

**POWER REGIMES AND  
PRACTICES OF BORDERING**

A POST HUMANIST  
EXPLORATION OF TBILISI'S  
URBAN FABRIC UNDER  
SHIFTING REGIMES

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## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

By creating a map with the title *Power Regimes and the Practices of Bordering*, we aim to examine the relationships between political regimes and the spatial practices that produce borders. Alongside the cartographic work, we tasked ourselves with creating a theoretical framework to understand the specific topics of our exploration better.

### Post-Antropocentrism

In this research, post-anthropocentrism or post-humanism provides a critical lens through which we analyse the (built) environment of Tbilisi, focusing on the dissolution of the human-centred approach to power and urban planning. Rooted in concepts developed by thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti and Bruno Latour, post-humanism rejects anthropocentrism and emphasises the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors in shaping space and society.<sup>8,9</sup> In line with post-humanist thought, landscapes are understood as dynamic entities shaped by the interplay of processes. The notion of the 'ever-changing landscape' in this research includes both environmental and infrastructural elements, recognising the city as a living organism where human and non-human forces are always in negotiation and co-constitute with one another.

In the context of Tbilisi, a post-anthropocentric perspective allows us to understand the city as a product of not only human decisions but also of non-human forces like the Kura River, the mountains, winds and natural disasters. Empires that ruled the region utilised the natural elements in different ways; like establishing borders and reshaping their practices of control to fit the landscape but also as entities to be manipulated.

### Power Regimes

'Power regimes' often refer to how political entities—empires, states and their ideologies—impose control over territories and populations. The term 'ideology' was first used by Antoine Destutt de Tracy during the French Revolution to refer to the science of ideas, but its meaning evolved over time.<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx redefined ideology as a system of beliefs that justifies and perpetuates the ruling class's power, often masking social inequalities. In urban spaces, these ideologies are not merely abstract concepts; they materialise in the city's architecture, infrastructure and borders.<sup>11</sup> Ideologies are spatial organisers, embedded in the very fabric of the city. For instance, in Soviet-era Tbilisi, the ideology of collectivism and equality was expressed through standardised housing blocks and communal public spaces, reflecting the regime's effort to promote social unity and reduce visible distinctions between different classes. While holding the potential of displaying various expressions of ideologies, from democratic to autocratic, we should expand on our understanding of 'power regimes', since it is generally agreed that a 'regime' is a mode of rule and/or management of an ideology.<sup>12</sup> We embarked on a journey exploring the optics of various theorists on the topic of power.

To Foucault—one of the most prolific thinkers in theorising the idea of power, power is intrinsically related to and exercised through control. In the 1975 book *Discipline and Punish*, he argues that in modern days, power is embedded in social structures through disciplinary mechanisms, not only in prisons (as exemplified in his theories on the Panopticon) but in other institutions as well.<sup>13</sup> Schools, corporations, hospitals—all operate under systems of control through varying levels of surveillance and oppression.

Moreover, to Foucault, power is intrinsically intertwined with space—its organisation and management. His concept of *quadrillage* (gridding of space) theorises how authorities divide and regulate space to ensure control.<sup>14</sup> Originating from practices in urban planning and military strategy, *quadrillage* involves segmenting areas into grids, allowing for surveillance, regulation and equally dividing people. The grid—whether in the layout of streets, the design of institutions or the partitioning of social groups—becomes a tool of governance, ensuring that power can be exercised in a more subtle, effective and pervasive manner.

Foucault's view on power is largely shared by Slavoj Žižek, a contemporary Slovenian philosopher, who argues that power operates not only through visible, direct acts of violence but also through ideological systems that shape how individuals perceive reality.<sup>15</sup> It modulates unconscious ideologies, making forms of domination invisible by embedding them in how people understand the world and themselves. American philosopher, Judith Butler, emphasises in her book *Gender Trouble* from 1990 how power shapes not only society but the formation of individual identity.<sup>16</sup> In her book *The Psychic Life of Power* from 1997, Butler expands further on this theory, adding that individuals are not merely constrained by power but are also produced by it, as power operates at a psychic level, internalising norms that forge the self.<sup>17</sup> In this way, it becomes imperceptible. The process of internalisation makes individuals both subjects of power and agents who further perpetuate it. This reveals the dual role of power, on one hand disciplining and the other constituting identities.

