

Matthijs Bouw of the Dutch practice One Architecture travelled to Tbilisi, Georgia, with four other young Dutch architects. He gives his impressions of their experiences during an adventurous journey.

GEORGIA — TEXT: MATTHIJS BOUW

## Architectural adventures in Georgia

# Transforming Tbilisi

*It is a magical place, Georgia, and it becomes dream-like the moment you have left it. And the people are magic people. It is true that they have one of the richest and most beautiful countries in the world, and they live up to it. And we understood thoroughly now why Russians had always said to us: 'Until you have seen Georgia, you have seen nothing.'*  
(John Steinbeck)

'Died on George W. Bush Street' will be my epitaph I think, every time I find myself yet again being driven from the airport to the centre of Tbilisi by a drunken taxi driver in the dead of night. Ever since the road was finally repaired in honour of a visit by the American president, the average speed has increased such that it is no longer compatible with alcohol consumption.

The pace of change is swift in Tbilisi. Every time I hurtle down George W. Bush Street there is more light, the Soviet blocks lining the road look freshly painted and a few more of them have acquired colourful glass panels. The 'Rose Revolution' in late 2003 seems finally to have put an end to the period of decline brought about by corruption, civil war and an earthquake in the wake of independence in 1991. But the effects of that decline on the one-time 'Paris of the Caucasus', model city of the Soviet Union and favourite holiday destination of the party bosses, are everywhere still apparent.

Tbilisi, with 1.2 million inhabitants, is reminiscent of Sarajevo. It is an historical city, surrounded by hills, with Ottoman influences, 19th and early 20th century expansions in every style Europe had to offer at the time, ending in a linear city of Soviet blocks along the River Mtkvari. Tbilisi, like Sarajevo is imbued with the many

cultures that have always been here. In the old city, synagogue, mosque and churches stand side by side. Once upon a time the city centre marched right into the river, on stilts. The bridges here, so the story goes, marked the crossing from east to west on the former Silk Route. In 1954 it was all torn down, by the Soviets, to make way for wide riverside avenues.

The 'European' city on the left bank of the river is the most beautiful part of Tbilisi. It arose in the period when the city – capital of the Caucasus and centre of culture, administration and trade – profited handsomely from the incredible riches that the oil in Baku brought to the region. A staggering quantity of stately buildings – theatres, banks, town halls – in exquisite classical, tsarist or art nouveau styles, front onto the tree-lined streets. Now, with most still in a state of disrepair that would not look out of place in Havana, restoration of the first buildings has just begun. The refurbishment of the TBC Bank building, for example, is an indication that things are looking up. Architects.ge, a young practice with a history of success with both fashionable interiors and designs for buildings, has even restored the splendid steel staircase to its former glory.

Artist Sophio Tabatadze has compiled a 'catalogue of changes in the city'. A good example of such change is her trio of photographs of Hotel Iveria, in the city centre. The first shows the hotel when it was brand new, an elegant, almost shining, Modernist building. A second photo shows the building in 2003, now occupied by refugees from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The building has been reduced to a motley assemblage of huts appended to the original concrete frame (the law allows empty buildings to be used for refugees from ethnic conflicts in the region). Since then the building has been

cleared out and the refugees moved elsewhere. In the third photo, only the frame remains. Recently a hoarding announcing the construction of a Radisson SAS hotel was erected out front.

Another series in Tabatadze's catalogue focuses on shops: 2003, according to her, was the year of the casinos; the catalogue contains some ten photographs of recently opened gambling clubs. 2004 was the year of the supermarkets. 2005 the year of perfumeries. It is clear how quickly priorities change and how new sections of the population are sharing in the increased prosperity. And 2006? 2006 was the year of the masterplans.

