FINDING IDENTITY IN GEORGIA'S DISSONANT HERITAGE LANDSCAPE

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"These colors arrived too quickly, unregulated and unapologetically."

How the last 20 years of sovereign architecture can change the feel of a country deeply rooted in vernacularity

Special thanks to Sabina Tanovic, Lela Gelashvili and Natalia Vatsadze for supporting and energizing me through the whole research and writing process.

Cover image (Fig. n.1)
Image by author - Boulder defining the path to Shkhara Glacier, Ushguli

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Introduction

What makes architectural heritage meaningful? Looking at cities like Baku, Rotterdam, or Tirana, it often feels as though some architects have entirely lost their sense of local heritage, imposing designs that steamroll over cultural identity. Eugene Viollet-le-Duc (1854) famously argued that society requires architects who truly understand the materials, construction processes, and the ideas behind buildings in their specific location and time. Most of us don't notice when an architect gets it right, but when they get it wrong, it becomes a permanent, unavoidable scar on the city. This is exactly what I experienced visiting Georgia in July 2025.

Walking through Tbilisi felt like jumping in and out of a broken time machine. Meaningful heritage sites are abruptly juxtaposed against "*facsimile architecture*" mimicking modern global hubs. I became overwhelmed with confusion as questions were piling in my head. Luckily, my initial sense of rejection turned into curiosity. However, I knew that as an outsider, I could not uncover the truth through observation alone. Thus, this research is supported by the lived experiences of local experts: Lela Gelashvili, a professional guide, and Natalia Vatsadze, an art historian. With their help, I aim to uncover the historical events and geopolitical influences that shaped the last two decades of Georgia's dissonant architecture landscape: a period I view as an architectural dictatorship spanning from Mikheil Saakashvili's frantic glass-and-steel Westernization to the current oligarchic urbanism of Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream party.

My hypothesis suggests that this architectural "*mish-mash*" is a byproduct of violent socio-political shifts, seasoned with nostalgia, regional geopolitical pressures, and a desperate pursuit of a globalized image. Hence, we have to look past the surface style. We must apply a more holistic, deeper investigation represented in my research through the analysis of the architectural strata of Georgia, passing through successive waves of Persian, Roman, Arab influence, and two centuries of Russian hegemony including the current territorial occupations. These layers provide the baseline to question the current situation.

I argue that the architecture of the last twenty years is a tangible, reactionary response to a volatile geopolitical climate, specifically, the tension between a heavy Russian grey shadow and aspirations for the European Union. By using Laurajane Smith's *Uses of Heritage* (2006) and Tunbridge and Ashworth's *Dissonant heritage: the management of the past as a resource in conflict* (1996), I intend to show how power has been used to toy with these historical layers. In turn, this will help to map the "*epicenters of dissonance*", through various case studies, in the cartographic project "*Looking for Identity*". In the pursuit of a vibrant future, the nation's collective vigilance faltered, trading the structural honesty of its heritage for a fleeting, power-driven facade. This research seeks to interrogate the architectural "*glitch*" of modern Georgia: is this skyline a byproduct of rapid urbanism, or a deliberate site where the Soviet past and European future collide?

Left (Fig. n.2)
Image by author - Pensive moment at the end of the trip, Kutaisi

ვახტანგ გორგასლის მოედანი
Vakhtang Gorgasali Square

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Outline

The thesis, following this introduction, is divided into four main chapters, designed to provide the historical context, the critical tools, and finally, the visual evidence of this phenomenon.

Chapter II: Peeling the Architectural Strata of Georgia's History - This chapter serves as our knowledge base. It identifies the deeply layered identity of Georgian architecture through its long history of invasions and influences. Tracing from pre-Soviet roots (Persian, Roman, Arab) to the 200-year Russian presence and its ongoing occupation of Abkhazia and Samachablo (South Ossetia), this section establishes the authentic baseline of Georgian heritage.

Chapter III: Defining Dissonant Architecture in the Georgian Context - Here, I provide the tools needed to criticize how political power toys with those historical layers. Using Laurajane Smith's concept of the *Authorized Heritage Discourse* (2006) and Tunbridge and Ashworth's theory on *Dissonant Heritage* (1996), this chapter analyzes the Georgian situation through three specific subcategories: Dissonance Implicit in Commodification, in Place Products, and in the Content of the Message.

Chapter IV: Looking for Identity - a Cartographic Project - This chapter shifts the thesis into a visual essay and a cartographic journey. Driven by my field research and firsthand insights from local guide Lela Gelashvili and art historian Natalia Vatsadze, this project maps the geographical epicenters of architectural dissonance across the country: Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Mestia, and Batumi. We will look at three case studies per epicenter, covering Tbilisi's glass structures, the "Disneyfication" of Mestia's mountains, political displacement in Kutaisi, and the extreme facsimile architecture of Batumi's Riviera.

Chapter V: Conclusion - The final chapter draws the outcomes of the research, questioning whether this two-decade architectural trend is actually shaping a bold new national image or just disinheriting Georgians of their own history.

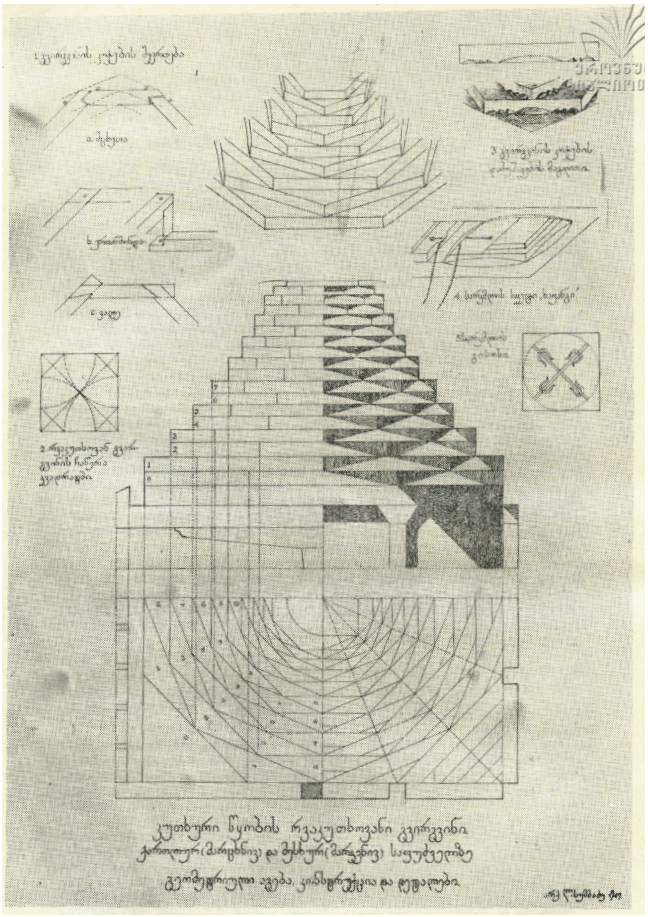
The thesis closes with the Bibliography, followed by full interview transcripts in Appendix A (Lela Gelashvili) and Appendix B (Natalia Vatsadze). Finally, Appendix C: Dissonance List acts as an academic gift. Because Chapter IV simply did not have the space to thoroughly discuss every single building I mapped, this appendix provides a complete catalog of these dissonant structures for anyone wanting to take this investigation further.

Left (Fig. n.3)
Image by author - View of the Mother of Georgia, Tbilisi

CHAPTER II: PEELING THE ARCHITECTURAL STRATA OF GEORGIA'S HISTORY

Today, the urban landscape of Georgia is inhabited by a plethora of "*architectural glitches*" which have aggressively mushroomed over the past two decades. These structures, characterized by their deregulated glass and steel aesthetics, represent only the most recent stratum of influences brought in through consecutive, relentless international waves. This complex stratification process can be clearly displayed through a palimpsest of invasions, some physical, others ideological (Ziaiemehr, 2023). Thus, this chapter aims to set the scene to interrogate the traumatic post-soviet architecture, beginning with the Rose Revolution (2003) and the rise to power of the former president Mikheil Saakashvili. To decode this modern phenomenon, we must begin peeling back the layers of the built environment like geological strata. By utilizing architecture as a visual aid, we can systematically uncover the vernacular, imperial, and ideological imprints that define the contemporary Georgian city, revealing how each successive power sought to overwrite the previous one.

Right (Fig. n.4) *Reconstruction of Georgian Darbazi (Domed Hall) with Dedabodzi (Mother-Pillar) and Gvirgvini (Crown)*by *the open-air Ethnographic Museum in Tbilisi, Georgia.* By Unknown, 2020, Tbilisi Architecture Network (https://www.tbilisiarchitecture.net/origins-of-domed-pillar-houses/).



Top (Fig. n.5)
Sumbadze's drawing of a *Octagonal gvirgvini of angular laying on the Kartlian (left) and Meskhetian (right) base.*
Note. Adapted from [Arkhitektura gruzinskogo narodnogo zhilishcha "darbazi"] (p.56), by *Sumbadze, L. Z.*, 1984, Metsniereba.
Copyright 1984

At the core of Georgian architectural identity, and serving as its foundational stratum, stands the *Darbazi*. Evolving through a centuries-long process of trial and error, this communal hall-house represents what Sumbadze (1984) identifies as an "*organic synthesis of constructive logic and cultural symbolism.*" Growing strictly from the inside out around a central hearth, the *Darbazi* was defined by two primary architectural elements: the *gvirgvini* and the *deda-bodzi*. The *gvirgvini* (or "crown") is a tiered, pyramidal wooden dome with a central oculus. Sumbadze (1984) describes it as an "*original solution for a centric-type ceiling*," achieved through the "*successive laying of wooden beams*" to transition from a square base to a circular opening. The structural and symbolic weight of this corbelled dome rested entirely upon the *deda-bodzi*, or "mother-pillar." This massive timber element served as the "*ideological and artistic center of the dwelling*," establishing a vertical axis that anchored the earthly hearth on the floor to the celestial opening above (Sumbadze, 1984).

The structural ingenuity of these timber-stacking methods reached the Roman world as early as the 1st century BC. In *De Architectura*, Vitruvius marveled at the Caucasian tribes in Colchis (an ancient Georgian kingdom in modern-day western Georgia) who laid logs "*alternately*" to produce "*pyramidal form*" (Book II, Ch. 1, Sec. 4). This localized vernacular logic allowed for large, column-free internal spaces that were lighter and highly earthquake-resistant. While Vitruvius attributed this timber construction to a regional lack of stone, local application reveals a more complex reality. Natalia Vatsadze notes that vernacular materiality adapted strictly to regional demands: while western regions like Racha and Adjara relied on timber foundations to manage high rainfall and seismic activity, eastern Georgia (Kakheti) primarily utilized small stones from the Alazani River (Vatsadze, 2026, Appendix B).

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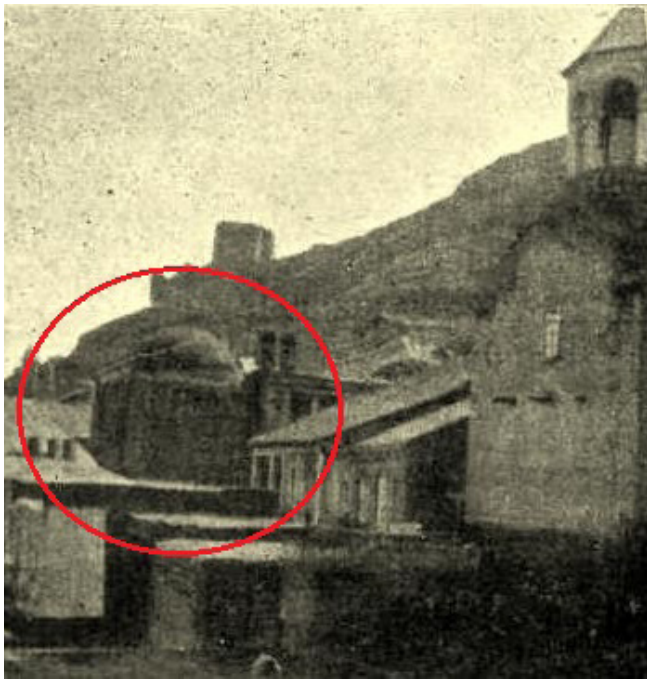
However, as Sumbadze (1984) demonstrates, even in stone-rich areas like Kartli (central Georgia), the wooden *Darbazi* roof persisted not out of sheer necessity, but as a sophisticated cultural choice. Wood remained the essential material for the "celestial" dome, cementing the wooden *Darbazi* as the cultural archetype and prestige form. The most profound evidence of this cultural preference is found at the ancient rock-hewn town of *Uplistsikhe* (10th-9th century BC) (Khimshiashvili, 1999). Here, the indigenous architectural DNA underwent a process of skeuomorphism. As Bock (1988) observes, builders meticulously carved the sandstone cliffs to imitate the wooden *gvirgvini* coffers, creating "fossilized" *Darbazi* houses. By petrifying their vernacular logic into the topography, the Georgians transitioned domestic safety into a lithic, permanent monument. This petrification proves that the Georgian vernacular was a complete, internally coherent system rooted deeply in the local landscape long before the arrival of foreign empires.

Top right (Fig. n.6) *Uplistsikhe Caves, Basilica St.George,* By Badri Vadachkoria (https://www.georgianholidays.com/attraction/museums-in-regions/uplistsikhe-historical-architectural-museum) Reprinted for educational purposes.

However, as the geopolitical landscape shifted into the 1st century AD, this indigenous tectonic isolation could no longer be maintained. Georgia, comprising Colchis in the West and Iberia in the East, emerged as a strategic frontier between the Greco-Roman world and the Iranian plateaus (Braund, 1994). During this era, architecture transitioned from a purely domestic concern into a physical manifestation of imperial concretization (Bock, 1988). From the West, Roman military expansion introduced architecture as a portable mechanism of control, utilizing "*readymade*" technologies such as *opus mixtum* (alternating brick and stone) and lime mortar (Cody, 2003). These exported vernacular methods and materials were fundamentally alien to the dry-stone and timber logic of the *Darbazi*. The *Gonio Fortress (Apsaros)* on the Black Sea, stands as a definitive example of this de-territorialized military kit dropped into the Georgian landscape, serving as a primary link in the Roman limes of the eastern Pontus (Braund, 1994).

Bottom left (Fig. n.7) *Gonio Fortress' entrance.* By Mikheil Chkhikvadze, 2015, Wikimedia Commons. Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.



Conversely, Sassanid Persian influence from the East exported spatial typologies that altered the architectural DNA of the Georgian elite, specifically the *Iwan* (vaulted hall) and the *Chahar-Taq* (four-arch domed square). Archaeological research at the *Dedoplis Gora* complex reveals that Iberian kings utilized these Persian palatial layouts to signal political alignment, even arranging domestic sanctuaries to accommodate imported Zoroastrian rituals (Furtwängler et al., 2008). This architectural overwrite reached the heart of the capital; the structural base of an ancient *Ateshgah* (fire temple) still stands in Tbilisi's Old Town, retaining its classic brick-built *chahar-taq* layout amidst later developments (Akbarzadeh, 2019).

Top (Fig. n.8) *Ateshgah's dome in the 1900 book Tiflis: souvenirs d'une mission* by Baron Joseph de Baye

Middle (Fig. n.9) *Interior view of the Ateshgah in Tbilisi, showing the Sassanid brickwork.* From Ateshgah: A Persian Fire Temple That Became a Mosque, by P. Akbarzadeh, 2019, BBC Persian Service. Used under Fair Use for academic purposes.

Right (Fig. n.10) Dedoplis Gora palace, drone photograph. (D. Gagoshidze.)

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At the same time, the adoption of Christianity as the state religion in 337 AD triggered a monumental architectural rupture. However, rather than passively adopting a "*readymade*" Roman or Byzantine kit, Georgian builders engaged in a sophisticated regional negotiation. As Bock (1988) argues, this resulted in the unique *Georgian "Cross-Dome" church*, a typology that effectively synthesized the longitudinal axis of the Roman basilica with the centralized, square-based logic of the Iranian plateau. This was not a simple imitation of foreign forms, but a structural "*petrification*" of indigenous memory. Buxton (1975) notes that the early Georgian builders moved rapidly away from the simple wooden roofed basilicas of the West toward massive stone masonry, creating a unified "*National Style*" defined by its verticality. Crucially, Sumbadze (1984) demonstrates that this transition was a literal translation of the *Darbazi* into stone. The use of *squinches* (corner arches that allow a circular dome to sit upon a square base) functions as a masonry echo of the stepped wooden *gvirgvini* dome. The 6th-century *Jvari Monastery*, with its "*tetraconch*" (four-apsed) plan, represents the peak of this architectural typology and serves as a model for numerous other churches across the South Caucasus (World Monuments Fund, n.d.).

Right (Fig. n.11) *The Jvari Monastery overlooking the confluence of the Mtkvari and Aragvi rivers.* From *Jvari Monastery*, by World Monuments Fund, n.d., https://www.wmf.org/projects/jvari-monastery. Reprinted for educational purposes.

This era of high-hybridity faced a new, violent urban rupture in the 8th century with the establishment of the *Tbilisi Emirate*. Following the sack of the city in 736 AD (Bock, 1988), Islamic urbanism was grafted onto the landscape, introducing the "*brick-and-dome*" aesthetic still visible in the *Sulfur Baths of Abanotubani* (Manning, 2009). Yet, despite this Islamic overwrite, the residential layout stubbornly maintained a vernacular "*terrace*" logic. One-story buildings were constructed so that the flat, soil-covered roof of the lower house served functionally as the balcony for the house above (Vatsadze, 2026, Appendix B). This vertically stacked system preserved a tradition of porous, communal living that would eventually evolve into the iconic *Tbilisi balcony*, resisting the rigid street-front logic of subsequent external influences (Manning, 2009).

Top, right (Fig. n.12-13) *The brick domes of the Abanotubani sulfur baths in Tbilisi.* From *Tbilisi Sulfur Baths,* by Georgian National Tourism Administration, n.d., https://georgia.travel/tbilisi-sulfur-baths. Reprinted for educational purposes.

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The 11th to 13th centuries under the Bagrationi Dynasty marked the political and cultural peak of medieval Georgia (Baumer, 2023). Architecturally, this "*Golden Age*" solidified a sovereign "*National Style*," established today as the country's "*Authorized Heritage*" (Smith, 2006). Rejecting the "*exported vernaculars*" of neighboring empires, Georgian builders synthesized local structural logic with Byzantine influences, culminating in masterpieces like the *Gelati Monastery* (UNESCO, n.d.).

However, this architectural confidence was shattered by Mongol and Timurid invasions, reverting construction to a *survivalist mode of defensive towers* (Baumer, 2023) as seen during my stay in the Svaneti region, specifically Mestia and Ushguli (see Fig.14). By the 16th century, Georgia was partitioned. In Tbilisi, under the Safavid Persian Empire, architectural kits were imported en masse, introducing *sweeping Persian brickwork, pointed arches, and vaulted sulfur baths* (Rayfield, 2012). It was within this Safavid-dominated stratum that the proto-version of the famous "*Tbilisi Balcony*" emerged. This was a desperate architectural attempt to maintain the internal family life of the ancient *Darbazi* (Sumbadze, 1984) while outwardly complying with Persian spatial demands. By 1790, constant pillaging meant almost no civil buildings remained. The capital, left as a deeply scarred palimpsest, had its indigenous logic buried under layers of imperial overwrite clearing the stage for the Russian annexation (Rayfield, 2012; Kulturexpress, 2026).

Top (Fig. n.14) Image by author - Close encounter with a Svan Tower in Ushguli

Left (Fig. n.15) *Gelati Monastery Note.* From *Gelati Monastery* [Photograph], by H. C. V. Ko, 2016, UNESCO World Heritage Centre (https://whc.unesco.org/en/documents/143858). © 2016 by Ko Hon Chiu Vincent.

The 19th-century Russian annexation (1801) sought to "*civilize*" the Caucasian frontier by imposing *Neoclassical* and *Art Nouveau facades*, physically reorienting Georgia toward the Western world (Mania, 2006; Wheeler, 2018). Interestingly, much of the precision stonework in these townhouses was executed by Greek communities operating local quarries (Vatsadze, 2026, Appendix B). This era is yet another representation of what Cody (2003) describes as the "*exportation of vernacular technology*," a process where imperial powers translate local building methods into Westernized aesthetics to assert undeniable cultural dominance.

Left (Fig. n.16) *Tbilisi Mutual Credit Society Building (1913) Note. The building was designed by architect Micheil Ohanjanov.* From *Art Nouveau in Tbilisi* [Photograph], by Tbilisi Architecture Biennial, 2020 (https://www.tbilisiarchitecture.net/art-nouveau-in-tbilisi/). In the public domain.

As the *Soviet era* (1921-1991) descended upon Georgia, it introduced a more totalizing ideological overwrite utilizing architecture as an apparatus of behavioral control (Engel, 2024). And, by the 1960s, the state shifted toward *mass-produced Khrushchyovkas*, basically low-cost, prefabricated concrete-paneled apartment buildings. Though technically designed for a 20-year lifespan, these blocks remain occupied today, posing significant risks to residents (Vatsadze, 2026, Appendix B). During this period, housing became an "*oxymoron*" (Boym, 2012); utopian state promises clashed with constrained domestic realities, forcing families to live in single rooms for decades and fueling an ancestral urge to expand homes through any available means (Vatsadze, 2026, Appendix B).

Right (Fig. n.17) *Soviet-era Khrushchyovkas in Georgia Note. These mass-produced housing blocks were re-coloured during the Saakashvii era.* From *"For Residents of Georgia, Soviet-Era Architecture is a Harsh Reminder of the Past"* [Photograph], by T. Christine, 2022, Print Magazine (https://www.printmag.com/architecture/for-residents-of-georgia-soviet-era-architecture-is-a-harsh-reminder-of-the-past/). Copyright 2022 by Print Magazine.

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Eventually, the geopolitical collapse of 1991 triggered a "*black period*" of civil war and economic failure, vividly remembered by Lela Gelashvili as a time of no electricity or water (2026, Appendix A). This survival atmosphere institutionalized "*Kamikaze Loggias*": informal, self-built extensions on the verge of collapse (Majzlanová, 2023). The societal trauma was exacerbated by the arrival of thousands of refugees from Samachablo and Abkhazia, who were funneled into *"defunct Soviet institutional buildings"* (Wheeler, 2018). In an act of architectural displacedness, the government often recreated their lost landscapes by planting specific trees and greenery from Abkhazia around their temporary shelters (Vatsadze, 2026, Appendix B). Caught between restorative and reflective nostalgia (Boym, 2001), this era birthed an "*Architecture of Anxiety*," an environment driven entirely by the lingering geopolitical fear of being pulled back into the Soviet orbit.

Right (Fig. n.18)
Image by author - Kamikaze Loggias jutting on the river Rioni in Kutaisi

Left (Fig. n.19)
Image by author - Walking through the Peace Bridge in Tbilisi, an example of Saakashvili's *Instant Intrastructure*

This post-Soviet historical anxiety perfectly set the stage for the most recent architectural stratum, beginning with the 2003 Rose Revolution. Driven by a desire to visually anchor Georgia to the West and escape its immediate geography, the state deployed what Williams (2012) termed "*Instant Infrastructure*." This period was defined by an "*Architecture of Spectacle*," characterized by a rapid proliferation of *glass* domes and *steel* structures. As Natalia Vatsadze notes, the government of Saakashvili frequently dictated designs to construct a facsimile of Europe, replicating a fountain from Bologna in *Batumi's European Square* and building a *Presidential Palace* that mimics the Berlin Reichstag (Vatsadze, 2026, Appendix B).

