com/2013/01/30/106/>



Fig. 16

Tbilisi. Mass renovation project of Sololaki neighbourhood, part of “New Tiflis” program launched by the Georgian Dream party.



Fig. 17

Tbilisi. Mass renovation project of Avlabari neighbourhood, before and after, part of “New Tiflis” program launched by the Georgian Dream party.

Methods

The focus of this study and how it came to be, are more closely tied to my own exploration of Tbilisi. A voyage that has been accumulating in my knowledge and perception and has enabled me to comprehend the intricate ecology of the city. The acknowledgment and the fallout were built upon a circular experiment in time and space, where each individual's tale and every interaction added up to create a spiral of ideas that didn't precisely follow any one course. That is why when thinking about the methods that have been used to carry out this research, the first notion to consider is the use of certain specific information and events, rather than solely their content. The construction of a personal method and the understanding of my experience in a more complex framework have been the main drive to produce research that could be defined with respect to the parameters that I would consider as pillars of this project, the social dynamics.

The Collection of Memories

Understanding a new environment, a new city, and a new culture starts with observing how people communicate and interact with one another. The ethnography of space is what gives Tbilisi its unique characteristics. Individual expression and deliberation become both formally and philosophically, the most tangible layer of the city's architecture, and this is the main result of personal interactions and a shared commonality that delineates Tbilisi's character. This individuation and understanding led me to begin gathering and storing data, walking aimlessly across the city, and gathering as many images as my memory could hold. As I would go on to explain in the next chapters, this methodology improved both my perception and familiarity with the environment. Knowing a city implies having a complete map in your head and being able to locate anything you need, want to see, or want to be inspired by at any time of day just by spontaneous intuition. All of this, which may be seen more as a process of building personal consciousness, occurs concurrently with the gathering of personal information from the people I was meeting, including my friends' memories and their anecdotes, stories, and family tales.

The Definition of Memories

I began to analyse these anecdotes and consider them not only as pieces of collective memory or as pieces of a societal puzzle, but also as tools to understand a more specific complexity, that of the construction of a city with

respect to these stories, to build up this process and cognitively comprehend its translation into creative action. These people's private lives are what is bringing the city together in the creation of a common ground.

What I aim to overcome through this research is the definition of nostalgia as just sentimental longing for a *period* in the past, and try to put an accent on its material manifestation through the unconscious actions of the people who deliberately decide to live *in* nostalgia. This translates in taking into consideration both social intangible parameters and their materialization in the space. Thus, the research will focus on how the symbolic intangible heritage is created through social interactions. These interactions and their specific materialization *through* and *in* the space, are the parameters that I will use to define the symbolic heritage worth preserving in the given context.

Conservation of collectiveness

As the Ezo houses are the cluster of Tbilisi's social dimension and complexity, the preservation of the archetypes and elements which add up, day by day through ordinary life to this complexity, becomes a priority. The evolution of the courtyard house during the past centuries, as it will be extensively explained in the following chapters, has caused considerable differences in the way the city is inhabited. The rapid disappearance of this housing typology due to urban sprawl and real estate speculation is damaging not only the historical identity of the city but its human ethnography too. In this regard I would mention the importance of Kibe Projekt, a conservation project we have been carrying out as a group of architects, artists, conservationists, curators, and carpenters, about the conservation of a late 19th-century wooden spiral staircase in a Tbilisian courtyard house.

Response

Kibe-Projekt

Kibe Projekt began in reaction to the Tbilisi municipality's large-scale cultural heritage clearance. Starting from February 2021 with the bureaucratic procedures, and after being introduced to the context by Thomas Ibrahim, together with Martynas Kilius and Francesca Crotti, we started to actively work on the conservation project of a cultural heritage-listed spiral wooden staircase with the help of foreign and local professionals, as a group of architects, artists, carpenters, conservationists, and curators. The goal was not only to maintain the artefact itself (See fig. 18) but also to emphasize the significance of activating one element in the courtyard house that can serve to support and preserve the space's social dynamics. This bottom-up initiative is therefore a direct reaction to the official practice geared toward destroying

Even though this spiral wooden staircase is one of the city's last of its sort, the object's form we posit a shared meaning if people join in the creative process. As a result, Kibe Projekt is a community-driven effort, and anyone has been invited to volunteer on the construction site. The initiative was funded by private individual donations, as Tbilisi city hall did not appear to have the financial wherewithal to fund it⁴, and of course, neither did the neighbours.

The dynamics of the Tbilisi Ezo are inextricably linked to the space's geometry. The social dynamics of the setting should provide energy for the remaking of the staircase. Therefore it was very important, from the very beginning, to set the project together with the inhabitants of the yard.

The initial bureaucratic steps were not as straightforward as we had hoped. During the Soviet Union, the courtyard house on which we were working was divided into dozens of apartments. This component is critical in comprehending Kommunalki's leftovers, both in a practical bureaucratic sense and as a common attitude of the people who have lived in the yard for generations. A total of 1/3 of the property owners had to sign a consent for in order to get a building permit. Despite this, the house was divided between 36 individual owners, something we never dreamed was conceivable given the number of units facing the yard. Some of these individuals may have owned a storage facility, a windowless room, and so on. Many of these people were

forgotten by their neighbours: “I believe she now lives in Spain...”, “Yes, he should be the owner, but I’m not sure whether he’s still alive, I haven’t seen him in years...” and other related tales.