### Adventures in Tbilisi

The idea that we, five architects (Bjarne Mastenbroek, Monica Ketting, Rein Jansma, Malkit Shoshan and myself), should accompany Gilian Schrofer (former designer with Concrete, a Dutch design studio) on a visit to Tbilisi arose at a birthday party. Gilian Schrofer and his concept and interior design firm, Concern, had spent the past year working on an idea to convert Kinostudios, the former headquarters of the Georgian film industry, into a new club. The club – working title Paradiso – comprises a restaurant, a multiplex cinema, two auditoriums and lounges. But Paradiso is about production as well as consumption. There will be offices for media companies, radio studios and an arts society. Unique is the 'Beria Room', named after the best-known alumnus of Tbilisi's school of architecture and later chief torturer to Stalin, that other famous Georgian; red accents will have a powerful effect in the dazzling white space. Gilian tells us about the delicious food, good wine, and the hospitable people. Intrigued by what is for us an

## Eurovision

Focusing on European countries, cities and regions



unknown outpost of Europe, we board a plane for our first, as yet tourist-style, encounter.

The first day we wander in astonishment through a city where cars are parked on the sidewalk (under Soviet rule so few people owned a car that there was no need for parking spaces), where the facade of every house and business sports a curious ornament composed of bits of metal or beer cans (TV antennas) and where we see a number of magnificent buildings that make our architect's heart beat faster – the Philharmonia, a perfectly round, glass building, the Ministry of Transport, which recalls several very recent OMA projects, and Central Station, a white colossus with a huge prefab canopy, wonderful halls and a fascinating, labyrinthine structure. The last building, incidentally, is currently occupied mainly by refugees, the gold market and a bazaar. These buildings, we are informed by Gaga Kiknadze, a partner in Architects.ge, were designed by architects who were trained under Stalin as craftsmen and who had a superior knowledge of materials and structures. Stalin appreciated quality and when, after his death, they were finally given their head, they produced some pretty impressive buildings. Under Khrushchev, things went steadily downhill; Khrushchev wanted cheap, industrial production and the same everywhere. Under Khrushchev, says Kiknadze, architecture broke down.

And that a lot is broken, is clear. With the rapid development the country has undergone during the last three years, it lacks the instruments necessary for putting the city in order again. The privatization that followed the Rose Revolution resulted in a wholesale sell-off, and what zoning plans there are, are so formulated that New York-style densities are possible. Monstrous apartment buildings are shooting up all over the place, traffic gridlock is imminent, and people seem to have lost all sense of scale. For instance, on one of the most beautiful sites in the city, on the edge of a park, there recently appeared a hideous apartment block that casts its shadow over a children's playground. So poorly constructed is this 20-storey building that the lifts don't work because of misalignments. The residents of these owner-occupied apartments have no choice but to lug their shopping up the endless flights of stairs.

It doesn't help that the neo-liberalist doctrine, foisted upon Georgia by its new best friend, the United States, makes it impossible to plan. 'Planning' smacks of Communism and is consequently taboo. According to Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' theory, the 'market' will automatically regulate how cities develop. The government should confine itself to defence, 'law and order', fighting corruption and minimal, transparent legislation. As a 'hobby', the president may build and restore fountains, and paint buildings pretty colours, but in all other cases he should humbly give way to the Halliburtons and Bechtels of this world.

The impossibility of careful planning – a phenomenon one sees in many former Communist countries, by the way – and

the need to do something to get around this, were the subject of much discussion in our group. Mastenbroek suggests that we should start by buying a pot of paint and painting zebra crossings on the road. Pointing to the relation between planning and human rights, Shoshan notes that the way the city is developing at the moment is exacerbating the difference between the 'haves' and 'have nots', which could be disastrous for development in the long term. Her organization, FAST (Foundation for Achieving Seamless Territory – [www.seamless-israel.org](http://www.seamless-israel.org)), has since returned to the South Caucasus with a new project, 'Territory of Desire'. Schrofer is planning workshops for local architects and students. And Jansma and I visit the city architect with a suggestion for a 'New Map of Tbilisi' (along the lines of the 'New Map of the Netherlands') showing all proposed development projects. It would allow everyone to see what projects are in the pipeline and what the city will look like after a certain period of time.

