

**Exploring Mythologies and Urban Development
in the Black Sea Basin:
Aspects of City-Branding and Identity-Shaping in
Contemporary Batumi**

Abstract

This article posits that the relatively recent urban renewal and city-imaging processes observed in Batumi differ significantly from Western European/American examples – although inspired by them to an extent – and therefore merit separate consideration. The article’s main argument is that urban regeneration and city-imaging in Batumi is an individual hybrid, namely a place-specific process with a global orientation. This employs myth, local literary traditions and the multi-ethnic make-up of the city, in addition to the emulation of internationally established methods. Furthermore, it straddles ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ branding. It follows that the processes of culture-led urban regeneration and the bestowing of identity to the city of Batumi need to be examined carefully and checked against various parameters that are not necessarily observed in the cases of better-known examples of cities that have undergone renewal worldwide. The aspiration of this article, is therefore, dual: to provide an enhanced understanding of the particularity of Batumi’s culture-led regeneration processes and to contribute in general to the improvement of methods for the in-depth study of Black Sea cities currently undergoing intense redevelopment.

Keywords: *Batumi, Mythologies, Jason and Medea, Black Sea city, Culture-led urban regeneration, Contemporary urban art, City branding*

Introduction

Since the early 2000s, Batumi, the historic port city¹ on the Georgian Black Sea shore has embarked on a plan for its regeneration and transformation of its image. Mikheil Saakashvili, the former President of Georgia² is credited with the initiation and implementation of efforts to restore Batumi’s visibility and importance. The city has since aimed to become a prime location for tourism, culture and investment. It seeks to do so by (re-)branding it-

self as one of the foremost outposts for tourism and development of the Black Sea basin. In order to achieve this, Batumi has already invested heavily in the change of its image through a series of planning works, building renovations, contemporary architectural interventions and public art.

In this article, I will argue that the relatively recent urban renewal and city-imaging processes observed in Batumi, although inspired, to an extent, by the Western European/American examples, differ significantly from the latter, and therefore merit separate consideration. I will suggest that urban regeneration and city-imaging in Batumi is an individual hybrid, namely a place-specific process with a global orientation. It employs myth, local literary traditions and the multi-ethnic make-up of the city, in addition to the emulation of internationally established methods. Furthermore, it straddles the line between “hard” and “soft” branding. As such, the processes of culture-led urban regeneration and the bestowing of identity to the city of Batumi need to be examined carefully and checked against various parameters that are not necessarily observed in the cases of better-known examples of cities that have undergone renewal worldwide.³ I, thus, aspire, aside from providing an enhanced understanding of the particularity of Batumi’s regeneration processes to contribute to the improvement of methods for the in-depth study of Black Sea cities currently undergoing intense redevelopment.

I will argue that city-imaging in Batumi is as much a global, as it is a local phenomenon, and that it continuously oscillates between the two, seeking to strike a proper balance. In fact, it appears that the processes chosen by the city tend towards Western-established practices of renewal, which Batumi hastily and sometimes uncritically emulates in its quest for the creation of a city of spectacle. However, Batumi simultaneously fosters and (re-)invents ideas regarding its own tradition and character, in a seemingly intense search for its roots and grandiose historical past, as well as its dynamic future.

I will attempt to highlight the individual character of Batumi’s redevelopment and imaging efforts, which on the one hand seek to respond to global practices and consumerist demands, and on the other embody and promote locally important symbols, concerns and grassroots initiatives. It is obvious that the common aim of Batumi with other cities that have set up plans for regeneration and city-imaging is the attraction of attention, and its corollary income generation, through mostly, but not exclusively, large investments and an influx of tourism. I will argue, however, that Batumi’s regeneration is also supported by a *mélange* of “myth(ologie)s”, both age-old and newly-shaped, which I am going to explore through specific examples and the complex web of relationships they invoke.

This paper is structured along three axes: a) the revisiting of local, age-old discourse, b) the revisiting of discourse primarily found in the wider Black Sea area and recently rendered Batumi-centric, and c) new discourse, formed in line with the requirements for the acquisition and establishment of a global city status. In my treatment of these ostensibly disparate, but ultimately linked, if not unified, discourses I will interchangeably utilize selected elements of Roland Barthes's (2009) analysis of "myth", as well as elements of Marc Gobé's (2001) emotional branding", Saskia Sassen's (1991) "global cities" and Manuel Castells's (1989, 2000) "space of flows" to support my case. I will, thus, aim to show that besides its hard-branding policies, so clearly traced in its waterfront planning and building activity, Batumi also offers -at least via its public art commissions -grounds for the consideration of soft city branding that should not go unnoticed.

Batumi Resurgent

As a city, Batumi has a long history, although it has been under various rules including Roman, Ottoman and Russian. In ancient times it was an important stop for travellers to colonies, while its significant modern-day port was built and started functioning in the late 19th century. The construction of the Batumi-Tbilisi-Baku railway in the early 20th century coincided with the completion of the Baku-Batumi pipeline for oil production, which helped shape the city's economic prevalence (King 2004, 195ff.). Ajara, the Georgian region of which Batumi is the capital, was proclaimed an autonomous republic in the early 20th century. During the Soviet era Batumi lost its relative importance, which it has been seeking to restore since the 2000s.

