



TBILISI DESTROYS ITS PAST

The Old Town is transformed

text & photos
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A view over Tbilisi, with parts of the Old Town in the foreground. The Freedom Bridge and the Public Service Hall by the river are a couple of Saakashvili's additions to the city.

**It so completely mocked the sphere
Of the eye's range and all of nature,
That it arose and remained a chimaera,
A city as if not of this world.**

Russian poet Boris Pasternak is only one of many famous visitors who have been stunned by the romantic city of Tbilisi, with its brick houses clinging to the cliffs above the Kura River. The covered wooden balconies with their delicate latticework and the sulfur-smelling domes of the ancient baths give the Asian quarter of the Old Town a distinct character.

Georgia is situated in the Caucasus region, on the dividing line between Europe and Asia. Throughout history, the country has been invaded numerous times. Persians, Byzantines, Russians and Soviets – they have all been here, and they have all left their footprint. Wherever you turn in Tbilisi, you see the influence of its former rulers.

Modern day rulers also leave their marks. Lately, there's been an addition of bombastic buildings of glass and steel to the city's skyline. Former president Mikheil Saakashvili, who came to power after the Rose Revolution in 2003 and stepped down only this November, has left a partly transformed Tbilisi behind.

His preferred architectural style is not of the modest kind. His is the love of ultra-modern shapes in glass and steel. Saakashvili launched an aggressive building campaign shortly after taking office. The plan was to change the image of Georgia, to attract investors as well as tourists by showing that the former Soviet republic was transforming itself into a modern and Western-oriented country.

Besides erecting numerous eye-catching buildings all over the city, a prominent part of the plan was to restore the rundown, ramshackle buildings along the winding streets and alleys of Tbilisi's Old Town. In 2009, the government launched a program called "New Life for the Old Town". Now critics claim that the "restoration" was too fast and way too furious; that priceless historical treasures were destroyed when the original brick buildings were demolished and replaced with concrete replicas.

"About a third of the Old Town has gone", says Peter Nasmyth, British writer and publisher who lives part of the year in Tbilisi.

He has witnessed what he calls a "Disneyfication" of old Tbilisi during the last few years. Many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings have been destroyed – some of them simply demolished to leave room for new buildings, others restored in an

insensitive way. Numerous old buildings have been redesigned, often with one or two extra floors added on top. Cheap Turkish tiles and aluminum-framed windows have replaced the original handmade materials, eliminating every trace of history, leaving a shiny, all-too-perfect surface.

"This is a tragic form of gentrification", Peter Nasmyth says.

He is one of the founders of the Tbilisi Architectural Heritage Group (www.tbilisiheritagegroup.co.uk), a network of people from mainly the UK and Georgia dedicated to informing the world about the threats to Tbilisi's architectural heritage, and presenting alternative solutions and ideas.

"What's happening here is very sad. You don't know what you've got until it's gone. Ten years on and the local population will deeply regret what's happened," Peter Nasmyth predicts.

Georgia has had more than its fair share of political turmoil during the last century. Brutal Soviet occupation followed by civil war and deep economic crisis in the 1990s left the country in a poor state. Decades of deferred maintenance has left parts of Tbilisi in desperate need of care. To an untrained eye, many of the



Beauty in decay, Lado Asatiani Street in the Old Town.



PHOTO: TBILISI HERITAGE GROUP

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Lermontov House in Gudiashvili Square before and after “preparation for restoration”, above.

Computer-generated images of a remodeled Gudiashvili Square by Austrian architects Zechner & Zechner.



Restoration – or rebuilding?



Lado Asatiani Street.



Rebuilt houses in Abano Street, next to the famous sulfur baths in the Old Town.

buildings in the Old Town seem to be beyond repair, the once beautiful balconies sagging, brick walls crumbling. But according to Peter Nasmyth, restoration is almost always an option. It’s just a lot slower than demolition, though not necessarily more expensive.

“You don’t have to knock these buildings down, you can repair them”, he says with emphasis. “Many people do it all the time.”

A growing number of architects, artists, and academics have been protesting against the rapid transformation of the Old Town. But there is a dilemma: many of the Old Town inhabitants welcome the changes. They prefer the brand new look of the concrete facades, and see the use of modern construction materials as a sign of progress.

“To many Georgians, old is still ugly. This notion is only slowly changing”, says Peter Nasmyth. He explains that ten years ago his neighbors approached him saying “Great news, they’re going to knock down your flat!” When he protested saying that he liked their quaint, nineteenth-century building, they replied that someone wanted to buy the building and he would be offered a “brand a new flat with a wonderful view. . .” Fortunately, the plan was never realized. But many others have been.