Another obstacle was gaining the trust of the neighbours and assuring them that we would build their stairs in the best possible way and that they would not have to pay anything. There were numerous issues. The majority of them were perplexed as to why we would do such a thing for them, while some began to gossip that we had an offshore bank account in Panama, that for them was the only way we would have ever been interested in volunteering for the benefit of the yard. After 12 landlords signed the notary paperwork, the project was accepted by the municipality.

Now, after more than one year of effort, the conservation project has ended. (See fig. 19) The results of the project are multiple, and each of them surprised us in different ways. The first result was that the neighbours fixed the iron gate that separates the alley from the yard itself. At first, we didn’t understand the reason and thought that they were getting jealous of “their” staircase to the point that they did not want strangers to come in and see it. We later found out that some neighbours did not want others to park their cars in the yard anymore. Now that the yard was given back to the residents, there was no way they would have allowed it to become a parking lot again. A few days after this first result, we noticed that the railing of another small staircase on the other side of the yard was fixed with some of the leftover wood we left on site (one of the substituted railings was an old piece of wood discarded during the conservation project). (See fig. 20) Everyone started to take care of the yard. The residents felt like there was one more reason to preserve what was there. Another result, even if more ethically questionable, was that the resident with the best view on the staircase rented his apartment for more than double the price of the year before. Even a few business ideas started to arise, like the one from Aleko, the same neighbour who decided to paint the gate. He thought of opening a café in the yard; it did not happen yet, but we maybe one day it will. For us, the fact that Kibe Projekt brought people to have ideas about the future of the yard, or that it stimulated them to even think about implementing it in any way, was the greatest achievement, and exactly what we were aiming for.



Fig. 18
Tbilisi. The Staircase before the conservation project. The residents were using it on a daily basis even though near collapse.

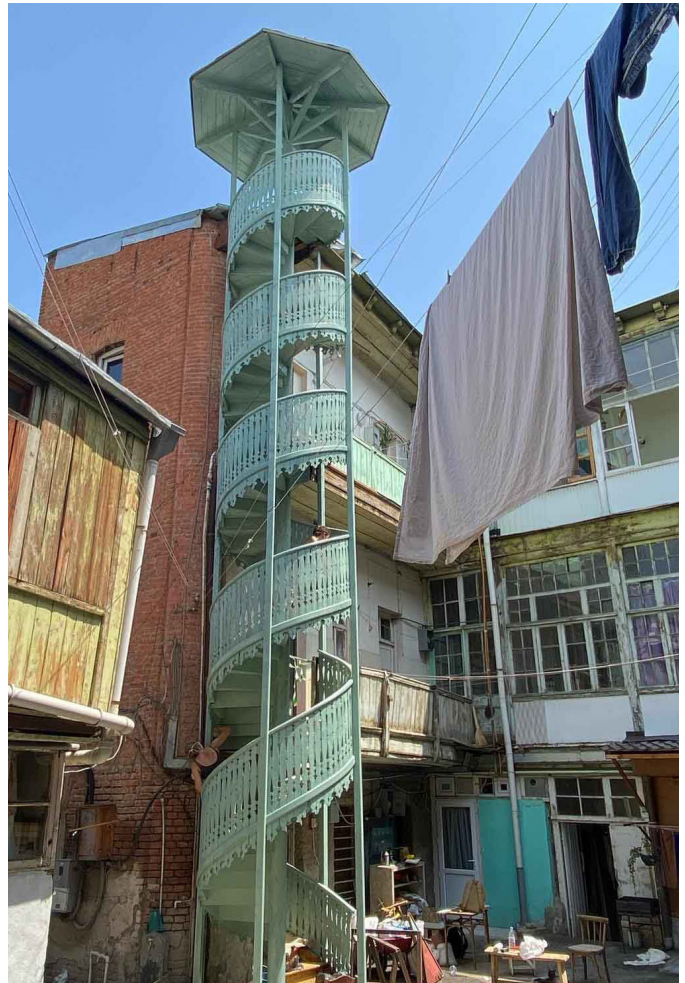


Fig. 19
Tbilisi. The Staircase after the conservation project. We managed to re-use almost 60% of the original pieces, after a long process of cataloguing, cleaning, and restoring. All works and every step of the project took place in the yard.



Fig. 20
Tbilisi. The other small staircase being fixed and painted by the neighbours.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia of collectiveness

While reading a book about Tbilisi, I stumbled upon the title of the “April” movie by Otar Iosseliani (1962). The narration of the city did not change since then. The story develops around a young couple of lovers who decide to move from the old town to one of the newly built Soviet apartments on the city’s outskirts. The first part of the movie follows the lovers in the labyrinth of their homes while they run around old Tbilisi to find a spot to meet or get ready to move out. Old Tbilisi is crippled, ruined, and romantic, with wooden balconies and collapsed brick walls that meet vineyards. (See fig. 21) Once they move to the outskirts, after the first period of excitement and enjoying the running water and electricity, they realize how the lifestyle in the apartment is far off from the shared and collective life they had in the old town. They keep buying furniture and appliances, and many locks for the door to protect their goods. (See fig. 22) Everyone is segregated in their apartments, minding their business and possessions. They become greedy. One day the water stops running in the kitchen, and the couple realizes that all their dreams are based on comfort and that they are giving up on happiness, sharing, and even romanticism, to be comfortable.

They decide to go back to Old Tbilisi.