Batumi's renewal plan, as would have perhaps been expected of a port city, is based on an extensive scheme of waterfront regeneration, a practice familiar from similar endeavors worldwide (Brownill 2013), whether successful or not (Jones 2007). The case of Batumi differs in that it does not spring from one landmark building, usually of cultural importance, around which more infrastructure and services are created and offered. Instead, the city has in the last few years demonstrated a frenzied building activity along the main axis of the seafront promenade, aimed at the unification of the late 19th century Boulevard with the rest of the newly developed quay. New developments have included a range of service buildings, notably big-brand hotels⁴, business and entertainment centers and restaurants, showcasing original designs, most of which were commissioned from foreign architectural firms (Terakye Ün-sal 2012). A large area adjacent to the port has been consecrated as Batumi's "Miracle Park", which is in part the inspiration behind the tagline "Batumi

Miracle” coined by the Batumi Investment Agency and used as one of the tools in the city’s rebranding process (Batumi Miracle 2011). Indeed, this is indicative of Batumi’s determination to prove that, as far as the contemporary condition and competition are concerned it is a major player in the global arena, which is the reason why it has embarked on a highly ambitious urban redevelopment plan.

However, even if the strategies that the city employs are in line with these of its Western counterparts with regards to hard branding, Batumi also seems to engage in soft branding practices such as the preservation, or creation and proliferation, often through rigorous interpretation, of mythologies that are associated with its origin and essence. Batumi plays significantly with the idea of myths, and obviously gives precedence to the quintessential myth that is related to the city, namely that of Jason and the Argonauts who came to claim the Golden Fleece. However, it also creates and feeds a number of other “myths”, some revisited and some new, in order to connect its city-imaging with global developments. In so doing, Batumi offers an interesting paradox: it appears to have a single soft strategy, namely that of working with “myths” to create connotations of Batumi’s ancient roots and multicultural history, in order to inscribe its future into the global economy; however, it simultaneously provokes some non-official reactions that complement, enhance, or at times simply oppose, a number of signifiers it employs in order to achieve its goal. In the sections that follow I will examine three approaches that illustrate the above. These are by no means exhaustive in terms of Batumi’s efforts, but are indicative of the uncommon, non-established methods that the city appears to have chosen to employ for its imaging and its quest for identity.

Mythologizing: Medea

The Greek myth of the Argonauts’ Campaign, whereby the Greek hero Jason led the Argonauts on his ship *Argo* to Colchis and reclaimed the Golden Fleece with the help of the Colchian princess Medea is inextricably linked with the area where modern-day Batumi lies. The ancient Kingdom of Colchis covered the area between and beyond Batumi and Poti, in the valley of Phasis river (now Rioni). The King of Colchis, Aietes, had sacrificed a golden ram which Phrixus, an ancestor of Jason, had been given by Zeus and flown from Greece to Colchis. King Aietes kept the ram’s fleece hung in a sacred place and guarded by a sleepless dragon, for fear of losing his kingdom if it vanished, as an oracle had foreseen. Jason, determined to regain the kingdom in Iolcus, which had been lost to his usurper uncle, Pelias, took on the lat-

ter's challenge to reclaim the Golden Fleece, and thus prove his worth as a hero – and, by consequence, a king. Jason led the Argonauts' Campaign to the distant land of Colchis, which was thought of to be beyond the edges of the known world. His effort to regain the fleece was met with a series of tasks imposed on him by Aietes, before his wish could be satisfied. The tasks were impossibly difficult. However, Aietes' daughter, Medea, an intelligent "sorceress" with great knowledge of herbs and medications, fell in love with Jason and promised him her help if he would give her his love. With her assistance, Jason was successful in completing the tasks. He retrieved the Golden Fleece and he and Medea fled to Greece, where the rest of their tragic life unfolded. After a series of events, Medea killed her and Jason's children and was, in the end, ascended to Mount Olympus in a chariot sent by her grandfather, Hélios.

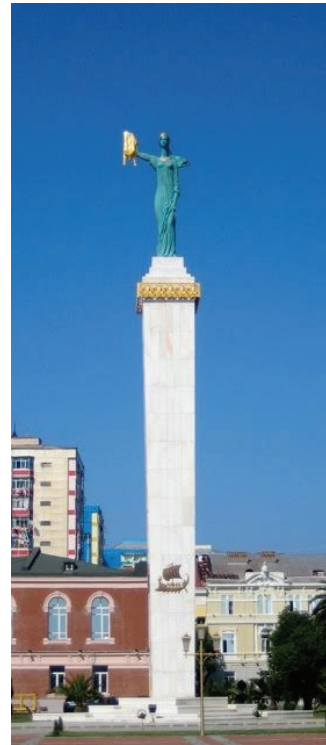


Figure 1. *Medea*, 2006, Batumi. © David Khmaladze.

There are several, different interpretations of the myth in modern Georgian art (Bughadze 2007, 124-129). However, it was not until recently, namely in 2006 that central Batumi installed the monumental sculpture *Medea* by Georgian artist David Khmaladze in the city's Europe Square (Figure 1). As

the artist mentioned through personal communication⁵ with the author, he was formally commissioned to make the sculpture, as part of President Saakashvili's bid to attract interest to the Black Sea coast. The work is a bronze statue of Medea standing high on a marble column, her head decorated with a golden crown and her neck with a golden necklace, holding the Golden Fleece in her right hand. The sheer height of the statue makes it one of the most imposing and visible sites in the city. A solemn figure, *Medea* here seems to symbolize the wealth and supremacy of her land.

The geographical positioning of the statue in the city is an element that needs to be taken into consideration first. Europe Square derives its name from the joining of Adjara to the Assembly of European Regions. The sculpture of *Medea* is in this case considered to symbolize the city's, and more broadly the region's contribution to Europe through the sacrifice of the Golden Fleece – in this case thought of as an offering of Colchis to Europe. As an accompanying brochure to the sculpture details (*The Monument of Medea with Golden Fleece*, n.d.):

“[m]onument [sic] of Medea with Golden Fleece has a double meaning; besides its artistic value it has historic meaning for Georgia and Georgians. The land of Colchis, renowned for its great cultural heritage and wealth for centuries, has been trying to regain its historic place in the world, especially today.”