The largest protests have so far concerned the

reconstruction plans for picturesque Gudiashvili Square. Protest groups staged numerous demonstrations in this historic square in 2011 and 2012 after computer-generated images of a remodeled, futuristic Gudiashvili Square had appeared online, showing a totally transformed area. Contemporary-looking frontages housing international chain stores had replaced the picturesque houses lining the square. The shady acacia trees seemed to be the only thing left of this historic environment. The images were published by Austrian architects Zechner & Zechner, who had won a competition to develop the square.

The Mayor’s office responded to the uproar by claiming that they knew nothing of the competition, publishing different pictures showing their own plans for the square’s rehabilitation.

Despite the protests, in May last year a construction company started tearing apart the famous Lermontov House, which some say is Georgia’s most iconic balconied building in Gudiashvili Square. The nineteenth-century building was named after the Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov who is said to have stayed here in the 1820s. Protesters and tourists alike watched in horror as the roof was removed and the balcony ripped off, which is how it remains today. According to the authorities, the building was being “prepared for res-

oration”, but previous examples of such preparation left few of the residents believing this.

Today, the Austrian owners of the Gudiashvili Square buildings have pulled out, and it is unclear what will happen.

UNESCO itself once wanted to list Tbilisi’s Old Town as a World Heritage Site in 2000. However, it suspended the proposal due to a lack of will in the local government towards preservation. The Old Town remains on the tentative list, but is looking more and more unlikely to fulfill UNESCO’s ambition, given that since 2000, the City Hall planning department has granted permission to demolish numerous listed buildings.

“They think preservation will hinder development, but all experts agree that it will, on the contrary, attract serious developers”, says Nato Tsintsabadze, Secretary General of ICOMOS Georgia (Georgian National Committee of International Council on Monuments and Sites). We meet in her office in the Betlemi Quarter of the Old Town, on a hill overlooking the city. The ICOMOS office is located in a historic building, reverentially restored inside and out, serving as an example of how restoration could – and should – be done.



Tbilisi is famous for its great variety of architectural styles.

Peter Nasmyth with his friend Elisso Sulakauri, who lives in a house built by her great grandfather in 1896. The wooden balcony is very typical for Tbilisi.

The lack of adequate political structures and legislation in Georgia is a major problem. There is no city plan for Tbilisi, and the building classification system published in 2007 is being blatantly ignored: both red-listed buildings (national monuments) and yellow-listed buildings (buildings where only the façade must be preserved) have been bulldozed the last few years. Until last year, decisions regarding listed buildings in Tbilisi were made within City Hall, instead of by the national government. But this is now changing. Saakashvili lost power in last year's general election, and a new government under Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili was installed. Since then, the heroic activities of a few key individuals, such as the new Deputy Minister of Culture, Marine Mirzandari, has led to the new government now making all planning decisions regarding National Monuments right across Georgia, including Tbilisi.

"We do hope that these changes in the law will help us," Nato Tsintsabidze says. "We are watching very carefully how the ministry acts."

Preservation is slow and costly, and it's obvious that the former government wanted quick change.

"Too much hurry is not very wise economically. The old government spent public money in a totally irresponsible way."

No one knows exactly how much money has been spent in the New Life for Old Tbilisi project, but it's millions of dollars.

"There's no transparency, there is no way to find out what is being planned until they actually execute it. They should involve the neighbors before they decide to demolish buildings", Tsintsabidze says.

Georgia is a poor country, and international funding is crucial to afford cultural heritage protection projects.

"Even in rich countries, they don't rely only on public funds", Nato Tsintsabidze says.

Instead, ICOMOS wants the government to create funding mechanisms that will attract foreign investors interested in cultural heritage protection. There is a great interest in the unique historical and cultural values of Old Tbilisi within the international architectural community, but no structures to channel any international funding.

With the new government, the pace of the demolition seems to have slowed down. But the future is still uncertain.

"We have to fight, and we have to preserve as much as possible", Nato Tsintsabidze says. ❌

New threat to Tbilisi's cultural heritage

Tbilisi Heritage Group recently revealed

that the Georgian Parliament is discussing a draft law on cultural heritage which has the potential to remove the protected status of 6,300 historical sites across the country. Among

them could be some of the most famous historical sites of Georgia, such as the Narikala Castle, the Opera, Rustaveli Theatre and Marjanishvili Theatre in Tbilisi, as well as Borjomi Park in southern Georgia and the Romanov Palace in Abastumani. Read more about this, and see the petition against the planned changes to the Law on Cultural Heritage at www.tbilisiheritagegroup.co.uk.



The ancient Narikala Castle overlooks the Old Town.