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This rapid, top-down modernization produced severe "*heritage glitches*." To construct the new *Parliament building in Kutaisi*, the administration demolished an existing Soviet War Memorial, prioritizing a modern glass dome over the historical stratum (Chapple, 2021). While ostensibly executed for "*regional development*" and to secure the government in case Tbilisi was bombed, the relocation practically served to move the site of power away from the capital's historical, easily reachable protest centers (Vatsadze, 2026, Appendix B). Similarly, at the 11th-century *Bagrati Cathedral*, aggressive restoration through modern glass and concrete additions, as promised during Saakashvili's mandate, resulted in the site being removed from the UNESCO World Heritage list (UNESCO, 2013).

Bottom (Fig. n.20)
The Parliament Building in Kutaisi (2015) Note. *Architect Alberto Domingo Cabo. From Georgia — Kutaisi Parliament building* [Photograph], by B. Maghularia, 2015, Flickr. Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

Under the current "*Georgian Dream*" government, the palimpsest has shifted from spectacle toward privatized fortification and globalized capital. The contemporary landscape is overwritten by deregulation, creating sharp class separations between wealthy districts for upper-class or Russian migrants, and marginalized local residents. The starkest manifestation of this inequality is "*Dream City*," a precarious, informal settlement on the outskirts of Batumi where 1,500 families live in structures built from garbage and scrap materials (Khitarishvili & Tavdgiridze, 2017). The nature of foreign influence has merely evolved; it appears that history is repeating itself, as previous invasions by Turks, Ottomans, Persians, and Russians are now replaced by massive investments from these same neighboring powers.

Top (Fig. n.21)
The "Dream City" informal settlement in Batumi (2023
Note. *This settlement highlights the socio-economic reality often hidden behind Batumi's "Las Vegas" facade. From Public defender visits so-called Dream City in Batumi* [Photograph], by Office of the Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia, 2023 (https://ombudsman.ge/eng/akhali-ambebi/sakhalkho-damtsvelma-batumshi-ets-otsnebis-kalaki-moinakhula). Copyright 2023 by the Office of the Public Defender of Georgia.

These are the architectural layers defining the contemporary Georgian landscape. By peeling back this history - from the indigenous vernacular logic of Sumbadze's (1984) Darbazi, through the survivalist "*Kamikaze*" loggias, and finally to the contemporary reign of deregulated glass and steel - we gain the analytical foundation required to decodify this popular glitch. This historical tracing reveals the current architectural mis-mash not as a random aesthetic accident, but as a deliberate, calculated tool of political and economic power.

CHAPTER III: DEFINING DISSONANT ARCHITECTURE IN THE GEORGIAN CONTEXT

Having established the historical strata of the Georgian architectural palimpsest, this chapter introduces the theoretical tools required to critically analyze the post-Soviet case studies presented in the following pages. As previously established, it is necessary to move beyond analyzing architecture as a static, singular object, and instead view it as the multifaceted, dynamic outcome of its sociopolitical context.

Right (Fig. n.22)
Image by author - Delapidated Neo-classical building in Tbilisi

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Tunbridge and Ashworth's (1996) concept of *"Dissonant Heritage"* provides the primary tools for this critique. They define dissonance as "a discordance or a lack of agreement and consistency," arguing that it is an intrinsic quality of all heritage. This tension revolves around materials, historical conditions, political determinants, and the subjective motivations involved in the interpretative process. Therefore, the very acts of preservation or construction are inherently exclusionary. As Tunbridge and Ashworth famously argue:

> *"All heritage is someone's heritage and therefore logically not someone else's: [it] implies the existence of disinheritance and by extension any creation of heritage from the past disinherits someone completely or partially, actively or potentially" (1996, p. 21).*

This winner-takes-all nature of heritage suggests that every architectural "win" for one narrative is a "loss" for another. To analyze where these ruptures occur within the Georgian landscape, Tunbridge and Ashworth identify three specific mechanisms through which this dissonance is generated:

1- Dissonance implicit in commodification: When heritage is packaged as an economic product for tourism, often alienating the local user.

2- Dissonance implicit in place products: When a city or space is forced to represent a specific, often singular, identity to compete in a global market.

3- Dissonance implicit in the content of the message: When the "story" told by a site is contested by different groups.

Laurajane Smith takes it a step further identifying the *Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD)* in her 2006 book *Uses of Heritage*. She has argued that heritage is not something material as we commonly think, but rather a discourse that selects what is worth preserving. Noting this, at the core of the "*architectural glitches*" in Georgia, sits a byproduct of top-down power. Through the lens of AHD, dominant political groups use their specific vision of the future to legitimize certain monuments and experts while erasing opposition. This was heavily apparent during the rapid modernization of the 2000s. As Georgian architect Irakli Zhvania observed regarding this era of state-driven development: "*Saakashvili behaved like a king, just picking his favourites with no competition or discussion. He dismissed any opposition voices as retrograde, standing in the way of modernisation*" (Wainwright, 2018).

Thus, taking into account these theories of "dissonance" and "AHD," the contemporary Georgian landscape emerges as a vivid, ever-growing laboratory of spatial conflict. These examples manifest the urge to re-brand the nation, creating a new landscape where the state's authorized discourse of "*European transparency*" (literally utilizing glass facades) clashes violently with the lived, often "*disinherited*" reality of the citizens.

Right (Fig. n.23)
Image by author - Typical Soviet Mosaics of Georgia in Kutaisi

Introduction to the Georgian Dissonant Landscape (Using case studies to explain different perspectives of dissonant architecture)

> *"We left the Soviet Union in 1989, but definitively in 1991 when the war with Abkhazia happened. Then we went through a very difficult period under President Shevardnadze. In 2003, we had the "Rose Revolution." After that, [when the new president Saakashvili jumped into power] a total change began. We moved from the "black period" [un-officially ending after 2008's Russian invasion of Georgia] toward the "colored period" - the colors arrived."*

This shift was not only an aesthetic choice, but also a carefully crafted geo-political strategy. Since the *Rose Revolution*, the "weapons" of modernization brought by Saakashvili (steel and glass), were deployed to physically and symbolically overwrite the Imperial and Soviet strata. This represents a radical application of Smith's (2006) Authorized Heritage Discourse, where the state utilized a new, vibrant palette to forcibly distance the nation from its traumatic recent past. As for the last two decades, Georgia has been rebuilding itself at "*breakneck speed*" (Williams, 2012), leaving little room for a critical evaluation of the damage inflicted upon the country's collective heritage image. Today, this unregulated rewriting of the Georgian architectural landscape has become too abrupt to ignore. That is why I chose to document it during my research.

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1. Dissonance Implicit in Commodification

> *"For nine years we had a president who was very interested in architecture," says local architect and planner Irakli Zhvania, who leads "ugly walks" around the city highlighting the catastrophic results of corrupt deals, destroyed heritage and the privatisation of land and public parks. "It was a disaster."* (Wainwright, 2018)

Irakli Zhvania refers to the infamous former president Mikheil Saakashvili, under whom Georgian heritage was aggressively repackaged as a commodity for the global tourism market. His fascination with western modern steel and glass architecture facilitated the rise of dissonance. Trying to appeal to the external visitors, the state disregarded the local population, who became increasingly alienated from spaces that lost their original social and functional meaning.

This phenomenon is clearly visible in the cluster of imported contemporary architecture in the heart of Tbilisi (see Fig. n.24).It has produced a dissonant dichotomy where, in a bid to attract European capital, authentic 19th-century fabric was often demolished. Natalia Vatsadze (2026, Appendix B) characterizes these interventions as a "decoration" or a "facsimile" of history.

> "*A municipal reconstruction scheme known as 'New Life for Old Tbilisi' effectively demolished and rebuilt Aghmashenebeli Avenue in stages between 2012 and 2016; the end result is a pastel-hued outdoor shopping mall that bears only tangential resemblance to the unrestored streets one block in any direction.*" (Wheeler, 2018)

For some of the tourists, it is a charming "authentic" backdrop. For the locals, it is a loss of a living home (later shown in the example of Lela's friend in Batumi). The city has been commodified into a modern European city lookalike, disinheriting the residents from their actual history to serve a purely geopolitical and economic agenda.

Right (Fig. n.24)
Image by author - View of Tbilisi's centre from the Mother of Georgia statue

CHAPTER III: DEFINING DISSONANT ARCHITECTURE IN THE GEORGIAN CONTEXT

2. Dissonance Implicit in Place Products

> *"An amazing little coastal city ruined by greed, lust and incompetence"* - Marshrutka driver in Kutaisi

During my vacation I asked Georgians if they had nice beaches worth visiting. The answers faltered, from proud to pensive. This stems from the traumatic loss of Abkhazia in the 1990s (Wheeler, 2018), which resulted in the loss of Gagra, the once-uncontested "Soviet Riviera". Although I did not visit Batumi, its role as a monumental piece in the Georgian dissonant architecture puzzle became undeniable throughout my research.

In recent history, Batumi, part of the Soviet-era resort cities, was regarded as a wonderful place for recreation (Batumi Boulevard, n.d.). However, the collapse of the USSR left a period of *anarchic capitalism*, where lack of regulation and central planning allowed the urban fabric to rot in poverty (Matthews, 2015). This void was filled during the Saakashvili administration (2004-2013) with a "*Full Speed Westward*" approach (Tolz, 2013), characterized by an aggressive state-led investment of over $550 million to radically transform the city's physical and cultural character (Matthews, 2015). The result is a city manufactured as a "*place product*" (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996) to compete in a globalized marketplace. To align Batumi with Western signifiers, the government erected an odyssey of post-modern pastiche *"including a full-scale Parthenon, a Leaning Tower of Pisa, and even an upside-down Washington-style White House"* (Matthews, 2015). However, as highlighted in the film Full Speed Westward, this "gleaming white town" of the citizens' childhood has been forcibly replaced by a "brightly coloured place" where the change is often only skin-deep; as Natia (Frida) Bolkvadze noted in the movie, many have "not seen such improvement when related to their income, but the colour of their block of flats have changed" (Tolz, 2013).

Top (Fig. n.25)
Image by author - Marshrutka driver on our 6h ride to Mestia

Right (Fig. n.26)
Modern High-Rise Development in Batumi (2025) Note. *This image illustrates the "facsimile architecture" and rapid commodification of the Black Sea coastline. From Batumi Real Estate: Apartments & Houses for Sale* [Photograph], by Batumi Projects, 2025 (https://batumiprojects.com/real-estate-batumi-in-georgia/). Copyright 2025 by Batumi Projects.

This top-down aesthetic overwrite has alienated the local population, turning them into nostalgic spectators of their own city's development. As international interest flocked to this manufactured landscape, a curious paradox emerged. It is striking that the same neighboring powers that defined Georgia's history of invasions are the very ones now fueling Batumi's transformation into a "*Vice City*." As observed with Lela Gelashvili (2026, Appendix A), history is repeating through investment. The proliferation of casinos and nightclubs, earning Batumi the reputation of the "Las Vegas of the Black Sea", serves as a geopolitical loophole for neighboring countries with strict anti-gambling laws (Vatsadze, 2026, Appendix B). This is confirmed by local artist Natia (Frida) Bolkvadze, who notes that visitors "come over the border for gambling... they could never have as much fun there, and here they really live it up" (Tolz, 2013). The dissonance arises because this globalized image must occupy the same physical space as a persistent local reality. The hyper-modern silhouettes of the *Alphabet Tower* or the *Sheraton Lighthouse* clash with the overshadowed Soviet-era residential blocks. Hence, the city is forced to function simultaneously as a global luxury product for the high-end tourist and a local survival space for the disinherited citizen. This *architectural glitch* occurs because these two versions of Batumi are designed for entirely different consumers, resulting in a fractured urban identity where the "authorized" facade of the future can no longer mask the *grayness* of the lived past.

CHAPTER III: DEFINING DISSONANT ARCHITECTURE IN THE GEORGIAN CONTEXT

3. Dissonance Implicit in the Content of the Message

"Look, I believe in glass buildings. I believe in transparency. I believe in public control." - Mikheil Saakashvili (Chapple, 2021)

The third and most politically charged form of discordance identified by Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) is the dissonance implicit in the content of the message. This occurs when the story or ideology a building is designed to broadcast is fundamentally contested by its context, its history, or its actual function. In the Georgian *Rose Revolution* era, the primary medium for this message was glass. Under the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili, glass was not merely a material choice; it was a polemic. It was intended to symbolize a clean break from the "opaque," "corrupt," and "heavy" Soviet past, replacing it with a "transparent," "Western," and "accountable" future (Wheeler, 2018).

The use of glass in public infrastructure (most notably in over 100 new police stations and civic centers), was designed to send a literal message: there is nothing to hide (Bassa's Blog, 2012). However, as critic Owen Hatherley (2015) observes, this "transparency" often functioned as a top-down aesthetic imposition rather than a democratic evolution. While the buildings aimed to project a "Western" image, they often acted as anarchic-capitalist experiments dropped into a landscape that had not yet recovered from the collapse of the USSR. Saakashvili's message of glass architecture was transparency, but the content was aimed *"to signal social transformation, glorify his administration, and impress international visitors — not necessarily in that order."* (Wheeler, 2018).

Top (Fig. n.27)
Mikheil Saakashvili appearing in court via video link (March 10, 2024), Note. *The image depicts the former president during a trial that symbolizes the deep political polarization in modern Georgia.* From *"Jailed Former Georgian President Saakashvili Gets Additional 9 Years In Prison" [Screengrab], by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2024 (https://www.rferl.org/a/saakashvili-georgia-trial-ivanishvili-court/33344999.html). Copyright 2024 by RFE/RL.*

Right (Fig. n.28)
The Parliament Building in Kutaisi (2015)
Note. *Architect Alberto Domingo Cabo.*
From Georgia — Kutaisi Parliament building [Photograph], by B. Maghularia, 2015, Flickr. Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

The most monumental “glitch” of this period is the Kutaisi Parliament Building (see Fig. n.28). This massive 131-foot-high glass dome, “was supposed to represent the transparency of democracy” (Chapple, 2021), however the dissonance between the message and the reality was stark. As noted by Vatsadze (2026), the relocation of the Georgian Parliament served as a tool for “decentralization”, a way to move the heart of politics away from the capital and, therefore, the people. Moreover, there was also no transparency (pun intended) during the planning process, with almost no public consultation, and the controversial demolition of a Soviet-era World War II memorial (Chapple, 2021).

Today, the building stands largely abandoned, a “white elephant” illustrating the fragility of architecture when it is used purely as a political billboard.

CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

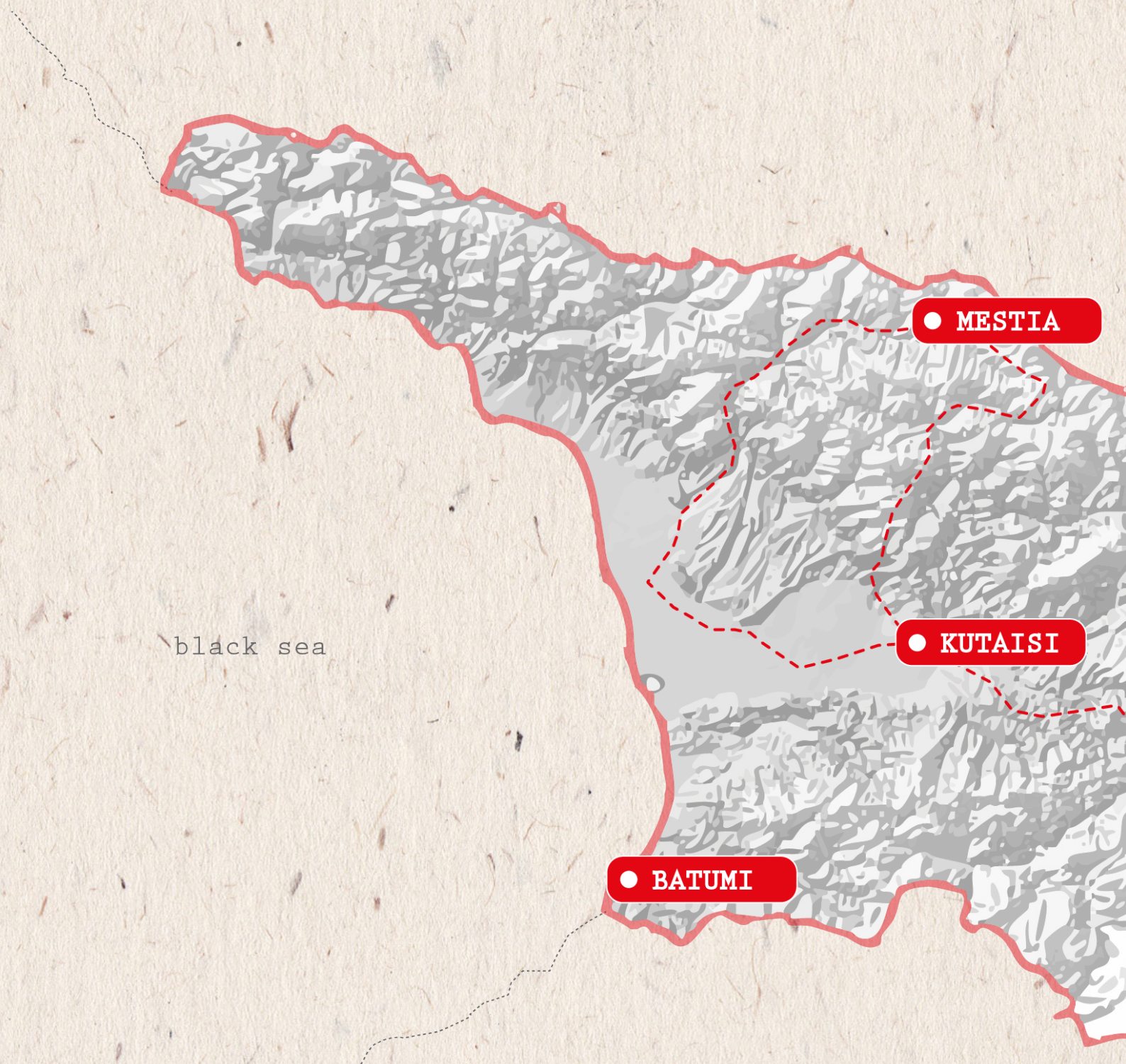
Because Georgia's architectural shift is so vast, I had to be selective. This chapter follows the physical footsteps of my trip augmented by insights from my interviews. Its function is an expanded travel log. While I wish I'd had unlimited time to document every corner of the country, this selection serves as a focused introduction to the messy reality of Georgia's dissonant heritage. (For a more exhaustive list, I have included a broader inventory of buildings in Appendix C). The following maps are built around what I've called "Epicenters of Dissonance." Having established the history and the theory in previous chapters, we can now look at how these sites actually function. We need to ask: How is this new architecture trying to sell a specific image of Georgia to the world? Is this "*dissonant style*" actually accepted by the people who live with it? And who exactly is driving this change? This project is a retrospective one. To be honest, when I was treading through these cities, I was still largely oblivious to the fact that I would eventually write a whole research paper on them. I often find myself wishing I had taken more photos or spent more time in certain spots, but that "accidental" documentation fueled my drive to investigate further. The map starts in Tbilisi—the cornerstone of the country's identity crisis—before moving through the urban shifts in Kutaisi and the mountainous periphery of Mestia. Finally, we look at Batumi, a city that, although I didn't visit, has to be mapped through the lived experiences and critiques of Lela and Natalia.