In the same document it is also noted that Medea's image, as portrayed by the artist, is stripped of “[d]eep emotions, great passions, impulsive character” [sic] and is, rather, presented as a “symbol of kindness, wealth and the power of the country” (*The Monument of Medea with Golden Fleece*, n.d.). As the Mayor of Batumi, Irakli Tavartkiladze stated: “Medea was the person who joined Georgia with Europe. She is known throughout the whole world for her medicine as well as through various mythological creations. Therefore, Medea is the symbol of integration of Georgian and European cultures” (*Monument of Medea: a new symbol 2007*). This is a position that is also manifest in the above brochure. It therefore becomes evident that Medea is promoted centrally as a symbol of the hybrid character of the city that enters a new era of calmness with regards to its own recent turbulent past, as well as of integration with its European neighbors.

Aside from Medea's undisputed importance for the Georgian goal of integration with Europe, what is interesting to observe is that, in close proximity to the monument's position one can find the new “cultural cluster” of Batumi. This is composed of old and new monuments, namely the Nation-

al Drama Theatre, the Contemporary Art Centre, the “Miracles Park,” and the beginning of the waterfront regeneration area. *Medea* seems, therefore, to symbolically tower over the new, reclaimed Batumi, as a symbol of solemnity and power.

I would argue that the interpretation of the myth by the artist is also telling of the city’s overall approach to renewal. Medea is portrayed on her own and not with Jason, even though the myth binds their fates and lives together. She is elevated to the status of the supreme local heroine, who holds the Golden Fleece and is ready to bestow it as she wishes, while the myth details that she helped Jason with the potion that she gave him in order to put the dragon to sleep. Argo, the famed ship of the campaign, decorates the marble column on which Medea is standing.⁶ One of the details of the column shows Jason and Medea together, in front of the fleece guarded by the dragon. Medea is portrayed exercising her sorcery, while Jason is passively observing, having taken a step back (Figure 2). Moreover, Aietes, who symbolizes the withholding of the gift, is effaced in this interpretation. This artistic approach could be read within the context of a tradition of feminization of Georgia in Russian literature (Layton 1994, 175-211). Medea is, thus, acknowledged as the unquestionable protagonist of the story, the local heroine who bestows a gift (the city of Batumi) to the world.



Figure 2. *Jason, Medea and the Golden Fleece* by David Khmaladze, 2006 Batumi. © David Natidze.

Batumi's most recognizable monument is viewed in a more pragmatic way on a community-based website about all things Georgian. This interpretation simultaneously seems to undermine the "universal truth" of the particular myth and to bestow a particular commercial significance onto the area of Ancient Colchis – therefore also, implicitly, onto Batumi as its principle city. The text that accompanies the photos from the *Medea* monument in Batumi details, among other things, the following:

“The Kolkhetian people developed expertise in the smelting and casting of metals long before this skill was mastered in Europe. This attracted the attention of Greek traders and adventurers, like Jason and the Argonauts, who travelled to the kingdom to seek out the rich natural resources, including gold. The Kolkhi people had developed a unique way to prospect for gold. A sheep's fleece was attached to a wooden support and left in a fast flowing mountain stream causing particles of gold to collect in the wool. The fleece would then be hung in a tree to dry before the gold was shaken or combed out. This technique for collecting gold may have given rise to the legend of Jason and his quest for the Golden Fleece.”(About sights 2014)

I would suggest that such an interpretation is an example of a case where a myth needs to be overcome. According to Barthes (2009, 160), “[t]he best weapon against myth is perhaps to “mythify” it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology.” At this juncture, the city of Batumi, in its search for celebrating European integration, attracting investment and acquiring global city status, may be seen as having “robbed” –in Barthes's terms- the original myth of its signification and proceeded to “mythify” it anew. Medea arrives here already as signification: she is the definitive local heroine who played a catalyzing role in the story (Bughadze 2007). She is also linked to the idea of sacrificing her own civilization for Europe, an idea firmly rooted in the artwork featuring her. However, the discourse now emerging around the figure of Medea casts her as a symbol of integration with Europe and aligns her with the city of Batumi, which seeks to enter global culture.

The Batumi statue of Medea is in stark contrast with other portrayals of the myth by Georgian artists in previous decades on the Black Sea coast. Two other versions of Medea, one from the 1970s and one contemporary, can be found outside the city of Batumi. But I would argue that they, too, refer back to the city and contribute to its image-making process, albeit through its subversion.

The earlier work between the two is entitled *Jason and Medea* (Figure 3). It was made by Jemal Japaridze in 1975, in Abkhazia, in the area of New Athos, then a popular tourist resort. Although referring to the same myth, and displayed on the same stretch of land, a bit further north from Batumi, the monument differs greatly from the Medea sculpture in Batumi's Europe Square. Their differences are both morphological and notional: the carved stone monument has a naïf, rather archaic quality that exudes energy and unity, and is closer to more archetypal forms. This is the opposite of the polished, seemingly unfazed and perhaps even slightly arrogant *Medea* in Batumi, who appears to be more at home in the luxurious, sterile environment of the new global, remodelled city. Further, the New Athos monument presents both figures together, united by their common aim, the Fleece, in contrast to the towering figure of *Medea* in Batumi, who appears to reign on her own, as befits the new mythology.