In contrast to classical theorists who often perceive power primarily as a mechanism of control and domination, Hannah Arendt, an in-

fluential German-American historian and philosopher, offers a more nuanced understanding that emphasises the collective dimensions of power. She relates the one-dimensional understanding of power disseminated by thinkers before to violence. For Arendt, power is not simply an attribute of states or institutions. Instead, she conceptualises power as a product of collective action in the public sphere, highlighting the importance of human interaction and dialogue. According to her, true power arises when individuals come together to act, sharing a common purpose and fostering a sense of community.<sup>18</sup> This perspective re-frames power as a form of public freedom—a space where individuals can collectively assert their agency and influence the world around them.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, power is deeply related to the active participation and resistance of individuals, rather than merely a force imposed by authority. Although many thinkers relate the idea of 'power' to (systemic) violence, our understanding of the word transcends the mere force of domination. In the context of our exploration, power is not a singular phenomenon. Its expression shifts according to the discussed context. Our concept of power departs from the anthropocentric narrative of humans as the only agent capable of asserting power over another. It recognises non-human actors who can co-produce heterogeneous power dynamics and counter-movements of resistance. Political entities and citizens, as well as the environment and technology, co-produce heterogeneous power dynamics in the context of Tbilisi.

Following the non-anthropocentric understanding of power, we claim that prehistoric topography was the first power regime of the area. While not always the most dominant, the environment's regime is the longest-standing actor in Tbilisi's power struggles.

## Practices of Bordering

We define Bordering Practices not only as spatial practice but also as social and ideological mechanisms that define inclusion and exclusion. Similarly, borders can also foster connection between two different parts. The Belt and Road Initiative brings a new wave of bordering practices that are less about physical demarcation and more about infrastructural connectivity and economic corridors. Borders, in this context, are not just physical walls or demarcations but also social constructs shaped by political, economic and cultural ideologies. Tbilisi, as a city with a long history of occupation and transition between regimes, offers a rich terrain to investigate these practices; please see Chapter 4, Findings for more in-depth information on this topic. By adopting this broader understanding of borders, the study reveals how both natural landscapes (mountains, rivers) and man-made infrastructures (roads, railways) play key roles in defining how territories are controlled, accessed or resisted.

## METHODOLOGY

The production of our map consisted of several key steps. We started by reading academic papers on Tbilisi's urban history that provided us with a general understanding of the city. The information was then synthesised into a timeline, highlighting the key moments when regimes shifted and how these changes impacted the urban planning of Tbilisi. Simultaneously we collected historical maps—sourced from archives, Facebook groups and books—from different periods. Translating the maps' legends revealed a variety of socioeconomic or political interests and intentions of the authors. One example of this is the French map of 1782 which introduced references to ethnic groups within the city and marked places with an economic nature such as shopping streets and bazaars, and can therefore be classified as a socio-economic map aimed to position Tbilisi as a trading city for European merchants.

The collection of city plans that we used to produce our map ranges from the first French portrait of Tbilisi in 1671 published in Jean Chardin's 1811 *Voyages Du Chevalier Chardin en Perse*, through developments under the Russian Empire and Soviet master plans, to recent images displaying strong capitalistic inclinations.<sup>20</sup> We transformed and abstracted the data into one 'similar language' and finally overlaid these maps to visualise the difference in spatial organisation. Georeferencing and overlaying the maps facilitated the overall understanding of the urban development of the city in time, while the timeline helped to link each transformation back to its political actor. In this chapter, we will explain how we studied the concepts explained in the previous chapter.

