

## New Look for Old Tbilisi: Preservation Planning in Tbilisi Historic District

### Abstract

*Historic preservation in Georgia is not always about history or preservation. Georgia's struggles to protect Tbilisi's historic architecture tell us more about Georgian identity than about urban policy. Heritage generally aims to connect communities with the past, but crafting a post-Soviet identity in Georgia has often meant avoiding reconciliation with history. Although tempting to blame the usual post-Soviet specters of state corruption and stunted civil society, the most dramatic changes in fact reflect efforts to craft both new personal and national identities, as well as changing notions what Georgians expect from historic spaces, city planning, and urban life more broadly. In Tbilisi, both public and private forces in the city have undertaken an identity project enacted through the built environment, replacing traditional vernacular architectures that emphasized communality with new forms more amenable to both private consumption and individual ownership.*

**Keywords:** *heritage, urban planning, historic preservation, architecture, identity*

### Introduction

Foreign visitors to Tbilisi are often enchanted by the old city's open woodwork balconies, stained glass panels, and exuberant towers, which can seem at once both familiar and exotic. Tbilisi's position along the Silk Road caravan route between Europe and Asia produced a diverse yet coherent mix of distinctive vernacular forms. The architectural legacies of Persian, Ottoman, and Russian conquests can be found among vine-shaded balconies and labyrinths of interconnected courtyards. Indeed, Tbilisi's postcard-picturesque neighborhoods clustered around the original medieval center—known as the Old Tbilisi Historic District (Figure 1)—would seem an obvious candidate for an UNESCO World Heritage Site. And yet for more than a decade and a half, UNESCO has turned a cold shoulder to such a designation.



**Figure 1.** Map of central Tbilisi with Old (“Dzveli”) Tbilisi in red.

Tellingly, this failure to win UNESCO approval stemmed not from the district’s lack of cultural and historic significance but rather from a lack of state and municipal competence. When the Georgian Ministry of Culture submitted a nomination dossier for Tbilisi Historic District to UNESCO in 1999, the committee determined the district met almost every criterion for “outstanding universal value” as a potential World Heritage Site (UNESCO 2005). But UNESCO (2001) determined the proposal failed to meet standards for “the protection, management, authenticity and integrity of properties”—in other words, the plans for preservation UNESCO employs this criterion to prevent local governments from neglecting management responsibilities and relying on UNESCO for funding. As a result, even the worthiest site cannot be listed if its sponsoring state cannot or will not undertake various site-supportive responsibilities. To date, authorities in Tbilisi have done little to reassure UNESCO of their willingness or ability to develop such plans.

How and why Old Tbilisi failed to qualify for heritage status—despite its obvious value—provides a revealing portal into Georgians’ efforts to construct a national identity in the post-Soviet era. Although the city’s impressive architectural heritage faces formidable, if familiar, physical threats, it is in many ways Georgia’s fraught relationship with its own urban heritage and nascent political identity that pose the greatest challenges. Seeking simultaneously to distance itself from the collectivism of the Soviet era and to present itself as ready for inclusion in membership Western Europe Tbilisi has spent much of the past decade destroying its architectural heritage in order to build a city that better serves its new national story. This new architectural

autobiography, however, is neither faithful history nor serves the city's most vulnerable residents.

Tbilisi's remaking has been driven by three distinct—if overlapping—forces, each pursuing different agendas, shaped by different budgets, and reflecting different social groups. But uniting all has been a shared agenda of articulating a new national identity—a project that includes both retrofitting the past while also reaching towards a hoped-for future. The first of these forces is the city's new urban gentry. Eager for spatial and social insulation, Tbilisi wealthy have abandoned traditional shared courtyards, with their blurred property rights and class boundaries, in favor of fortified mansions.

The second force is the state's ham-fisted attempts at historic preservation planning. Old Tbilisi is imagined less as a functioning residential neighborhood and more as a sanitized advertisement to tourists and global investors. This force ascended in tandem with the rise of the United National Movement's pro-Western platform in 2003. UNM simultaneously glorified Georgian history while also calling for a modernized future in step with Europe rather than Russia. Although both of these narratives appealed to a beleaguered public emerging from Moscow's long shadow, their inherent incongruity has produced conflicted planning agendas—and so limited historic preservation—for Old Tbilisi.