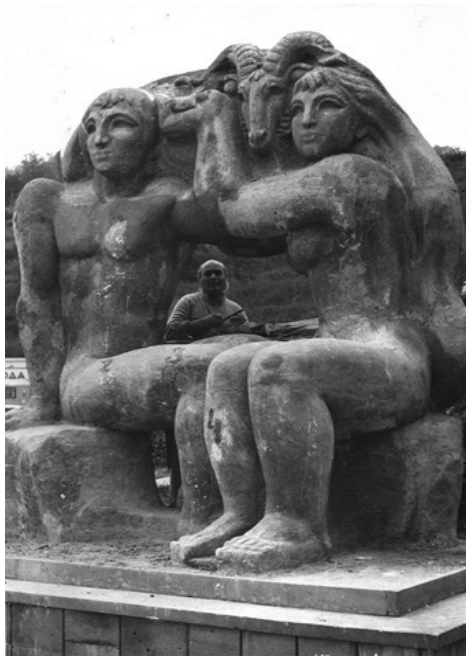


Figure 3. *Jason and Medea* by Jemal Japaridze, 1975 New Athos (Akhali Atoni). © Ketii Japaridze.

Another interpretation of the same myth comes from contemporary art. The American artist Gabriel Adams (2012), who took part in Art Sea

Poti, an open-air festival of contemporary art at Maltakva Park, with his work *Listen Speak* (Figure 4) writes the following:

“[...]Poti, Georgia’s major seaside port, shares a tragic piece of mythic history with this area of the Black Sea, the Greek myth regarding the theft of the Golden Fleece. In the aftermath of recent history, a Russian military occupation, as well as living in the shadow of the successful seaside town of Batumi, this story of the disappearing fleece seems to have embodied itself in physical reality. All goods imported touch Poti’s shore yet all this shipping activity appears to garner no benefit to the town whatsoever. Somehow, even if it is only a symbolic gesture, it is my hope that this work will motivate people to listen and speak, and perhaps be able to speak, to be heard, and as a result to have their golden fleece returned to them.[...]”



Figure 4. Gabriel Adams, *Listen Speak*, 2012. Commissioned by and installed at Art Sea, International Festival of Contemporary Art, Poti, Georgia (produced by Art Active). © Gabriel Adams.

Although the artist in fact aspires to raise awareness among residents of Poti and its area, by advocating them to speak up and be listened to in order to regain their importance as a port, because Poti has been in the shadow of Batumi for far too long, he –perhaps inadvertently – raises Batumi to a superior position. This only comes as further proof that the new mythology is so well-established that it cannot function as an intended “weapon” against the city it represents. The usage of the myth to reinforce Poti’s image in contrast to that of Batumi in fact obliquely reinforces the latter’s (regained) superiority.

The engagement of the Jason and Medea myth is not only top-down, but can also be found in “grassroots” initiatives, often in interesting juxtapositions with official approaches. Street art can yield some interesting information in this respect. In Batumi there is a pavement drawing of Jason fighting alone, and triumphing over the guardian dragon in order to attain the Golden Fleece. Although this heroic action was achieved with the help of Medea, who had prepared and given him a potion to put the dragon to sleep, Jason is here depicted on his own. This is a street interpretation of the myth that is counter to the repeated and overwhelming presence of Medea in various parts of the city.⁷ Semantically, this is done in two ways. First, the painter seems to be placing Jason “in the ground” as Jason is depicted alone, without Medea – whose presence, even though implied through the story of the myth, is not felt, let alone invested with any grandeur. As such, her dominance, as felt in the sculpture, is subdued and the importance bestowed upon her as the indisputable heroine is here contested with a version that more closely follows the original myth. The feminization of Batumi/Georgia no longer takes place; instead it feels as if tradition still honors the hero of the myth, an issue that perhaps relates to still-existing gender-relevant conceptions.

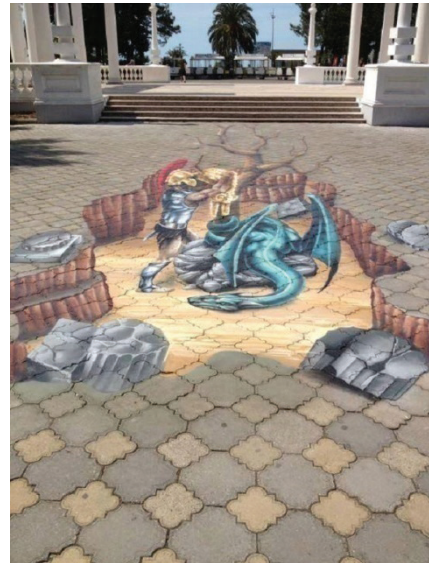


Figure 5. Jason defeating the Dragon and reclaiming the Golden Fleece, 2015 Batumi. © goba-tumi.com.

Second, even though 3D street art formally requires showing depth in order to produce the 3D effect, the scene can also be understood as taking

place is a sub-stratum of history. As the *faux*-excavated ground of the picture shows, the scene is deeply rooted within the city itself. This may be seen as symbolizing a visceral understanding of the myth by inhabitants, as opposed to the imposed, fabricated, Medea-only interpretation of the myth by the city authorities. In stark contrast to the sky-high *Medea* structure, which maintains a distance from the viewer⁸ the pavement drawing also appears to be closer to the actuality of the inhabitants of the city, to the extent that they are only one step away from the scene. The majestic statue on Europe Square, and street art versions of the myth offer opposing interpretations, creating a dialogue between the categories of “high” and “low” art, traditional and contemporary, top-down and grassroots.