Tales of a shared life

“My grandfather used to tell me that in Soviet times everybody was sharing in courtyard houses. All kinds of people lived in the yard, from scientists to professors to artisans and factory workers. Everyone was sharing the yard, and the kids were all playing together. He told me that sharing was not only material, like when you need some sugar and go ask the neighbour, but it was also intellectual. The professors’ kids were learning something from the workers’ kids, and vice versa. It was a constant learning and sharing process, beyond needs.”

(Elene, personal communication, 2022)

“I remember that we used to play a lot in the yard with other kids. On Chiakokonoba¹, I even remember that we used to make big fires in the yard using all sorts of things, from tires to wood; the bigger, the better. I lost all my facial hair because the fire was too big, hair, eyebrows, eyelashes,

everything. But it was fun. Nobody sets fires in the yards or the streets during Chiakokonoba anymore.”

(Nika, personal communication, 2022)

“When I first moved in, I realized that the neighbour was staring at my window from her window the whole time; she almost made me move out of that place.”

(Thomas, personal communication, 2022)

“I’ve been living in a courtyard house all my life. Everyone knew everything, it was like a big family, even if half of the neighbours were not the people you liked or trusted. Everything was happening at the same time there. There could have been a funeral on the ground floor while a wedding was going on at the first floor. Now I live in an apartment, I needed a break from that life. It was overwhelming.”

(Tatuli, personal communication, 2022)

“My neighbours were the worst. Everyone was always annoyed by every single thing, even when it was happening in my own house. It’s always like that. There are more bad neighbours than good ones in the yards.”

(Rezo, personal communication, 2022)

“My great-grandfather built our family house, even though he was not a super-rich guy. He was living on one floor with his family and renting the other ones. With the Soviet Union, all apartments were modified and split to host more people. The implementation included people from the Caucasus Region as overall, so a family of Armenians, once owners of a very important textile industry, moved into one part of our apartment. My family managed to buy back the apartment just a few years ago. It took decades.” (See fig. 24)

(Elene, personal communication, 2022)

[We are at Muhudo, a falafel place run by a group of young people, our friends, for us a familiar gathering space; I notice a very old lady sitting right next to the door, drinking lemonade and with a sweet smile on her face. I ask Ana who is she.] (See fig. 25)

“She lives right here, in the Armenian building. (See fig. 26) She is the last lady still living there, she had a very tragic life. The building was designed to be the “castle” of one single person. It’s one of the most important buildings in Tbilisi. During the Soviet Union, it was split into many different houses. She lives in a small studio there. An Oligarch bought the whole building, and she is the only lady that didn’t sell. They are probably going to demolish it soon.”¹³
(Ana, personal communication, 2022)

Beyond Idealization

These stories are taken from conversations that I had with friends in Tbilisi. The meaning of the courtyard has changed in the last few years; young people move from the old town to look for better infrastructure and newer apartments, precisely like the couple from “April”. The ones left in the yard are the older generations and the tourists in the Airbnb. Even when listed as cultural heritage, most courtyard houses are not well maintained; no one can financially afford a renovation, so everyone improvises according to their needs. The result is an unpredictable assemblage of people’s tastes and necessities.

The longing for shared life, like in Elene’s account at the beginning of this chapter, is most likely based on a time when simple things and habits mattered more than they do now. In Tbilisi, nostalgia for communal living, or better still, the spirit of it rather than the conditions per se, is ubiquitous, especially among the elder generations.

Nevertheless, the Soviet blocks in which the couple from April lives, still today represent a better infrastructural choice. These tall concrete buildings, other than being earthquake-proof, are already alienated from the context, no negotiation between neighbours is needed. That is why, even though built to back up communist ideology, these blocks fit perfectly into the capitalist market. Meanwhile, the capitalist bourgeois houses built in the 19th century, cannot be alienated from their context, they do not represent a detachable and privileged position, typical of the most classical private property conceptualization. These houses are on narrow streets, in close proximity to other buildings, and with many common spaces shared among different families, other than not having the same water or gas infrastructure as the Soviet blocks. Their desirability as private properties on a capitalist market, paradoxically, is lower than for Communist social housing.

Notes

¹³ I later found out through Ana that the building in which the old lady lived (See fig. 21) and all the plot around Elene's grandfather house (See fig. 19) had been bought by the same oligarch. The two buildings are very close to each other, the first is in the main avenue (Rustaveli Avenue) and the second following a curved street that descends to one of the main bridges crossing the Mtkvari river. Ana also told me of some gossips about the Oligarch wanting to build a complex of high rise buildings in that plot.



Fig. 21

April. A frame from the movie, showing a picture of the couple's house in old Tbilisi hung in their new apartment. The husband often touches the picture in the movie as to caress an old and beloved memory.



Fig. 22

April. A frame from the movie, where the couple sits in their living room filled with all their new belonging, and all the comforts that come with having them, however living unhappily and bored.



ძველი თბილისი ვიწრო ქუჩაზე

მღვდლები — როდის იქნება ამ ქუჩას გააგანიერებენ და
შენ თავიდან მოვიშორებ, შე ლეონის გულავ, შენა!

შოფერი გაშვებულს — შენ კიდეც ამ ვიწრო ქუჩაზე შე-

Fig. 23

Cartoon. On old Tbilisi's narrow streets, the balconies are so close to each other that sharing and commonality may soon transform in argument.

Doni [Davit Nacvilishvili], 1957. Pankris Tsverze. *Tbilisi: Sakartvelos SSR kulturis saministro*, p.34.



