

Tbilisi as a Palimpsest

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

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Reflection Text

Introduction

The goal of the research, as stated at the start of the graduating studio, was to examine how Tbilisi has evolved as a physical mash-up of several eras, empires, and civilizations. This was done in a typical Tbilisian yard. Initially, efforts to analyze and comprehend the city was focused on its architectural, historical, and morphological elements, with the goal of thoroughly documenting all the yards in a given section of the city through photographs, drawings, and sketches. Moreover, my first-hand experience working in the field of conservation in Tbilisi—more particularly, in the conservation of a late 19th-century wooden staircase—provided pivotal insight for the research. However, after this initial examination and the outcomes of my experience in the city, I began to consider how closely the social dynamics of the residents in these yards were tied to the character and nature of the buildings. Memory, habits, and movement, make the yards unique. The latter is one of the primary axes that connect the personal lives of those who reside in Tbilisian yards with the semi-public yard area itself. The way people move in the space and their conscious or unconscious interactions with other people's space enable them to navigate, interact, and live both communally and individually.

The yards are nests of nostalgia where old customs, practices, and ways of interacting and living collide with the present, sometimes colliding with it and other times embracing it.

Relation between Research and Design

Movement and circulation enable the social processes of the yards; hence, maintaining the yards' social dynamics begins with maintaining their circulation and subsequent customs (or rituals). The "development" of Tbilisi will continue on its path to oblivion, and it's possible that the cultural heritage buildings, including the staircases and architectural details that contribute

to the above-mentioned circulation that distinguishes Tbilisi's urban and social structure, will vanish even more quickly. In this situation, the concept of creating a radical and massive intervention becomes not only necessary to prevent the disappearance of these objects but also a means of maintaining the dynamics of the city via progression, adding another layer.

Research and Design Approach

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

As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands. A description of Zaira as it is today should contain all Zaira's past.

The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the granting of the window, the banister of the steps, the antennae of the lighting rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.

Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities, 3. Cities and Memory

If I ever had to use somebody else's words to describe a collection of images and perceptions of Tbilisi, I would read this chapter of Invisible cities, by Calvino. I will try, starting from this analogy, to narrate Tbilisi and my project.

When I first arrived in Tbilisi, I did not know what to expect. What I found there may not be life-changing for many, but opened up a completely new perceptive mechanism in my imagination, where my understanding of the city and its ever-changing status, were mixing up to create new images and memories of events that I did not experience, but I felt like mine. Living

there felt like being in a constant status of active imagination, in the Jungian sense, where the meeting ground of the images of the conscious and its synthesis, given by the unconscious state, are to be found in the city itself. In Jung, active imagination served as a self-healing tool, where he translates his emotion into symbolic images, and put them into communication with the multiple unconscious states while being consciously awake.

Now, to simplify the analogy, we need to imagine this process applied to a city, from the buildings to the people, the trees, the animals, and the light. The city itself generates multiple, unexpected scenarios, that may not be recurrent but feel familiar in the moment in which you abstract those scenarios and try to make them dialogue with your unconscious state; it's a counterintuitive place that was created and keeps being fed by multiple intuitions, and the result feels chaotic but in harmony. The way the buildings stand, the balconies protrude on the streets, and the staircases intertwine feel like what every image of a city and every imaginative state of a place, would look like if they all collided in the subconscious of a child.

To add another layer to this complex ecosystem, and to get back to Zaira, we need to imagine all the intuitions that manipulate the space to be the result of a complex chain of memories, lived or acquired by other people. Like being a child who wants to draw a tree, you remember your mother telling you a story about her childhood and describing a tree. You don't know that tree, but you draw it. It's not your memory, nevertheless, you drew it, and now you have a memory of that image too. This is how Tbilisi generates itself. So, every relation between space and action is not defined by the objects composing the space, but by the stories from which that space was generated, "relationships between the measurement of its space and the events of its past", as Calvino writes about Zaira.

The countless contacts and my observation of the yard and its development were for me the most significant and integral parts of the design. Due to the conservation project, we have been working on over the past year and a half, I was required to live in the yard on a daily basis, first as a stranger and then as a member of a family from which separation felt almost unnatural. The narrative behind this thesis is comprised of a remarkable number of data and tales, a collection of other people's memories, ranging from the stories I have heard from friends to the ones I have myself experienced.

The main objective of the aforementioned project was to preserve a 150-year-old spiral staircase in order to strengthen the dynamics of the Tbilisian yards, which are in danger of disappearing completely due to political and economic speculation and interests. This project also aimed to bring together people and the community and to share knowledge in order to preserve this area of the city. Due to mediocre conservation measures, financed by the City Hall, Tbilisi is undergoing a rapid transformation that may cause a significant loss of cultural heritage

buildings. We gave a statement as a reaction, and I believe we succeeded. By acknowledging this argument, I was able to continuously improve my research and design strategy, turning my day-to-day life in Tbilisi into the perception and image of the architect I want to become.

My strategy for prioritizing the social component over the formal understanding of the city developed as a result of the daily acquisition and acknowledgment of data and personal stories. I prioritize and consider nostalgia, how it is perceived, and how it is sustained in my study.

The way I move around the room and how I interpret the environment (distances, scales, forms) have an impact on my experience and how my body remembers that environment. The phenomenology of movement results if this motion is then condensed to the encounters I experience in that particular space, the fact that these meetings are only made possible by that particular circulation, and the fact that I moved in that particular route and that particular direction. I gain experiences that are not just my own, and my perception of the space interacts with another person's perception of the space who is also moving in the same way. This results in an entirely new effect that would not be possible without the accumulated and remembered experiences of my movements.

The individuation of where all the accumulation of memories, intuitions, narrations and images I have been talking about in the previous paragraph take place, is the Tbilisian courtyard house. This space made of multiple thresholds, individuals, and individuality, represents the city's dynamics. In this space, made of each inhabitant's pursue for active imagination, I started to collect my Tbilisian stories.

The design translates into a radical action that seeks to retrace memory along various vectors to ultimately produce one:

Memory through experience

Memory through the experience of movement

Memory through the memory of movement

Memory through physical dynamism

The phenomenology of movement, where movement is the experience of the space, is given by the experience of its memory.

Relevance to Architecture Track and City of the Future Studio

In the beginning, I sought an architectural meaning that might bind the various levels of the city together, a method to preserve the uniqueness and eccentricities of the structures and their cultural significance for Tbilisi. After several months of observation, I came to the conclusion that the social dynamics of the residents of those buildings were what gave the city and its yards their distinctive architecture. For me, it is hard to comprehend architecture without taking into account people's memories and experiences of that space, independent of the context. The way in which people live defines the space; as needs alter, so do spaces, and architecture. I looked into the evolution of these buildings from aristocratic or bourgeois homes to Kommunkalkas in the Soviet Union, where communal living was not an option but the norm, in order to comprehend the Tbilisian yards. Up until the present, when the remnants of communal life and the effects of the privatization of homes following the fall of the Soviet Union have had a significant impact on how people live in those homes. Because of its origins in the context, I think my proposal is pertinent for the Architecture track. I personally do not support a globalizing architectural language or buildings that might be erected anywhere. I think that rather than the development of a single formula, construction materials, traditions, and the anthropology of a society should be what guide through a design.

For the same reason that I do not believe in global architecture, I hold the opinion that the buildings of the future cannot exist if the sole measuring instrument is the present, and this is in relation to my thesis and the City of the Future graduating studio. Here is why I believe that to build a better city of the future, ideally, we should consider taking one step back to move two steps forward and avoid annihilation and un-individualization of our cities.