This indicates the fact that in Batumi city imaging is not just an authority-directed enterprise here. There is also a need for expression from “within” and bottom-up. Perhaps even resistance to an imposed image that does not necessarily fit comfortably with the local communities’ perceptions and feelings is starting to grow. Although street art examples are not as common as the official art, this particular case allows for some early observations to be made. First, it is interesting that there is indeed a street culture forming in Batumi and that there is tolerance towards it, whereas previously this may not have been the case. Moreover, street art is a predominantly Western phenomenon, and that of global cities, such as New York, London and Paris. By analogy, the appearance of street art in Batumi invests it to global city status.

The symbolic importance of *Medea* for Batumi is, however, not exhausted in public art, whether commissioned, or the product of street artists (Nedareishvili 2007, 222–229). The new Radisson Blu hotel was built on the site of the old, Soviet hotel, “*Medea*.” What is perhaps most important for the sake of argumentation here is the visual effect caused by the silhouettes of the sculptures of *Medea* and the *Medea* (Radisson Blu) Hotel (Figure 6 and Figure 7). The outlines of the two structures function as negatives of each other. Their proximity may mean, in spatial terms, that whichever way one looks in this central part of the city, they will always see some version of *Medea*. This brings to mind Barthes’s proposition of the “perpetual alibi” in myth, whereby meaning and form are linked by a negative identity and alternate between the empty and the full depending on where the focus is placed (Barthes 2009, 147). Although this extrapolation is schematic and used here rather as an impactful example, this approach can invest with meaning the relationship between these two structures and their surrounding environment. Meaning and form, there, constantly interchange and never seem to leave the frame neither totally full, nor totally empty.

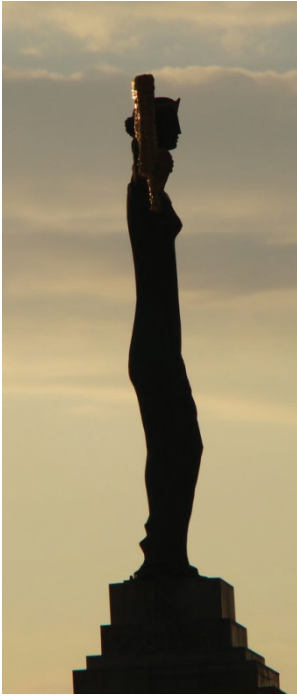


Figure 6. David Khmaladze, *Medea*, 2006. © Sebastian W. Bauer.



Figure 7. Hotel Medea, Adjara Resort JSC, Development Solutions LLC, Batumi, 2006 – 2011. Project: Architetto Michele De Lucchi Srl, Freyrie & Pestalozza Architetti Associati. Project team: Michele De Lucchi, Leopoldo Freyrie, Marco Pestalozza with Marcello Biffi, Laura Parolin, Andrea Saita, Sang Yeun Lee. © Gia Chkhatarashvili.

Proceeding from the above, I would like to argue that Barthes's treatment of myth as de-politicized speech (Barthes 2009, 167ff.) tallies with Medea's overall presence in contemporary Batumi. Barthes explains that the "political" must be understood as "describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world" and that the prefix "de-" does not negate, or undo a value, but instead abolishes contingency and historic fabrication. As such, Medea, who had so far, in art and otherwise, been exalted as the heroine of the Georgian nation, now becomes rather a non-specific symbol of the human power to "make the world", as demonstrated by the abstracted, emotionless statue that naturally blends into and converses with its surroundings, creating a number of repercussions.

One particular branch of branding, popular within the tourism industry, namely emotional branding, seeks to take a more emotional route to the consumers and to promote products in a soft way that takes the psychology and needs of the consumer into consideration.⁹ As Marc Gobé notes, the en-

trance to the new millennium has brought about the need for a combination of cultural elements of the past with modern or futuristic tendencies. The reason this happens is that it provides some relief to the distress of change and integration into a frenetic era, but it also allows consumers to empower themselves through an insinuated power of choice to combine “the best of all eras” (Gobé 2001, 293).

In the case of Medea, the myth she embodies, and its multiple iterations in Batumi this approach becomes particularly pertinent. After all, the accompanying literature of the statue, states that: “[t]his piece of monumental art serves as a unification of the past and the future, it actually combines the rich national and European cultural and artistic traditions”.¹⁰ All iterations in the city, ranging from the actual Medea sculpture, through to the Radisson Hotel, but also the related street art, seem to be firmly rooted in this emerging sensibility and practical direction of dealing with cultural elements past and future within the remit of urban dwelling and re-imaging.

Mythologizing: Man and Woman (Ali and Nino/Statue of Love)

Another “myth” that Batumi has shaped its image around in the last few years is expressed in Tamar Kvesitadze’s sculpture *Man and Woman* (2011, also known as “Ali and Nino”, and affectionately called locally “Statue of Love”). The tragic love story of the two youths, which is based on the novel by an author with the pseudonym Kurban Said (believed to be Azerbaijani),¹¹ has reportedly inspired the internationally renowned Georgian artist to create her *Man and Woman* (Figure 8). The work is a nine-meter high mechanic installation of two steel figures – one male and one female – who move towards one another, until they appear to kiss and merge into one sole figure, only to come apart again, perpetuating this cycle of movement. *Ali and Nino*, a novel developed around the love story of a Muslim Azerbaijani man and a Georgian Christian princess during the First World War details the societal and political challenges they had to face, only to be tragically separated by Ali’s death at war.