Fig. 24

Tbilisi. Elene's grandfather house. The building is the only one still standing of the block. All other buildings on its sides were demolished.



Fig. 25

Tbilisi. Muhudo, the falafel place mentioned in the chapter, located in a typical Ezo house, in what seems to be an abusively built garage, later transformed in restaurant. The old lady was sitting on the wooden bench under the window.



Fig. 26

Tbilisi. The old lady's house is located in this building. The scale of it takes a whole block on the main avenue. It is considered as one of the most precious examples of Art-Nouveau in the city, built by Nikolai Obolensky, between 1912 and 1915. Various European craftsmen contributed in the construction of the building, (Mania, *European Architects in Tbilisi*), that nowadays is almost completely neglected and abandoned.

Collectiveness

Gabriel and Barbara

Gabriel is 9, while his sister Barbara is 7. They live on the ground floor in the courtyard house with their mother and grandmother. At the beginning of our friendship Gabro gifted me with a man he had drawn with a 3D pen, one arm came off as soon as I touched him, but he was very proud of his little self-portrait. A few days after, I met Barbara with her grandmother close to the metro station on the city's main avenue. I smiled at her and kept walking. A few seconds later, I heard a knock on my arm; Barbara was standing in front of me with an apple bigger than her face, her arm straight toward me. She was just back from the bazaar.

Whenever they come back from school, they enter the yard screaming their interpretation of my name, "Duren!" we play for a bit. They share their chocolates and sometimes ask me for help with the English homework. It always ends up that I do the task for them. (See fig. 27 and 28)

Dodo and Kato

On the first floor, Dodo lives with her daughter's family. I can hear walnuts getting smashed in the wooden pestle with a porous black river stone every weekend. Her face focused on keeping the pounder in balance on the railing of the wooden balcony. I can see the little ponytail of Kato, her 3 years old granddaughter, standing straight on her head while she runs back and forth on the balcony. The first time I met her, she had cut her hair in something very similar to a '90s post-punk bangs. When the laundry is not hung, Kato plays with the wheel of the curricula system that keeps the laundry ropes rolling from one balcony to the other. I can hear the whistle of the wheel spinning on the rod, and I know Kato is there playing. I can only see a ponytail and a little hand. (See fig. 29 and 30)

Eka

Eka lives with her husband and her mother-in-law on the second floor. She used to be a professional diver in the Soviet Union. Lasha also has an apartment on the second floor; he is a well-known rugby player. Eka's house faces West, while Lasha's faces North. One day Eka needed something from Lasha, so she leaned out of the window and started to call him while hitting his window glass with a plastic broom handle, "Lashaaaa! Lashaaaa!". He never replied. I have never seen him.

Avtandil

I was with Thomas when I met him. Thomas is American; everyone in the courtyard knows him. Avtandil stopped him one day and asked him if he could please help him out with a letter he had to write in English to the America Embassy. He was barefoot. We got invited to his house. He was renting a dark, windowless studio on the ground floor of the yard, right next to the metal staircase that leads to the other floors. He started to ask Thomas many confusing questions. We were sitting in the living room, serving as a bedroom as well. The conversation was very disconnected; Avtandil's stream of thoughts invested us like a train at full speed. Then, he pulled some pieces of paper from under the mattress. There were a lot of words written with a blue pen: THOMAS, HARRY POTTER, FAST AND FURIOUS, BILLIONAIRE, 95% POOR, among them. Avtandil was not living an easy life, and we couldn't help him. Thomas promised he would have written a letter to the US Embassy to ask for some million dollars to invest and get richer than Mark Zuckerberg. We never saw him again.

The Opera singer

Every day from a window in the alleyway, you can hear feminine voices singing and rehearsing Opera verses and the harsh and disciplined voice of an old woman correcting when needed. Sometimes, the lady accompanies the voice of her apprentice with a harp or a piano. One day I was passing by the yard, and I saw her at the window with a little round mirror in her hand, doing her make-up and trying to catch the sunlight. For half a second, I questioned if I was in the yard or backstage of a famous Opera Theatre. It was the first and only time I had seen her. She smiled at me motherly and proudly while putting a blush on her cheeks.

The spider-kid

A kid lives in one of the apartments facing the alleyway that brings to the yard. He is probably two years old, or maybe less. Every now and then, I find a little toy that he threw from his window, mostly cars. The first time I saw him, he was climbing the iron fence of one of the two windows of his house, his mother screaming at him to get down from there in the background. He still does it very restlessly, and he gets better at doing it every day. (See fig. 31)

Zaza

Zaza is a policeman. He lives on the first floor, right under Lasha's apartment. One day we got invited to his place for dinner. He lives in a tiny studio; there's a piano, a desk, a bed, a fridge, a little table, a sofa, and chairs in the same room. A book called "Le basi della grammatica italiana. [Basics of Italian Grammar]" with a bright yellow cover is on the desk. A poster with a genealogical tree of a Georgian public figure is hung on the wall. He and Gio, his friend, cooked for us. We ate the most delicious village chicken of our lives. We drank amber house wine that Zaza kept bringing from the balcony. We said toasts, as Georgians do, at all glasses of wine he was pouring for his guests and then drank it to the sip; a special one to Lali, his mother, who passed a few months ago. She loved Italian Opera. We listened to music and watched Mina singing "Amor Mio!" on the big screen of his television. We entered the house at 8 pm, and we left almost six hours later. (See fig. 32)

All these people are narrators of a collective and shared story. They define the space through the direct involvement of their life in everybody's routine. The space of the house and the yard cannot be identified anymore in the dichotomy of private-public. Private is part of the public, even if it may sound contradictory.

