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Urban Space in the Period of Transition and New Cultural Paradigm

A city as a constantly evolving and renewing fabric becomes especially sensitive in transitional periods. A clear example of this is the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi, in the 1980-es and 1990-es, when a string of significant events occurred: the step up in the national-liberation movement, the breakup of the Soviet Union, the gaining of political independence, military tensions in two regions of the country, a civil conflict in the capital city and the economic crisis. Radical changes took place in people's daily life and physical environment.

Each historical economic and political formation created its own "city." Bearing this factor in mind, let's look at Tbilisi: on the one hand, the Soviet system assumed the responsibility for the urban development of the city and dealt with all social issues of the city, regulated the correspondence of its structures with one another. In short, the capital city was a manifestation of functioning system, an arena of its sociocultural functioning and therefore, with the end of the Soviet epoch the city lost this solid system and was given a real chance of autonomous development.

A dysfunctional state of the first years of independence put a daily life of Tbilisi under a new, special regime of economic and social relations. As a result of total economic collapse the city as a system broke up and became a field of accidental actions. The city turned into a physical arena of struggle for self-survival. This new objective further increased the role of street. The street was no longer a space for political actions alone, but also a space mirroring economic and social factors: With the paralyzed transportation and fuel crisis, streets were filled with pedestrians, which led to perceiving the scale, architecture and landscape of the city in a different, new way. This changed the meaning of notions "far" and "near" accordingly. Difficulties in movement actually turned a number of territories within the city unreachable. The shortage of staples led to the increase in the number of people in streets. The street became a place where food could only be "obtained" through long queues. Power shortages added to a general grave social situation, turning the city into a dark, lightless scene and charging the urban image with heavy, subconscious tension. The life was associated with the time and space exclusively assigned to the city, being out of step with the world dynamics, which could not be escaped.

After the demise of the socialist economic system, the necessity arose to overcome stagnation and establish an economic model of a new type. The city came to face a new challenge: the capital city proved to be the only *topos* that assumed the function of meeting new requirements – search of new opportunities, increase in importance of certain geographic zones, shift of centers, construction of new functional buildings, et cetera.

New economic relations became a dominant and vital impulse of the city life. However, the existing social environment found it painful and often, even inconvenient to accept forms of market economy that were well established and tested outside the Soviet space. Strong technological and commercial flows, being an integral part of urban development, manifested themselves in the city culture, primarily, architecture. Architecture is a clearly functional art. It is the best indicator of signs of “internal movement” of society and at the same time, it nudges society, towards transformation. According to R. Barthes, “...as soon as there is a society, every usage is converted into a sign of itself” (Barthes 1964: 41).

Such mutual influences are difficult to separate, thereby further complicating differential analysis. For example, if a social environment is dominated by trade relations an adequate architectural phenomenon are the zones such as market places and shops created within the space of the city, the rental of historic-cultural buildings to catering and other trade facilities; also, the outdoor trade and various advertising billboards. Architecture which is a most “socially honest” art unambiguously reflects the sidelining of historic-cultural values of society and the emergence of new priorities instead. Architectural communication of Tbilisi largely acquires a consumer connotation; cultural impact of buildings is sidelined as something weaker and less aggressive. Even in trying to establish cultural communication, it uses a different language for interaction – be it a billboard announcing a concert or a poster of theatrical performance containing, at least, logos of sponsoring companies, which apart from its main message conveys the information about certain financial relations and liabilities. As Lefebvre notes, the privileging of the image has led to an impoverished understanding of space, turning social space into a fetishized abstraction. The image “kills” and cannot account for the richness of lived experience. “Products and the circuits they establish in space are fetishized and so become more ‘real’ than reality itself– that is, than productive activity itself, which they thus take over” (Lefebvre 1991: 140). Thus, a traditional cultural layer, once representing a significant part of metaphysical image of the city, has weakened gradually and notably.

As the state gained strength and the political situation stabilized, an issue of legislative changes necessary to regulate cultural monuments was put on the agenda; moreover, the rehabilitation of old districts, namely, wooden architecture of Old Tbilisi and Agh-mashenebeli Avenue, was identified as a priority; corresponding projects were drawn up (and later, implemented), emphasizing the importance of old districts in a modern urban context. Heightened focus on historic districts as tourist attractions notably altered real estate prices in these districts. The demands of the industry pushed for prompt response from this part of the city often led to spontaneous and harmful decisions again.

