

Social and Cultural Peripeteias of Tiflis-Tbilisi's Biography:

What, Who and How Should Be Protected in the Old City?

Tbilisi (Tiflis before 1936) – the ambitious capital of Georgia and in many respects the traditional centre of the South Caucasus – in contrast to the wonderful jubilee city – Vilnius – for many years now is pining on the UNESCO Tentative List of World Heritage. The Old Tbilisi (better name it Old Tiflis) long since and to no effect being proposed for ranking as a site of World Heritage, is actually a phenomenon of urban culture that deserves attention and preservation first of all on the part of local authorities and local population and only then on the part of such demanding and objective organization as UNESCO.

And what does happen in the Old Tiflis, or rather **with** the Old Tiflis? The present statement is an attempt to answer this question not in the traditional – arts critics sense, but with the referring to the factors determining the life of each city as a graphic example of syncretism of the socio-cultural and architectural-planning constituents. This very premise underlines the further reasoning about the peripetias of the Old Tiflis.

Such a complex, culturological approach to the disclosure of the city's essence is far from being new. As far back as the 6th-7th centuries, Saint Isidore of Seville, the first European encyclopedist who, by the way, is also deemed to be the Patron Saint of the Internet, stated: *“Urbs is the name for actual buildings, while civitas is not the stones, but the inhabitants.”* In continuation of this philosophical concept, a millennium after, the outstanding Georgian public figure Sul Khan-Saba Orbeliani formulated a surprisingly capacious definition of the city phenomenon: *“City is a multitude of people residing in a community, for in order to subsist man should enjoy mutual aid and benefit sharing rather than live alone”*. Exactly in such approach lies the clue to both the urban life development and the full-value conservation of urban heritage.

In order to comprehend the problems of the conservation of urban heritage in Georgia, in particular, in modern Tbilisi, the originality of the national culture, the ratio of its rural and urban constituents should be taken into account. In spite of the availability of impressive monuments of urban culture of the ancient (Uplistsikhe, Archeopolis) and medieval (Vardzia, Gremi) epochs, the traditional Georgian culture by virtue of objective historic circumstances is, on the whole, a **rural phenomenon**. This genetic heritage determines to a great

extent many aspects of the social life of the present-day Georgia, including the sphere of urban heritage conservation.

Indeed, in spite of backward orientation of the traditional Georgian society and, perhaps, exactly because of this reason, the comprehension of the cultural heritage, in general, and urban heritage as a special category, the corresponding cultural reflection, with rare exception, was not peculiar to the Georgian social and cultural life. Such a paradigm gradually takes root in Georgia only by the mid-19th century, thanks to the efforts of the European, Russian and Georgian researchers of the antiquity .

The relation to the heritage radically changed after coming to power of the Bolsheviks and the second annexation of Georgia (1921). The aggressive pathos of the “new” left no room for the cultural heritage – either material or spiritual. Naturally, the destructive Bolshevik elements affected most of all religious objects – irrespective of their confessional or ethnic origin. The wave of the so-called “socialist reconstruction of cities” in the 1930s hit Tbilisi as well. Many religious objects were destroyed, among them Georgian Orthodox churches, the Russian Alexander Nevsky Military Cathedral, the Armenian Vank Monastery, Shiite mosque, later – the protestant church. Many religious buildings were closed and/or given up for spectacular, sport or economic functions. The urban tissue was also threatened.

A significant in this respect is the position of the first Master Plan for the Tiflis (1934): *“In Tiflis, there have been preserved the whole districts with the features going back to the Middle Ages – Avlabar, Maidan, Kharpukhi, the Armenian Market. There can be found the narrow streets, where two bullock-carts cannot pass by each other, tiny well-yards, where even the Tiflisian sun cannot peep in, the houses stuck on the hillside, resembling more the “swallow’s nests” than human habitation. The density is incredible – up to 1000 men per ha. There is no trace of amenities. Greenery is also absent.”* It ends with a categorical verdict: *“Such districts need complete reconstruction “.*

Luckily, this sentence was not executed; and the main reason of it is the linear spatial-planning structure of the city, predetermined by geography. The point is that the Master Plan, from the orographic, demographic and economic considerations, first of all contemplated the development of new sites for housing and public spaces in new outgoing direction, leaving the Old City as if behind the new “socialist” Tiflis. For this reason, the historically developed part of the city escaped destruction or radical reconstruction. The Old Tiflis and its indigenous population were simply neglected and forgotten...

