

Notes from the Other Georgia

THERE IS A MOUNTAIN TERRACE OVERLOOKING THE CITY OF TBILISI from which all of Georgia spills out before you. On a clear day, and most days in this city are crystalline, the panorama tumbles down to a bustling metropolis, out over the gently curving Mtkvari River, and on to the snow capped Caucasus in the distance. It is a picture postcard view in a city that seems made for them.

But there are no postcards in Tbilisi. There are no post cards because there are no tourists, and haven't been since the glory days of the Soviet empire, when this city, with its Mediterranean climate and genteel streetscapes, was a favored get away for the Russian proletariat. Today, that time feels almost impossibly remote. Post independence Tbilisi is a shambles, a shadow of its former self; one need only turn around for the evidence. Behind that terrace with the spectacular vista lies a palatial Stalinist banquet hall now abandoned to ruin, its perimeter of delicate columns marred by graffiti. A funicular railway and a cable car system that once carried the masses to this summit are now decomposing wrecks. The only route to the top is a circuitous and heavily cratered road.

The ultimate symbol of the city's decline, however, is the inescapable Hotel Iveria. Built in 1967 as the pride of the Soviet Intourist system, it is now giant decaying monolith on a desiccated ceremonial plaza in the very heart of the city. Requisitioned as a hostel for refugees from the breakaway province of Abkhazia, the 22-story tower's once-crisp modern balconies have been adapted to picturesque effect with a patchwork of plywood enclosures and a waving spectrum of laundry.

Urban trauma is sadly familiar to Tbilisi. Strategically located on the trade routes between the Black and Caspian Seas, and between Russia to the north and Persia and Anatolia to the south and east, it has long been an appealing target for ambitious imperialists. In 1795 the entire city, then a labyrinth of Byzantine alleys and squares, was razed to the ground by a marauding Persian shah, Aga Mohammad Khan.

In the century that followed, under the rule of the Russian Tsars, Tbilisi was reconstructed into a cosmopolitan hub of business and culture. The Russians left the Byzantine plan of the historic center intact, but expanded the city outward with a more regularly ordered grid. The new buildings themselves fused European neoclassicism with Georgia's vernacular

tradition of deep wooden balconies, often detailed with ornate Moorish patterns. In the city's wealthier districts, Sololaki and Chugureti, this union takes on a particularly schizoid form: here, the streets are lined with facades in the most correct of European styles, but slip back into their internal courts and you find a riot of jury-rigged balconies that betray the secret life of a city that is neither West nor East, but something in between.

It's been a long, steady decline since the days of White Russian dominance. The Soviets, who had little patience for the "bourgeois" neoclassicism of the Tsars, implemented a series of urban renewal schemes that would make even Robert Moses cringe. Wide swathes of elegant building along the Mtkvari were cleared for high way construction and development, and much of this space remains barren today. What was not erased, was simply left to rot.

The late 1970s saw a campaign of superficial renovation intended to bolster the image of Eduard Shevardnadze, then secretary general of Georgia's Communist Party. At his behest, Tbilisi's old city center was done up in pastel colors, giving it the rather capricious appearance of a Caucasian New Orleans. However appealing, this policy has left today's preservationists with daunting challenges: "The greatest problem during the

Communist period was 'showcasing,' the whitewashing of facades without structural repair or maintenance," says Kakha Trapaidze, a former art critic who now heads Georgia's Monuments Protection Department. "There was no attention paid to sewage or water systems. Everything was cosmetic."

A brief but destructive civil war at the end of 1991 compounded Tbilisi's troubles, which finally came to a head this past April, when an earthquake measuring 4.8 on the Richter scale shook the city. Though not especially strong in magnitude, the tremor was catastrophic for already vulnerable Tbilisi. According to a report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, more than 1,500 residential buildings were severely damaged; 10 hospitals and 30 schools were forced to close. Some \$400 million is now required for infrastructural repairs just to the old city—an astronomical sum considering Georgia's entire state budget is \$554 million. In Trapaidze's words, "small interventions will not help."

The freewheeling nature of Georgia's post independence economy, combined with inadequate legislation and an over



matched and under funded preservation department have left Tbilisi's historic core an easy mark for predatory developers. "We have a serious lack of skills in the field of sustainable development," says Nato Tsintsabadze, a British trained preservation architect who founded the advocacy group Save Old Tbilisi in 1998. "There are no lawyers, economists, public relations specialists, property managers, or developers with experience with heritage properties. We need to prove that a program of preservation is economically sustainable."

While preservationists work to demonstrate the value of restoration, the situation on the ground continues to deteriorate. Two neoclassical buildings on Freedom Square, the very heart of the city, have recently been demolished to make way for new construction. And this past November, France—that bastion of cultural sensitivity—began work on a new embassy in Tbilisi's cherished Alexandrov Park. "I will not object to this if the French authorities allow us to build a Georgian embassy in the Bois de Boulogne," quipped Guram Sharadze, a Georgian parliament member, in a recent interview with the *Georgian Times*. But construction on the building proceeds.

Elsewhere, profiteers play a cynical game of attack through attrition, allowing historic properties to rot knowing full well there are no funds for repair or reconstruction: When the buildings are condemned, they pounce. And then there are the cases of outright corruption. Take, for instance, the status of a once grand Moorish townhouse in the desirable Sololaki district. "We understand the value of this building," says Toto Kikanadze a retiree who has lived in one of the building's 13 apartments for 40 years. "After the earthquake

the local authority said it needs a million dollars in repair work and refused to do anything. We had just asked for basic fixes. They want to relocate us out of our home so they could sell it."

Amidst the carnage, there are signs of encouragement. Funds from a \$4.49 million cultural heritage credit from the World Bank have been used for a comprehensive documentation of the historic old city and to rehabilitate a lengthy strip of one of its principal thoroughfares, picturesque Shavteli Street. In the Betlemi quarter, one of the hardest hit by the earthquake, a \$20,000 grant from the Kress Foundation has been used for emergency stabilization. The World Monuments Fund, which has placed Tbilisi's historic center and its art nouveau buildings on its "Watch List" of most endangered sites, has been a key ally in the pursuit of grant funding. And following the recommendations of a Council of Europe white paper, amendments strengthening Georgia's preservation legislation were passed in June 2002.

Preservationists are also learning to manage political institutions and the media for their benefit. In collaboration with the popular daily newspaper 24 Hours they have begun awarding the "Order of Mohammed," a dubious honor bestowed on those perpetrating "rude interventions." "When I started preservation work, I thought all my life I'd be free from politics," says Tsintsabadze. "Then all of a sudden I woke up in a whole new situation. It's a different world,"

But talk, as they say, is cheap. "We can't just protest," says Tsintsabadze. "If there is no rehabilitation process, we will lose this city." Hopefully, it's not too late.

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