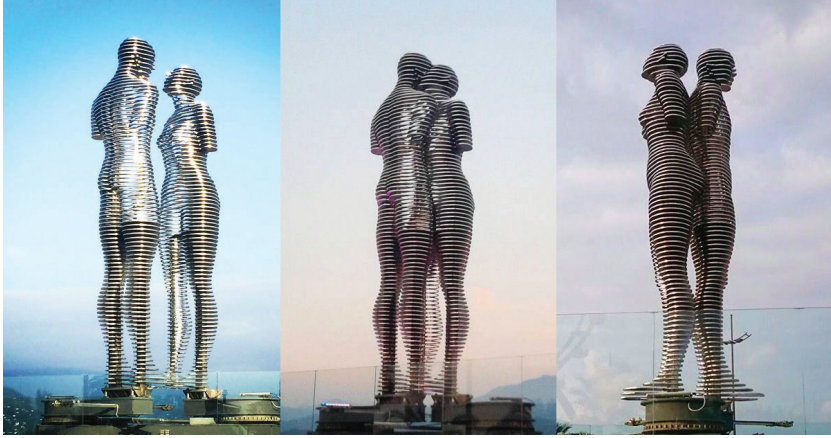


Figure 8. Tamara Kvesitadze, *Man and Woman*, 2011 Batumi. © Galerie Kornfeld.

It appears that love and unification have become a big issue for Batumi, as at least some of the city's public art commissions show. Aside from Kvesitadze's *Man and Woman*, the Batumi seafront has also been dotted with Guela Tsouladze's series of sculptures *Love* (2008). These are oversized metal constructions of human outlines in various configurations that hold or somehow interact with a heart. They are positioned along the waterfront promenade in Batumi. In this particular case, the personal mythology of the artist is taken up and turned into a city myth, as Tsouladze has explained that it was a personal circumstance, which led him to create the first variations of these sculptures in 1993 in New York. Another example of public art referring to the same subject is Irakli Tsuladze's *First Love* (2012), also positioned on the Batumi waterfront promenade. Although it looks like it is referring to romantic love, I would argue that it also creates connotations that relate to the end of conflict and the dawn of a new era, where unity and harmony reign. In any case, this approach is a prime example of the prevalence of the soft branding approach, where the emotional response of the inhabitants/visitors of Batumi is sought.

However, although (romantic) love is present in the waterfront area of Batumi with the above sculptures, the heroic love between Jason and Medea is not documented anywhere. On the one hand, this points to the fact that Batumi could, possibly, aim to extol universal love and harmony between people(s), especially following the end of the conflict, which could be the reason for which all three artists are chosen to portray love through the deployment of human figures that are almost entirely devoid of external char-

acteristics defining race, ethnicity or age. The only exception is the *Man and Woman* sculpture, which, obliquely but surely, refers back to the tragic love of an Azerbaijani Muslim and a Georgian Christian. This is an issue that is especially pertinent in contemporary Adjara, where Orthodoxy is often intertwined with Georgian nationalism, while the Muslim population is concerned about their integration and equal treatment (Liles 2012, 18).

By contrast, the myth of Jason and Medea, an ancient, non-religion-specific myth – at least in contemporary terms – seems to take a step back



Figure 9 and 10. Guela Tsouladze from Love sculptures, 2010 Batumi. © Guela Tsouladze.



Figure 11. Irakli Tsuladze, *First Love*, 2012 Batumi. © Irakli Tsuladze.

in the city's quest for the portrayal of hope and commitment for harmonious and loving relationships (whether social or personal). Moreover, Medea is perhaps too precious a symbol, supporting a whole new, abstracted mythology that pertains to global expectations for the city, as seen above, that she cannot be sacrificed at the altar of the rather more contained and specific notion of "love and harmony", also promoting inter-cultural love, albeit with significant differences.

In reference to Guela Tsouladze's and Tamar Kvesitadze's sculptures it should be noted here that the "heart" sign was used around the same time that these sculptures were created, for the new city logos of other Black Sea cities that Batumi competes with in significance and visibility, namely Odessa and Istanbul (Figure 12 and Figure 13).



Figure 12. Odessa City Logo, 2012.
© Art Lebedev Studio.



Figure 13. Identity design for the Süleymaniye development project, 2012. © Al Mohtaraf.

The heart sign has inextricably been linked with the successful branding of the city of New York, as we are reminded by Milton Glaser's logo "I love New York," which has symbolized the city since 1977 (Greenberg 2008, 11; Figure 14).



Figure 14. Milton Glaser, I love NY, 1977. © Milton Glaser Studio.

I would argue, then, that the heart-logo competition is not limited to Batumi and its rival cities, Odessa and Istanbul, and therefore not limited to the Black Sea basin. Rather, it references New York, which is perhaps expected if one pays attention to a set of already apparent elements. New York is among those prime global cities, alongside Paris and London, which Batumi seeks to emulate. Elements of New York's seminal images have already infiltrated Batumi, even if implicitly, as for example the Trump Tower and the New York-based Sheraton hotel. Moreover, the statue of *Medea* is, despite the difference in the historical and socioeconomic conditions, which produced them, rather reminiscent of the Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi and Gustave Eiffel's *Statue of Liberty* (1886).

This observation fits within Castells's conception of the "space of flows", namely the manifestation of the detachment of dominant power and production organisations from societies and cultural identities based on place (Castells 1989, 167-171). Within this context, on the one hand information technology allows for the collapse of temporal relevance and on the other there is a random combination of "flows", which may include capital, information, technology, organizational interaction, images, sounds and symbols. The space of flows reappears in Castells's (2000, 442) later work, *The Rise of the Network Society*, where it assumes a firmer definition as "purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors in the economic, political, and symbolic structures of society". To the extent that that economic and political structures form the background, and the symbolic structures are here at the forefront for our purposes, the virtual exchange of Batumi's main actors

with New York, for example the Sheraton, the Trump Tower, the “heart” logo, the resemblance of *Medea* to the *Statue of Liberty* all inscribe in this context. It thus becomes apparent that Batumi is a city already residing in a “space of flows”, which brings it closer to its imaging aims.