The Old Tiflis was recalled later, in the period of relative liberalization of the social life in the then Soviet Union. The 'return' of the Old City was timed to the 1500th Anniversary of Tbilisi (1958). However, the problem of reconstruction-regeneration of the Old City turned into the matter of national significance only by the mid-1970s. In 1975, the *Zone of the State Protected Historic Part* was approved. In 1985, the zone was extended at the expense of the so-called "capitalistic" blocks of buildings, being added with the vast *Zone of Regulated Development* and the *Zone of Protected Landscape*. In addition, the "repressed" architectural styles, including modern, were emancipated. The outstanding specimens of constructivism, Stalinist Empire style and modern architecture were given the status of a monument. The **typology** of the protected monuments widened. A stage-by-stage large-scale work for rehabilitation of the Old City started.

But the most notable is that the so-called "directive organs" understood that all efforts of the Old City rehabilitation without development of the socio-cultural constituent would be futile. Therefore, the restaurants, souvenir and handicraft shops, etc. were opened and prominent figures of culture were settled in the reconstructed houses in the district of Sulfur Baths. An important factor of restoring the urban identity became the annually held autumn festival – "Tbilisoba".

Behind all this, in addition to the clearly declared care for the historical heritage, there was a sober political purpose. The leader of the then so-called Union Republic – Eduard Shevardnadze, worried by the rise of the national liberation movement, especially among students, redirected the youth energy into the seemingly safe patriotic track – protection of the historic heritage. For the time being, such policy yielded fruit, but, objectively, it could not withstand the secession of Georgia from the Soviet Union (09.04.1991).

The Kremlin-inspired "Tbilisi War" that followed the pronouncement of independence resulted in the destruction of many historic buildings on the central Rustaveli Avenue and in the adjoining quarters. The military junta having come to power, in searching for mass support, resorts to a populist measure – the practically gratuitous privatization of the entire urban housing stock is being declared (1992). It is important that the monuments of residential architecture under emergency conditions in the Old City were also subject to privatization. Under a single decree, a new numerous class of real estate owners was created. The new owners momentarily began to exercise their rights; as regards the other side of the medal – the obligations of the owners to maintain their lodgings, all appeared to be much more complicated and the matter here is not only the economic possibilities of "new proprietors".

Here it is necessary to return to the starting point of my statement, recollecting once more the correlation between the architectural-planning and socio-cultural constituents of the urban environment. Such syncretism is particularly necessary in the historic environment, the bulk of which is made up exactly of residential houses. In this respect, one should ask the question – to what extent does the Old City participate in the formation of the identity of the present population and, generally, when and how has formed this contingent of tenants?

In order to answer, it is necessary to remember that in the soviet times, first of all in the 1920s-1930s, the state housing policy was a reliable instrument for designing a “new man”. The total eviction on the basis of class of the so-called “non-labor elements”, the constant waves of occupancy by marginal rural migrants, the nightmare of overcrowded apartments, ‘informing’ and forms of encouragement – down to the transfer of dwelling space to the informer and even the belongings of the people victimized on the basis of information; the establishment of quasi-social organizations controlling the behavior of dwellers in so called “communal flats” – all this has led in the end to the formation of a social and cultural mutant, whose genetic features have become the implicit obedience to the authorities and reckless conformism; the behavioral indifference towards the surroundings and social environment; the neglect of the value system and rules of conduct of urban culture; the lack of self-organization skills and, probably, most important in our case – the aiming at dependence. The historic lesson from all this consists in the circumstance that the soviet authorities managed to stratify the complex urban environment into component layers and broke the ties between them. No less important is that *homo soveticus* as a species turned out to be surprisingly stable, resistant to any progressive reforms, programs and projects. The tragic diagnosis additionally burdened with the hard economic position of most households in the Old City of modern Tbilisi.