Tbilisi gained in its attractiveness as an arena of intellectual-trade possibilities, which led to intensification of the flow of population to the capital and increase in the concentration of individuals per unit of space. This increase was expressed not only in a quantitative indicator, but also the diversity and frequency of communication. The establishment of new, consumer-oriented capitalist market principles implies a drive towards

such “accumulation” of masses for the aim of maximizing monetary gains. Consequently, psychological impacts characteristic of megalopolis, a clear manifestation of capitalist order, became noticeable. It would be incorrect to compare our capital city with European or American megalopolises where any aspect of urban life – commercial relations, employment market, technical and intellectual activity – reached incomparable level of intensity and consequently, had a much stronger impact on a mental state of an individual, but with its new vector of development Tbilisi also displayed some qualities of megalopolis, which, taken together, gradually changed the perception of the city and pushed an individual towards a greater isolation and aloofness.

The abundance of new constructions significantly altered the appearance of many districts of Tbilisi. In addition to stylistically diverse high-rise buildings new micro-districts were created, causing a new redistribution of social connotation. Incompatibility of styles and striking contrasts introduced a certain fragmentation in the perception of space. Since the space was utilized without any preliminary plan, but only according to the market principle of demand and supply, individuals became detached from their familiar space. Due to such a fast and chaotic change in the image, they failed to adapt to a new form which, in turn, led to their estrangement, detachment from the architectural space of their own city.

Increase in the rhythm of the city and its painful impact on a spiritual life is precisely described in Georg Simmel’s classical essay “Metropolis and mental life”. The rhythm of city reflects the intensity of repetition of certain events within the city. Emotional irritants alternating at a certain frequency cause an adequate reaction from a subject. As a result of frequent nervous irritations a subject “exhausted”, wears out his supply of emotions. An indifferent, cool attitude towards any fact is a sort of responding defensive reaction from an individual, the only weapon against aggressive objective reality. The subject tries to create its own culture to counter-influence the objective reality of the city (Simmel 1969:47-60).

As the city had an oppressive impact, an individual started to seek spiritual forms of self-defense as well as a “material shelter” that nudged a subject towards the spaces enabling to free oneself from a feeling of tension and overwhelming anxiety. The only requirement an alternative space was required to meet was to be different from a large city as only by perceiving the difference the brain could fire a signal of “relaxation.” A space that largely met this requirement were old districts of the city. A proof of it is a heightened attention that has been observed of late towards the European and “old-Tbilisi-style” part of Tbilisi. Cultural and historic value of these parts of the city has always been adequately appreciated. Wooden architecture of the Old Tbilisi has always been treated with great care and in the Soviet period, it was unanimously recognized as the image of the city life and culture, a sort of trademark of Tbilisi. However, current increase in the importance of these districts is associated not only with their cultural and esthetic values but also a number of factors that should be sought within the new vectors of the city development.

The first thing worth paying attention to is the stylistic unity characteristic for the old districts. Clearly, this does not mean a stylistic similarity between the wooden architecture and the European buildings, but rather this means the existence of un-fragmented, intact landscape of these zones in which metastases of growing city are not yet clearly observable: one cannot see here mixed fabric and illogical fluctuation of architectural space; in contrast to a large city, in the zones of Sololaki, the former Plekhanovi and Old Tbilisi one can rarely see new high-rise buildings; a less eclectic architecture allowing to perceive the space as a whole. The feeling of stability which arises when walking in these districts, creates a sense of “visual relaxation.” Exaltation of functional style seen in every layer of the city life is felt at a lesser degree in old Tbilisi. In these districts of the city one can observe painstakingly adorned buildings, decorated fragmentation of facades, modernist motifs, vases, ornamented facades. The use of these details has been long abandoned because of modern esthetic values, also, due to their expensiveness and “non-functionality.” Thus, this décor once again reminds us that we are in a different space, the space where even “non-functional” may be valuable. The same holds true for temporal and spatial communication of old streets. A limited space with narrow streets tells a subject about the ease of overcoming time and space, removes his preoccupation with the need of transport and the loss of time the transportation takes. Instead of strain of strictly established route of the city, which is associated with the power of governing institutions, old streets offer individuals listless, “unplanned” walking. Michel de Certeau in his essay “The practice of everyday life” underlines importance of walking practices and affirms that “these spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life” (Certeau 1984: 96).