Top (Fig. n.29)
Collage by author - Conceptual collage of the trip taken in July 2025 with view from Kuruldi Lakes (Mestia) and own map showing our route through Georgia

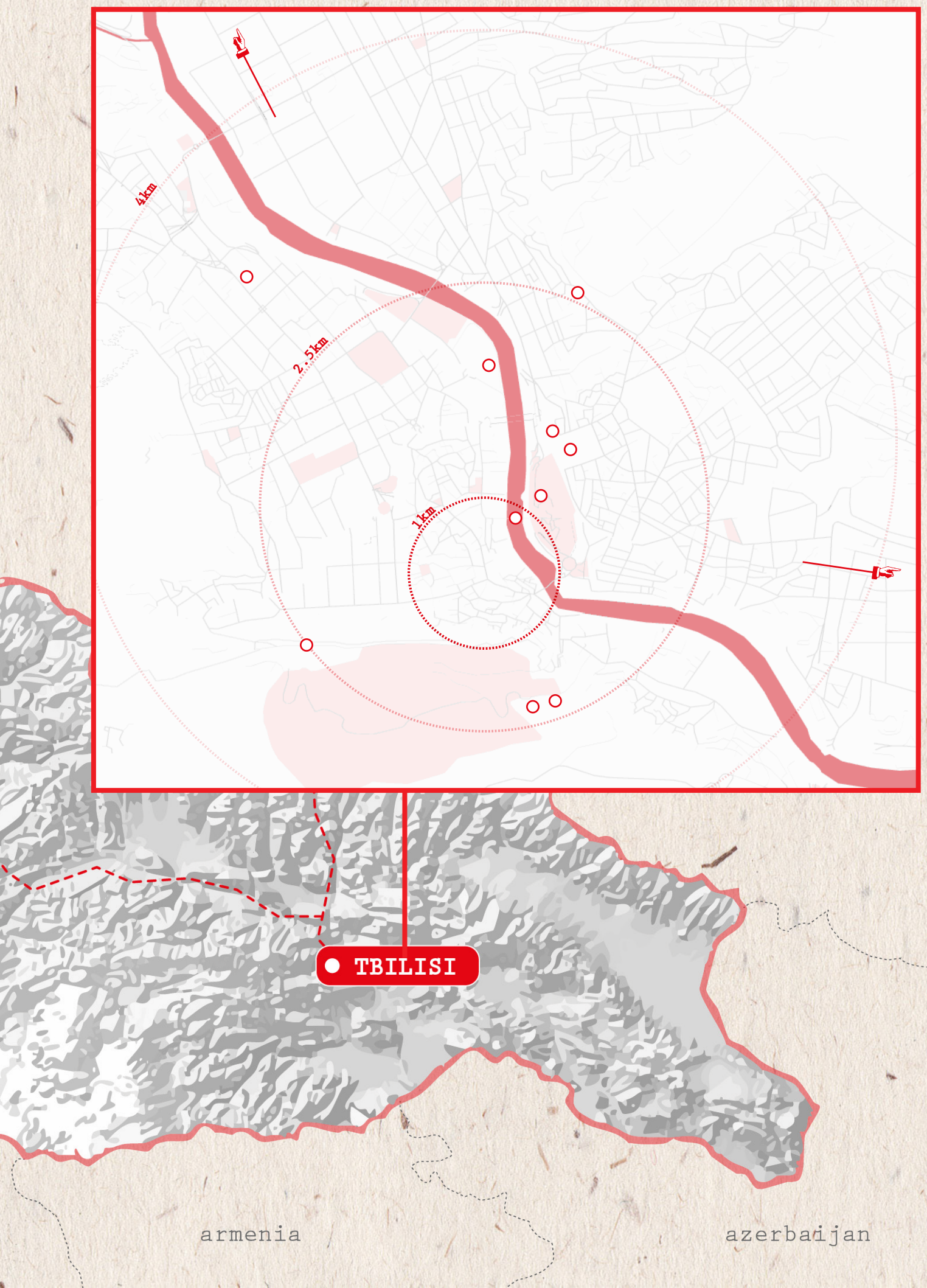
MESTIA
KUTAISI
TBILISI
BATUMI

CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

Tbilisi: the beginning of my trip and the cornerstone of Georgia's dissonance. We have acknowledged in chapter III that Tbilisi has been commodified into a modern European city lookalike. I chose these three case studies to uncover some further elements of dissonant heritage. (See appendix C for the full list)



Centre (Fig. n.30)
Map by author - Map showing our route through Georgia and callout map of the dissonant elements of Tbilisi


4km
2.5km
1km
TBILISI
armenia
azerbaijan

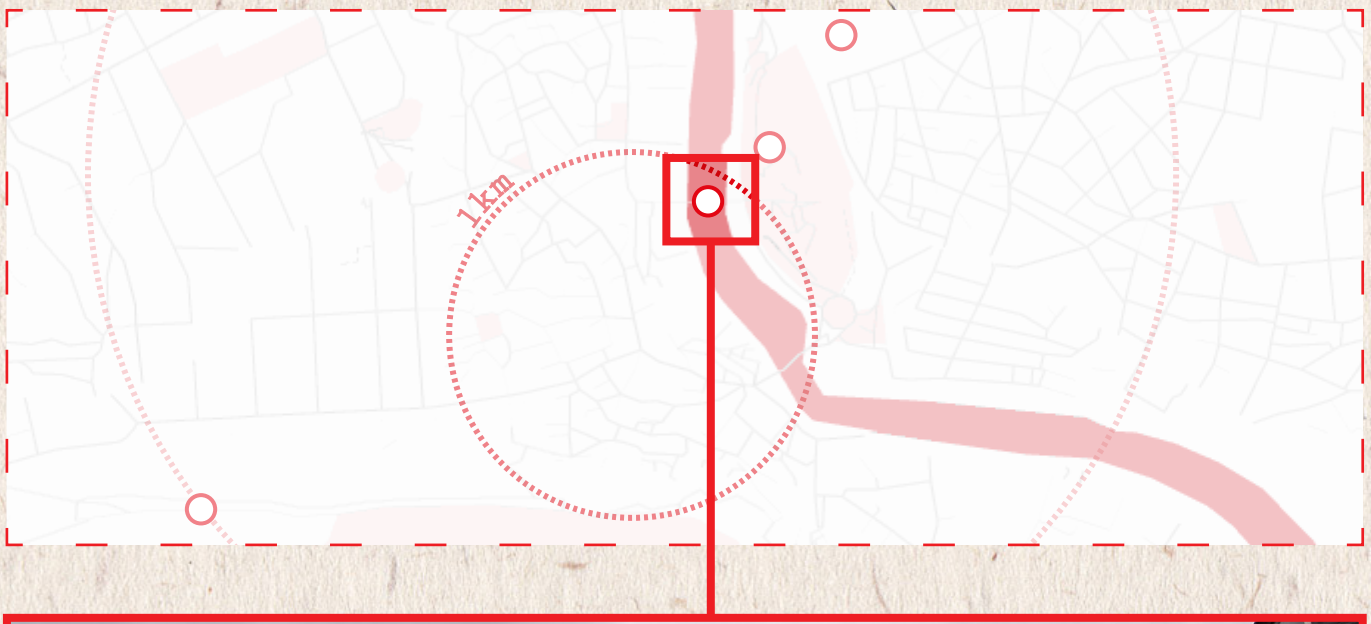
CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

2010 / The Bridge of Peace / Michele De Lucchi

"Dilapidated houses in Tbilisi? Demolish them all and build a glass bridge that lights up when you walk past it" (Burton, 2017).

This sentiment, capturing the frantic energy of the Saakashvili administration's *grands travaux*, found its most controversial expression in the 2010 completion of Michele De Lucchi's Bridge of Peace. The structure serves as a primary case study for what Cody (2003) defines as the dystopic act of "exporting architecture." Rather than an organic evolution of the local urban fabric, the bridge was a literal import: fabricated in Italy and transported to the capital in 200 unassembled components (Bassa's Blog, 2012). This "imported vernacularity" disregards the nuanced architectural strata of Old Tbilisi, in favor of a placeless, high-tech aesthetic. As mentioned in Chapter III, this is a masterful example of Dissonance implicit in commodification. The state's primary objective in fact was the manufacturing of a new national "brand" to attract international capital and obscure Soviet-era associations. However, as Natalia Vatsadze (2026, Appendix B) argues, this intervention functioned as a top-down "decoration" rather than meaningful urban development. While the government invested approximately 25 million USD into a glass and steel structure featuring also 10,000 LED bulbs (Bassa's Blog, 2012), much of the surrounding historic district remained in a state of structural precariousness, still reeling from the "black period" of systemic collapse (Gelashvili, 2026, Appendix A). Furthermore, the local reception of this architectural glitch is marked by sharp cultural resistance. Residents famously rejected the official narrative of Transparency and Peace by dubbing the bridge the "*Always Ultra*", referencing its resemblance to a sanitary pad (Gelashvili, 2026, Appendix A). This linguistic subversion highlights the dissonance between the state's Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) and the lived reality of the citizens. This architectural dictatorship is finally represented by the decision to prioritize a shimmering, Italian-made facade over, for example, the refurbishment of public and private housing.

Right (Fig. n.31)
Map by author - Zoomed in of the callout map of the dissonant elements of Tbilisi
Image by author - View of the Bridge of Peace in Tbilisi


1km

BAR

CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

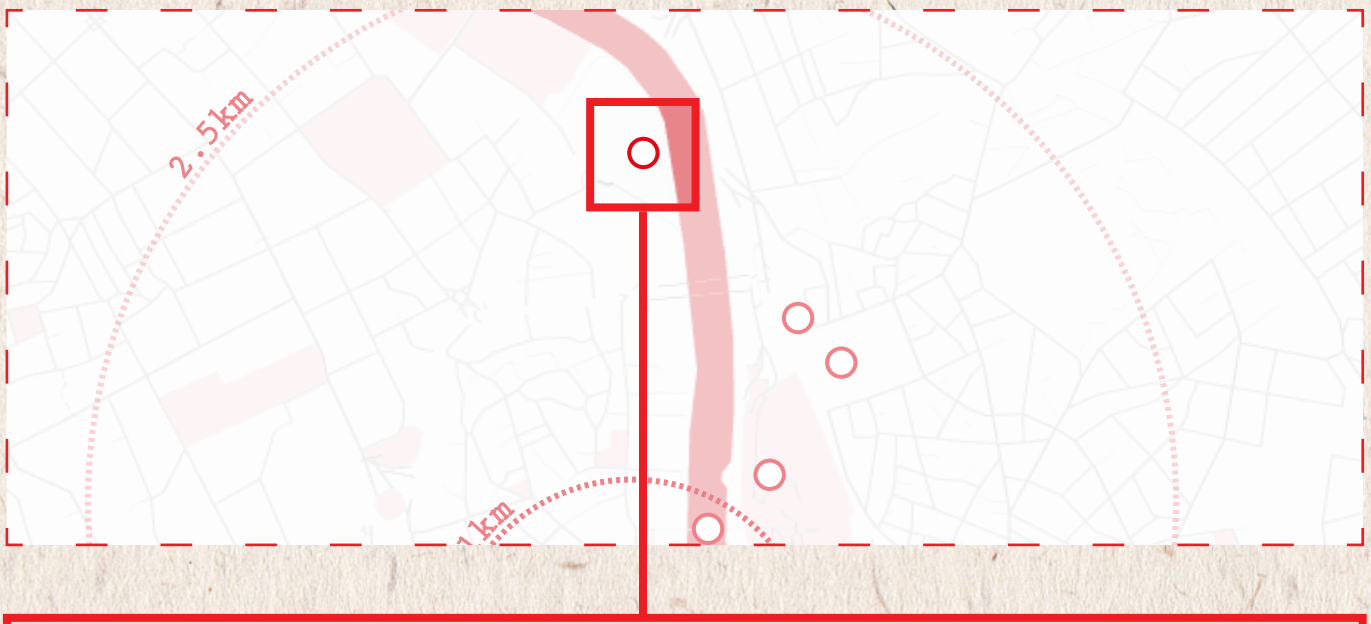
2012 / Public Service Hall / Massimiliano & Doriana Fuksas

"*[A] symbol of the city's commitment to efficient public service*" (Georgia.to, n.d.)

This is the laughable claim that marketed the structure. Instead, it functions as a $54 million (Fuksas, n.d.) testament to top-down aesthetic imposition, laid by the Saakashvili era's forced modernization (Wainwright, 2018). Fuksas, another Italian "starchitect" imported during the Saakashvili era, treated the riverfront as a tabula rasa, playfully shaping the skyline with eleven white fiberglass "petals" that reach heights of 35 meters (Fuksas, n.d.).

While the architects' official discourse compares these structures to a forest canopy, critics and locals have been less generous, describing them as a "crop of giant toadstools" blooming haphazardly above the city (Block, 2019). This is the "toddler with crayons" approach to urbanism: a series of avant-garde gestures that prioritize international prestige over local context. The dissonance is found in the gap between the building's stated purpose and the reality of the "public service" it represents, a service that has frequently favored wealthy investors while allowing genuine Georgian heritage to be plowed over by "creative stylistic approaches." As observed during the 2018 Tbilisi Architecture Biennial, while these prestige buildings "popped up" with rapid speed, the quality of construction was often substandard and entirely divorced from the city's historical strata (Block, 2019). The Public Service Hall is thus a monument to Dissonance implicit in the content of the message: an expensive, high-tech facade of "transparency" and "efficiency" that ignores the disinherited citizens living in the shadows of its fiberglass canopies. It serves as a stark reminder that when a city is treated as a blank paper for foreign architects, the result is often a fractured identity where the "authorized" future is physically and culturally incompatible with the lived past.

Right (Fig. n.32)
Map by author - Zoomed in of the callout map of the dissonant elements of Tbilisi
Image by author - View of the Public Service Hall in Tbilisi


2.5km

CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

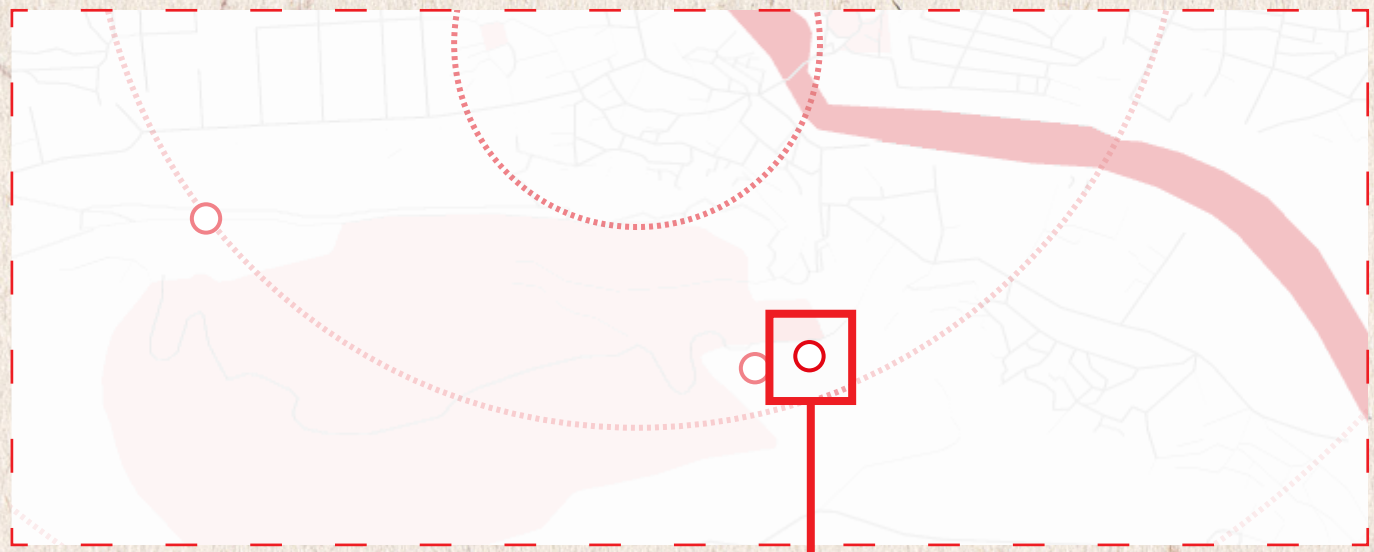
2021-Ongoing / King's Garden Luxury Complex / Apollo G.S.

"*This is a monster in town*" (Lorusso, 2015)

This was the appropriate verdict from local activists as they watched the *Sololaki ridge* (historic area of Tbilisi) being sliced open by excavators. While hiking up to the Mother of Georgia statue, I too, unmistakably noticed the carved hillside and realized that it was serving as a pocket to host new developments. As you look out from the ridge, the spatial hierarchy becomes distinctive; much like the extreme urban divides of Mumbai, former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili is essentially building a "Best Friends Forever" enclave for the ultra-rich, physically elevated above the crumbling reality of the city below.
The most aggressive of these interventions is Ivanishvili's Panorama Tbilisi, a $500 million project that carves a seven-star hotel and golf course into the mountainside. Critics have slammed the project as "*urban boosterism at its worst*" (Zhvania, 2016), noting that it treats the landscape as a private playground for offshore capital.

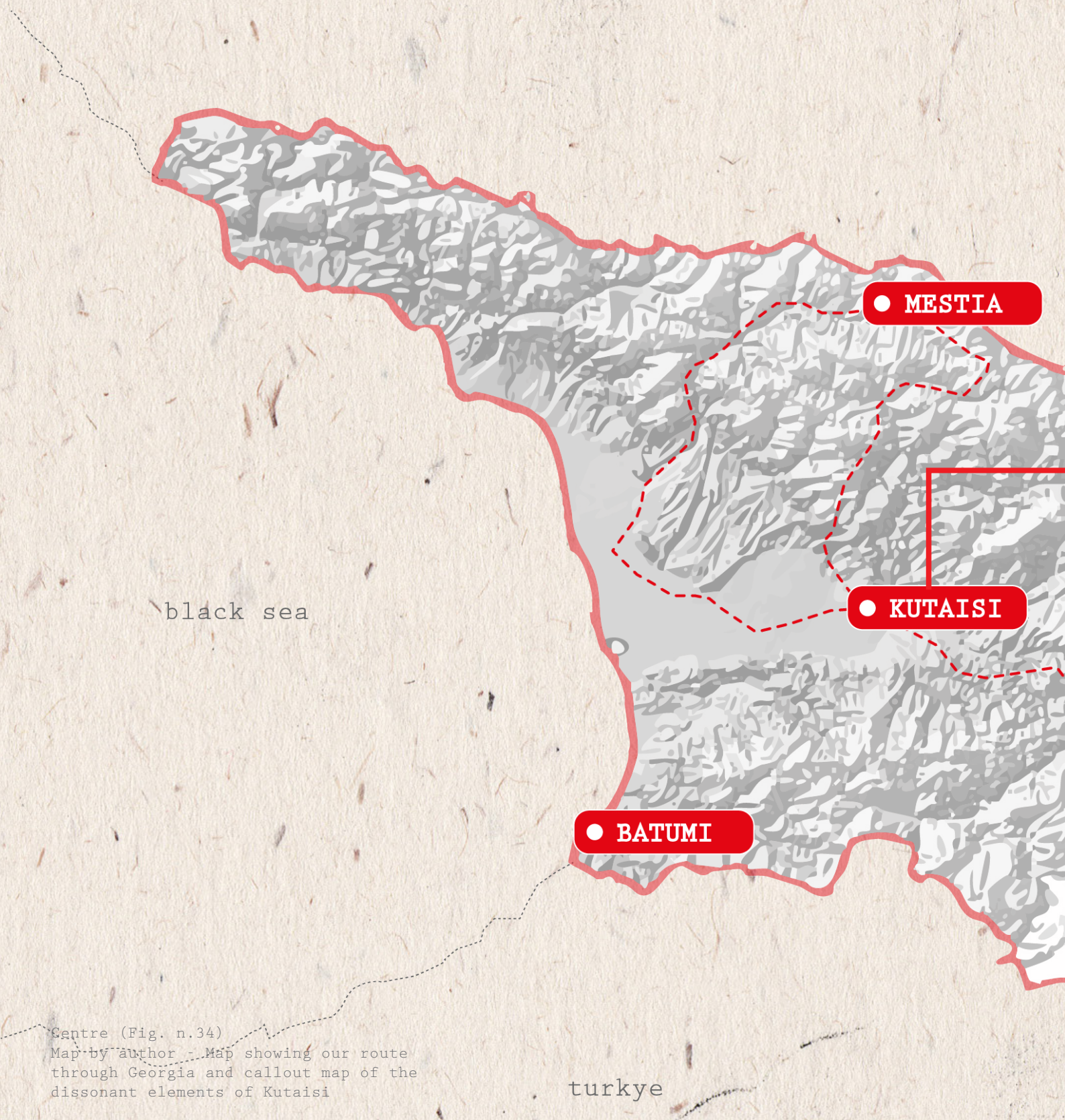
Right next door, the ongoing King's Garden complex follows the same playbook. Its marketing team has the audacity to brand this concrete intrusion as "A new heart for Old Tbilisi" (King's Garden, n.d.), despite the project functioning more like a gated bypass of the city's actual heart. The dissonance reaches a peak of pure absurdity in the project's promotional video. It features digitally rendered Gulf sheikhs and luxury sports cars (King's Garden, 2018) gliding through a version of Tbilisi that simply does not exist. The developers are selling a hyper-wealthy fantasy that ignores the gridlocked traffic and crumbling infrastructure that the rest of the population navigates daily. Ultimately, these aren't "bridge" projects; they are "barrier" projects. By prioritizing the seismic and historical destruction of the *Mirza Shafi* area for the sake of elite investors (Shelia, 2015), these developments prove that in the new Georgian landscape, heritage is something to be plowed over rather than preserved.

Right (Fig. n.33)
Map by author - Zoomed in of the callout map of the dissonant elements of Tbilisi
Image by author - View of the Kings Garden project ongoing construction in Tbilisi

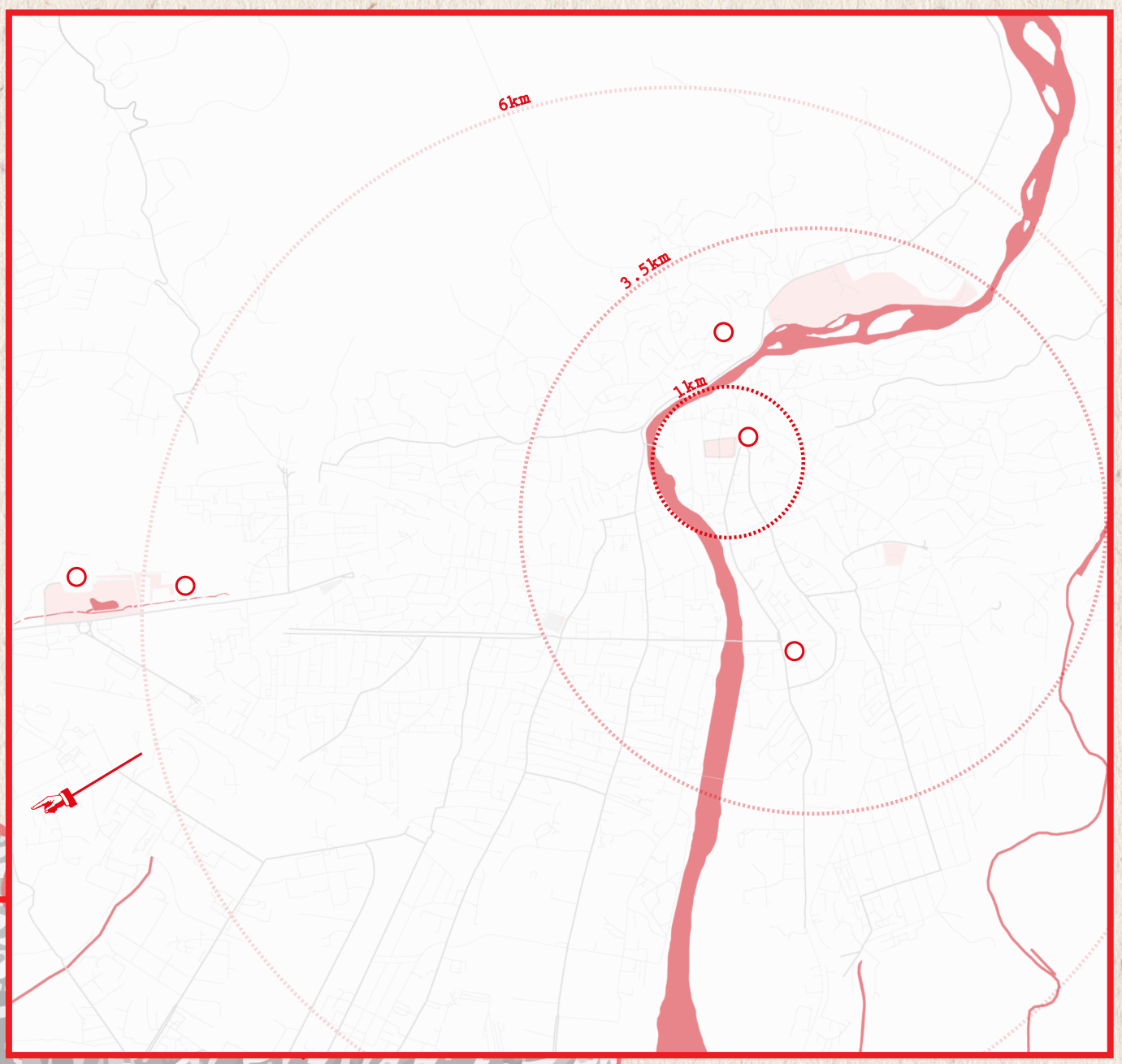


CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

Kutaisi: Introduced in this paper as a place favouring political displacement and corruption, Kutaisi reaches its peak dissonance with the Kutaisi Parliament Building. Unfortunately, although its people are quite stubborn and old-fashioned (according to Gelashvili, 2026), it is not the only example available. However, when compared to other cities in Georgia, Kutaisi showcases a more decentralised approach to Dissonant Heritage.



Centre (Fig. n.34)
Map by author - Map showing our route through Georgia and callout map of the dissonant elements of Kutaisi



TBILISI

armenia

azerbaijan

CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

2009-2012 / Bagrati Cathedral (reconstruction) / Andrea Bruno

"The World Heritage Committee, [...] Expresses its deep regret that despite previous decisions the re-building of Bagrati Cathedral has been completed and considers that the Bagrati Cathedral has been altered to such an extent that its authenticity has been irreversibly compromised..." (UNESCO, 2013).