Most of the described experiences are not explicitly meant to be directed to me or do not happen in a specific household, at one time and with a specific frequency. Nonetheless, you are pushed to live everyone's life because space allows for it. And the space it's been manipulated by the people inhabiting it. So, you get to know their routine, life, and habits without really asking for it, and that's the only way to be a part of it.

The threshold between the life of the Tbilisian and the city's life is as thin as intricate. As you could live the lives of everyone living in the courtyard house, you can hear them talking, smell the food they are cooking and cross their looks through the windows of their homes. The interaction of people makes the space. Their actions in the context of their own house and yard (action as intended as manipulation of the space) and the interaction that comes from it is a search for sharing that is impossible to dodge. The courtyard is made of people's lives and represents their privacy in the outside space. I know the colours of Eka's bed sheets, the pyjamas of Gabro and Barbara, and all the

clothes and bed sheets of the yard residents because, on each sunny day, the courtyard transforms into a caravel with dozens of ropes and multiple sails. Everybody's laundry is hung outside, from the underwear to the tablecloths; everyone has the string that crosses the yard from one side to the other, sometimes crossing it diagonally. Sometimes your head touches someone's wet shirt while going upstairs to another floor. You must move into the labyrinth of other people's public privacy.



Fig. 27
Tbilisi. Barbare and Gabriel asking me for help with their English homework in the yard.



Fig. 28
Tbilisi. Barbare putting her doll's clothes to dry in the yard.



Fig. 29
Tbilisi. Kato playing with the pulley while probably standing on a stool.



Fig. 30
Tbilisi. Dodo smashing walnuts with her wooden pestle on the balcony.



Fig. 31
Tbilisi. The spider kid in one of his missions.



Fig. 32
Tbilisi. Nika, one of our Kibe Projekt team members, during the dinner at Zaza's place. Mina showing on the TV in the background while performing "Amor mio!".

A system of vectors

En flâneur

In my everyday discovery of the city of Tbilisi, I found myself walking in dozens of different courtyards. Time after time, I started to file the images I recorded in my memory. Only once I walked into the same yards more than three or four times, I could be sure of my recollections. Each time I experienced a new space; each season, while walking in the places I already knew, I needed to initiate the process of memorization again, with the green leaves and blossoms changing radically what I thought I knew from the season before. I wanted to know Tbilisi, discover its viscera, and remember. It was in these transitional and precarious moments when I was grappling to rationalize what constitutes the character of Tbilisi that a transitional space of actually comprehending the essence of what I was trying to grasp happened: the impossibility to get all too comfortable with the city itself. To get used to the fact that the city will never make you get used to it.

Memory and movement

Therefore I started to think about defining the courtyard house, both as a space and as a living organ. I dissected the experiences and the stories I collected and started to analyse which were the constants that were making the yards unique in their architectural and experiential expression.

As a result, I prioritized two elements, memory, and movement. The first is a collection of experiences and tales, that summed up, construct, and deconstruct the space and its configuration, in the search for a comfortable place of the past. The second, movement, is the element that drives through the different memories of different people living in the yards. The space is set up so that encounters have to happen, so that spaces may be shared, and activities may be carried out commonly. Memory becomes the tool for movement and vice-versa. As much as the courtyards are a result of people's interactions and interconnections, they are also the result of a layered nostalgia, a nostalgia that is collected into different memories of how people used to live in the yard, and these memories materialize in the way people move and circulate. Movement is the vector of social interconnection.

Memory through the experience of movement

The definition of the yard goes beyond the conception of public and private. The social dynamic of the yards is made possible thanks to movement and circulation, from one door to another, from one staircase to another, and from

one way of perceiving scale, space, and distances, to another. That is why, in my research, I put emphasis on the conservation of the yard and its social dynamics, starting with the conservation of its circulation.

I will define the connection between memory and movement as different vectorial forces, connecting people living and visiting the Ezo.

The first vector is the one of *memory through experience* and its subsequent evolution to *memory through the experience of movement*. This first force translates into the way one can circulate, and the way to memorize the space; this synthesis impacts the experience and the way each individual perceives the space. Memory becomes physically dynamic and evolves into the results of different accidents and encounters linked to personal experience. In essence, the people I see and encounter during my journey through the exploration of the yard, influence radically my understanding of space. I move in a certain direction, so I meet other people.

Memory through the memory of movement

The second vector is the construction of *memory through the memory of movement*. The acquired experiences are not only personal but a sum up of the way other people used and moved into the space too. The space can be memorized, so as a means, one can access and move through it; nevertheless, the way people use the space changes daily, and this adds up to memory and to personal experience.

Basically, every time I access the yard, the memory of the movements I had carried out before develops, therefore I will remember how I reached a doorstep not only through the path I followed but also through the experiences I lived while getting there.

These two vectors form a phenomenology of movement in constant flux, defined by embodied memory as a malleable form constantly exposed to unpredictable conditions of a living space.

The project

[...] The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurement of its space and the events of its past: the height of a lamppost and the distance from the ground of a hanged usurper's swaying feet; the line strung from the lamppost to the railing opposite and the festoons that decorate the course of the queen's nuptial procession; the height of that railing that and the leap of the adulterer who climbed over it at dawn; the tilt of a guttering and a cat's progress along it as he slips into the same window; the firing range of a gunboat which has suddenly appeared beyond the cape of the bomb that destroys the guttering; the rips in the fish net and the three old men seated on the dock mending nets and telling each other for the hundredth time the story of the gunboat of the usurper, whom some say was the queen's illegitimate son, abandoned in his swaddling clothes there on the dock.