The third force, trapped between an encroaching elite and an ineffective state, is the result of low-income Old Tbilisi residents' attempts to improve their status and living conditions. Without the resources of the elite, most historic district residents cannot afford to replace their crumbling homes outright—and many cannot afford to repair a structure suffering from complex systemic issues. Residents are thus left to improve their lot via extensions and enclosures that occupy formerly public spaces or modify historic buildings beyond recognition.

Like many other former Soviet cities, Tbilisi has worked to reestablish its distinct municipal identity after decades of plans handed down from Moscow. In shaking off centralized schemes, however, the city has also rejected nearly all long-term planning. Embracing Western free market's ideals with the zealotry of fresh converts, Tbilisians have placed their faith in the invisible hand to optimize outcomes in nearly all realms. The consequences have been disastrous for historic neighborhoods with legacies of pronounced poverty and deteriorating infrastructure. Inadequate maintenance, reckless demolition, and inappropriate alterations continue to undermine the physical and aesthetic integrity of Tbilisi's historic architecture.

This absence of comprehensive planning in the tumultuous wake of independence left Old Tbilisi vulnerable to a debilitating mix of long-de-

ferred maintenance and political imperatives to shape an urban environment amenable to neoliberal development. Although the United National Movement promised greater transparency and a departure from “post-Soviet chaos,” President Mikheil Saakashvili’s pursuit of foreign investment arguably encouraged municipal authorities to forego any preservation planning that might impede Georgia’s lauded rise to the top of the World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business Index. Valued only as testaments to an idealized past, historic buildings fall prey to whichever renovation scheme best advances the narrative of an European Georgia, preferably at the lowest cost to City Hall. In this clumsy attempt to make itself more attractive to Europe, Georgia both destroys its distinctive architecture and denies the pluralism central to the European value system.

The 2009 “New Life for Old Tbilisi” plan revealed the shortcomings of a municipal government in thrall to pastiche European Olde-Towne branding and content to leave responsibility for historic neighborhoods entirely in the hands of the private sector. Developed with no public input, the scheme imposed the logic of individual real estate ownership upon an urban environment that had historically emphasized shared spaces. This clash of property regimes, and the resulting erosion of traditional Tbilisi architecture, reveals a country unable to imagine a middle ground between socialist collectivism and capitalist atomization. The fate of Old Tbilisi is the embodiment of the Georgian post-soviet identity project in the built environment.

### *Vernacular Architecture and Identity in Old Tbilisi*

Residences built by Tbilisi’s nineteenth-century merchant elite, with their Eastern-inflected design elements retained from the city’s earlier history as a Silk Road trading hub, are now considered the most emblematic architecture of the “Old City”. Historic houses generally feature balconies and a courtyard, which is often encircled by tiers of open or glazed galleries. These distinctive aspects of Tbilisi vernacular architecture define the neighborhood’s character and shape local social interactions, but their communal nature presents formidable obstacles to preservation, privatization, and the post-Soviet identity project.

Today’s wealthy Georgians, with eyes fixed on the European middle class, prefer private consumption to collective sociability. This new worldview finds the blurred social barriers of the shared courtyard an embarrassing “oriental” (or worse, socialist) relic with little resemblance to the idealized “Euro-remont” residence in a detached home or tower apartment. Similarly,

urban planners and historic preservationists struggle to regulate ambiguous collective spaces within a market regime intended for clearly defined private properties. As the consistent failure to meet UNESCO planning standards illustrates, the obstacles to preserving Tbilisi's distinctive architecture reveals much about Georgians' headlong rush to establish a new identity as Westernized urbanites.