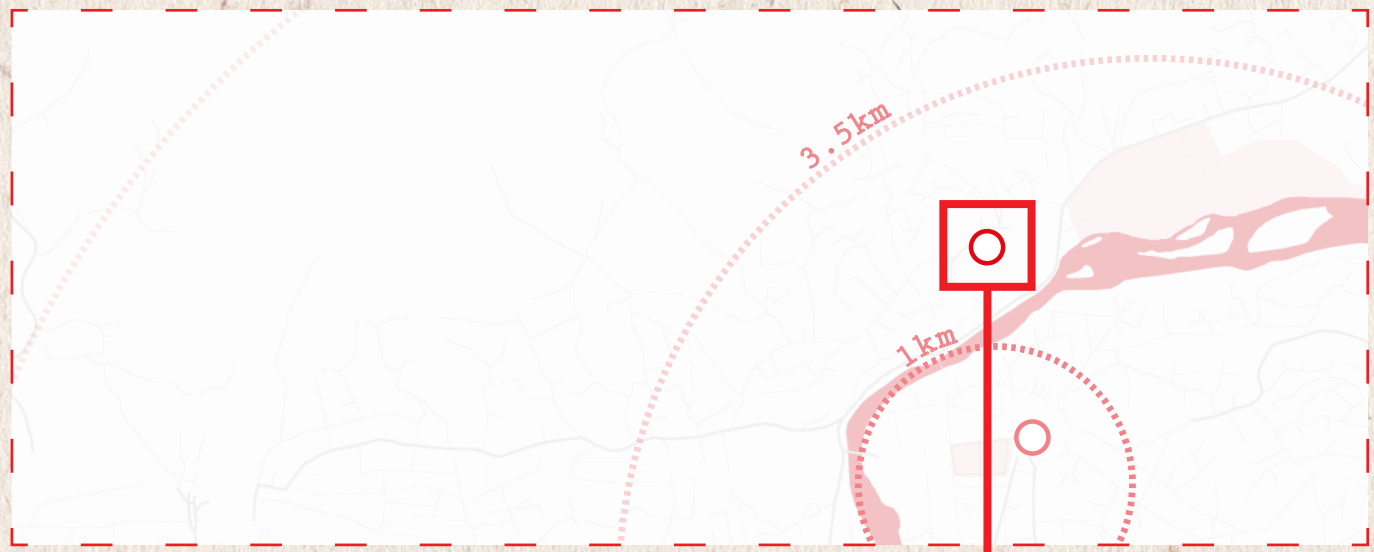
This stinging rebuke from the World Heritage Committee is the architectural equivalent of an excommunication. It was Natalia Vatsadze (2026, Appendix B) who first made me aware of the sheer absurdity of this situation: Bagrati Cathedral is the first building site in history to be stripped of its UNESCO status because the state decided to "fix" it.

The 11th-century cathedral was a masterwork of medieval stone until the Saakashvili administration decided that a romantic ruin wasn't "functional" enough for a modern Georgia. The National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia warned that "in order to maintain its authenticity", the Georgian Authorities needed to abandon their strategy to "restore its function" in favour of keeping the "museum of ruins" (Meladze & Uekita, 2020). Obviously, they did not listen, because Italian architect Andrea Bruno was commissioned to "complete" the structure. The result is an appalling "Frankenstein" fusion, where ancient masonry is choked by a sleek, steel-and-glass elevator shaft and a modern roof that effectively erased the site's Outstanding Universal Value (Bruno, 2013). During the interview with Natalia Vatsadze, she told me about Nika Vacheishvili, former minister of culture "*who signed the documents to make these changes in Bagrati*". However, she still doesn't "understand why it happened, why he did it, why did he sign..." (2026, Appendix B)

By 2017, the compromise was deemed terminal, and Bagrati was officially removed from the World Heritage List. The state prioritized a polished, photogenic "Place Product" over the authentic reality of historical strata. Today, Bagrati stands as a functioning church for the local diocese, but an architectural pariah on the world stage. It is a monument to modern hubris, a place where the state's desire to "perfect" the past with glass and steel succeeded only in rendering it historically hollow.

Right (Fig. n.35)
Map by author - Zoomed in of the callout map of the dissonant elements of Kutaisi

External staircase in glass and steel as designed by Andrea Bruno. View from the northwest (courtesy of T. Meladze).


3.5km
1km

CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

2011-2017 / "McDonald's" Square Reconstruction / Various (Government-led)

Kutaisi's central David Agmashenebeli Square, now colloquially known as "McDonald's Square", serves as a reminder of Georgia's architectural identity crisis.

It all started just a few steps away, at the site of the 19th-century Alexander Nevsky Cathedral which, after being leveled in 1924 by "Stalinist bandits" (Kutaisi - TIEG TRAVEL, n.d.) only greenery managed to sprout for decades. Fast forward to 2011: driven by former President Saakashvili's fascination with monumental fountains, the Colchis Fountain emerged as the fourth iteration of the site, replacing a succession of Lenin and Stalin statues, a failed flower park, and a statue of David the Builder. Featuring oversized, gilded replicas of ancient Vani jewelry, the fountain functions less as historical preservation and more as pure decoration. It is a shiny "place product", a Disney-fied nod to the Golden Fleece designed to anchor a newly branded city center.

However, the true dissonance arrived in 2017, and it was tripartite. My spatial investigation via Google Earth reveals that in a matter of months, the former footprint of Alexander Nevsky Cathedral was abruptly terraformed into a polished "history-less" Church of St. David the Builder. Simultaneously, Kutaisi's first (and hopefully last) McDonald's conjured like a beacon of American consumerism on the square's edge. All of this coincided with UNESCO officially delisting the nearby Bagrati Cathedral, declaring its historic authenticity "irreversibly compromised" (UNESCO, 2017). The result is an "unholy trinity" of pre-Christian mythology, Orthodox nationalism, and global fast food.
This is the dissonance of commodification in its purest form. The state is attempting to sell "Ancient Roots," "National Faith," and "Western Progress" concurrently. Forcing the Golden Fleece, an Orthodox liturgy, and the Golden Arches to compete for cultural authority on the same physical footprint proves that in the rush to manufacture a "New Georgia," the city's heart is no longer a living community space, but a branded showroom.

Right (Fig. n.36)
Map by author - Zoomed in of the callout map of the dissonant elements of Kutaisi
Image by author - View from the Colchis Fountain to the McDonald's and the 2017 Church of St. David the Builder

1km

McDonald's

CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

2011-2013 / Kutaisi International Airport / UNStudio

My vacation in Georgia ended like the “icing on a cake” in this passing building.

The 2012 inauguration of Kutaisi International Airport by the Dutch firm UNStudio highlights Saakashvili’s race for modernization, where architectural gestures were manufactured almost “overnight”. Designed by Ben van Berkel, the airport was marketed as a high-tech gateway intended to “weave” the Georgian landscape into a global network (UNStudio, n.d.). However, this sleek, transparent terminal serves as a case study for structural failures: the prioritization of a photogenic “place product” over the fundamental physics of construction.

The dissonance between the “starchitect” vision and the reality on the ground is captured perfectly by Lela Gelashvili (2026, Appendix A), who recalls the construction as a frantic, non-stop performance. “*Many of these dissonant buildings were built extremely fast. Like a race,*” she notes, pointing out the chemical impossibility of the timeline: “*I know cement needs 28 days to dry [...] I don’t know how it’s possible to build that fast.*” This disregard for structural integrity had literal consequences; the airport’s roof was reportedly lost on two separate occasions (Gelashvili, 2026).

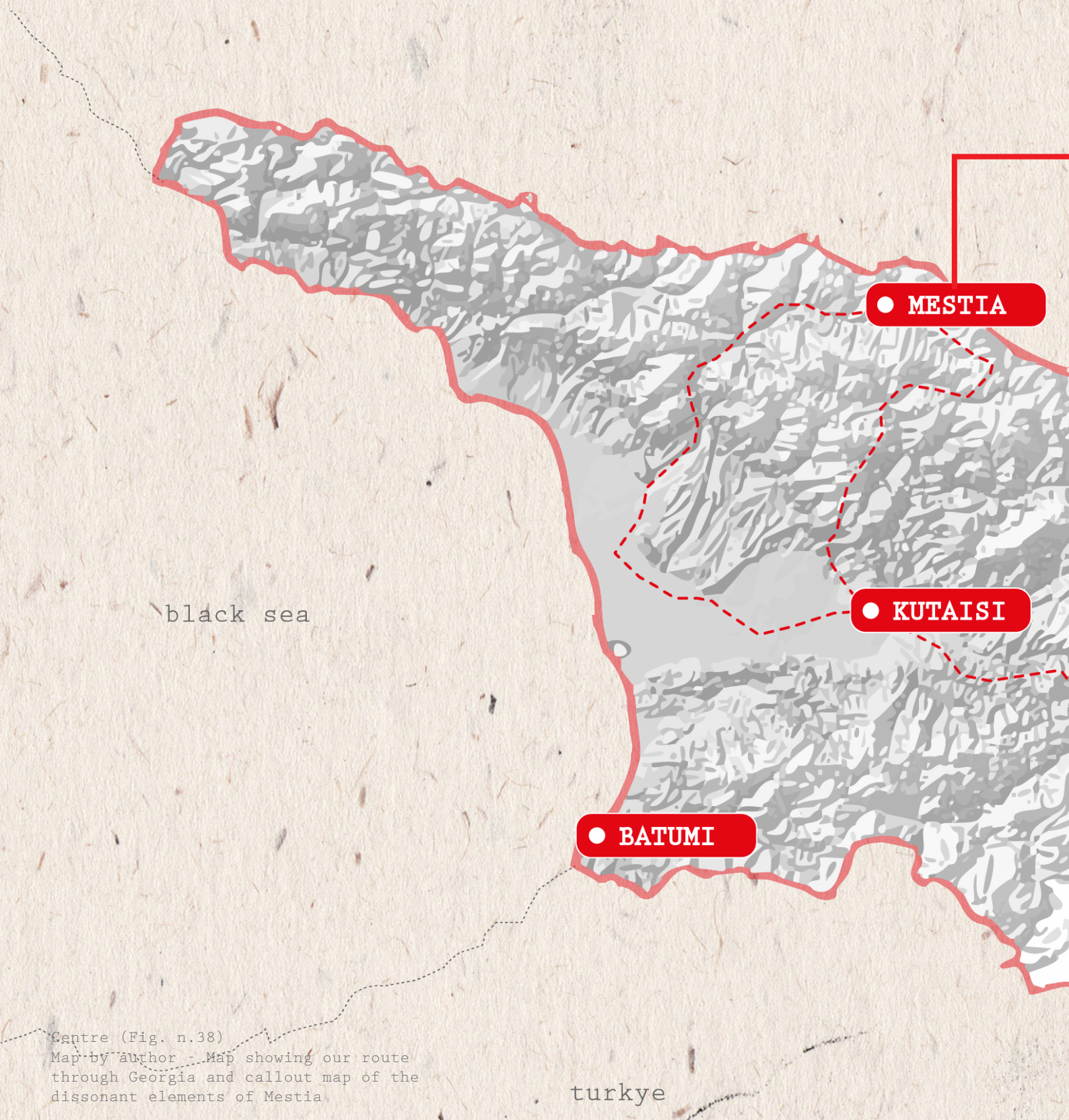
However, as mentioned by Vatsadze (2026, Appendix B) “[so far,] *Kutaisi is the most untouched City* [in Georgia]*“,* and I hope, as third-largest, most influential cities in Georgia would keep this way.

Right (Fig. n.37)
Map by author - Zoomed in of the callout map of the dissonant elements of Kutaisi

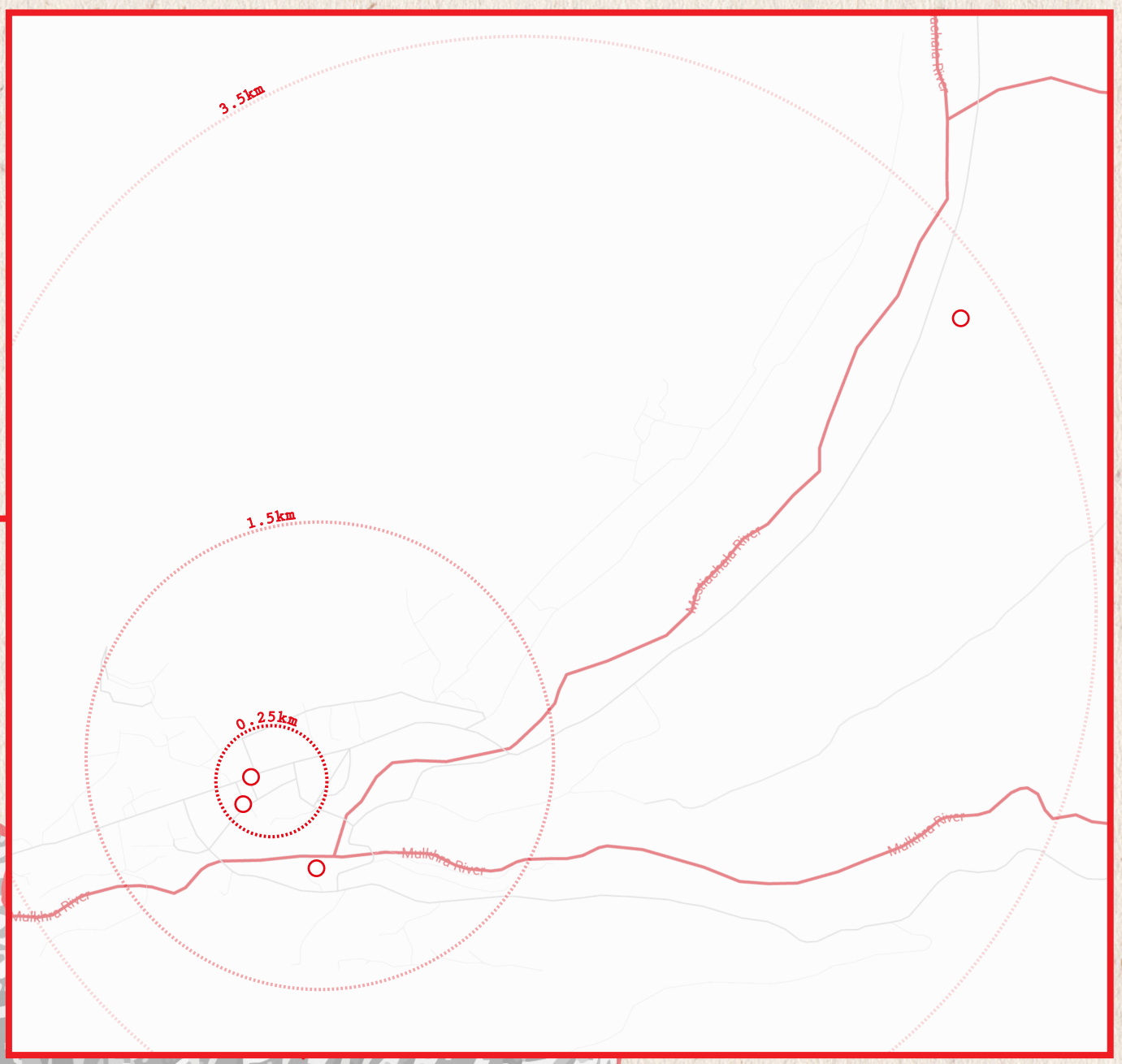
Kutaisi International Airport (David the Builder) Note. *View of KIA* From *David the Builder Kutaisi International Airport* [Photograph], by R. Slotboom, 2023, Google Maps google.com/maps/place/

CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

Mestia: Saakashvili strikes back! During his mandate he managed to flip "*a remote mountain outpost populated by bandits*", into a ski resort (Burton, 2017). The state handed over the city to Jürgen Hermann Mayer (German architect leader of the architecture firm "J. MAYER H." in Berlin), so he could play with it, creating a "Swiss-style" pastiche to attract global capital.



Centre (Fig. n.38)
Map by author - Map showing our route through Georgia and callout map of the dissonant elements of Mestia



TBILISI

armenia

azerbaijan

CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

2011 / Police station / J. Mayer H.

After 6 hours of loud eastern European music in the marshrutka (old vans for cheap public transport), we arrived at the promised gem of the mountains, Mestia. Although, we are welcomed by a cancerous meteorite made of concrete and glass. That, as all the other elements of dissonant heritage in the city, is the work of the aforementioned J. Mayer H. As Lela Gelashvili (2026, Appendix A) noted regarding this era of hyper-development, these structures were dropped into communities almost overnight, appearing entirely alien to the local context.

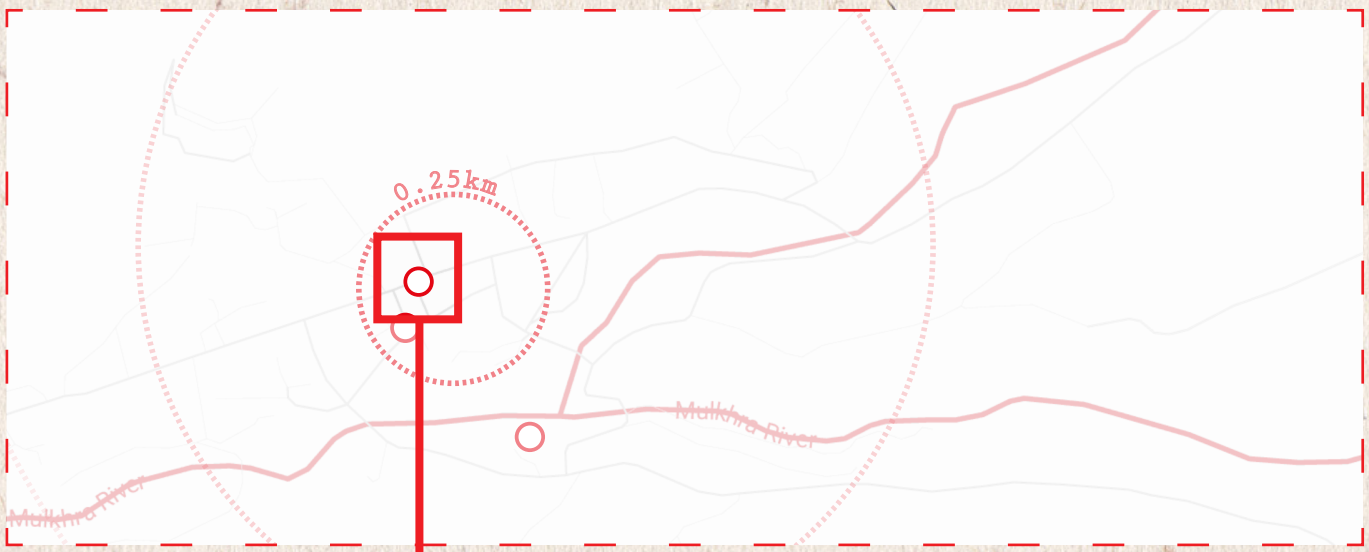
Mayer's 2011 Police Station is a masterclass in Tunbridge and Ashworth's heritage dissonance:
First is the dissonance in the content of the message. The architect claims the building's "textured concrete forms" are a "modern echo" of Mestia's medieval defensive stone towers (Dezeen, 2012; Volner, 2013). By that absurd logic, any generic concrete building is a Svan tower just because it is taller than it is wide. Mayer cites a "loose interpretation" of local masonry, but wrapping a glass core in prefab concrete instead of utilizing vernacular stone is as loose as his understanding of vernacularity.

This physical gaslighting feeds directly into the dissonance of place products. To compete in the global ski-resort market, Mestia was forced into a singular, avant-garde alpine identity, turning a deeply historic settlement into a branded architectural showroom.

Finally, we see the dissonance of commodification. By packaging political "transparency" and Svan "heritage" into a flashy economic product designed exclusively for the tourist gaze (Bassa's Blog, 2012), the state alienated the local users who actually have to live in the shadow of this concrete meteor. It is a building that speaks exclusively to foreign capital, not to the mountains it supposedly honors.

Right (Fig. n.39)
Map by author - Zoomed in of the callout map of the dissonant elements of Mestia

Mestia Police Station Note. *View of Mestia Police Station [Photograph], by V. Shpakivskyi, 2021, Google Maps https://www.google.com/maps/place/*


0.25km
Malkhra River
Malkhra River

POLICE

CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

2012 / Mestia Public Service City Hall / J. Mayer H

Turn the corner from the police station, adjacent to an innocuous Spar market, lies the alienating, disused Public Service Hall.

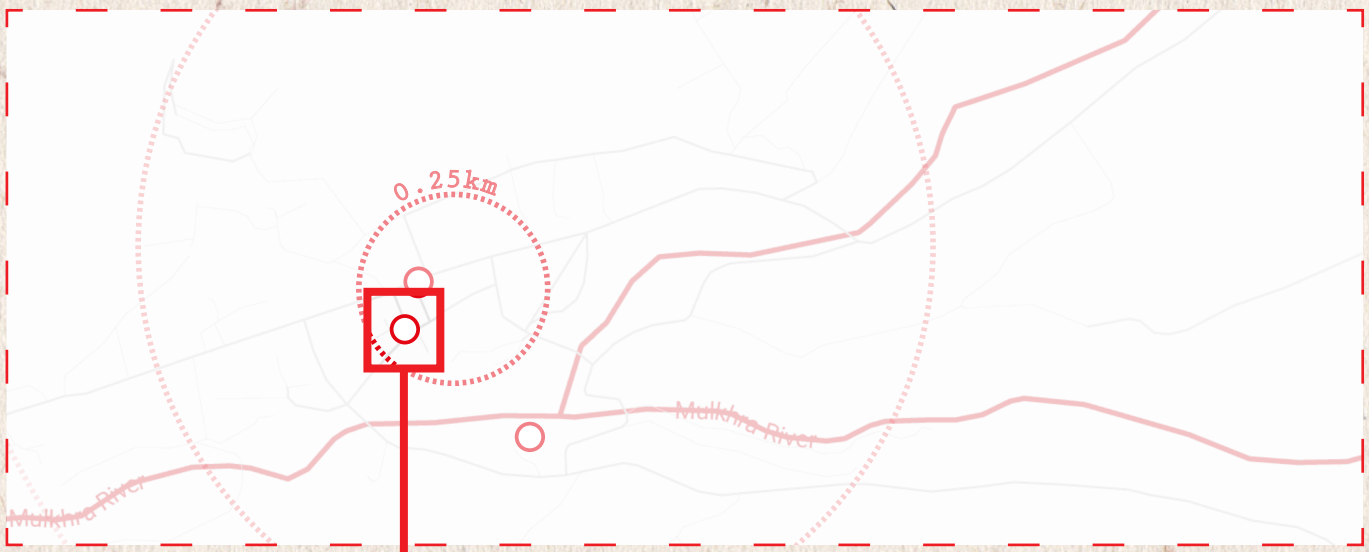
While J. Mayer H. claims the building's "concrete structure frames the spectacular landscape" (Frearson, 2012), the reality in July 2025 was a decaying, unmaintained monolith. As its nearby "brother", this project perfectly illustrates the dissonance in the content of the message: the Saakashvili-era obsession with "transparency" and "justice" manifested as a series of opaque, asymmetric concrete hexagons. It is a physical contradiction: a "House of Justice" that feels impenetrable and bunker-like, where the "story" of civic openness is contested by its own cold, fortress-like form.