In parallel to the reconsideration of urban space the role of cafes has significantly increased. Cafes first appeared in the old districts (in the Soviet space the role of café in social life was incomparably unimportant as compared to a similar Western model). The semantics of café (café-bars, café-restaurants, clubs, et cetera) participates in the daily life of the city and at the same time, opposes the city routine. A café may be regarded as an alternative space which assumes, at least partially, a task of creating a festive mood and therewith offers a distinguished, contrasting environment within the boundaries of everyday life to exhausted citizens. Visiting a café is associated with free will, desire, pleasure and not with a social responsibility. Consequently, a degree of probability, spontaneity characteristic of pleasure and relaxation is high and thus a café creates something approximating to a sense of festive space. According to Octavio Paz, for a modern western citizen, a public festival, as a traditional opposition to the routine, enabling people to return to primordial cosmic energy, is unattainable. In the Western world it is replaced by the culture of private celebrations, weekends, cafes, et cetera (Paz 1998:18).

Transparent architectural schemes of old districts of the city, with open staircases and balconies with wooden balusters, are open for direct communication. Residential spaces are closely connected to one another, a shared courtyard is a continuation of a neighbor’s apartment, a common space. This open communication space of socially di-

verse neighborhood, which includes shared yard and balconies, ensures interpenetration and openness. Lack of amenities and comfort creates an additional condition for close human relationship. In the districts that maintained a yard architecture, elements of traditional lifestyle have been preserved to a greater extent whereas in the modern districts the tradition of relationship continued to exist in the form of separate manifestations. While comparing modern city life and traditional city culture of Tbilisi Tamar Berekashvili writes: “within these constant networks of connections there is no place left for the most important thing that strengthens relations – the meeting of personalities and cultures” (Berekashvili 2010: 274).

A possibility of social involvement of individuals is precisely that special value that this type of neighborhood acquires in a modern urbanized city. One cannot see the accumulation of masses here, which is characteristic of modern development and leads to disappearance of individual. Any accidental person here is not an anonymous cell of faceless mass, but an individual having his/her own worth. Even the space in which people have to interact is marked with certain individual signs. It has the past and is associated with this or that experience. When discussing contrasts between *domus* and *megalopolis*, Jean François Lyotard speaks about a distinguished principle of people’s involvement in society: in case of *domus*, with its culturological model approximating to the model of a small town, the relationship between people is inclusive, in other words, it does not exclude, marginalize “alien,” a random passerby, but invites him/her to participate in its own common space. “Exclusion is not essential to the domestic monad. The poor man, solitary traveler has a place at the table. Let him give his opinion, show his talent, give his story”. (Lyotard 1991:193) The old intact urban fabric still maintains a cultural myth. One can perceive the past which is preserved in deformed architectural forms. Tbilisi-type yards and houses seem to be recounting about an intimate dimension of people’s life, making it accessible for us and thus turning us into a participant of their space. Instead of dull, sterile facades with hardly discernable individuality, we experience a private narrative here.) A possibility to approach a private space and experience the past nurtures fantasy and activates memory, through which the linearity of time and space is overcome. While talking about metaphysical impact of house Gaston Bachelard also points out this aspect of perceiving house: “the house, like fire and water, will permit me, later in this work, to recall flashes of daydreams that illuminate the synthesis of immemorial and recollected. In this remote region, memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening” (Bachelard 1994: 5). This process loads the space with personal emotional experience, enriching the image of the city with such depth which is constantly hidden under a superficial, rough functionality of everyday life.

Conclusion

The analysis of peculiarities and scale of transformation of the city enables us to conclude that the capital of Georgia as an independent, autonomous organism is still in the process of auto-identification and strives to identify and establish its own image and potential.

In describing the post-Soviet urban dynamics of the city, several stages of transformation are outlined: a) Urban paralysis which was a process accompanying the breakup of the Soviet Union and dysfunction of the state; b) Step up in private initiatives in the setting of weakened state governance, which caused the city, as a system, to get engaged in accidental, spontaneous, fluctuating processes; c) Alongside the identification of state priorities the regulation of the city function has begun and led to the increase in the importance of cultural-esthetic and pragmatic potential of the city; In parallel to these processes, an alternative space of the Old City has been outlined and its value is proportional to its difference from the rest of the city. Along with the increase in autonomy, this part of the city is been formed as a unique temporal-spatial unit that meets those cultural, esthetic, psychological, existential requirements of a citizen, which a modern city environment is not able to ensure.

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ქეთევან ჯიშიაშვილი
(საქართველო)

**ურბანული სივრცე გარდამავალ ხანაში
და ახალი კულტურული პარადიგმა**

რეზიუმე

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ურბანული, ძველი ქალაქი, პოსტსაბჭოთა, ტრანსფორმაცია, სოციო-კულტურული.

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