Old Tbilisi is aesthetically and socially characterized by two architectural elements: the balcony and the courtyard. Both occupy a grey area between public and private space, lending themselves to informal social interactions. Balconies extend private space over public streets, while courtyards invite public space to the doorstep. The role of Tbilisi vernacular architecture in shaping community life can be found embedded in the word *mezobeli* (neighbor), which takes its root from *ezo* (courtyard) (Mania 2010, 9–15). In recent years, however, the value of Old Tbilisi architecture as a social environment has been eclipsed by its roles as tourist backdrop and symbol of Georgian East-meets-West culture.

Of course, folk symbols rarely have an uncomplicated provenance, and Old Tbilisi's iconic balconies are no exception. Although an ancient city, Tbilisi's most cherished historic buildings actually date back no further than the Russian imperial era. After the Persians razed Tbilisi to its foundations in 1795, Russia annexed Georgia only a few years later (1801). The ruined capital's new rulers resurrected Tbilisi as a cosmopolitan trading hub and seat of imperial administration, with an eclectic mix of architectural styles imported from Europe, including a Haussmann-like parade boulevard and a grid plan dictating expansion beyond the medieval core. Traditional balconies graced the homes of Tbilisi's merchant elite, who were not Georgian, but rather almost entirely Armenian (Suny 1994).

Many of Old Tbilisi's iconic imperial-era residences were, in fact, commissioned by this Armenian elite. Armenians would continue to dominate urban commerce and industry well into the early twentieth century, even as their influence was diluted by an influx of Russian administrators and rural-to-urban Georgian migrants. When Georgia declared independence from the Russian Empire in 1917, local Bolsheviks exploited the shaky republic's economic chaos to aggravate ethnic tensions, framing the Armenian urban bourgeoisie as enemies of the Georgian proletariat. The triumph of the Bolshevik Red Army over Menshevik Georgia in 1921 led to the replacement of remaining influential Armenians with Georgians, bolstering the Soviet narrative of Georgia's willing incorporation into the Soviet Union. The once-rural Georgians who repopulated Tbilisi eagerly constructed a new national narrative emphasizing their own presence in the city, often shouldering

aside the complex legacy of urban culture in the Caucasus. As historian Ronald Grigor Suny (2009, 17–55) notes wryly, the “Sovietization of Georgia” ultimately resulted in the “Georgianization” of Tbilisi. Old Tbilisi became an architectural synecdoche of sorts for Georgia itself—a process that by necessity simplified more nuanced historical associations. In short, the architectural symbols of a timeless Georgian urbanity are neither particularly old nor particularly Georgian. The passage of time has enabled contemporary Tbilisians to claim Russian imperial-era structures inhabited by Armenians as reflective of an essential Georgian identity.

### *Preservation Trends in the Private Sector*

Paradoxically, the embrace of Tbilisi architecture as a folk symbol has only complicated historic preservation efforts. Although Tbilisians nearly always identify neighborhoods in the “Old City” as prestigious, they often dismiss the district’s historic courtyard-style buildings as offering too little in the way of privacy and security. The new urban ideal, then, is to live in a high-status historic neighborhood, but in a comfortable “modern” house. The predictable consequence has been a rash of new buildings constructed in precisely the neighborhoods originally valued for their distinctive historic architecture (Manning 2009, 924–945) (Figure 2). High land values—if not high structural values—in Tbilisi’s core have marginalized shared space and the city’s distinctive architectural heritage. In their place, Tbilisians have installed a system of clear private property boundaries more amenable to free market transactions and an atomized built environment reflecting Western aspirations. Retreating into walled compounds, Tbilisi’s new elite has created, in the words of



**Figure 2.** Residences of the new elite, socially and aesthetically out of character with the surrounding historic architecture. © Angela Wheeler.

anthropologist Paul Manning(2009, 71–102), an “architectural embodiment of the rigid separation” that stands in contrast to the traditional cityscape.