Certainly, for the past 25 years much has changed in Old Tbilisi for better, much but not the most important - the inhabitants have not become yet conscientious **subjects** of urban heritage protection. Up to this day the NIMBY syndrome (Not In My **B**ack **Y**ard) is still in effect. This vacuum is filled up by non-governmental organizations, such as “Tiflis Hamkari” (“hamkar” – a historically self-governing artisan-trading and charity organization, similar to the Guild of Europe that existed in Tiflis right up to the Sovietization) or ICOMOS-Georgia, with the support of the Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage, involving the local population in the Program for Revitalization of the historic Betlemi Quarter.

One of the problems of the historic heritage protection remains to be the ambiguous political interpretation of the architectural heritage of the Soviet period. An example – the attitude towards the building of the former Institute of Marxism and Leninism (IMEL), designed and constructed in 1933-1938 by the outstanding architect Alexei Schusev. The history of its demise and demolition started in 1990 when the two high reliefs facing Rustaveli Avenue, by Georgian sculptor Jacob Nikoladze, Rodin's disciple, were removed. At that time the intervention of the public saved the building's façade from complete elimination. Late, in 2007, during presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili, the IMEL building was deprived of the status of an architectural monument, was privatized and doomed to demolition. And again public protests saved the building from annihilation, although much damage had already been done. Now, on the place of the one demolished wing a skyscraper is being built.

Why was it so important to preserve the IMEL building? The point is that this very building is concurrently the witness, victim and accuser of the soviet architectural and town-planning policy of the Great Terror period in the mid-1930s. One can easily witness it by walking round the building and comparing the constructivist back elevation with the Stalinist Empire style of the frontispiece along the central Rustaveli Avenue. The best theme for an architectural excursion throughout Tbilisi and soviet history is hard to think out...

On the whole, if one attempts to appreciate the attitude towards Old Tiflis in a word for the past 25-year period, the capacious term - "consumerism" comes to mind. The use of the Old City as a change for achieving political goals, the populist letting the genie out of the bottle, the adjustment of the normative base to the interests of developers, the architectural and planning egocentrism of the gentrification process, the reckless boosterism, the epatageous and cynical attitude of foreign 'starchitects' to the historic environment, the absolute priority of Tbilisi branding, and, finally, the questionable taste of decision-makers – all is implied in this word.

Can one urbanistic move take off such a load from the Old City? In the opinion of some Georgian urbanists – it can. The solution consists in the transfer of the transit trunk-railway and the entire rolling stock, splitting Tbilisi into the disintegrated strips, behind the Tbilisi Reservoir area. The so vacated area – about 100 ha in the downtown, will accommodate a new Central Business District (CBD), and not only it. Luckily, the world practice is rich in such urbanistic decisions and the first which comes to mind is La Défense of Paris. Only in this case the central part of Tbilisi will be relieved and, I hope, will deserve the attention on the part of UNESCO. And it is not a futuristic project but a reality having already been constructed by 70% by the former

government. I am sure that the current suspension of construction has been caused by petty political motives...

In conclusion, taking an opportunity of seeing here the UNESCO high officials, I would like to come up with an idea that the legitimization of historic urbanonymy on local and national levels are no less important than the conservation of one or another historic building. And this is particularly important for the countries having gone through a period of total ideological remaking of the authentic urbanonymy. Unfortunately, ***the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*** has not yet acknowledged this essential and captivating component of intangible urban heritage, possibly reasoning only from the Western, civilized practice. I understand that such a serious subject deserves a separate discussion, possibly even a special conference. Nevertheless, has not come the time to think about it?

With this by no means rhetorical question and with thanks for your kind attention I'd like to end my statement.