#### 'Supra' urbanism

With Bob and Mamuka, bank directors, industrialists and owners of the biggest property development company in Tbilisi, we discuss the long term development of Tbilisi. They gradually become convinced that it is in their interest as developers to take a careful and sustainable approach to the city.

We talk a lot about Georgian culture, about the beautiful clothes and the aesthetic refinement of the Georgians, and about the construction of a city, which I compare to a 'supra', the traditional Georgian banquet where everyone sits at a long table laden with food and wine, where people sing and drink a toast to peace, to friendship, and to all the other things that are important in life. Building the city is something you do together and for one another. A good city is as welcoming as a 'supra'.

Bob and Mamuka decide to make all the fragmented projects on the left bank of the Mtkvari the subject of a trio of related masterplans and in July 2006 they engage One Architecture to flesh them out. This is in addition to our other work – on Cinema City with Architects.ge, on the station precinct and the market with Zwarts & Jansma, who have been commissioned revamp Central Station, and the design of a mixed-use development on three plots along the river (Riverside Plaza).

Working on the three masterplans with Marijn Spoelstra, a planning economist I have brought along, we demonstrate that a short-term development strategy generates less money in the long term, and that internal co-ordination and with other projects is the way to achieve exceptional quality. This development strategy quickly produces results that will benefit the quality of the entire city. Because Georgians like to be outdoors and to stroll around their city (which the climate freely permits), it is decided that Cinema City will not be an airconditioned island but an integral part of the neighbourhood with a mix of different functions; by linking up with the faded glory of the 19th-century Agmenashebeli Avenue, this

## It doesn't help that the neo-liberalist doctrine makes it impossible to plan. 'Planning' smacks of Communism and is consequently taboo.

thoroughfare will be revitalized. And for Riverside Plaza, we draw and calculate that roofing over the road along the river will not only re-establish the connection with the river which was destroyed by Stalin and result in a wonderful promenade, but also make money in the long run because it allows for a different programmatic mix aimed at a higher market segment. This last leads in turn to the argument to build at much lower densities than the regulations permit so that the area has a lot more public space and is more in keeping with the surroundings.

Now that the mayor has also expressed his enthusiasm for the roofing, we can get on with developing the plans. That is going to require quite a lot of energy. Much of the 'infrastructure' we take for granted in the Netherlands, from market researchers to engineering consultants, is no longer or not yet in place and will have to be built up on the spot. In order to increase the potential for outstanding architecture and high-quality construction, we are looking into the possibility of setting up our own prefab factory.

The German architect Nikolaus Hirsch has made the availability of material the subject of his architecture. In his upcoming book *On Boundaries*, he describes how, for his project on Tschavtschavadze Avenue, the secondary constructions were made locally, the steel main structure came from Turkey and the facade from Germany. As such, the project tries to pose questions about the logistics of construction and the specificity of the locality.

Working in Tbilisi is very demanding, not least because you have to take account of so many things that are normally confined to the periphery of the profession. But the necessary commitment is not difficult to summon up for what the American writer John Steinbeck rightly called a 'magical place'.

In October the grapes are harvested. For five years now, Mamuka has been using French know-how to replant a to replant a vineyard – the wine culture was another victim of the decline. Now, though, it is time for the first harvest. It's cause for celebration and everyone is invited to a 'supra' laid out under an awning in the fields. There is young wine, lots of food and the men sing their polyphonous songs. I don't understand a word of Georgian but they are probably singing about how fine things require lots of patience and care. ←



Three images from Sophio Tabatadze's catalogue of changes in the city, showing the Hotel Iveria, designed by T. Kalandarishvili, in 1968, 2003 and today.

→ Tbilisi railway station



↑ Ministry of Transportation (Z. Dzalaganija and G. Tschachawa, 1976)