As part of a deliberate "ensemble of new public buildings around the main central public plaza" (Frearson, 2012), the City Hall serves as a dissonant place product. As its neighbour Police station, it was designed to manufacture a singular, "modern" identity for Mestia to compete in the global tourism market, effectively erasing the palpable complexity of the traditional Svan village.

While exact local costs are often hidden, similar Mayer projects in Georgia, such as the *Sarpi checkpoint*, cost over $10 million USD (J. Mayer H., 2016). In a region where basic infrastructure was often lacking, dropping multi-million dollar alien concrete into the center represents a profound economic dissonance. Today, unmaintained and largely disused, the City Hall is a monument to a state that prioritized the architectural "brand" over the identity of its citizens.

Right (Fig. n.40)
Map by author - Zoomed in of the callout map of the dissonant elements of Mestia

Mestia Public Service City Hall Note. *screen grab of Mestia Public Service City Hall [Screengrab], by Author, 2021 , Google Maps https://www.google.com/maps/place/*


0.25km
Mulkhra River
Mulkhra River

CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

2010 / Queen Tamar Airport / J. Mayer H

Leaving Mestia's center behind, on our way to Chalaadi Glacier, another of the alienating Mayer's structures bestowed upon us.

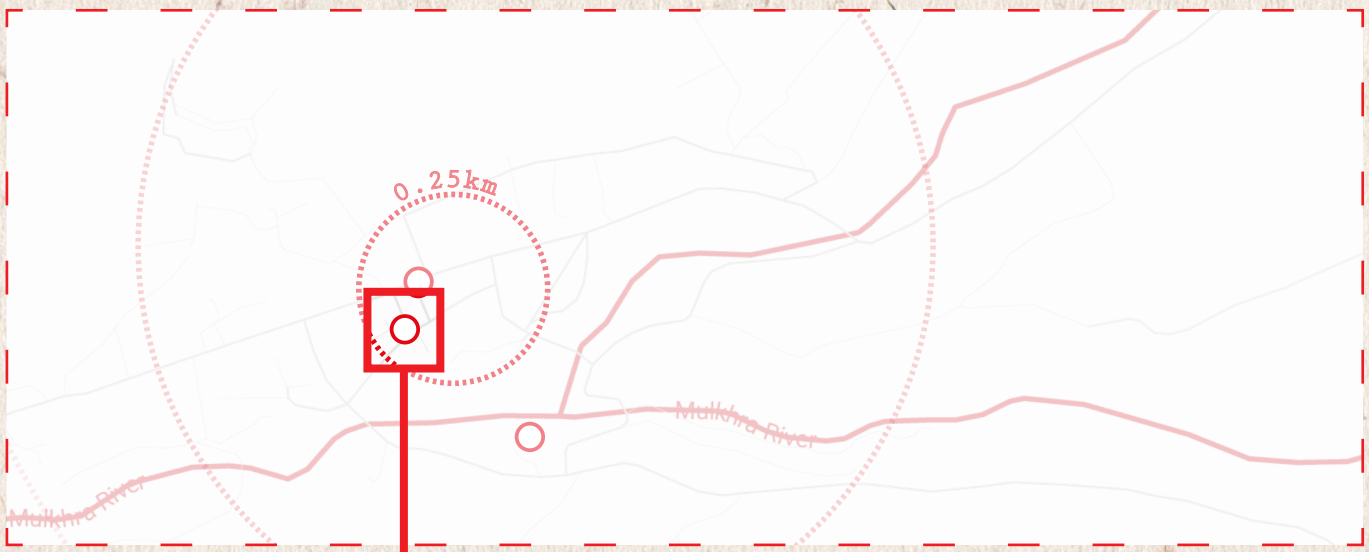
Queen Tamar Airport, completed in 2010, is perhaps the most frantic example of Georgia's race for modernization. J. Mayer H. famously designed and constructed the terminal in just three months, an architectural sprint that Lela Gelashvili (2026, Appendix A) describes as a period where you'd "*turn around and find something new*" almost overnight. While J. Mayer H. (n.d.) boasts it was once voted "*the most beautiful airport in the world*," I argue that failing the fundamental task of contextual architecture is unforgivable.

This is the dissonance in the content of the message at its most extreme. To claim this concrete and glass (Queen Tamar Airport, 2020) "worm" honors the landscape is to ignore the Outstanding Universal Value of the medieval Svan towers that define the region. It feels like a deliberate gamble with UNESCO status; after the irreversible damage done to Bagrati, one wonders if the state was actively trying to get Mestia delisted as well. As Lela aptly noted, while the airport is "useful," its aesthetic is "quite ugly" and fundamentally at odds with the mountains.

However, there is a glimmer of hope in the new airport expansion. In 2025, the Tbilisi-based firm LSG Solutions won a national competition for a timber terminal that finally prioritizes cultural sensitivity over international starchitect tropes (Wei, 2025). Led by an all-female Georgian team, the design utilizes locally sourced timber and stone, replacing Mayer's concrete with materials that actually breathe (Wei, 2025). The rhythmic roof structure draws from the ceremonial attire of Queen Tamar, transforming a generic "place product" into a genuine cultural touchstone (Wei, 2025). By returning to vernacular roots and sustainable engineering, the expansion suggests a future where Georgian infrastructure is grown from the soil, rather than dropped from the clouds.

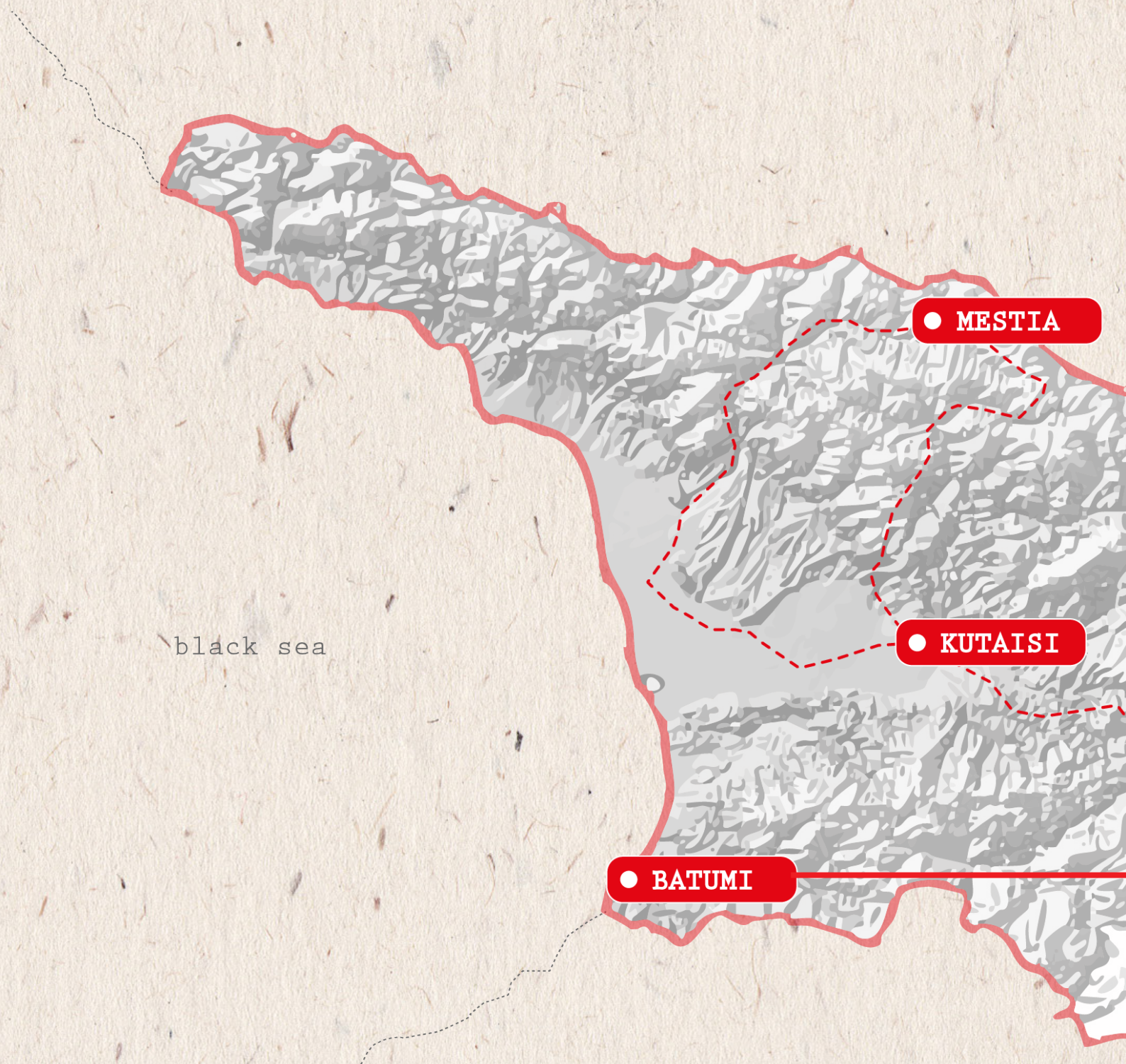
Right (Fig. n.41)
Map by author - Zoomed in of the callout map of the dissonant elements of Mestia

Queen Tamar Airport in Mestia, Georgia (2012) Note. *Queen Tamar Airport in Mestia* From *Queen Tamar Airport in Mestia* [Photograph], by *TheFlyingDutchman*, *2012, Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Queen_Tamar_Airport_Mestia.JPG). Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.*

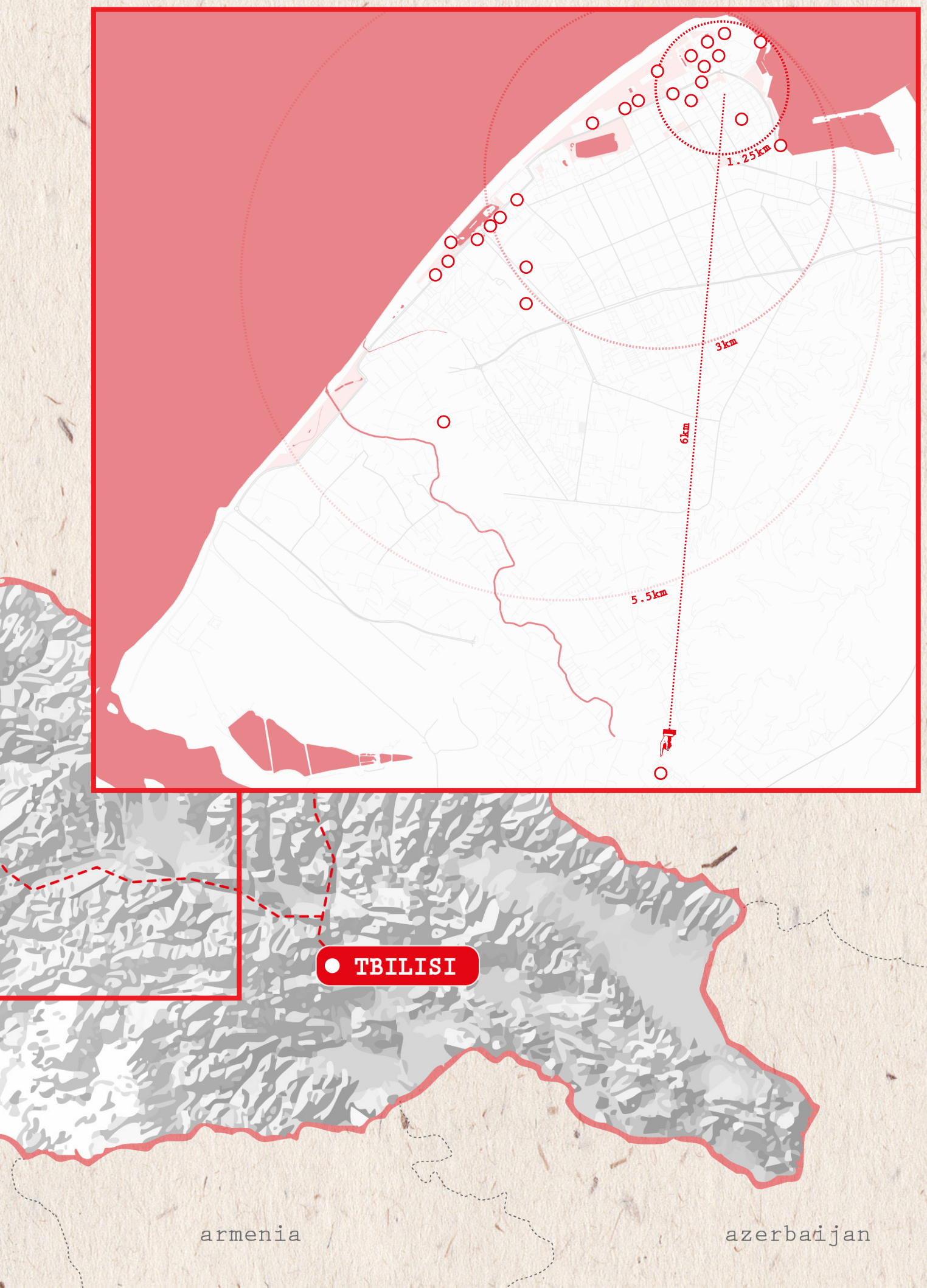

0.25km
Malkina River
Malkina River

CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

Batumi: The epitome of Dissonant Heritage. It jumped from a quaint Soviet coastal town to the "Las Vegas of the Black Sea" in only 15 years. Populated by extreme facsimile architecture and disinherited communities, this city's image revolution has to thank Saakashvili's vision and international investments. I could have omitted this part as I haven't been there, but the interviews with Lela and Natalia gave me valuable information that rendered this chapter full of contrasting emotions.



Centre (Fig. n.42)
Map by author - Map showing our route through Georgia and callout map of the dissonant elements of Batumi


1.25km
3km
6km
5.5km
TBILISI
armenia
azerbaijan

CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

2009-ongoing / “Las Vegas of the Black Sea” / Various architects

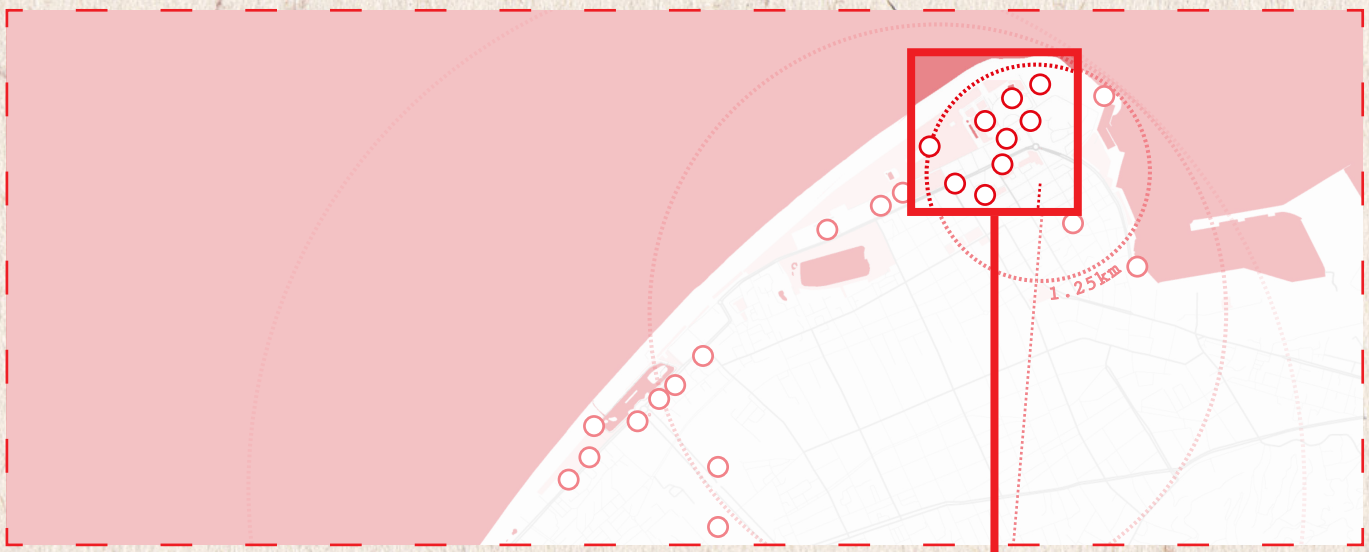
The city’s Riviera functions less as an organic urban shoreline and more as a multi-billion-dollar architectural theme park. To manufacture this fantasy, the state directed an initial $350 million (Cox, 2012) into a skyline designed explicitly to capture foreign capital while systematically displacing its own citizens.

This waterfront is dominated by Cody’s (2003) concept of “exported vernacular”: a deliberate transplantation of foreign architectural identities to simulate global prestige. Manifested along the historical boulevard,through an absurd architectural mis-mash: a beachfront luxury hotel shaped exactly like the Roman Colosseum, the Piazza Square mimicking the campaniles and mosaics of Venice, and a literal gilded replica of Bologna’s Fountain of Neptune (Monkey’s Tale, 2025). Saakashvili, according to Vatsadze (2026, Appendix B) is “*the kind of man who thinks that he can do everything, you know? He can be an architect, or* [when] *he was somewhere* [in Europe, he] *then decided to bring it back, to* [copy it]”. Batumi, therefore, represents the ultimate dissonance of the “place product.” By pasting Italy onto the Georgian coast, developers effectively paved over Batumi’s authentic socio-historical fabric, replacing it with a globally digestible, contextless brand.

However, the true cost of this Riviera is deeply social. This glittering boast of international capital was essentially spent to disinherit the local population. As waterfront property values skyrocketed to cater to the influx of Russian, Belarusian, and Iranian wealth, native residents were priced out and pushed to the margins (Vatsadze, 2026). The creation of this European mirage required the deliberate marginalization of the very people who lived there. In Batumi, the exported vernacular does not bridge cultures; it acts as a glossy barrier of gentrification, proving that the city’s spectacular economic “success” is inextricably linked to the spatial and cultural alienation of its locals.

Right (Fig. n.43)
Map by author - Zoomed in of the callout map of the dissonant elements of Batumi

Batumi: City of Meetings (2024) Note. *This promotional image illustrates the state-led effort to brand Batumi as a global hub for business tourism.* From *MICE: Batumi—The city of meetings* [Brochure], *by Visit Batumi, 2024 (https://mice.visitbatumi.com/en). Copyright 2024 by Visit Batumi.*


1.25km

CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

2020-Ongoing / Lela's friend house "eviction" as a byproduct of "Westernisation"

At Mamia Komakhidze 31, the human cost of Batumi's "Vegas" transformation becomes heartbreakingly personal. For 150 years, this private house stood as a generational baton, surviving the Soviet Union and following wars, only to be defeated by a 23-story wall of concrete and glass. Lela Gelashvili's friend, a guide in Batumi, represented the final holdout against a tide of overdevelopment that has already swallowed her neighbourhood. While her neighbours gave up quite quickly, trading their history for new apartments, her family resisted until very recently, where, left alone in the neighbourhood, they had to comply too (Gelashvili, 2026).

The result is a cruel form of architectural bullying. Surrounded by the rising towers of the "New Boulevard," her home is reduced to what she described as a tiny "*mushroom*". This is the politics of Westernisation at its most predatory. In the race to build "*faster, and cheaper,*" developers have prioritized the "first line" of the coast for casinos and high-rent yields, effectively zoning out the people who actually call the city home. As Lela (2026) observes, *"Justice is hard to find compared to money; it's a human illness."*

This displacement is not just an "eviction"; it is a disinheritance. When the friend finally decided to take the money and leave, she wasn't just moving house, she was surrendering a century and a half of Georgian identity to a project owned by international financiers and Turkish casino magnates. This "New Boulevard" is basically a physical barrier that sharply separates the higher and lower classes of society. In the shadow of these 23 floors, the generational memory of Batumi is being cleared to make room for a business model that views the local population as an obstacle to progress.

Right (Fig. n.44)
Map by author - Zoomed in of the callout map of the dissonant elements of Batumi

Current situation at Mamia Komakhidze 31
Lela's friend's centenary house will be overshadowed by the new hotel/residential project by Lela Gelashvili. View from the north side (courtesy of L. Gelashvili).

1.25km
3km
6km

CHAPTER IV: LOOKING FOR IDENTITY - A CARTOGRAPHIC PROJECT

2012-Ongoing / Dream Town: The mirror of dissonance / unknown

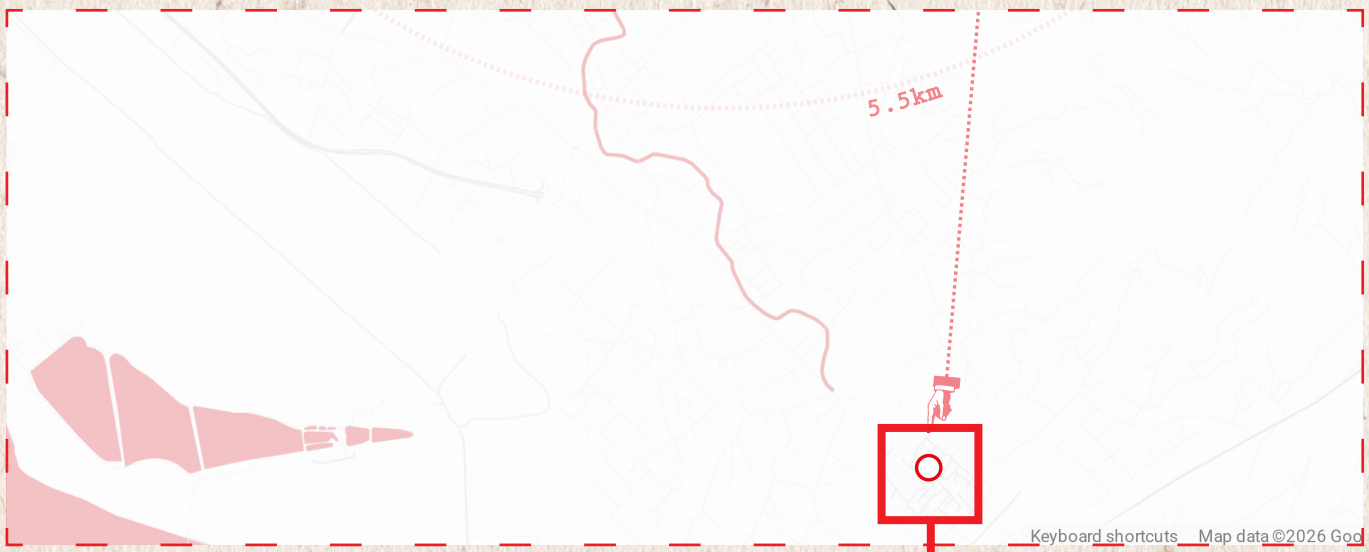
The final element of the dissonant depiction of Batumi is Dream Town, an area of 25 hectares only 6km from the center.