Like many gentrifying neighborhoods, Old Tbilisi suffers not only from invasive new development, but also from a legacy of poverty. The city’s already-fragile historic neighborhoods suffered in the post-Soviet period, between urban warfare, infrastructural collapse, unemployment, haphazard property redistribution, mass emigration, and a major earthquake. Poor economic conditions and high rates of poverty in the historic districts prevented homeowners from undertaking much-needed repairs (Vardosanidze 2000, 105–115). Without homeowner’s insurance or a stable government to provide assistance, many buildings went decades without maintenance, allowing minor problems to escalate into systemic structural failures.

Facing a drastic housing shortage and a chaotic economic climate, residents were often unable to relocate from the buildings crumbling around them. Undertaking in situ home improvement (often by expanding living space into previously communal areas) was the only real option for a vast majority of the urban population. The architectural consequences have been dubbed VBEs, or “Vertical Building Extensions” (Bouzarovski et al. 2009). These are best thought of as gated compounds on a budget, parasitic growths that do not conform to their “host” buildings socially or aesthetically—and occasionally engulf the original structure entirely (Figure 3). While not as dramatic as wholesale demolition, their occupation of shared spaces and communication arteries, blocking light and access, has had a transformative effect on the urban landscape of Tbilisi (Chogoshvili 2013).

The jerry-built privatization of Old Tbilisi is not just a recent real estate phenomenon, but also a legacy of post-Soviet transition. Across the former Soviet Union, residential privatization was intended to follow a standardized, formal process. In practice, it was erratic, and frequently resulted in the occupation of previously shared but legally ambiguous spaces like courtyards, gardens, balconies, galleries, and stairwells (Ballester et al. 2002). By the late 1990s, many Old Tbilisi courtyards were compartmentalized into labyrinths of storage sheds, garages, parking lots, or fenced-off private gardens. In many ways, this chaotic new urban landscape forms the mirror image of state-led privatization efforts. If City Hall sought to sanitize Tbilisi’s past for tourists and commission sleek towers that whisper of investment opportunities to foreign businesses, the “Old City’s” private residents likewise aimed to retreat from the communality of the shared courtyard and extract a slice of their own post-Soviet dues. Although Soviet housing policy also led to subdivision of courtyard houses, those earlier modifications differed in their intent from current trends. Then, vanishing courtyards were merely the collat-

eral damage of collectivist property redistribution; today, as that redistribution is reversed, courtyards are targeted both by a new property regime organized around individual ownership, and by the new forms of identity resting upon private consumption.



**Figure 3.** Extensions and additions found on buildings in Old Tbilisi. Additions often accelerate structural damage to old buildings never intended to carry the weight of new floors or materials. © Angela Wheeler.

### *Preservation Trends in the Public Sector*

The architectural manifestation of the post-Soviet Georgian identity project, however, is not simply the work of individual Old Tbilisi residents grasping for Euro-remont. The state, particularly under pro-West President Mikheil Saakashvili, frequently undertook politically motivated “preservation” efforts that neither protected historic architecture nor accurately represented the Georgian past. Instead, these projects advance a new national narrative that sanitized much of the country’s past: the half-century of communism; the decade of chaos in the 1990s, and the centuries of ethnic and confessional pluralism reaching back to the ninth century. Tbilisi, in this ar-



chitectural telling, was a modernized capital aspiring to European inclusion, safe for package tourists and global investors alike.

Eager to create an historic core resembling those found in western European capitals, City Hall embarked on a campaign that could best be described as retrofitting the past to serve the needs of a desired future. The UNESCO-designated historic districts of major European cities have several attributes that appealed to a Westward-looking political administration: cleanliness, prestige, revenue-generation, and architectural embodiment of national identity. Municipal leaders determined to remake Old Tbilisi in this image, failing to take into account the long-term social, political, and financial organization that created the appropriate conditions for West European historic districts to flourish (Gerkeuli 2010, 51–64).

In addition to a revived Old Tbilisi, City Hall faced significant pressure to relieve overcrowding and bring housing and infrastructure up to standards common in other European cities, without the support once provided by the Soviet state. Tbilisi's last master plan, developed under Soviet rule, expired years ago, and political turmoil has prevented a new one from being drafted (Van Assche et al. 2009, 243–304). Or, as some pundits have suggested, City Hall has deliberately refrained from developing a new master plan so that it might pursue investment opportunities more freely. The Saakashvili administration certainly made attraction of foreign investment one of its top priorities (Figure 4), resulting in pressure to de-list registered historic buildings in order to sell valuable downtown plots for new development.