As this wave of memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands. A description of Zaira as it is today should contain all Zaira's past. The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the granting of the window, the banister of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.

Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities, 3. Cities and Memory

The future of the Ezo

As the rapid disappearance of Tbilisian courtyard houses keeps progressing and the recent social and political circumstances will not contain this mass destruction, I imagine a future in which the courtyard as it is today completely disappears. This idea of a not-so-far future is not as metaphorical as anyone would like it to be; as of today, a tabula rasa feels like the most linear temporal consequence for the future. From this projection, the idea is to collect what I have been emphasizing as the main archetype in the hierarchy of the Ezo: the staircases. I imagine dismantling the staircases from the yards that are getting demolished and assembling them again in a new yard, a community space that is the synthesis of Tbilisi's palimpsest.

Movement and circulation enable the social processes of the yards; hence, maintaining the yards' social dynamics begins with maintaining their circulation and subsequent customs (or rituals). The "development" of Tbilisi

will continue its path to oblivion, and it's possible that the cultural heritage buildings, including the staircases and architectural details that contribute to the above-mentioned circulation that distinguishes Tbilisi's urban and social structure, will vanish even more quickly. In this situation, the concept of creating a radical and massive intervention becomes not only necessary to prevent the disappearance of these objects but also a means of maintaining the dynamics of the city via progression by adding another layer.

It is important to mention that the aim of the project positions itself far from the standardized idea of musealization of the Tbilisian everyday life; that is why through the process of collection of the memories of the people I met, and the subsequent synthesis with my embodied memories, I propose a tailor made intervention. The project disregards a specific crystallization in time and space, of both objects and the dynamics which they inspire, and puts the user in direct relation with the city's unpredictability and ever-changing quality.

As a first step, I individuated two empty lots in the old neighbourhood of Sololaki, which is now very rapidly getting gentrified.¹⁴ The two empty lots, which used to be courtyard houses, are now used as parking lots. The buildings have probably been demolished or collapsed because of low maintenance a few years ago. Unfortunately, no information was found about the buildings previously standing there, if not satellite images, the latest dating back to 2005. The file rouge between these two sites, besides their proximity, is the presence of two walls. In one case, the large parking lot occupies half of the block of the urban grid. (See fig. 33) The imposing wall that is left naked from the previous building standing attached to it, represents the material palimpsest. This wall includes in its form every image of any dilapidated wall one could imagine, a synthesis of dozens of other walls, materials, fractions, and windows. Is the material memory of the building that used to stand attached to it.

On the other hand, the second parking lot is an enclosed, protected space. A long stripe between two other buildings. (See fig. 34) The morphological conditions of this plot facilitate the ideal and imaginative association with the enclosed space of the house. On one of the two longitudinal sides, a wall has preserved all the traces of the rooms, from their outline to the wallpapers and the kitchen and bathroom tiles. Here is about a collection of memories.

How were the rooms used? Who used to live in those rooms? What were they cooking in that kitchen?

Both walls represent the city's (un)layering.

In my project, I will use these two walls as the backdrop of the scenography I compose. Both walls are very strong with symbolism, and their condition represents a heavy and full absence. For as much as they stand as witnesses of a past life, they project you into an imaginative future: questioning how a room was used, a window frame was changed, or a hole in the wall was fixed, puts the viewer in the position of an unconscious storyteller.

Notes

¹⁴ The site is located very close to one of Tbilisi's traffic nodes, Freedom square, and at a few meters from old Sololaki, where the New Tiflis Project is ongoing. It is a well known fact that a considerable number of Russian citizens has moved to the Georgian capital after the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war in February 2022. Sololaki is probably one of the neighbourhoods that has registered the higher number of new businesses other than a considerable real estate speculation on rental prices during the last year. Even though the process of gentrification has started probably in concurrence with the beginning of the New Tiflis Project, the new migratory flux has surely accelerated it.

The phenomenon is of course reflecting also on the future of the courtyard houses. Very often whomever has a property in a Ezo, prefers to move to the suburbs and rent their own apartment as Airbnb for shockingly high prices.



Fig. 33
Tbilisi. Intervention wall 1. The parking lot can be found between Dadiani and Tabidze St. in lower Sololaki.



Fig. 34
Tbilisi. Intervention wall 2. The parking lot can be found in 22 Dadiani St.

Process of identification

Through the initial process of individuation, as intended as the first consequence of direct observation and analysis of the yards, I started to isolate the single constituent elements of the space. These singular and identified objects, directly or indirectly linked to the actions they represent or produce, will be defined as allegories; more specifically: the allegory of thresholds, the allegory of motion, and the allegory of commonality.

The project stands as an implemented version of the original concept of the yard, as much building material as is practical will be sourced from actual and potential demolished Ezo homes. Old Soviet railroads are frequently used as columns and may be reused for other architectural features since the primary structure, the foundations, and many other details like additional stairs and loggias are thought to be made of metal. Discarded railroads are frequently seen in courtyards where they are re-purposed as brick wall reinforcement, columns for Kamikaze loggias, and other solutions. The project's execution adheres to the core ideas of Kibe-Projekt, such as community involvement, a boost to the local economy, and artisanship, in this case calling for a network of neighborhood craftspeople to participate in the setup. The workshop for building and restoring the staircases would be located in the remaining area of both parking lots, and it might provide students from the Academy of Art and nearby universities an exciting chance to learn woodworking alongside craftspeople, just like it did for Kibe-Projekt. It would be feasible for this scope to have the woodworking shops in the existing sheds, which are currently being used as covered parking. The ironwork would need to be decentralised to specialist shops, most likely in Eliava, where the majority of stores and the bazaar for building supplies are located in northern Tbilisi.

