Graduation Reflection: Urban Palimpsest in Gldani

Introduction

My graduation project, titled *Urban Palimpsest: Emotional Sustainability in Urban Regeneration*, explores an alternative strategy for post-Soviet housing renewal in Gldani, a peripheral district in Tbilisi, Georgia. The work is anchored in the architectural and territorial investigation of how fragmented urban structures—both physical and social—can be mended not through tabula rasa demolition, but through layering, appropriation, and sensitive interventions.

At the heart of this exploration is the design of a key infrastructural-architectural element called the **"Wall-Stage Building"**. This linear, five-storey structure—approximately 4 meters wide and 180 meters long—functions primarily as a circulation and services backbone. Its hybrid structural system, composed of concrete portal frames and external steel supports, enables a range of programs—such as a library, market, sports hall, greenhouse, and theatre—to be attached as modular add-ons or interlocking volumes. These programmatic units' interface with the wall structure rather than being fully enclosed within it, emphasizing an open-ended, adaptable design language that aligns with the project's palimpsestic and socially engaged approach.

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

This graduation project is rooted in the Architecture (A) track and engages directly with questions central to architectural thinking: spatial agency, material strategy, and tectonic articulation. While the project operates at urban and territorial scales, its core is unmistakably architectural concerned with how form, structure, and inhabitation can mediate socio-political and temporal conditions.

The Wall-Stage Building exemplifies this. It foregrounds architecture as both a spatial infrastructure and a cultural medium, addressing circulation, appropriation, and programmatic layering through design. Rather than proposing a singular form, the building provides a framework for multiplicity—an architectural proposition that emerges from, and adapts to, its socio-political context.

The project aligns with the MSc Architecture, Urbanism & Building Sciences programme through its emphasis on multi-scalar design, research-based methods, and societal engagement. However, its architectural specificity—through structural logic, material experimentation, and the crafting of spatial thresholds—grounds it firmly within the disciplinary concerns of the Architecture track.

This project is situated in the Architecture track (A) and developed within the Borders & Territories studio. It aligns strongly with the MSc Architecture, Urbanism & Building Sciences programme in its integrative methodology, blending socio-political awareness, spatial theory, and design experimentation.

By focusing on peripheral urbanism and informal spatial practices in a post-Soviet context, the project engages with both the architectural and urban scales. The design of the Wall-Stage Building reflects the MSc programme's ethos of multi-scalar thinking, architectural agency, and contextual responsiveness. The thematic alignment with AUBS is further deepened by the project's grounding in fieldwork, structural innovation, and its ambition to produce architectural knowledge that is both critical and projective.

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

the design/recommendations influence your research?

The research began with a deep dive into the socio-spatial dynamics of Gldani, focusing on informal add-ons, micro-economies, and collective spatial memory. Special attention was given to how residents physically extend their apartment buildings—through balconies, rooms, sheds, and structural interventions. These were documented, analyzed, and conceptualized into a series of spatial prototypes that categorized and abstracted different extension logics. These prototypes served as a vital design resource, forming a typological foundation from which the new public Wall-Stage Building emerged. The add-on nature of the residential extensions directly inspired the compositional logic and adaptability of the new building, embedding lived architectural tactics into its structural DNA.

The design, in turn, generated new research questions. For example, as I began prototyping the add-on modules, structural and thermal challenges emerged (e.g., cold bridge issues in exposed steel structures), which prompted further technical study and conversations with mentors. The interplay between theory, empirical observation, and tectonic experimentation created a feedback loop where design became a form of research and research sharpened the precision of design.

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

The methodology combined field mapping, critical theory (Actor-Network Theory, palimpsest theory), and iterative design testing. I placed emphasis on drawing-based research, structural prototyping, and climate/energy simulations to validate the feasibility of the Wall-Stage Building.

One strength of this approach was its ability to work across scales: from the 2.5km infrastructural axis to a 3x3m grid that organizes the interior modules. Another strength was its openness to feedback and revision. For example, when initial structural ideas (central circular columns) were challenged, I pivoted to a concrete portal frame system and developed a logic of thermal break pads and prefabricated secondary floor structures.

This approach encouraged adaptability, rigour, and design as a form of situated thinking. The iterative cycle of design-build-feedback-test proved productive in refining both conceptual and technical clarity.

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

Academically, the project contributes to ongoing conversations on post-Soviet urbanism, emotional sustainability, and architectural palimpsest. It offers an original framework for addressing fragmented and politicized urban conditions not through erasure, but through strategic layering and negotiation.

Societally, the project offers a tangible alternative to top-down, erasure-based regeneration models. By respecting the spatial intelligence embedded in informal practices, the proposal enables a more inclusive and memory-sensitive urban development. The Wall-Stage Building becomes not just an object but a framework—allowing programs to grow, intersect, and evolve with community input.

Ethically, the project positions architecture as a mediator between state policies and local needs, between formal order and informal life. It challenges the notion of the

architect as sole author, and instead promotes a role as enabler, listener, and assembler.

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

Although rooted in the specific urban and cultural context of Gldani, the project's underlying methodology and architectural logic are highly transferable. Many post-Soviet and post-industrial regions worldwide face parallel challenges—negotiating between top-down regeneration strategies and informal, bottom-up spatial practices.

The palimpsestic approach developed here—treating the city as a layered spatial narrative—offers a framework for identifying and amplifying latent potentials in any built environment marked by fragmentation or contested memory. The Wall-Stage Building, with its modular grid, add-on strategy, and adaptable circulation core, can be reconfigured to suit different urban fabrics, climates, and programmatic needs.

More importantly, the process—based on close observation, typological abstraction, and iterative prototyping—provides a replicable design method. It supports architects in formulating context-sensitive, open-ended spatial frameworks that are socially engaged and structurally responsive.

6. Self-formulated reflection questions

1. How can modular architectural design support long-term community appropriation while maintaining spatial clarity and structural feasibility?

2. In projects that deal with post-Soviet memory and informality, how can architecture balance poetic expression with technical and regulatory realism?

7. Looking ahead: planning for the final phase (P4)

In the final phase of the graduation period, I will further develop the Wall-Stage Building from conceptual structure into a detailed architectural system. This includes:

- Finalizing the hybrid structural system: refining the portal frame logic, steel truss supports, and thermal break strategies.

- Completing detailed sections, structural drawings, and construction details for the add-on modules.

- Deepening the spatial and social programming of each layer within the building, including library layouts, greenhouse systems, sports infrastructure, and market interfaces.

- Simulating how the building performs across seasons and user groups, addressing climate, light, ventilation, and energy use.

- Preparing the visual and narrative material (axonometric views, sections, storyboards) to convey the concept of "urban palimpsest" and the adaptability of the public condenser.

This final phase aims to bridge the speculative and the buildable—to test whether the Wall-Stage Building can be more than a metaphor, and instead become a model of how urban renewal can be sustainable, layered, and emotionally resonant.