## Post-Antropocentrism

The maps aim to visualise the entanglement of human and non-human elements in the construction of Tbilisi's landscape. Adapting the non-anthropocentric approach, we treated the landscape and the built environment in a homogenous fashion to prevent showing the landscape as a mere background. The reading of the map coded in three different scales reveals information sequentially. The first scale, observing the map from afar, showcases the original power regime—the environment. The mountains are prominent and the map is oriented according to the flow of the Kura River. The meandering changes of the river are mapped, together with the wind conditions (used for the advantage of man-made planning). The goal of the map is not only to show how power regimes used natural features to impose control but also to acknowledge how nature has resisted or subverted these efforts.

## Power Regimes

To map power we decided to abstract all 3 actors—landscape, planning paradigms of regimes and counter-movements—by using the following drawing techniques: the gird, line, square and point. The grids are used to show the urban layout imposed by different rulers, by reducing the planning paradigms to abstract grids, we bring them to the same level, allowing for a comparison. For each planning paradigm, a different grid with different line thicknesses is used to be able to separate the periods. Throughout our investigations, we studied realised and unrealised plans since both carry information vital to understanding the ambitions and ideologies of the various power regimes. The axes in the urban layout, which were, for example, used for organising parades and manifesting power, are highlighted as thick lines. The squares,

or how we represented them as brackets, are settlements of the urban sprawl in the 90s following the topography, which can be seen as a more organic and uncontrolled development than the imposed masterplans (grids).<sup>21</sup> Moments of resistance, when people take the power into their own hands and oppose the ruling empire, are mapped and represented as points—buildings, streets, squares or actions that became sites of protest or defiance against these regimes.

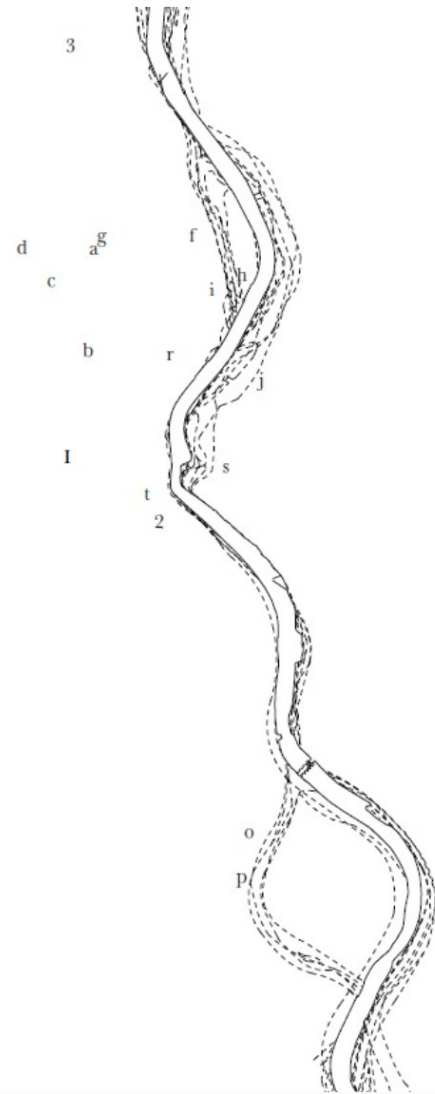


Figure 04. Close up river and countermovement locations

As a graphical reference, we used the 1999 book X-Urbanism by Mario Gandelsonas, an American Architect and Theorist, who is known to read cities through the use of grids.<sup>22</sup>

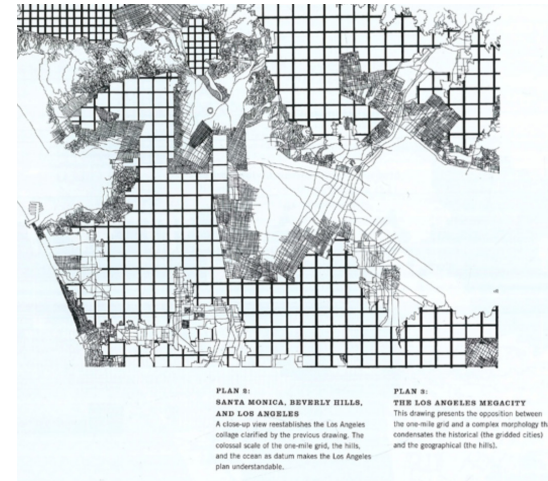


Figure 05. Image from book X-Urbanism

### Practices of Bordering

The concept of bordering practices reveals itself through the layered mapping of Tbilisi's urban fabric. The map will visualise how different empires have used natural landscapes and infrastructures to create and maintain borders and serves as a narrative, illustrating how political power has continuously shaped the city's spatial limits. The Belt and Road Initiative reconfigures Georgia's geopolitical borders, turning the country into a key node in a global economic network and simultaneously as a geopolitical buffer zone between the EU and Russia.<sup>23</sup>