In the twentieth century, Tbilisi took shape under either the rigid, centralized urban planning of the Soviet Union or the unregulated market forces of the post-Independence years. Launched in 2009, the “New Life for Old Tbilisi” renovation scheme—endorsed by the Saakashvili administration—was promoted as an attempt to reconcile these extremes, addressing urgent planning issues without the undesirable implications of socialism. Planners and developers, the marketing went, would work together to address both preservation and quality of life issues in Old Tbilisi. Banks were to provide loans (guaranteed by City Hall) to developers to complete unfinished projects. Developers would then negotiate with Old Tbilisi homeowners to “swap” properties: residents would vacate historic homes, surrender them to the developer, and move into the newly-finished projects that would not otherwise be profitable. The developer could renovate or demolish the old house, and sell the lot back to City Hall at a rate of USD 400 per square meter, allowing them to defray their original debts to the banks. City Hall would hold the properties for unspecified future investments and developments (Arch-uadze 2012, 21–23).



**Figure 4.** Between 2009 and 2011, the Georgian government paid for full-page ads in *The Economist*, emphasizing low taxes and loose regulations within a rapidly-modernizing democracy. Architecture old and new often featured prominently.

Officials hoped for multiple benefits: better housing for the historic districts' poor, a reinvigorated construction industry, higher employment, and an Old Tbilisi that would be cleaner and more palatable to tourists. The program's ingenuity in the midst of financial crisis was praised in an article for *Architectural Review*—albeit one written by architect Nick Shavishvili (2003), whose firm had a stake in the project. In the end, however, “New Life,” earned a mixed reception from both Tbilisi residents and the international heritage community.

“New Life,” along with other historic district redevelopment projects commissioned by City Hall, ultimately undermined the Georgian identity project’s goals of European integration and World Heritage Site they were originally intended to serve. Low-quality restoration work, top-down implementation lacking in transparency, and the destruction of public amenities were roundly criticized by local planners and the internal press alike (Batiashvili 2010, 34–39).

The only committee to oversee “New Life” work, a parity council, was composed mainly of the developers and municipal officials rather than planners or heritage professionals, which explains why so little attention was paid to selecting appropriate preservation approaches for each site. Conservation advocates who want to preserve existing structures according to professional

conservation standards struggle to find common ground with those who argue for full restoration of buildings to appearances that they may never have had. This approach—dubbed by preservationists as the “stylistic unity theory” of building—emphasizes “stylistic consistency, purity, and unity” (Stubbs 2009). Implementing stylistic unity theory in Old Tbilisi might make for a more marketable image market for visitors, but it also ignores and erases the complex, multi-ethnic history of the districts. If the European heritage conservation establishment relies on the retention of original material remains, and Asian heritage professionals place greater importance on the retention of the spirit of the place, under “New Life,” Tbilisi accomplishes little of either.

At many of the “New Life” sites, historic buildings were not usually preserved, but demolished and reconstructed (often with an extra floor or two), creating a “Potemkin village” effect (Figure 5). Rather than producing an appealing environment for tourists and potential business tenants, the lack of informal social space results in a landscape too sterile and incoherent to attract pedestrians. Candy colors and clean lines, it seems, are a poor substitute for even the long-neglected public spaces of unrestored historic neighborhoods. As Paul Manning (2009) has observed, emphasis on façades alone leads to pastiche architecture, in which traditional idioms are folklorized and



**Figure 5.** Sterile streetscapes in newly-renovated Old Tbilisi. © Angela Wheeler.

theatricalized, detached from their original social meanings and reduced to symbols of the “Old Tbilisi” brand—a brand that was exported across Georgia and applied as a one-size-fits-all image for other historic cities across the country (Figure 6) (Suramelashvili 2013). It could be said, then, that under the “New Life” scheme, Old Tbilisi is being replaced by “Old Tbilisi Revival,” a twenty-first century pastiche that reimagines nineteenth century urbanity, with only the most superficial concessions to traditional forms.