Allegory of Thresholds

As the sun comes out on a November morning, Eka, Mzia, Khatuna, and Dodo, start to pull their laundry lines through the pulley. Storey by storey, the yard gets crowded from the number of colourful fabrics. A drop falls on my shoulder while I walk in the yard. We are ready to sail. I know that Eka has an endless quantity of flower-printed bed sheets, while Dodo's niece likes to wear black jeans. I know that Khatuna's son has a spider-man bed cover, and Mzia just washed his son's working clothes. The boundary between me, an outsider, and them, the insiders, is broken now. I know their laundry piece by piece, day by

day, from fall to summer. Sometimes I touch them with my head while moving around the yard, sometimes I help them move when a sudden rain arrives. The laundry lines set a visibility threshold; the scenography changes radically, and the perception of the space is irretrievably filtered through the private lives of the residents.

The laundry lines get translated into a series of curtains connected to the main structural grid. This series will divide the space into different fractions; each fraction has its own pace, and through each fraction, the space gets discovered or rediscovered layer by layer. The curtains can be opened or closed with respect to the users' desire: from a sun or wind barrier to a quest for privacy, or a change in scenography.

Is October, maybe November and the persimmon tree in my yard is exploding with fruits. The leaves have already fallen, and the black branches of the tree embroil a segment of the sky, while dozens of persimmons contrast with the bright blue. The vineyard that wraps the fence of the gate climbed up the persimmon tree, and they became one. Some kids are climbing the fence from the street to grab some fruits, with their backpacks thrown on the ground and some sticks to shake the closest branch. I look at them from my window, trying to not get noticed. I recognize one of the kids, he lives in one of the apartments facing my yard, unfortunately, none of the branches reaches his window. They managed to get some fruit, and as if they committed a crime, they run away triumphantly.

Allegory of Movement

Walking in old Sololaki, one happens often to walk under beds of grapes. The city is very polluted now, so only the trees in the upper part of the city get their fruits eaten by the neighbours. It may happen, nonetheless, to see an old man climbing up an improvised ladder to grab some grapes, with a little helper grabbing the fruits from his hands. Sometimes, entire yards are covered with vineyards, and the other floors of the buildings are hidden depending on the season. The yard becomes a discovery, from one season to another, from one fruit to another.

Nature, fruits, and seasons become integral in the discovery of the yards.

From how the residents take care of it, to how they use the fruits to make wine together, dry the persimmons, or distil cha-cha.

The East entrance of the project will be defined by the presence of a vineyard canopy, that connects to the main grid structure and the kamikaze loggia in which it will be possible to store, sell, or drink, the cha-cha distilled in the yard itself. The fruit trees will be introduced in the garden of the west side in a dedicated area.

While I climb up my friend's house staircase, I notice through an open window a little kid cooking with her grandma. It is August and Tbilisi is warm. After a few steps further up, I notice how a young woman had seen me while discovering her daughter and her mother cooking together, from another window, in another room of the same house. We all had seen each other. I would not have been able to see them cooking together if I hadn't climbed the staircase, and I wouldn't have noticed the kid's mother if I hadn't gone a few steps further up, where my visual was free from the neighbours' laundry.

A few months earlier, I used to live in a courtyard with a very long, double-ramp staircase. The staircase led from the yard only to my door, but while climbing up I was walking a couple of meters parallel to my neighbour's windows. My neighbours were a couple of elderlies living with their daughter and her three children, all girls, from the age of two to nine. Every morning around 8, when I was going to buy bread for breakfast, the grandmother was sitting at the window, with a little prayer book, staring at the void while reciting. The first couple of times I hadn't noticed the little leather-covered book, and I was left with a bitter taste after greeting her and not getting an answer-back. When I noticed, the following days, that she was praying, I felt like slowing down on the staircase to not make too much noise or moving more gently so that even my movement wouldn't disturb her. I felt like I was disturbing her intimacy with God.

The older sister was always helping her grandmother in the housekeeping businesses, from hanging the laundry to washing the floor. She was the one communicating with me in English and letting me know, always from the same distance between her window and my staircase, when the water company

would cut the water for extraordinary works. Other times, she was just sitting and playing cards with her grandfather on a little table with two stools, always facing that same window.

The staircases that I decide to collect, restore, and give back to the natural temporality of the city, are not just objects and do not only represent a cultural heritage effort. These staircases are where the main scene of the ever-evolving theatre play of the Ezo starts. From the looks to the smiles, from the curiosity of looking in the houses to the feeling of officiousness. The staircases are what link everyone living in the yard, no matter if upstairs, downstairs, further, directly, or indirectly through the staircase.