## FINDINGS

### Post-Anthropocentrism

Throughout the centuries, human-environment interactions had various expressions. Our mapping brings forward how different regimes acted on Tbilisi's landscape and how the landscape impacted them in return. The first settlement of Tbilisi was the fortress of Narikala, based on Tbilisi's advantageous topography to oversee and control the surrounding territory. This and the later expansion of Tbilisi in the valley between the two mountains as a strategic opportunity for defence can be seen as a symbiotic relationship between humans and the environment. During and after the Middle Ages, the city grew out of the fortifications in the valley, sprawling towards other plateaus. In these times, the river was used as the main form of infrastructure. Whereas, later regimes, like the Russian Empire, overruled the original environmental condition. Enforcing their ideologies through technology, mountain slopes were flattened, interventions in hydrologic networks emerged and a new lake, functioning as an agricultural reservoir, was built. However, it should be pointed out that these adjustments to the landscape are strongly related to the new emerging technological advancement.



Figure 06. Close up map 90's urban sprawl

Furthermore, our map also clearly highlights how Soviet and Capitalist ideologies make different use of the landscape. During the Soviet era, urban planning prioritised equality and communal living, resulting in long, horizontal axes (without relation to the context and shrinkage of the urban forest) that levelled out at the foot of the mountains, reflecting a society without a distinct upper class. In contrast, the emergence of capitalist ideals caused individual housing to move increasingly higher up the mountainside, to the point where Tbilisi's famous TV tower couldn't be viewed without a residential building disrupting the skyline. In our map, we display precisely these moments of tension between ideology, in the form of planning paradigms, and topography—each wanting to dominate and rule the other. This dualism between landscape and urban development takes a different form in each power regime; from following the topographical lines in the historical centre and the expansion of the city during Tsarist Russia to the Soviet period using rigid grids that were being broken by the mountains at the edges of those developments and the post-independence period climbing up the mountainsides.

### Power Regimes

Our research reveals that Tbilisi is an urban palimpsest, where layers of power regimes have shaped its built environment and left behind traces; from imperial citadels to Soviet boulevards. Overlaying maps from different eras uncovers the shifts in urban planning that correspond to the ideologies of each ruling empire. During both the Russian Empire's and the Soviet era's rule, urban planning was employed as a strategy of control. Under the Russian Empire, Tbilisi's organic, chaotic growth was reshaped to a layout that asserted imperial authority. In the Soviet period, this spatial discipline became even more pronounced, with mass housing blocks, monumental squares and state-run institutions serving as tools for homogenisation. However, where there is power there is also resistance.

Tbilisi's old centre, with its narrow, winding streets, resisted the imposition of control through order. These organically developed areas, difficult to regulate, became spaces where counter-narratives and resistance to both Russian and Soviet domination thrived.

### Practices of Bordering

Albeit the fact that Tbilisi experienced devastating invasions, the new ruling powers always made use of the old, existing foundation. Because of this the ancient urban fabric is still present and extensions of new neighbourhoods are made following a chronological order. This makes it rather easy to trace and date the different urbanistic models applied to the city. How newly added neighbourhoods connected to the existing structure, how the grids meet, is mostly by adapting the outline of the existing and implementing the new fabric onto this, like a "collage", as Natali Tatumashvili and Ani Chorgolashvili called it, in the before mentioned video call with us.