There are, however, alternatives. Other historic cities have preserved their architectural heritage, and the social interactions it supports, in ways that leverage preservation’s potential as a public service—difficult as that might be to quantify. But in Georgia public amenities were among the first victims of Soviet collapse, as their maintenance requires long-term policies and coordination of efforts. Although they rarely produce enough revenue to offset expenses, public space is an invaluable resource, particularly for low-income residents who are more likely to live in overcrowded conditions. While Soviet planners allocated as much as one-third of each neighborhood to public space, independence and the transition to “wild” capitalism swept aside such interferences with market forces (Shavishvili 2009, 209–224). Building residents carved up shared courtyards while new entrepreneurs seized park space



**Figure 6.** The Old Tbilisi brand exported across Georgia: (clockwise, from top left) Mtskheta, Telavi, Sighnaghi, Tbilisi. © Angela Wheeler.

for their kiosks, restaurants, and shops. Rather than reverse this trend, City Hall has been content to turn over public space to commercial tenants without the consent of surrounding residents (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Renderings by German architecture firm Zechner & Zechner detail a plan to develop largely residential, middle-class Gudiashvili Square into an upscale outdoor mall (the drawings even suggested commercial tenants including Prada, Chanel, and Emporio Armani). Two historic buildings on the square, including the landmark Lermontov House (top, center) were demolished to make way for the development project, which was ultimately scrapped in 2012. In 2015, activists led by Tiflis Hamqari and ICOMOS Georgia called for a preservation-oriented revitalization plan, including the reconstruction of the demolished buildings.

Although it is widely acknowledged that Old Tbilisi needs dramatic improvements in housing and infrastructure as soon as possible, the solution should not rely on the commercialization of public space and expedient removal of original communities to suburban apartment towers. With no political venue for neighborhood or homeowners' associations—perhaps the

most appropriate way to manage courtyard housing—Tbilisians are left without a voice. In seeking a European appearance that projects democracy and modernization, City Hall has often resorted to top-down planning, lacking transparency and consensus (Salukvadze 2009, 159–187).

### *Conclusion*

Unchecked by effective regulations, a combination of public and private forces has rapidly transformed Old Tbilisi, obscuring the rich social and cultural legacies once reflected in the city's unique urban landscape. While the state has reconstructed entire neighborhoods in a standardized, homogenized version of Tbilisi's past, private sector actors have steadily eroded the integrity of neighborhoods—building by building—with Euro-remont fortresses erected by the wealthy and haphazard extensions assembled by the poor. Collectively, this remaking of Tbilisi marks a dramatic break with the past. If much urban development of the Soviet period was additive—constructing whole new neighborhoods such as Saburtalo—the post-Soviet changes have been largely transformative, either altering or replacing the architecture of historic neighborhoods. Ironically, then, despite the Soviet era's reputation for destructive planning policies, Moscow's interventions left historic neighborhoods intact if neglected. In contrast, it is the capitalism of the post-soviet period that has been profoundly destructive to the city's connection to its own past.

Although the post-Soviet “wild market” made it possible for citizens and the private sector to create new and convenient city space at an individual level, these opportunities have often come at the expense of public space and discouraged engagement with authorities. In many ways, Tbilisians under neoliberalism have been reduced to spectators in the preservation of their own heritage, unable to tame either market forces or City Hall's perfunctory redevelopment schemes. The final irony of the Georgian identity project as applied to architecture, then, is that elite efforts to project the democratic values espoused by the West has meant an imposing top-down schemes on a public without public consensus or consent. Amid an urgent housing shortage and fluctuating economy, Tbilisians often view preservation and planning as luxuries. That both might, in fact, help resolve such problems is often dismissed, particularly by a cash-strapped City Hall unwilling to invest time on public consensus and considerate historic resource management.

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