This proximity highlights a grotesque juxtaposition: while the coastline glitters with billion-dollar investments for a "fake city" of foreign casinos, at least 1500 families live in a makeshift ghetto built from the literal refuse of progress (JAM-News, 2017). A wasteland of cardboard and bare cement sitting in the shadow of the Black Sea's shining showroom. Natalia Vatsadze (2026) describes the construction here as "Marrakech architecture", a desperate, vernacular response where residents utilize garbage, cardboard, and scrap materials to assemble shelter (Vatsadze, 2026 Appendix B). This "Cardboard City" sprang up almost overnight in 2012, fueled by the hollow pre-election promises of the Georgian Dream party to provide for eco-migrants and war veterans. Instead of the promised prosperity, these citizens navigate a landscape of mud and open sewage. The human cost is lethal; the lack of basic infrastructure recently claimed the lives of two children who drowned in a water-filled construction hole, a tragic symbol of the state's total negligence (Georgia Today, 2025).

Dream Town forces a confrontation with the integrity of a country that has lost sight of its identity. How can Georgia claim "Western Progress" when its war veterans and disabled citizens live in conditions described by the Council of Europe as "intolerable"? (Khitarishvili & Tavdgiridze, 2017) As the state continues to invest in "place products" for the rich, it effectively renders its own people refugees in their own city. The deeper Batumi sinks into its glittering mirage, the more the national spirit fractures. Dream Town is the mirror that reflects the true cost of the "New Georgia": a state that has traded the dignity of its people for the hollow approval of international capital.

Right (Fig. n.45)
Map by author - Zoomed in of the callout map of the dissonant elements of Batumi

*The "Dream Town" Settlement on the outskirts of Batumi (2017)*Note. *A symbol of unfulfilled political promises and the stark poverty existing behind Batumi's modern skyline.* From *Dream Town: Batumi's ghetto* [Photograph], by *M. Khitarishvili and T. Tavdgiridze, 2017, JAMnews (https://jam-news.net/dream-town-batumis-ghetto/). Copyright 2017 by JAMnews.*


5.51km
Keyboard shortcuts
Map data ©2026 Goo

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

This research started as a reaction to my lived experience in Georgia. The shock in the multi-layered image represented during my trip left me with a pressing question. What is the true Georgian architectural identity? The answer, as this journey has revealed, is not singular but plural. Georgia possesses a multitude of identities, some of which are intrinsically, fundamentally Georgian, while others have been shaped by relentless waves of external influence. If there is one certainty to be drawn from the nation's built environment, it is that history is repeating itself. The historical invasions of the past have been rebranded as the foreign investments of the present, often originating from the very same countries. Only this time, it is the calculated direction of the corrupted Georgian government that allows this capital to terraform the nation's image toward idealized, Western horizons.

During our interviews, Lela's reflection on the "arrival of colors" in the post-Soviet era was heartfelt. Following decades of gray, Georgia's haste and solace in cutting that umbilical cord, faltered the nation's vigilance. Indeed, the colors of this modern era arrived too quickly, unregulated, and unapologetically. In the desperate, collective hope for a vibrant, Western-aligned future, optimism became a quiet facilitator for an authorized architectural discourse that completely disregarded the depth of Georgia's historical strata. The new identity of glass and steel, subdued the structural honesty of the country's heritage.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously stated, "*In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.*" (King, 1967/2010). This powerful reflection on moral responsibility emphasizes that the inaction of allies during times of injustice is far more hurtful and enduring than the open hostility of enemies. In the context of Georgia's urban metamorphosis, this quote translates in the civic inaction during the aggressive ongoing construction booms from the late 2000s. The rapid erection of alienating skyscrapers and dissonant "place products" occurred largely without local resistance. As Tinatin Gurgenidze, co-founder of the Tbilisi Architecture Biennial (TAB), observed in Oliver Wainwright's (2018) article: "*There has been very little discussion about architecture and urban development in Georgian society. People are starting to wake up to the fact that their environment is being destroyed, but there is no forum for discussing an alternative way forward.*"

This awakening is crucial. Yet, the current reality remains precarious. India Block's (2019) article frames this sentiment perfectly. The majority of people are declaring most of the new developments as inappropriate, and are condemning the government who overlooks (or worse destroys) architectural opportunities. This concern is echoed by Alexander Brodsky, one of Russia's celebrated paper architects of the 1970s: "*Hopefully they will stop still building contemporary things and big skyscrapers […] I hope that they save the old buildings of Tbilisi. I do not see it as a city full of contemporary buildings. But I do not know what is going to happen, because of the developers.*" (Block, 2019)

Ultimately, this thesis used the Georgian case to stimulate a critique and a wake up call to post-war/ post-invasion countries in how to recollect the pieces of their identity. The research process has opened up a vast world of information regarding the physical and psychological costs of hyper-development, which I have endeavored to summarize through the lived experiences of

Right (Fig. n.46) Image by author - Layered back-streets of Tbilisi

my interviewees and my own observations. While the dissonant landscape of modern Georgia can feel overwhelming, the fact that society is "*starting to wake up*" offers a profound glimmer of hope. It is my sincere hope that Georgia will find a way to preserve its invaluable architectural heritage, balancing the necessity of growth with the dignity of its history. This investigation into Georgia's spatial identity does not end here; rather, it has laid the groundwork for my continued commitment to documenting, questioning, and advocating for the authentic architectural soul of the Caucasus.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW WITH LELA GELASHVILI

Interviewee: Lela Gelashvili (Professional Tour Guide)
Interviewer: Raoul Tomaselli
Date: February 11, 2026
Location: Online
Duration: 1:30 hours
Language: English translated from Italian
Note: This transcript has been edited for clarity and brevity, while maintaining the original meaning.

[L]: You've done an enormous amount of research!

[R]: Yes, there's so much to say, you know how it is.

[L]: But you have to be interested, right? I'm not that interested in this genre of architecture or these specific things. I can only give you my opinion—what I see and how I see things. What the people in general think... might that be too much?

[R]: In the thesis, we use you as an example, but your voice represents millions of people. You are an expert in the field of tourism, and since you interface primarily with Italian tourists, you see their perspective too. That is very interesting.

[L]: Let's start with the questions.

[R]: Yes, I sent them to you, but we can just discuss things generally to get an idea.

[L]: There is one question I feel it wouldn't be right for me to answer... in the sense that I am quite apolitical. Quite, despite the fact that every person in any country should be informed about what is happening. However, regarding Question 9—where you ask about when they started building these palaces [dissonant architecture] and what people said about the money—I can tell you about that period. When was the start? The buildings were constructed around the beginning of 2010, when Saakashvili was President. We left the Soviet Union in 1989, but definitively in 1991 when the war with Abkhazia happened. Then we went through a very difficult period under President Shevardnadze. In 2002/3, we had the "Rose Revolution." After that, a total change began. We moved from the "black period" toward the "colored period"—the colors arrived. By colors, I also mean these buildings, these dissonant palaces that architects talk about (whom I don't know well, honestly). At that time, it was general information that the money came from loans and investments. Various loans from America and investments from foreigners—for example, Turks and Arabs who received a piece of land to manage in exchange for money for the Georgian government. That was the general knowledge, what we knew.

[L]: Now, regarding the tourists walking through Tbilisi: of course, they see the historic city and then encounter these glass and iron buildings on the street. There are Italians who are a bit surprised that the buildings are so different from the ancient architecture—but then again, even that old architecture isn't "truly" Georgian. Some say it's just the times bringing this novelty; others say it would have been better to build in the old style. But building in the ancient style, as you know better than me, costs much

more and takes much more time.
You asked if Italians recognize De Lucchi's style? Never. It has never happened to me that an Italian recognized De Lucchi's architectural style. Nothing at all. It was actually a surprise to me that no one knew the architect or his style. Can I give my opinion? I meet many Italians who know religion very well—specifically the religious architecture of churches, the frescoes, even the authors of the frescoes and different styles—but they don't know De Lucchi at all.

[R]: And there was also the question about which style of architecture they prefer, or where they spend more time.

[L]: Honestly, they prefer the ancient, authentic architecture. In my opinion, if you want to see the authentic Georgia, you have to leave the city. You have to go to the small, remote villages where you see how Georgian people actually live.

[R]: Because generally, Georgia has been influenced by so many nations—Persians, Turks, Arabs, Russians—over the last 200 years. That's why there are so many Soviet buildings and...

[L]: And Europeans too. For example, in the city, you've surely visited palaces belonging to merchants, many of whom were Armenian, who had visited Europe (perhaps in secret, speaking of the 19th century) and brought that European style back to Georgia. These buildings with balconies—the colorful wooden balconies—they are all Persian. It's not a "Georgian" style. We say it is our style because several centuries have passed, and we have appropriated that element.

[L]: You wrote here as examples two or three buildings: the Public Service Hall, the Bridge of Peace, and the other one with the tubes [Music Hall].

[R]: Yes, by Fuksas.

[L]: Well, these are grouped together, but if you notice, they are somewhat outside the center. Regarding your question—"When you walk past these buildings, do you feel like you are still in Georgia or outside the country?"—Honestly, yes, I feel like I'm abroad. When you walk in the center, like the Abanotubani district, it feels like an Asian country. Then you leave that district and see these tubes, the Bridge of Peace... it looks like modern Europe, like Las Vegas, especially since there's a casino near the bridge. In my opinion, our previous president [Saakashvili] around 2012-2014 really wanted to make Georgia more European to show others—and to make Georgians feel—that we are truly European. Because in the 90s, Tbilisi was horrible. If you looked at the facades while walking, they barely existed; you saw pipes, rags, and wood smoke coming out of windows. People were cutting down trees in the city for heat. There were enormous lines at 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning to get bread.

[R]: Basically, in the 90s, it was a situation of extreme poverty.

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[L]: Yes, extreme poverty, and everything was black and gray. Instead, the 2002/2003 period arrived with colors and hope. So, there weren't many people protesting, "What are they doing here? This is ugly! How can you put this bridge here?" There wasn't a great protest. Of course, there were experts who thought it was better to maintain the old style, but the government at that time wanted to make the city resemble other cities in Europe and the world. For example, in Spain—Valencia has buildings like this, right?

[R]: Yes, cities that modernized with this kind of architecture. It's very bright, right? Like "a lure for larks"—something that attracts you because it shines. It's part of my thesis: the fact that Georgia wanted to approach Europe through its image to be more attractive for European investment, finally being part of a whole.

[L]: And to separate from Russia! From their culture and their Russian style. To free ourselves from those dark, red, gray colors we had for years. Now, there was a question here that I liked: do tourists, when they see these dissonant palaces, make a parallel with their own country?
[R]: Yes, Question 13: "Do tourists compare these buildings to those in their own countries or think these projects wouldn't be allowed at home?"

[L]: They don't say that. As you know, I work only with Italians, so I can only speak for them. Italians from the North, like Milan—you know what that city is like? For Milanese people, it's normal. For Sicilians, however, it's not okay. They say the authenticity of the city must be maintained. I don't know why. I'm interested in this too. Why is there such a big difference between Milanese and Sicilians? Do Sicilians respect history and architecture more, or have the Milanese simply adapted better to the new century?

[R]: My view is a mix. People from the North are more "Europeanized." They feel more like a part of Europe, while people from the South are content in their own environment. They don't have this desperate need for an opening to Europe. Northern culture is based on work, on "facturing" [revenue]. If these investments make a city open to Europe, that's good for them. Those in the South want to maintain their identity. They say, "Okay, we don't have much money, but we are happy in our land as we are."

[L]: You've answered all the questions we had here. You have to imagine that Georgia is small, but it's mixed with these mentalities. Those in Tbilisi, and some in Batumi, are more "European" and think like the Milanese—if investments bring well-being and careers, 90% agree. Those in small towns or the countryside want to maintain their identity.

[R]: That makes sense. But then I see a city like Mestia—historic, UNESCO heritage—and then they put that Queen Tamar airport there, and that museum that looks like a meteorite fallen from the sky. It doesn't make sense.

[L]: Let me tell you about Mestia. The Svans are completely different from other Georgians. They have always maintained their traditions, their families, their life. No one can interrupt their world. However, there was

never an objection to the airport. No protests like “Why are you building this here?” They just needed the airport because it was useful. Understand? And they built it quite far from the center. So they weren’t against it. Maybe they don’t even think about whether the construction is horrible. In my opinion, it’s quite ugly. It doesn’t fit with those mountains.

[R]: I’ll send you an article later, because in researching the Mestia airport, I saw it was built in three months and the architect designed it in one day. Now, 15 years later, they are trying to expand it with a new studio using wood. It might be more contextual, but it would be interesting to know if they are changing it for logistics or because it aesthetically clashes with the village.

[L]: I don’t have that information. What you’re telling me is new to me. But it’s true it was built in three months; I remember well. Many of these dissonant buildings were built extremely fast. Like a race. They built almost overnight. You’d turn around and find something new. They really did it that way. For example, the Kutaisi airport has lost its roof twice—completely. That was also built in very little time. I have no idea about architecture, zero, but I know cement needs 28 days to dry because I studied chemistry at university. I don’t know how it’s possible to build that fast. But they worked day and night, Saturday and Sunday, non-stop.

[R]: Were the workers Georgian, or were they from elsewhere since the money came from Arabs, etc.?
[L]: No, Georgians worked, especially in Mestia. But now, for example—I don’t know if you know—they’ve built a massive 12km tunnel in Gudauri/Stepantsminda. They cut through the mountains for the road. A large Chinese company is building it. There are many Chinese workers and very few Georgians. High-level engineering and logistics are for the Chinese; the laborers are Georgian. It was the same in 2010-2014. Little has changed politically. If the financiers are foreign, they bring their own high-level engineers. Maybe for trust.

[R]: We saw those tunnels on the way to Stepantsminda with Chinese factory names. I was thinking of a parallel with Montenegro, where China funded a highway and now Montenegro is so indebted that China has acquired parts of the territory. I wonder if this could happen in Georgia too.

[L]: Perhaps. Though for Chinese people to settle in Georgia would be very difficult. Even though we are open, families don’t mix much. But economically and logistically, the land of Georgia is important to them. These are huge projects, like the highway from the Rikoti Pass—you’ve surely been there.

[R]: Yes, probably, I don’t remember the name well, but yes.

[L]: Now, here’s a question I liked a lot. I hope you don’t write this! [laughs] It’s a question between friends: “What do you call these buildings?” I always called the bridge the “Bridge of Peace,” but many Georgians—some of

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the more ignorant ones, because the world is a village—they gave that bridge a name. Are you familiar with women's sanitary pads? There was a brand here called "Always," like the English word.

[R]: Exactly! It looks like one. That's a very clever impression, haha.

[L]: Taxi drivers call it that. Especially the men from the Soviet period. There were people who lived well then—children of high-level party members—and for them, the Soviet Union is still the greatest country. For them, anything new or dissonant is ugly. Surely that name comes from them.

[R]: And what about Batumi?

[L]: In Batumi... those tall buildings we call the "New Boulevard." The city has almost doubled in size. They built right along the sea—those tall Orbi towers, for example. In that area, it used to be countryside. It was almost all mud. People lived in shacks with animals. The financiers cleared those people out, gave them money or apartments in the new towers, and they settled elsewhere. But most of those apartments are for rent. It's a business. The idea of Batumi was to resemble Vegas. They build with glass and iron because it's faster and cheaper, and they sell the idea as "modern." My friend, who is a guide in Batumi, lives in a 150-year-old private house. She didn't want to leave, but when she saw the projects surrounding her house... she's forced to. She has to take the money and leave her family home of generations. I'll send you the photo.

[R]: Yes, thank you.

[L]: She said she will be like a "mushroom" among these towers. But they give a lot of money. Because in Batumi you can play in the casinos.

[R]: Can you only play in Batumi?

[L]: No, there are chains in Tbilisi too, but Batumi has many. My friend even works in a Tbilisi casino that is a branch of a Batumi one; the owner is Turkish.

[R]: I saw a project like the Palm in Dubai being planned for Batumi—building land out into the sea with skyscrapers in a circle. I can't imagine the social/economic divide that creates for those living behind that "barrier."

[L]: I have no idea. I think generally that power has always been money. Justice is hard to find compared to money. It's a human illness. If they have the power to build like Abu Dhabi, they will. Those on the second line will stay there; those in front will be better off. I don't think they can fight and win.

[R]: Can you imagine Georgia in 5 or 10 years? Does the center move toward Batumi? Does Batumi become the image of Georgia?

[L]: That will not happen. I assure you. Never. Tbilisi is both

geographically and historically the heart of the country. It is so ancient and important. Batumi will be like Vegas—a place to go for fun. But the sense of being in Tbilisi won't be lost. Intelligent people come for art, culture, and history. I don't believe young people lack the intelligence to know the history of the country they are visiting.

[R]: But regarding my thesis on the search for Georgian identity, this Batumi stuff feels like a fracture. It could separate the country like North and South Italy.

[L]: Batumi is complicated. In North and South Italy, everyone is Italian. In Batumi, it is mixed. There are many Turks. Some say Batumi will become a Turkish, Asian, Muslim city in a few years. Even "genetic" Georgians in Adjara are Muslim due to Turkish influence. For them, being with Turks isn't a problem because the religion is strong. So, a bit of a separation is possible.

[R]: I wouldn't want that image to be replicated in places like Kutaisi.

[L]: Ah, Kutaisi! People in Kutaisi think like Sicilians—they think they are the best race in the world. They believe they are the "purest" Georgians. They won't let anyone ruin their city. They maintain their identity very firmly. Money isn't as important to them; they share what they have and are happy. Career and wealth to build a "better" life don't interest them as much.

[R]: Indeed, I didn't see much dissonant architecture there, only the Parliament.

[L]: And the Parliament is outside the city.

[R]: One thing I saw in Kutaisi is that they build their own things—expanding houses without regulations?

[L]: That's everywhere. That's a government problem. The people build how they like. Most of the time the government tries to enforce rules, but they fail. If my house isn't UNESCO heritage, I can design it however I want. No one tells me to respect the environment. Even the government doesn't respect the rules—look at Abanotubani in Tbilisi, those horrible cement buildings. In the Soviet period, houses had to be the same color, level, and style. Even in the countryside near Svaneti, houses from the 50s-70s are identical. After the 80s, we tried to separate from the Soviet style, but we had no money to eat, let alone build.

[R]: So, for you, what is the Georgian identity?

[L]: For me... speaking of architecture? I personally love houses of stone and wood. I think the identity lies in the materials. Balconies, because those are truly ours. Not the "Arabic" style worked wood you see now, but the ones that took ornaments from religious art and churches—real Georgian ornaments, maybe mixed with Byzantine style. That is our identity, not iron

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and glass. And Soviet buildings are horrible. Though they say—I don't know—that they are more resistant. I bought my apartment in a "new" building in 2016. The stucco is already coming off the walls.

[R]: I can explain that. Soviet modular construction was super efficient and materials were cheap then. Now, materials and labor are expensive, so new constructions save money on materials or pipes. Soviet stuff is "efficient," but you live better in the new stuff. You can't compare them on a "livable" level. One last question: the "We are Europe" movement in Tbilisi. Are you part of it? Where do you think Georgia is going?

[L]: Geographically, Georgia is Europe. There's no discussion. Genetically, we are a mix of Europe and Asia. Historically, for centuries, the Turks were here. On the Silk Road, there were surely "pairings." It's hard to say we are a "pure race," though Georgians believe a myth: that when God was dividing the world's land for Italians, Spaniards, etc., He kept a piece for Himself. The Georgians arrived late because they were at a table making toasts to the God of Peace. God was moved and gave them the land He had kept for Himself. Many Georgians truly believe this land is a gift from God. I don't believe it, but historically this land has been important to everyone because we are right in the middle. Logistically, we were always the shortest way to connect these two worlds. Here, we have a saying: "You are stuck in like a needle in the eye." We annoy everyone. Because they want the land, but they don't want the Georgians. The Russians are the same. They want the territory, but the Georgians? Do we annoy them?

[R]: Do you see Georgia becoming part of the European Union?

[L]: Of course, of course, of course I see Georgia as Europe. But our current government—which in my opinion is pro-Russian, and this is just my view—makes everything difficult. Because the "master" of the government, Ivanishvili, is a billionaire with a massive apartment inside the Botanical Garden. He made his money, and still makes it, from Gazprom. So, it's easy to understand what's happening, right? We are "calm" because Putin has his friend here. In Georgia, there won't be any problems apart from the war issue. Even though Persians, Turks, and Muslims have invaded Georgia throughout history, no one ever managed to take away our language. Only the Russians tried. They wanted to make us truly Russian. And they succeeded to an extent, because even in Europe or just browsing the internet, so many Italians say, "Ah, Georgia, so you're Russian." You see? It means they succeeded.

[R]: And what about Abkhazia and Ossetia? Did they succeed there too?

[L]: There, yes. Abkhazia and Ossetia were part of Georgia, just like Adjara, following the Black Sea coast. Ossetia is in the central Caucasus. Abkhazia was our "pass" to be free from the Soviet Union. And we lost Ossetia because of our demonstrations and our choice to move toward Europe.

[R]: Exactly. I'm thinking that the European Union, seeing these internal problems in Georgia, might not want to take in a country that is already so problematic, as it could create more conflicts. The socio-political situation

Right (Fig. n.47)
Image Concession by owner - Lela Gelashvili in Uplistsikhe

now, with Russia at the gates... if Europe took Georgia in, it would be like a declaration of war against Russia.

[L]: Yes, which is why it will be difficult to enter Europe. In my opinion, as long as this government is here, no one will let us into Europe. But I also think neither the Russians nor Putin will fully enter Georgia. However, getting into Europe isn't that easy. We have to surpass several levels. Historically and genetically, you can talk all you want about being European, but you have to prove it with your behavior and your progress today to be Europe. And we are still quite far behind. Personally, I prefer to be Georgian with good relations with the whole world while maintaining our identity—our language, our way of life, our architecture, our history, our food, our wine. I was in Verona, at a restaurant. My friends told the waiter the wine had to be the best in the area because they had a guest who knew wine well and had traveled from very far. The waiter asked, "Wait, is she coming from Georgia?" He knew about Georgia and the 8,000-year history of winemaking. I want to say that this fact—that Europeans and Americans now know this history—is the merit of the previous government [Saakashvili]. For better or worse, I repeat, I am quite apolitical. But I recognize the good things the previous ones did, and I see the mistakes of the current ones, just as I saw the mistakes the previous ones made.

[R]: The previous government was Saakashvili's. He basically put Georgia on the global map.

[L]: That is what they did, but he didn't have the patience to maintain his level. He lost his head. Because—and this is a human sickness—when you have power, out of egoism, this feeling of superiority takes over. As soon as we have the chance to be powerful, genetically, the brain goes out the window and we lose our minds. It happens to everyone. It has always happened to everyone. All the masters of different countries in the world... it happened like that. Because it is the human sickness.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW WITH NATALIA VATSADZE

Interviewee: Natalia Vatsadze (artist, independent curator and one of the founders and members of the artistic collective Bouillon)
Interviewer: Raoul Tomaselli
Date: March 20, 2026
Location: Online
Duration: 2 hours
Language: English
Note: This transcript has been edited for clarity and brevity,

[R] - Okay. Hi. Nice to meet you. I'm Raul. I'm an architecture student here in the Netherlands, but I'm from Italy.

[N] - Okay, I'm Natalia. One of the members of Bouillon Group. I'm an art critic, art historian and performing artist, mostly.