Tbilisi's bordering practices were not merely physical but often social and linguistic. For instance, certain neighbourhoods were defined not by walls but by the social classes and nationalities that clustered together, creating invisible borders. The language barrier, as seen during the colonisation by Germans, is a prime example of such an intangible border. Nevertheless, in another video call, this time organised by the Borders & Territories studio of TU Delft, Tbilisian architects Ioseb Andrazashvili and Vano Ksnelashvili pointed out to us that the urban sprawl of the 90s, before going up the mountainsides as mentioned earlier in this chapter, also penetrated the existing urban fabric. Because "[people] were filling the voids rather than climbing up the mountains," existing borders between neighbourhoods became more obscure, a form of dismantling established borders.

If borders internally were established between different classes of citizens within the city, external borders were constructed by militarised regions with neighbouring states, making Georgia function as a buffer zone. In 1860, under Russian rule, an infrastructural development occurred, marked most notably by the introduction of the railway. Running across the city, parallel to the river, the train tracks became the city's artificial spine. These new forms of bordering and spatial governance, tied to neoliberal economic policies and global infrastructure projects like China's Belt and Road Initiative, continue to shape the city's landscape and implement a form of economic and political control.

Yet, these borders are constantly crossed and redefined through migration, trade and conflict, reminding us that bordering practices, though imposed, are never fully fixed.<sup>24</sup>



Figure 07. Close up how different grids meet the topography

## CONCLUSION

Through our findings, it becomes clear that the interplay between power and space is a dynamic, ongoing process, with past regimes leaving enduring residues that have become part of the city's (urban) fabric. This notion resonates with Bergson's idea of the "persistence of the past," highlighting how historical influences continuously shape the present landscape.<sup>25</sup> The city's evolving structures, from the Persian Empire's fortifications to Soviet-era residential blocks, reflect not only the visible control exerted by various regimes but also the ideological imprints left on its citizens. In today's globalised, post-Soviet Georgia, the concept of borders has undergone a profound metamorphosis, reflecting new dimensions of power. The city's boundaries are no longer solely defined by physical geography but by the fluid flows of capital and information that traverse them. This shift encapsulates a broader narrative of how power reconfigures itself, illustrating the complex interplay between urban space and the myriad forces that shape contemporary life in Tbilisi. The 'Power Regimes and Bordering Practices' Map raises important questions about the future of Tbilisi and other cities along the New Silk Roads. As global systems of power become more interconnected, how will cities navigate the competing demands of different regimes? How will the built environment adapt to new forms of control, whether digital, economic or environmental?

While this research provides an overview of Tbilisi's power regimes and bordering practices, it is limited by time constraints and the existence and availability of historical maps before 1671. Future research could delve deeper into other periods or engage more directly with residents' perspectives on how these borders affect their daily lives. Through our study, we came across three principles that are the

base of every map. A map is an action, representing the human instinct to give an order to what we know.<sup>26</sup> A map is a selection, it conveys a message and selects elements significant to its author. A map is a subjective interpretation, with the potential for manipulation. Therefore, we should acknowledge the subjective view that we have as European students while examining Tbilisi's historical maps.<sup>27</sup> When using abstraction as a tool, one should be aware of its reductionist qualities resulting in the loss of diverse representation. We however still decided on the method of abstraction to compare different periods of planning paradigms by bringing them on the same level. To solve the problem of losing information, we decided to integrate the so-called 'zoom plans' for every planning paradigm that we represent in our map. These zoom plans show in more detail the urban fabric, corresponding to the line thickness of the planning paradigm they belong to (six in total). The grid serves as a 'rule', representing the planning of each power regime, an example of what 'escapes the rule' are informal settlements.

The research is now translated into a 2D map, by going on-site and doing field research for two weeks we hope to fill this flatness with the voices of the city's residents. For example, Betul Aniker will investigate sites like the club Bassiani and how people use movement as resistance, whereas Isa Schlesinger will trace decay. New input will be documented via photography, film, drawings, interviews, mappings and more. The collective research is also used as a starting point for individual theory essays. Daria Pietruczynik, for example, will connect Tbilisi's ever-changing past to the topic of loss and Luna van Arendonk will try to understand the city's liminal state between a Soviet past and European aspirations by examining the loss of sulphur healing traditions.

## ENDNOTES

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