Allegory of Commonality

It was the end of Spring; days were warm, and nights were fresh. I was starting to feel at home in Tbilisi. A friend invited me for some wine and cheese at her place, in the upper part of the Mtatsminda neighbourhood, where an ocean of roofs, red, and grey, in metal or tiles, was unfolding under us. She lived in a courtyard house, but her entrance was from a tiny door on the right side of the courtyard's main gate, where a wooden staircase led to a first door on a mezzanine, and then upper to a walkway where my friend's house was. There were two doors, one directly to her bedroom, and the other to the kitchen, both facing the walkway. It was probably my favourite house in Tbilisi. Her restroom had a balcony, accessible only from the restroom. Something I had never seen before, and I had never thought could be so surprisingly enjoyable. We drank wine and ate cheese on the wooden walkway. The other apartments facing that space were not rented. We could see the other neighbours sitting in the yard and chatting downstairs. I could recall at least a dozen of other circumstances like this. On different balconies, walkways, and loggias; the same actions, impressions, and sharing.

What I aim to do in the project, is to use walkways and balconies with two different significance. In one case, as spaces in which sharing and observing become a direct consequence of the circulatory path; in the other case, the circulatory path itself, the route that people will follow, is the one connecting the visitors together in the discovery of the space, the social dimension, and potentials of the yard.

The Composition of the Sequence

The stories I have collected, the observations I have analytically recalled, and all the details and the phenomena that built up the research served as a direct tool to understand the composition of the space of the yard. From all phenomena, events, circumstances, actions (mine or someone else's), stories, and memories (mine or someone else's), I abstracted the dimensional and experiential information I needed to build the space of the yard, even though deconstruct it beforehand.

This derivation, or better defined, experiential genealogy of the yard, is in a constant state of motion and becoming, not just agentially but also mnemonically and perceptively.

My deliberation in finding for all elements (thresholds, motion, and commonality) their place in the hierarchy of the construction of the yard, is a direct result of how all actors I have been naming, every inhabitant of the yards I have been in contact with, made me realize.

That is why the functioning of the space is not for me to decide. I consider the project as a constantly evolving living memory, and what I try to translate through old, new, reused, or manipulated elements, is a space that I got to know through the stories I have collected in this research. Is the result of decades of nostalgia of someone's grandfather, the daily routine of an old lady hanging laundry, or the way I have been observing how all these people's private affairs were unfolding in front of my eyes while I was trying to not invade their routine. I found a place for the objects that were impregnated with memories and experiences; the users will find their experiences and their memories through the space I composed. The project does not seek for a sole and bright solution for the future, it seeks for an open end, it may be full of light as much as forgotten into darkness. It looks at the past with nostalgia and regard, conscious of what has been lost and cannot be composed again, but even more conscious of the importance of the vectors of social dynamics that still can and need to be preserved, as I experienced them.

Post Scriptum

After a few months of staying in Tbilisi, I went back home, in Italy. I went to Rome on the weekend after my arrival, and I understood what Tbilisi is about for me.

This body, Tbilisi, made from so many dislocations, gives you the constant impression that the city may stop existing at any moment in time because there is no time able to circumscribe the city. Its multiplicity is tangible to everyone. The way you live the city is all about a labyrinth of different tales. Tbilisi may die at any moment in time, and you feel lucky to be there and see its beauty. It's a constantly moving organ, even the materials that make the old town so fascinating are not meant to be forever: wood, metal, bricks, all deteriorating and moving in front of your sight towards their end. This makes Tbilisi not stable, for me, schizophrenic, always looking for how to get fixed, always looking for action, change, completion, and movement; and this is what makes me love it. Its opposite, in my metaphor, is Rome. Rome is stable, travertine, granite, and even the bricks are eternal. You know that Rome will always wait for you exactly as it is now. Rome makes you feel safe, makes your memories and nostalgia feel safe because nothing changes, it's beautifully stale. And Rome is an enormous palimpsest too, a real museum of architectural greatness from century to century. And it is eternally beautiful. Rome is stuck in a time of splendour that is specific, even if its multiple centuries of history are overlapping and intertwining. Rome will not die the day after you visit it, and that is why you feel lucky to see it because you know you will always be able to come back and see it as it has always been.

Tbilisi is a constant cycle of do-ut-des, people make the city and give to the city, and the city gives back to them and influences lives and habits. Probably contemporary Rome wouldn't be Rome without Romans, but its architecture IS Rome. Tbilisi can't be Tbilisi without Tbilisians because its architecture IS the Tbilisians.

Bibliography

Bibliography

April. Directed by Otar Iosseliani, *Kartuli Pilmi*, 1961.

Boym, Svetlana. "Soviet Everyday Culture: An Oxymoron?" *Russian Culture*, 1 Jan. 2012, pp. 1–30

---. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York, Basic Books, 2001.

Italo Calvino. *Invisible Cities*. London Vintage, 2009.

Mania, Maia. *European Architects in Tbilisi*. 2006.

---. *German Architects in Tbilisi*. 2012.

---. "Transformation of Tbilisi Yard." *Sabchota Xelovneba*, no. 3, 1985.

Manning, Paul. "The City of Balconies: Elite Politics and the Changing Semiotics of the Post-Socialist Cityscape." *City Culture and City Planning in Tbilisi: Where Europe and Asia Meet.*, by K. van Assche and J. Salukvadze, edited by N. Shavishvili, Lewiston, Mellen Press, 2009, pp. 71–102.

Messana, Paola. *Soviet Communal Living : An Oral History of the Kommunalka*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Millington, Kevin. *THE EXCHANGE RATES of the EURO vs OTHER MAIN CURRENCIES and THEIR IMPACT on EU TOURISM TRANSPORT and TOURISM EN*. 2007.