[R] - Wow. Then, you must know a lot about all these facts about the last 20 years of Georgian architecture, about the politics of Saakashvili and the oligarchs, Ivanishvili, his mansion and all these buildings.

[N] - I don't know if you uh, check our works but maybe it's not uploaded but we have one guided tour in Tbilisi, the name of this tour is Art and politic, and during this tour, we are speaking about the politics after the Soviet system collapse and also about the politic of architecture in Tbilisi, because the architecture in Tbilisi is changing during the protests because they are trying to more and more protect the power, the institution, which are like for for now the governmental institutions and so on and that's why the architecture of the city, I mean also like the even the gardening of the city in the centre especially is changing a lot.
I don't know, have you been in Tbilisi?

[R] - Yeah, so I'm writing this thesis because, when I went to Georgia, I spent a month there last summer. I started in Tbilisi, then I went to Kutaisi, Mestia and Steppansminda.
And everywhere. I went, there was this glitch of architecture where the or sort of original (now, I know that it's not very original because it's like Persian and Turk as well Armenian there is a mix of everything), heritage architecture was juxtaposed to like the glass and steel structure and new flashy buildings. And that made me think a lot and I was like, what the fuck is going on here? And then, I'm researching a lot. Like this morning I discovered through searching on Ivanishvily's Mansion, that he shipped by sea, like different trees uprooted from around the Black Sea.How is this allowed!?

[N] - There is a very good film by Georgian filmmaker, Salomé Jashi. The name is "Taming the garden" and you can see this film. It is really, very, very, very, very cool. So, I think that you have to come once more to Tbilisi and just to plan, more carefully where to go, what to do, whom to see, and… Because you know? There is the Architecture Organisation, and one architect from it is making this guided tour in ugly Tbilisi. The name of the tour is "Ugly Walks". Yeah, which is very good. I don't know if they are still doing it, but you can find the person who was doing it.

And about the architecture in Georgia, I can say that the first places found in Georgia, like during these archaeological researches, are the circle buildings (Darbazi). But, even in these circle buildings, when you look at the plan, you can see the buildings which are like Loggias. I think this is our nature to build on something, more and more, to make, for example, one building and then we are always putting more and more houses around as it was with the architect of Loggias - this is by nature, I know, I don't know how to explain it. Because, all these old buildings in Tbilisi, if you walk there, you can see all the balconies they are making, extra rooms, they are making extra buildings and this, like eclectic architecture, I think this is the very nature of the Georgians (talking about kamikaze loggias). Even the old buildings you can see in the mountains have the same situation, because it's connected with the style of the family living. Because in the beginning, all the families were living together and the families were very big. In Tbilisi, there is this Ethnographical Museum where you can see this architecture of Georgian Architects from different parts of Georgia, because in each part of Georgia, the architects and also like the materials they are using, it's very different. For example, in Kakheti they are using the stone from the river, the Alazani river, one of the biggest and longest rivers in Georgia. And, from this Alazani, they are taking these small stones, and all the architecture is built from these stones.
And in the past, for example, in another part of Georgia, mostly in Racha, in Lechkhumi or even in Adjara they had a wooden architecture which was also connected with nature. Because there are more rainy places and also earthquakes are more common and they used to make these houses on wooden foundations where the second floor was also done with wooden architecture. But later they changed it to replace the foundation and ground floor with stone. However, when earthquakes arrived, all the buildings like this were destroyed.
But still, they are always trying to put, even within one building, more buildings closer to each other. This is due to economical reasons, because Georgia is a poor country and the people were always poor. But also, because of the geographical situation of Georgia.
I think that, in the past century, every 30-40 years, there has been a war. There was an occupation in the beginning of the 20th century, 1921. We took part in the Second World War, and the percentage of Georgians who died in this war was the highest among the Soviet countries. This is a small country, but if you compare with the percent of the citizens who took part in this War, and who died, this one of the biggest. And then, the wars in 1991 and 1993 with Abkhazia and with Samachablo (we called it Samachablo, but the Russians called it Ossetia) and also like um the war between Georgians, on the political level.

[R] - Sorry, so you are not calling it Ossetia?

[N] - No, no. This is Samachablo. Yeah, this is also connected with the architecture we have here. Because a lot of refugees came to Tbilisi.
And, since Tbilisi is the biggest city in Georgia, everybody wants to live here. This is a reason why the architecture of Tbilisi is like this. But do you know what's left of the original architecture of Tbilisi? The oldest architecture in Tbilisi are mostly the churches. Yeah maybe you see …

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[lights went off in Natalia's house]

[N] - Oh!? This is because of the electricity…but yeah I hope that maybe it will come back or it will be enough. If not, we can speak another day.

[R] - Okay, thank you.

[N] - And, yes, they connect (talking about the aftermath of the war in Samachablo). So there are a lot of reasons why these refugees came to Tbilisi. I don't know if you saw the houses of the refugees. This is a very interesting place to see.

[R] - I'm not sure. In which area would they be?

[N] - In different areas, even in the centre. But what is really, very interesting, is what they gave to the refugees. You know, the most important thing is that they don't give houses to the refugee families. They give, for example, the big abandoned hotels from Soviet times. And all these people are living in one building block, separated from the people living in Tbilisi.You know that this separation is a very important thing to understand how these people were living. And also, when the Soviet system collapsed, there were no jobs, no electricity and no water, as I don't have it today, no water and no gas.
That was the situation in Georgia. No work. Because in Soviet countries, everything was connected. For example, if someone was making..books, the paper comes from one country, the glue comes from another and you do it here (in Georgia). And after all this system just collapsed, these people came, these refugees. So, people who live in Tbilisi think that these refugees are the reason that they are also living in very bad conditions. Because you are always trying to find someone to shift the blame of the situation, to point the finger at. And then you can say that all these people came and took our jobs.

[R] - So, is that what Georgians think about the refugees?

[N] - Yeah. In the 90s, yes. But, with the war in 2008 during Mikheil Saakashvili, no one thought like this, because everybody was more prepared. Everybody understood what's going on and everybody tried to help. Also the country was more prepared. They gave the houses and they built the Villages where they gave full houses for them. But again, back in the 90s these refugees only got rooms, very small rooms where maybe five, six, seven people lived in, because there was not any opportunity to give them. I made this research with one Italian photographer a few years ago, and I'm also working on the topic of "Forced Replacements". I like this topic. But this also connects with the architecture and with the landscapes. The landscapes around the architecture in which those kinds of people are living (refugees). All the people from Abkhazia are trying to make a landscape which was present in Abkhazia: date palms or the trees that they used to have there. And, when you are going in these districts of Tbilisi, even in the centre, you see all these things. Also, the refugees never take care of these buildings of course

- Because they knew these are not their buildings, they were just temporary, and also for many of them, a few years ago, the government just left some houses, which were not in the centre and which were easy to give.
But, for those who were living in the centre, it was more difficult to live there. Because, of course, these kinds of houses are more expensive, and they (the owner/government) are trying to get more (money). But you know, this bad situation which I explained from Abkhazia, has happened. And everywhere are good people and bad people, if we can call them that. Because, it's easy to speak when you have things, when you don't have problems. However, for example, I have in my house many things that I love very very much.
But they (the refugees) had to leave. And leave everything here. They just left everything here. Of course, they were trying to survive somehow. On the other hand, some of them - because of the corruption system of the Soviet countries, one of which Georgia, some of them got, not one, but two houses. And some of them, not even one, you know?

[R] - Yeah. It was according to the level of hierarchy, if they were very close to the oligarchs and the right people.

[N] - Yes, that's what happened.
When I was a kid (born in 1978, Natalia is talking about the situation after the fall of the Soviet era in the 1990s), I lived with my mum in the centre of Tbilisi. You couldn't go out after six o'clock, because everywhere you turn there were these people with guns. Sort of like the army, but an unofficial kind of. We had the first democratically elected President of Georgia in 1991, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who was later killed. And there was the Civil War in Tbilisi. But this war happened only in the centre, you know? There was a coup d'état in Tbilisi because of a very small group of people with guns, criminals coming from prisons. They were the ones who were ruling the situation from the prison. And then later, they were in the parliament of Georgia. (Natalia is talking about the Mkhedrioni - a heavily armed paramilitary faction of pardoned criminals who orchestrated the 1991-1992 coup and subsequently gained parliamentary power.) And, of course, everything was destroyed and everybody tried to make their houses bigger (kamikaze loggias). That's why …

[electricity came back in Natalia's house]

[N] - Oh, the electricity came back.
Okay. That's why these poor people tried to make small additions to their buildings. They can't buy other houses, so that is how Kamikaze Loggias started to appear.
The name Kamikaze is because of course,there were no architects involved. They were thinking to themselves how to do it.

[R] - I understood that the Kamikaze Loggias terminology comes from, kamikaze as being something that can be destroyed easily, because it's not built by an architect or engineer. But also the end of the word kamikaze - so the "aze" - is a nice hint to the Georgian surnames finishing with "adze", like your surname.

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[N] - Yeah but I don't think that it was meant like that (Natalia denying the "hint to the Georgian surnames"). I know that the terminology comes from Levan Asabashvili, he is an architect and urbanist in Tbilisi. Also, there is one very good artist, Georgian, Gio Sumbadze, I can give you the contact and you can contact him because he was the one who made this kamikaze loggia in Venice Biennale (2013), and that was the only building built in Venice for the last 30 years, or more. Because they are not making any new buildings and that loggia was the only one which was built.

[R] - I wanted to say that you did a separation between West and East Georgia in terms of materiality, like the vernacular material of the West is the timber because they have a lot of forests and East as the stone. And that's what I also found out in the past couple of days when I was researching the origin of vernacular architecture in Georgia, which is the Darbazi houses. And they are both in the west and the East. And, from what I understood, in the East the rock city of Uplistsikhe.

[N] - Uplistsikhe! But this is not just a living place, you know, this is the architecture which is built in this Stone. We have such a kind of architecture in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, for example, Vardzia. This is the biggest one. But in Uplistsikhe, it was more of a temple, you know? It was before Christianity, like a big city, but not a city, more like a temple. Because my brother was the director of this museum in Uplistsikhe, I know very good this Uplistsikhe museum. And he was there for a few years as a researcher of Georgian pre-christian mythology and religions.
And about the stone, yeah… In Samtskhe-Javakheti it's more of stone, less wooden houses. But also in other parts of Georgia, they can be one floor buildings, using the ceiling as the balconies. This was also in the old part of Tbilisi before the typical Tbilisi balcony houses, maybe you saw them? Because the oldest of these balconies is from the 18th century, whereas the rest is another architecture from the 19th and beginning of 20th century. And maybe you also saw this modernistic architecture, which is really amazing in Tbilisi, not a lot, but still really beautiful and nice. But mostly these houses are from the 18th century, but in this area, the oldest area, where was this Leselidze street, Kote Abkhazi, where there are these hot water baths. This part was the oldest part of Tbilisi, this part and also Avlabari and Narikala. There were these one floor buildings, but because of the topography, almost like mountains, they were built one on top of another. And that makes the culture of the balconies: from the rooftop of the building below, the balcony was coming on top. This roof was covered with the ground, just soil, nothing more. And you could see such kind of architecture around Tbilisi in old times.
My grandmother, for example, also told me that this was a popular kind of architecture.
You can also see these wooden houses, but for the most part, the walls are built from stone.
And also, I know a lot about later architecture using stone, built by Greek people. Because, in the beginning of 18th century in Georgia came a big community of Greek people, due to the war between Turkey and Russia. The Greek were forced to leave the part of Turkey which was, in the old times, belonged to them, and they came to Georgia. My family actually is partly

Greek, that's why I know. And those people had quarries. And those people were the ones who made these stone houses in Georgia.
A few years ago, we wanted to make a stone house and we could not find anyone who could do it, but then we found one Greek who is still living here. Because all these Greeks just left Georgia during the 90s. After the collapse of the Soviet system and after these borders opened all these different nationalities who were living in Georgia, mostly they left Georgia. This was partly connected with the nationalism which comes in Georgia and which is also connected with the religious situation in Georgia… I don't know what you know about the religious situation in Georgia, because it's very hard.
Basically, 90% of Georgia are Orthodox believers, but don't believe in it, many of them are just blind believers. In every corner of Tbilisi, from the 90s, the church became a powerful institution. Before, it was forbidden to go to the church (by the people in Soviet countries) but after the 90s, nationalism brought this religion back because it was said that the Orthodox Georgia, the Orthodox Christianity saved the Georgian language, saved the culture, and blah, blah, blah.

Also, you know, before they believed in Lenin and Stalin. And still there are a lot of stalinists living here, and I'm now making research and a film. I did one film from 2020, about the new cultures of Stalin, since we are renovated and restored. Now I am working on this project and the people who support it don't even know who Stalin was in reality. Can you imagine if in Germany, someone would make a statue of Hitler? you know? And yeah, that's the reality in Georgia and now I'm working on this project which I have on my Instagram page. But only some photos from the video screen, because I don't want to upload it because they can come and beat you all right!? I don't know, they could even kill you because of this. It is a very hard, you know, very hard topic for Georgians. Before they believed in it, I think that the Georgian Church and communism were very close to each other because their mentality is the same for me. You know, in Georgia it's very, very clear. And also they earn a lot of money. This is the biggest and Powerful institution in Georgia who can control and even make political decisions and force the government to do it. And every election, every time when the elections come, they are getting more money and places for free and it's very clear you can um you can make it just search and you will find out all in the comments.

[R] - I read an article the other day that was describing Georgia as a Marxist Italy. The fact that you're saying that the Church is also dictating politics in Georgia and decisions, it's another similarity that we have in Italy as well, it's kind of interesting.

[N] - Yeah, and the car I sent to you (https://www.instagram.com/p/DKygrDNImNM/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==), I found this car in one of the District of Tbilisi, and that is what Georgia is to me. Later, I did the work about this and I used the Gaz-24 "Volga" as was the most expensive car in the Soviet Union. The Black Volga's were reserved for mid-level officials, as well as for special services and were almost never sold to ordinary people.

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I can share this work with you, because I think that nothing changed after the Soviet system collapsed because we are still staying in the Soviet system.

[internet problems]

[N] - Well, you can ask something and I can just answer, but for me, of course, the architecture is connected with the geographical situation and with the wars. Especially if you are making the thesis about what's going on after this Soviet system collapse in Tbilisi. This connects with the geographical situation and with the wars we had in Abkhazia, in Ossetia, with the refugee situation because when so many people come to live in the different cities of Georgia, then there is no place for those people and also this traditional thing with the family, how the family were living before together. And now this situation is changing, it's become more contemporary, and everybody wants their own houses and, of course, because of it, there's a lot of buildings which were built after the 90s.
One of the first buildings was in Vake, the richest part of Tbilisi. I don't know if you have been there, but I know this because I was living there and that was the first building they did in the 90s. But in the 90s, the architecture was different from the ones they are doing now: the ceilings are thinner because it is economical and at the same time very quick. But you also know that in Soviet times they were giving the apartment to the people, Yeah? But that was not for free as they are usually mentioning that this was for free. They were taking the money from their salary that they were giving to the people, keeping it and later, they are giving the apartment, but you can't get this apartment, for example in 2025, even after 30 years. And also in Soviet time they made these suburbs, which were more or less normal before, but now it's not like this. They had the standards on how to build the houses, how many, for example, gardening between the houses. But now, what's going on? They are using these gardening spaces to build the new buildings between them. And of course, it's collapsing in this city because the people living there all have cars and under this Soviet building, there were no garages or parkings. So now, there are traffic jams in Tbilisi, an ecological crisis, because of car and building pollutants, especially in the centre. Also, the landscape of Tbilisi it's very difficult because there is the river, the mountains and the cities in between. And also the problem is that you can't build these buildings everywhere. And when they are doing it, that's why there are a lot of destroyed buildings. The new buildings they are making here are with no standard and still, we don't have any plans for the city because they don't want to get it because a non-controllable situation it's easier. Because all the rich billionaires who are now in the parliament, they have this business of making the buildings, making the houses.
And I think the problem also comes with the political situation around Georgia. For example, when Erdo an, in Turkey, all the people were not in a good connection with this Erdo an new government. They just run. Many of them now are living in Berlin in different countries but Tbilisi becomes a city like I called it Limbo City. They come here to live,they make schools and like they are trying to somehow survive and in Tbilisi there are the streets where you can see only Turkish cafes and restaurants, and also a lot of Iranians because of the political situations in Tehran and came here

to live and the Azerbaijan situation, because you know that they have this king of Azerbaijan? Because his father was a president, and for many years, nothing changed there and they arrested the journalists, no Freedom speech, no nothing, everything is controllable and even till now, they don't have, we don't have any connection. You can go to Azerbaijan only by plane. They just closed the border saying that they have a pandemic situation till now because it's easier for them to control the situation in Azerbaijan and all this other Azerbaijanis journalists and more free people, came to live in Georgia. And of course, when the war began in Ukraine, a lot of Russians were coming to live here, they were buying the houses, but for now you can see the city in the city because they don't want to make any assimilation with the local ones. And of course for the local ones it's also very difficult to look at the people who are partly connected with us.
Did you know there were three waves of Russian people in Georgia? The first one was before the war, then the second one was when the war began who does not want to be a part of this and then when the sanctions appeared and they came the third wave, which was the worst one because they just want to eat McDonald's and drink Coca-Cola - Which is not allowed now in Russia.

[R] - Oh my God. So… I have a lot of things to summarise out of what you said, like so much information I love this conversation. So, starting from the Soviet blocks. Before there were the stalinist blocks that were wider and more spacious and they were built with better material. Then, Khrushchev said let's make them smaller, with cheaper materials, but a lot of them, okay?

[N] - Now they have to destroy these Khrushchovykas, because they are allowed to be there for only 20 or something years. Now, the people that are living there are in danger.

[R] - So this connects to the northern part of Tbilisi. From my understanding, there are a lot of Soviet blocks there.

[N] - Yeah, Stalinkas were built in the centre of Tbilisi, mostly in Vake, because there was the University of Tbilisi. And, of course, the first apartments were given to cultural workers who are in a very good relation with the Soviet system. Who used them in a very good way. And also for the ones who are teaching at the universities, the system gave these houses for them. If you come to Tbilisi I can show everything because I know this really well.

[R] - I am definitely gonna come again to Georgia because I came last summer with my partner and we just fell in love with everything. It's just an amazing country which has a troublesome past…

[N] - No, we are still in trouble today, because the political situation is very bad. And now also, the Patriarch died a few days ago (The Patriarchate in Tbilisi involved the long-time spiritual leader, Ilia II who died in march 2026). Can you imagine what's going on now? All these people are like sheep in the streets... So this is really, very, very bad.

[R] - And about the Russian waves… like these latest waves out of the

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Russian-Ukrainian War, am I correct to assume that a lot of Russians went to Batumi? Because of the boom of the “boulevard” in Batumi in the construction creating basically like a casino Vice City.

[N] - No. Not because of the casinos. Iranians and Azerbaijani, are coming because they don’t have these casinos in their countries. Also there are these brothels, a lot of them, and they mostly have the Russian women working there. Less Georgians. But also I just missed the Belarus people, because in Belarus also, they have a very difficult situation. So Belarussian are living in Batumi. And these Belarusians are the ones with money, because in Georgia, the people don’t have money, they (Georgians) can’t afford to buy these apartments, for them, it’s very expensive. They (Belarusians) are buying these apartments and after that the Russians also come. But Russians love to live in Tbilisi, because it’s more fancy. Not in Armenia for example in Yerevan, or in Baku, no. Because in Baku the situation is totally different. In Armenia the people are nicer for them, of course. But maybe not now, because the political situation changed, because they lost the Karabakh, and when the war in Karabakh began, Russia didn’t support them. And now, the Russians that were living in Armenia, want to come to Tbilisi, because culturally Tbilisi is more active, a lot of things are going on. Maybe not for me, because of the current political situation, because all the cultural workers are boycotting and we are staying on the streets of Tbilisi to somehow survive and to help the countries to survive from this Russian government. Because we (Georgia) have this Russian government really, they are sending messages saying that we don’t have the war in Ukraine, and actually ukrainians began the war.This is Russian propaganda. Everything is Russian propaganda.Georgian people are supporting the ukrainians, I can say that 90% of the people are supporting 10 percent are from the Soviet times, who think still after these two wars in Georgia, three was in Georgia that the Russians are nice and we have not to make them angry or something like these stupid things. And Georgia is ruled by one person, Bidzina Ivanishvili. You can see the film about this, “Taming the Garden”.

[R] - Wait a second, so Ivanishvili is still very present in the Georgian political context?

[N] - Yes! Yes, but he is always hidden. Now, the parliament is only the so-called Georgian dream, the only party of Georgia for the past 30 years. Who have achieved nothing. Except they become rich, like billionaires, and they are ruling the architecture of Tbilisi too.
And this year, big Iranian companies are coming here to build big houses for very, very rich people. And now what’s going on in Tbilisi is that it is becoming a separate city. The part for rich people and the part for the poor people. They (the government) want to separate the city. This is very, very bad. We don’t have it yet in the centre. But the Government gave the greenest part of Tbilisi to these Iranian companies who are coming and putting in reality nothing.. Everything is still in construction for ever, the money flow is redirected to the same companies who are building these luxurious apartments for very rich Georges (a small percent), Russians, because they have very big money, and Iranians. And we have to be just workers.
Also, regarding the architecture of Tbilisi, in the centre we had

universities from the Soviet era. The first university was built in 1918, during the independence of Georgia. We then opened other universities which were built during the Soviet time. So now, the government changed the law of the education system in Georgia. And they said that they will tear down these buildings, because this is a very big investment in the center to allow new buildings. But no one knows if they will do it or not. Because during these 30 years, nothing that they promised ever happened. Anyway, they want to refresh Tbilisi from these students because they are a power, which can force protests.So they want to build on these very beautiful buildings, their huge skyscrapers.
You know, this is not just a building of the university, but an infrastructure of universities. The university was independent, or at least that is what was written about them. Now, the government is trying to take it. You can search it because I think the free international journals write about it a lot. (talking about the “One City-One Faculty” Model)

[R] - So the university in Tbilisi is taken by politics?

[N] - Yes. Not the first building because they know if they would take the first building (because that was the first University), there will be a big scandal and the people will come out and they will protest. But other Universities, even the professors, are against this situation. But you know, this is the government who are saying “okay, okay”, and then they are doing what they want, because all the parliament is controlled by them. This is the situation for now.
But you know what is good? A lot of protests are going on in Tbilisi because no one recognises this government after the elections. No one recognizes this, except maybe Iran or Russia and the country connected with Russia.

[R] - When I went to Mestia, I was in this cafe, where all the workers were wearing t-shirts with written on the back “20 percent of my country is dominated by Russia”. There is this big feeling from the Georgians that you don’t like Russian politics, right?

[N] - Yeah. Last year was different. But for now, we have 150 prisoners, plus open cases. One open case is on me too.

[R] - What do you mean for open cases?

[N] - For example, they (the Russian government) says that I am preparing something like a revolution to topple the government or something like this bullshit. Why? Because I was invited to some workshops in the USA. You can check it because it will also be in English. So in the USA, I was part of these discussions about protests without any harm. Peaceful protests. Yeah. How to make a peaceful protest?
And we didn’t know that, then, they recorded the video - hiding - and published it. This led Russia to open the cases on the people that were there. Mostly artists, including me.
So until now, there are these open cases, and I was in the court, where they questioned me. And I can’t even… I signed a document that says I can’t speak about the questions they asked me, which were foolish ones. Foolish ones, you

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can't imagine even but one day ….