The Ali and Nino story is often likened to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. This reference aids the city of Batumi in its imaging purposes in at least three ways. First, the romantic story of Romeo and Juliet has an undoubted recognisability and universality of message. The age-old theme of love and unity arising between differing sides, albeit through tragic events is reiterated in the case of Ali and Nino, who fight through the disparity of their religions. The statue which incorporates this strong social commentary that can be found in the tradition of at least one other place and age, obliquely elevates its host city to the status of place where inter-cultural love (romantic or otherwise) and harmonious co-existence is more than possible. On a more pragmatic level, the relationship drawn between Romeo and Juliet and Ali and Nino links the city of Batumi to Verona and thus strengthens the importance of the former as a tourist destination. After all, Batumi’s contemporary efforts to create links with Italian architecture are evident through various examples. These include the Piazza Batumi (Figure 15), which is reminiscent of Italian *piazze* and specifically of the Piazza San Marco in Venice, and the statue of Neptune in front of the Batumi Drama Theatre in 2010, which is a copy of the original statue of Neptune in Bologna and a reference to many similar statues in various cities of Europe (Figure 16). Again, there is a specific combination of images, symbols, capital and organizational interaction that not only functions on a semiotic level, but also directly references the literature of the network society above, highlighting Batumi’s efforts to secure its global city status.

Mythologizing: A global gateway

Observing the frenetic rhythm of Batumi’s redevelopment and city imaging since the early 2000s it can safely be assumed that one of the things it pursues is the acquisition of a global city status. By “global city” Saskia Sassen (2001), who first coined the term, intends a city that holds a strategic role in the globalised economy today. A global city is understood as an urban formation that both concentrates control and is the expression of the urban social and economic changes that have occurred owing to the financial and specialised service industries’ upsurge since the 1980s. The latter come as a result of a quick and sudden growth of the globalization of economic activity and the intense growth of services in all industries.



Figure 15. Piazza, 2010 Batumi. Chief Architect: Vazha Orbeladze. © gobatumi.com.



Figure 16. *Neptune Fountain* (Batumi Drama Theatre and the Radisson Blu Hotel in the background). © Aleksey Muhranoff/travelgeorgia.ru – CC-BY-SA.3.0

There are certain elements of a global city that Batumi already reflects: it demonstrates an important concentration of industries and investments, and innovation.¹² It also showcases a rapid social change that is not only due to the change in its economy and structure, but is also the consequence of its exit from the time of conflict. As mentioned earlier, the construction activity is a telling, visual and tangible, sign of this new reality. It remains, however, within the realm of the emulation of Western approaches. The city, instead, seems again to choose to “mythify” its desired, progressively acquired global

character through works of public art, in a similar vein to the one it has done for the revisiting of the age-old and area-related discourses above.

As analysed in the previous section, Batumi is already becoming a global city, within the context of the “space of flows”. The latter can only be understood within the network society, the literal spaces for which are provided by the global city. In its search for its new status, Batumi creates some new discourses to portray itself, equally, I suggest, to the world and to its own inhabitants. According to Castells’s (2000) analysis of the “space of flows”, social actors in the economic, political, and symbolic structures of society organise it based on three levels of support: a circuit of electronic exchanges, hubs and nodes, and the spatial organisation of the dominant elites. In the first, no space existed for itself; however, places do not disappear, but their logic and meaning become absorbed in the network. The second layer is constituted of nodes and hubs. The above-mentioned electronic network links up specific places, with social, cultural, physical, and functional characteristics. Some places are communications hubs (coordinating smooth interaction of the elements of the network), while other are the nodes of the network (the location of functions that build a series of locality-based activities and organisations around a key network function). The third layer concerns the spatial organization of the dominant, managerial elites (rather than classes). I will refer below to three contemporary public works of art in Batumi that I posit respond to these three levels of support.

Emile Laugier’s *L’Arobase (The @ sign, 2012)* (Figure 17), also placed along the promenade, is a constant reminder of Batumi’s connectedness, virtual and real, to the rest of the world. The “@” sign signifies the non-place, the collapse of time and the inter-connectedness of the globalised economy. However, the fact that this *par excellence* virtual sign has been given undoubted materiality that moreover invests it with similarities with elements of the natural world, such as shells, turns it into a clear and unshakeable visual reminder/vehicle of reassurance about Batumi’s new identity, albeit geographically precise and linked to tradition through the choice of art form.

Jean Dupuy’s sculptural installation *WHERE* (Figure 18) on the Batumi seafront is another constant reminder of the globalized world.¹³ It could be seen as abstracted presentation of the second level of support, that of hubs and nodes, emphasizing the different directions of communication and the points of functions in the economy. However, this can also be interpreted as a self-reflective question of the city itself. Batumi may be wondering where it is standing within this frenzy of development and lack of clear direction. It could be argued that this is again a case of “myth robbing” as analyzed in the first section: the city itself may be seen as robbing itself from the image



Figure 17. Emile Laugier, *L'arobase*, 2011 Batumi. © Guela Tsouladze.

of the once-mighty, central in economic exchange crossroads that was once full of certainty, to invest it with the uncertainty and the “flow”-like reality of the globalized system of which it forms part.