[internet problems]

[N] - One day when this case will be stopped. I don't know if they will put me in prison or the ones that were with me. Because how many people can they put in prison? We don't have big prisons here in Georgia, but they built a new one for women.

[R] - What?!

[N] - They built a new prison in "Vurya" (not sure of this spelling) in part of Georgia, only for women… But at least, there is a good nature.

[R] - …Interesting… Because of this situation, can I use this conversation in my thesis or should I put you as Anonymous, don't put your name?

[N] - Oh no, I'm not afraid. Of course you can use it, don't worry. I think that we will finish with the government. Soon, I believe in it.

[R] - What did you say?

[N] - I think that this government will be changed. They have maybe a maximum one year.

[R] - Is there maybe an opposition party to the Georgian dream right now?

[N] - Ah, there are a lot of opposite parties. But now they make a coalition which is very good, this was a few weeks ago. But many of them are now in prisons, many of them just ran from Georgia, living in other countries. Oh, but hope.You know, I think that the political situation is very difficult, and Georgia, which is very small, no one takes care of it.
But I think something will happen when this situation with Iran is finished. I don't like Trump or his politics. I don't think that any war is good, but maybe also when the war with Ukraine will be finished I think this situation in Georgia will change a lot.

[R] - Do you think that Georgia could then join the EU or because the situation with Russia would be too difficult?

[N] - I know. Now they are making money because of this sanction. And Georgia is allowing this sanction. They open these oil companies, you can search about it, too.
Because now we get sanctions from Britain. Because they find out that Georgia is helping Russia to avoid these sanctions. And this is the time when they are making big money. And when it is finished, Russia does not need Georgia any more.
And then, there will be a big economic crisis. And then people will be out in the streets. But I don't think that the revolution will be like the Rose Revolution, calm and nice. Because now I think the people are very angry. But it's still not enough.

[R] - it's boiling. Like that reference of The Frog in the Boiling Pot. If you put the water in and then you start to boil it, the Frog doesn't realise it, until it dies.

[N] - Yeah, I think they are adding some cold water from time to time and then it's begun to boil again. Now the patriarch died and the Russians are coming to make this liturgy in the church. Not the Greek. Because they don't allow it because this Greek Patriarch is for the ukrainians. This situation is very bad. There could be one big scandal. Today, it's been three days since he died. I'm not even looking at social media because I really hate this situation. Another architecture example. Almost in every district every 2 new buildings that they build, they're adding one church next to them. This is a very common thing right now, because it is a money making machine.

[R] - About the churches, the other day, I found another thing about Saakashvili "lovely situation" regarding his love for architecture. He likes architecture so much that this church, near Kutaisi I think, is called Bagrati, it was a UNESCO world heritage site. And because of Mr. Sakashvili's reconstruction, refurbishment with glass and concrete addition, it got removed from the list.

[N] - It was, it was. Also, for example, in Gelati, which is also in Kutaisi, they destroyed the frescos from the 11th century because the money which was given from America to make research, to make renovation, reconstruction, everything they just put them in their pockets.
It looks very amazing. You can just search for Gelati. They cover the frescos with some plastic or something and it's a white one. But if you want, I can give you the contact of the minister of culture who is a theoretician, and Arts critique, I knew him. Nika Vacheishvili, he was the one who signed the documents to make these changes in Bagrati?

[R] - Nooo, nooo really??? It's so painful!

[N] - If you want, I can give it. He's okay. He's a very normal guy. He specialized in the architecture of Georgia. Maybe, you can begin by just speaking with the architects of Georgia of Tbilisi. Just tell me that, and I will give you the contacts.But maybe when you come to Georgia, we can go to his house in Ateni, one of the parts of Georgia, I was there many times. And he has a Guest house now. He is a really, very cool guy. So you don't understand why it happened, why he did it, why did he sign... Because before, Bagrati as a ruin looked very good. I was also speaking with him, and I don't understand why. But still, I cannot be very angry about it. But yeah, there were all sorts of people who were doing these things and now, he is in the protests. Protesting for Gelati (chuckles)
But what's going on now? Just to think what happened during the Saakashvili era, it's nothing to compare with the current situation. In every field, in the cultural heritage and all this.Now it's a much more difficult situation

[R] - Because I'm finding a lot of articles about the past, and little to nothing about recent situations. For example, during the restoration of the

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historical Centre of Tbilisi Saakashvili, tore down the buildings and rebuilt them with concrete.

[N] - No, that was not like this. They made a renovation. This is, of course, not a restoration. That was a very bad renovation. But when he finished with one part of “Aghmashenebeli Avenue” (A major rehabilitation project launched in 2011 “New Tiflis” that saw historic buildings restored and the area turned into a pedestrian-friendly zone with cafes and restaurants) those Georgian Dream people came to renovate another part. And if you compare these two parts of Tbilisi to each other, nothing is different. You know, they were also destroying, changing, and making the “renovation”. I’m thinking, for example, that if the renovation brings good for the people living around something then it is really, very good. Then okay, you can just sacrifice something, even the culture Heritage for the better living of the people there. And I think this sacrifice of this part of Georgia, was good. Because after they built the infrastructure, the people began to live there, the tourists came and life changed a lot. And in this part of Georgia, there were a lot of Armenians, there was this extremist ideology situation, all of which just disappeared because of this renovation. And I can say the same, for example, with Sighnaghi, one of the cities which also was renovated, for me, of course it was more authentic because I’m looking at it as an artist. I’m not looking at it as an economist who is earning money. But in the beginning, I didn’t like it, it was like a decoration. But when you see that people are living there and life is going, it’s not like a decoration then, you know, it’s changing the situation a lot.
They also made the renovation of the oldest capital of Georgia, Mtskheta, which is very close to Tbilisi and I think this was a good renovation because there was nothing left. Because everything around was destroyed, nothing was going on there and it was very ugly and bad. They did not renovate, they built new houses. They thought to build in a style similar to what was before, but it’s not any style. Of course, I don’t like when they are faking the heritage, I don’t like this fake old style building when they are trying to make it look like our culture. And it’s not, because you could not see this kind of architecture before in this part of the city. But even so, they did it in a good way. It has become more touristic, more attractive, and it brings a lot of money for the locals.
When the culture is helping the people and bringing them a good life, then okay. But for example, when, during this government, they destroyed the oldest Gold mine Sakdrisi, it was very bad. Because Sakdrisi was the oldest gold mine in Europe. And they destroyed it.The money and all this gold from this old Heritage goes to Russia, nothing for the people who live there. Nothing changed for the people living there. And now, these people are in a worse ecological situation than they were before. So basically, I like cultural workers, I like good architecture, I like the old heritage, but it can be sacrificed if it brings better life for the people. But not in a way that brings nothing to the people and it even makes a worse condition of ecology for them.

[R] - Exactly. Imagine, right now the biggest example is batumi. For me it’s insane how it changed so fast in the last 15 years, and the projects that they are doing as well for the future years. Have you seen that basically

they took the Palm from Dubai and “replanted” it in Batumi? Everything makes me angry.

[N] - Do you know that they are going to make an island?

[R] - Yeah. That’s the one.

[N] - And also everything is connected. For example, there is one place near the sea, they want to make a port where the ships are coming. (Natalia is talking about the failed Anaklia port project). And this is the part of where the bird’s migration is passing. And this is a very important part for them to survive. If they build this port, then they just disappear.

[R] - They’re killing biodiversity.

[N] - Yeah, they are. In Tbilisi, also, there is part which is where the birds are passing through. It is very small and not in the centre. But they like it because there are still a lot of trees and big forests. And of course, they want to use this again to make this huge block of buildings there and again, they built one Church near.
Yeah, so these are the only places where they can stay. Can you imagine if there will not be any places left to stay for them? They don’t think about the future or the ecology. For example, we had a very hard winter in Tbilisi this year, and it was snowing a lot. They cut all the big trees because they don’t care about these trees. And then, of course, these trees are falling down onto a lot of cars and buildings were destroyed, and they are putting these small trees, not to take care of them later.
I’m not living in the Centre now, I’m living in a district where I have a small garden. But even here, we are afraid that now, they will begin to build these huge buildings around us, and then you will be left only with your garden.

[R] - Like In the Southeast part of Tbilisi, now there is the China District, where Chinese construction workers built the entire neighbourhood I think.

[N] - They are not living here. In the 2000s a lot of Chinese people came and they even opened the shops but then they disappeared. I don’t know why. I know in Armenia, for example, there were also this community and Armenian people, they do not buy anything from them. They don’t have any communication because Armenia is a country where only one percent is of other nationalities. But in Georgia, it’s not like this because Georgian people are still very open and a lot of different nationalities are here. Even they are nationalists. I can say this because I’m partly from a Greek family and I know what it is. Still nationalist, but not so much. You know, they like these differences.

[R] - There is a comedian, his name is Victor Patrascan and, when talking about Georgia, he was like, “guys you are one of the most welcoming countries in the world…Stop! They are using you”.

[N] - No. No. You know. Yeah, we are welcoming but this also appears in the

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architecture, in the so-called “Italian yards”, you know? You don’t know about it? Yeah, you are Italian, you have to know it (chuckles). So we have this architecture from the end of the 19th century to early 20th century with balconies inside and outside with these colourful, very beautiful building styles. They called it Italian houses with Italian yards.
Originally, these houses belonged to one family. During the Soviet times there was no possibility to give new apartments, so they took them, they confiscated these buildings. Afterwards, they gave each family one or two rooms. These families came mostly but not only from the villages.During these years, we were living all under one roof. Armenians, Georgians, Azerbaijanians, Syrians, Russians, Ukrainians.
And so they called those houses “Italian yards”. In Italy there is no such a terminology to explain what is an “Italian Yard”, but in Georgia there is.

[R] - I must say, I’m loving this conversation but I have to go very soon. I’m gonna ask you one last thing for the moment. It’s about Batumi. Batumi was meant to become the new Riverside holiday for the Georgian people after the Russian took Abkhazia, and Sokhumi wasn’t available anymore.

[N] - Yeah, that’s true. No one went to Batumi before when we had Abkhazia. Everybody went to Abkhazia because the sea in Abkhazia was much better and also when you are going to Batumi for 10 days, eight days from this are always raining. So this is a very problematic seaside city. But at the same time, a lot went to Batumi before. And every Christmas time I was going there to celebrate with my friends. But it has now been many years that I’m not going anymore because it has become the ugliest city of Georgia. And this is now one of the biggest cities in Georgia with Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Rustavi. A lot of people from Adjara are coming to Batumi, villagers and non. But there is no place for them to live in Batumi, (because everything is expensive). So there is one district in Batumi, called “Dream Town” and this town is built like “Marrakesh architecture” - when you are using everything that is available with your hands. All the materials or something like this. It’s the architecture of the refugees who are making these kinds of buildings when you don’t have any money and they take stuff from the garbage and with that, they are making the houses. Those people are living in this architecture there. This is a very interesting place where nothing is normal. And last year, two kids died in this town because there was a big hole in the ground, with water and they just fell in it and drowned. You can just search it.

[R] - Dream Town, found it! “Batumi’s ghetto”.

[N] - Yeah. Whoa, that’s it. There are a lot of things that can be said about this. It is a very, very big topic

[R] - I just can’t understand this. You have millions, billions of dollars spent on a fake City when you have your people, the people of your country, living in this situation on the other side of the city?!

[N] - Yeah, yeah, that’s true. And you know that during the Ukraine war,even now, Georgians are leaving the country and Russians are coming to live here.

One and a half million Georgians are living abroad and we are a nation with three million and half, not more.
That's what's going on. And even we are thinking of leaving the country, but I don't want to leave this country for them. Although it's impossible to live here.I'm not working for now. I can't work because there is no support for the artists, no projects, nothing for the artists. But before, you could apply for something, like with European grants that you can't even use now. I got it, a small grant but it's also dangerous, because if I use it, they could say that I am a foreign agent and they could put me in prison for this. But I'm doing it. (laughs) I can't work now. I was working as a teacher for many years. I was working as a guide for tourists for many years and as a designer for many years. But, you know, I'm not a bad artist. I am very hard working and I think a lot more people abroad know who I am, than in Georgia because of this situation.

[R] - Yeah, yeah. When you ask me on Instagram, how did you find me?

[N] - Yeah, that's always interesting to know how the people are finding you, you know? Yeah. Okay. Let me know if you have any more questions you can contact and we can talk. Also meet in Tbilisi to do a tour.

[R] - Yeah I'm already dreaming about a tour of Tbilisi with you, maybe eating some khinkali and stuff. I miss it.

[N] - Yeah, definitely. Okay, I can share the names of Nika too, and you can write directly and say that the contact was given by bouillon group member Natalia and he will speak with you.

[R] - Nika is the person who signed off the Bagrati cathedral?

[N] - Yeah, he was the minister of all culture?

[R] - Well, it's insane. Thank you, thank you, thank you really,

[N] - You are welcome. Yeah, the topic is very huge. I don't know what you will come up with, but I'm very interested when you will finish and if you will share it with me. I will be very happy.

[R] - The problem is that now I'm finding more and more stuff, but the deadline that I have with the university it's in a month. So..

[N] - Oh my God!

[R] - So yeah, I need to submit, I believe that I will submit a draft version because the topic is just so interesting, I want to continue it. So, yeah, but there's gonna be two different versions like uh, Yeah, but because like it's so so so much.

[N] - Yeah, because you have to take a very small piece. You can't take the last 30 years of Tbilisi. This is a huge topic. You can take only like, maybe from these last 30 years a specific something. Otherwise, it's even like, I

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don’t even know how you’d do it

[R] - Because right now, how the thesis structure is, you know, just the introduction, and then talking about the history of architecture in Georgia starting from the darbazi houses and then all the layers of invasion from the Roman Persian Turks, Ottomans Etc, Russian and then the last part of the history of Georgia, like the architecture of anxiety that the Russian left. And after that, I’m going into the description of what’s dissonant Heritage, like the terminology from these researchers. And then I’m going into a visual map of dissonant architecture in Georgia, based on my trip, my field search in Georgia. So it’s gonna be only Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Mestia, but I will put Batumi as well because it’s just incredible, but I didn’t go to Batumi.

[N] - But Kutaisi is the most untouched City, which I really like about it. Because for now they are making these new buildings only in one part of Kutaisi.

[R] - There are only two examples that are found in Kutaisi. The parliament…

[N] - But this is not in the city, this is not making any influence on the city. But, of course, there is this airport, which was built to make the city more appealing. And they did this Parliament to decentralise the government. Because Tbilisi is the centre, and he wanted to make this decentralisation of the country, to put something different and to give the chance for this city to be changed but I don’t know, was it a good chance or a bad chance for now? Because it would have happened that in very untouched cities maybe come the time when we have to think how to make new buildings. But now they destroyed one of the oldest prisons in Kutaisi, which was very nice architecture a few days ago. To build what? A block of flats for high end people. One billionaire, whose daughter is in the parliament. Yeah, that’s how they are making a business, you know?

[R] - To make the Parliament I read that they destroyed a War Memorial Monument

[N] - There are a lot of these War Memorial monuments in every village of Georgia. There is a monument for the people who died in the second world war everywhere. When you will be in Tbilisi, we can go around. You can tell them. That can be a very small Monument. I don’t think that that was something they could just move to another place. I am not part of these Saakashvili lovers and his political lovers or something like this. He was also making fountains, which was very popular for him. Do you know about it? A lot of fountains from him

[R] - Is the fountain in Kutaisi, in front of the McDonald’s, from him?

[N] - Yes, definitely definitely one of them. But this isn’t just a new one. He was taking one form and making the same in many cities, in Marneuli, different ones. Because he was the kind of man who thinks that he can do everything, you know? He can be an architect, or he was somewhere and then decided to bring it back to Tbilisi. For example, in Batumi, there is a

fountain, which is also in Italy, in Bologna.

[R] - Bologna?? The fountain of Neptune?

[N] - Yeah, and the same is in Batumi. Because he liked it.

[R] - I mean there is the example of the Colosseum as a hotel in Batumi.

[N] - Yeah, for example the President Palace looks like the German Reichstag in Berlin. No, is that right? So this was the main building of Nazis in Berlin.
It's also very important where they are making these buildings of power. Because it is in front of the Georgian Orthodox church main church. And then there is Bidzina Ivanishvili on the mountain and you can see from one side these three buildings…
So there are very symbolic things you can speak about and show to each other power and how they are making these buildings, how they are choosing these places. Also it's a very interesting topic. But for me for now it's very interesting how the architecture of the city, I mean all the architecture, not only the buildings but all the environment around the city. From chairs to furniture of the city during the protests. How they are changing it to protect the governmental buildings. This is a very interesting topic from my side.
And even when Saakashvili actually put the parliament palace in Kutaisi, why did he do it? Because all the protests that are happening in Tbilisi are always in front of the parliament. It is the heart of the city, you know? And to be in the heart of the city in this place historically connected to protests will always be in the mind of the people.
I think they just wanted to separate. They built this building not in the city, but far from the city. Yeah. It's because can you imagine that from the capital this mass is going to protest something in Kutaisi in front of the Parliament?

[R] - Yeah, yeah. The thing that he said, why they moved it to Kutaisi, was to decentralise, in case of an attack on Tbilisi, we will still work. But in reality is what you say, like, they didn't want protest to continuously happen in front of it and they put it in Kutaisi, but not only in Kutaisi, in a farther part in Kutaisi. Yeah, that makes much more sense.

[N] - Yeah, but this government thought that they are too lazy and too rich to go to Kutaisi, to live there. They like their fancy luxury lives in Tbilisi. And this party, they again, turned it back. But now, if you come to Tbilisi, and if you look at the parliament, what's going on there, all Parliament is with these metal frames around and so much police is there, you can't imagine. On another note, now they are just getting new laws. For example, if you are standing in front of the parliament, they will catch you because they are saying that you are impeding movement for other people. Then they are putting you in prison.
So because they don't want to move, they are changing the laws. Not changing the place of the building, but changing the laws to control the people.
Not to all come to the protest. I think you can. Also check these new laws

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because it's also connected with the architecture. Yeah, that's it, okay?

[R] - I'm sending you a couple of articles. One of them was about the Dream town of Batumi, one of the Kutaisi Heritage Monument being torn down and I also sent you a picture that I took in Tbilisi, when there was a protest in front of the parliament. It's for later.
Yeah, thank you, thank you very much.

[N] - You are welcome, ciao! That was nice talking to you.

[R] - So Gamarjoba!

[N] - Ciao! Bye.

Centre (Fig. n.48)
Image Concession by owner - Natalia Vatsadze

APPENDIX C: DISSONANCE LIST

Tbilisi: The cornerstone of dissonance

2004 / Holy Trinity Cathedral (Sameba) / Archil Mindiashvili
2007 / Ivanishvili Mansion / Shin Takamatsu
2009-2010 / Ministry of Internal Affairs / Michele De Lucchi
2010 / The Bridge of Peace / Michele De Lucchi
2010-Ongoing / Rike Park Music Theatre and Exhibition Hall / Massimiliano & Doriana Fuksas
2011 / Tbilisi Prosecutor's Office / Architects of Invention
2012 / Presidential Palace / Michele De Lucchi
2012 / Public Service Hall / Massimiliano & Doriana Fuksas
2012 / Botanical Institute of Ilia State University / n/a
2014-Ongoing / Panorama Tbilisi (Sololaki Rise & Tabakhmela) / Artytechs (Daduna Shatashvili)
2016 / The Biltmore Hotel / GMG Group
2017 / King David Towers / MD Architectural Studio
2018 / Tbilisi Gardens / MUA - Multiverse Architecture
2021-Ongoing / King's Garden Luxury Complex / Apollo G.S.
2023 / Axis Towers / Aleksandre Mezhevidze
2024-Ongoing / TBC Forum (New Headquarters) / UNStudio
2025-Ongoing / Central Park Tbilisi (Former Hippodrome) / Cartu Foundation

Mestia: The "Disneyfication" of the mountains - modernizing the vernacular

2010 / Queen Tamar Airport / J. Mayer H.
2012 / House of Justice / J. Mayer H.
2011 / Police station / J. Mayer H.
2012 / Mestia City Hall / J. Mayer H.
2021 / Mestia Museum of History and Ethnography / MUA - Multiverse Architecture
2025 (Ongoing) / New Mestia Airport Terminal / Green Studio (with LSG Solutions)

Kutaisi: Political displacement and corruption

2009-2012 / Bagrati Cathedral (reconstruction) / Andrea Bruno
2011 / Colchis Fountain (Central Square) / Various (Government-led)
2011 / "McDonald's" Square Reconstruction / Various (Government-led)
2011-2012 / Parliament Building / Alberto Domingo Cabo (CMD Ingenieros)
2011-2013 / Kutaisi Airport / UNStudio
2012 / Kutaisi Public Service Hall / Michele De Lucchi
2020 / Kutaisi International University (KIU) / IDOM (Spain)
2026 (Ongoing) / Demolition of Gubernski Prison / Kutaisi City Hall (Permit Authority)

Batumi: The “Las Vegas of the Black Sea” - extreme facsimile architecture

2009 / Europe Square / Local Municipality
2010 / Sheraton Batumi Hotel / Nurol Group
2010 / Statue of Ali and Nino / Tamar Kvesitadze
2011 / Radisson Blu Hotel / Michele De Lucchi
2011 / Alphabetic Tower / Alberto Domingo Cabo
2011 / Batumi Public Service Hall / Michele De Lucchi
2011 / Neptune’s Fountain / Copy of Giambologna’s original
2012 / Batumi Tower / David Gogichaishvili
2012 / Kempinski Hotel Batumi / Erbug Architecture
2012 / Piazza Batumi / Vazha Orbeladze
2012 / Face House (White Restaurant) / Local Developer
2012 / Theatre Square / Local Municipality
2012 / Chacha Tower (Tower of Love) / Local Municipality
2013 / Argo Cable Car Complex / Doppelmayr
2013 / Batumi Summer Theater / Gocha Garuchava
2014 / Batumi McDonald’s & Fuel Station / Giorgi Khmaladze
2015 / Hilton Batumi Hotel & Residences / CallisonRTKL / MUA
2016 / Porta Batumi Tower / Broadway Malyan
2018 / Colosseum Marina Hotel / Local/Private Developers
2019 / Senate Restaurant & Lounge / Private Architects
2021 / Alliance Palace (Courtyard by Marriott) / Alliance Group
2022 / Batumi Stadium / Bahadır Kul Architects
2024 (Ongoing) / Alliance Centropolis / Chapman Taylor
2025 (Ongoing) / Ambassadori Island / Modern Houses
2026 (Ongoing) / Gonio Yachts & Marina / Gonio Residence
2026 (Ongoing) / Calligraphy Towers / Grand Maison Group

END NOTES

Identity comes from context. The loss of context comes with a loss of identity.

I want to push this research further, exploring the idea of a modern vernacular architecture system in Georgia.

I hope to come back to Georgia soon enough...

Centre (Fig. n.49)
Image by author - view from Kuruldi Lakes (Mestia)