Elisa Fantozzi's *Perilleusement votre* (“*Perilously yours*”, 2012) (Figure 19) portrays a giant flip-flop balanced on eggs. The fact that the city decided to install it in front of the Radisson Blu (“Medea”) hotel indicates its preoccupation with the matter. The artist maintains that visitors to the hotel can see the installation and feel a sort of playfulness. She hopes that the flip-flop evokes positive emotions, at least among locals (Life as Fragile as Stepping on Eggs 2012). However, I argue that the work may also represent the third level of support, namely the spatial organization of managerial elites. It is no coincidence that the work will first and foremost be viewed by businessmen who reside in the global brand hotel. The flip-flop itself could be considered a code both for one of the biggest global industries, namely tourism, and the lifestyle service industries for white-collar workers globally. Beyond that, however, the work may also indicate a double-edged sword situation in which the city finds itself: Batumi is an exciting, imposing tourist destination, alluded to by the holiday footwear. However, a menacing possibility lurks under the surface, the breaking of the eggs, and a very fine balance is needed to avoid it. The work could well be read as an allegorical comment on the city's dangerous flirtation with spectacular and uncontrolled development that is uncritically pursued. This is a consequence of quick and sudden growth of the global city as observed above.

It is interesting to note here, in relation to the desired global city status, and to Batumi's tendency to emulate an “elsewhere” that these commissioned artworks, as many other found in Batumi, are by artists living in Paris. This virtual link that is created between the two cities, Batumi and Paris again



Figure 18. Jean Dupuy, *WHERE*, 2010 Batumi. © Guela Tsouladze.



Figure 19. Elisa Fantozzi, *Périlleusement votre*, 2011. © Elisa Fantozzi.

brings the former conceptually to an equal level to one of the most recognised global cities, in a way similar to the one described earlier with the example of New York.

Conclusions

As I attempted to show via a selection of examples, myth(ologie)s of the processes of city-imagining and identity-shaping of contemporary Batumi are articulated on various levels and in differing combinations. There appears to be a multitude of pre-existing and newly-created signs that in a process of second-order signification become signifiers of the character that Batumi seemsto desire to show to the world at large. Aside from the fact that these rehashed or emerging associations shape Batumi's current and future identity, they also demonstrate that the city almost continuously and indecisively oscillates between two poles. Binary oppositions are created, which include: old-new, local-global, Christian-Muslim, European-Asian, spectacular-subdued, top-down-grassroots, and which consistently seem to feed one another.

It is more than apparent that the city does not exactly conform to other Western examples of renewal and city-branding, due in part to its projected aims. It becomes obvious that Batumi combines a seemingly deeply-rooted need to follow age-old, even traditional discourses, which it then challenges, demystifies, and "mythifies" into alternative, contemporary ones that befit the city's aim for re-imagining. In so doing, Batumi seems to allow approaches of soft, even insidious, branding to take precedence over more tried and tested hard-branding methods. The latter are evident and immediate, however they do not seem to be the catalysing force in the city's imagining efforts. On the contrary, the strong associations created on many other levels of communication seem to indicate a distinguishing local difference existing alongside more established methods, also found elsewhere in the world. Therefore, researchers need to create a set of tools specific to the city of Batumi, with which it will be possible to critically assess the processes it undergoes in its quest for identity.

This case study shows that the Black Sea city is not coherent in its approach to change. But it also underlines the ever-expanding tendency of other parts of the world to uncritically adopt methods that were initially developed for Western settings, where the specific historic and socio-economic conditions and local traditions and heritage affected the decisions made. Such a realization calls for further research and careful, individual, approaches to all cities that undergo similar transformations throughout the world, and in particular in the turbulent and fast-evolving area that is the Black Sea basin today.

Notes

1. Batumi was first mentioned by Aristotle in 4th century B.C., as “limen bathys” (“deep port” in Greek). The place name *Batumi* derives from the Greek word *bathys* (“deep”). The city has since demonstrated historical continuity.
2. Saakashvili was President for two consecutive terms, from 25 January 2004 to 17 November 2013. He is currently Odessa’s Governor.
3. For a comprehensive account of culture-led urban regeneration plans in cities through the ages see Graeme Evans, 2001. *Cultural Planning: an Urban Renaissance?* London and New York: Routledge.
4. Among them global hotel brands such as Hilton, Sheraton, Kempinski and Radisson.
5. David Khmaladze, e-mail interview with the author. 20 October, 2015.
6. The bas reliefs were created by artist David Natidze.
7. This includes her statue in Europe Square, the *Medea* refectory in the Park Cafe, and the *Medea* Hotel (Radisson Blu, see below).
8. The distance created that the artist was forced to find special ways to show the characteristics of the statue’s face and expression, see *Monument of Medea*, op.cit.
9. For a first dealing with emotional branding in relation to cultural development see EvdoxiaBaniotopoulou, “*Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis: A case-study of institutional curating of contemporary art in an urban context* (unpublished PhD thesis, London: Central Saint Martins, 2010).
10. The Monument of Medea with Golden Fleece. n.d.[brochure]
11. The first edition of the novel was published in the German language by Verlag E.P.Tal & Co, Vienna, 1937. The true identity of the author has not been established, though there are many theories about who he may have been. Ayaydin Cebe 2012, 50-55.
12. For a comprehensive presentation of vital facts on the city of Batumi see “Economic indicators” and “Key sectors” (<http://investinbatumi.ge/guide.php?id=12>). Batumi has been awarded several international awards, including “Autonomous Republic of Ajara as Investor Friendly Region”, Batumi as The Best New Destination” and “Chairman of Ajara A.R. Levan Varshalomidze as Innovative Governor” by the American Academy of Hospitality Services (<http://investinbatumi.ge/welcome.php?id=24>).
13. This work here is unique. However, there exists a set of similar works with the works *HERE* and *WHERE* in France: one is in a vineyard in

Bordeaux (château Smith Haut Lafitte) and one is in a country land next to Paris. Information acquired through communication with the artist's gallery, 18 October 2015.

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