



Cities of the South Caucasus: a view from Georgia

Edited by David Gogishvili & Alessandro Coppola

QU3#15

iQuaderni di U3

Comitato di redazione | Editorial committee

Giorgio Piccinato, *editor*

Nicola Vazzoler, *deputy editor*

Francesca Porcari, *secretary*

Lorenzo Barbieri, Sara Caramaschi, Martina Pietropaoli, *iQuaderni di UrbanisticaTre*

Flavio Graviglia, *photo editor*

Elisabetta Capelli, *content supervisor*

Eleonora Ambrosio, *leRubriche di UrbanisticaTre*

Viviana Andriola, Domenica Bona, *social & communication*

Janet Hetman, *media partner & events*

Giulio Cuccurullo, *graphic design*

Comitato scientifico | Scientific committee

Thomas Angotti, *City University of New York*; Oriol Nel-lo i Colom, *Universitat Autònoma*

de Barcelona; Valter Fabietti, *Università di Chieti-Pescara*; Max Welch Guerra, *Bauhaus-*

Universität Weimar; Michael Hebbert, *University College London*; Daniel Modigliani, *Istituto*

Nazionale di Urbanistica; Luiz Cesar de Queiroz Ribeiro, *Universidade Federal do Rio de*

Janeiro; Vieri Quilici, *Università degli Studi Roma Tre*; Christian Topalov, *École des hautes*

études en sciences sociales; Rui Manuel Trindade Braz Afonso, *Universidade do Porto*

Rivista scientifica sottoposta a double blind peer review.

Scientific journal subject to double blind peer review

N. 15, anno sei, luglio 2018 | No. 15, year six, july 2018

In copertina | *On the cover:*

Tbilisi, "In the Caucasus"

Foto di Corinna Del Bianco

con il supporto di



in questo numero
in this issue

Cities of the South Caucasus: a view from Georgia

A cura di | Edited by David Gogishvili & Alessandro Coppola

David Gogishvili & Alessandro Coppola_p. 5
Editorial

Joseph Salukvadze_p. 19
Urbanization Trends and Development of Cities in Georgia

Gvantsa Salukvadze & Temur Gugushvili_p. 33
Geographic Patterns of Tourism in Urban Settlements of Georgia

Suzanne Harris-Brandts_p. 45
Building Vacancies: Tourism and Empty Real Estate in Batumi

Madlen Pilz_p. 59
**Speaking, Building, Shopping:
A Social-Anthropological Approach
to the Post-Socialist Condition of Tbilisi**

Joseph Sparsbrod_p. 73
"There Was Communality." Narrating Transformations in Old Tbilisi

Appendice | Others

In the Caucasus_p. 88
Progetto fotografico di | Photographic project by
Corinna Del Bianco

Profilo autori | Authors bio p. 101

Parole chiave | Keywords p. 104

Cities of the South Caucasus: a view from Georgia

Building Vacancies: Tourism and Empty Real Estate in Batumi

by Susanne Harris-Brandts

Batumi
Empty buildings
Tourism development
City branding
State building

Since the 2003 Rose Revolution, Georgia's Black Sea city of Batumi has seen a dramatic rise in tourism-related construction. Yet, many of these buildings remain unoccupied or in a protracted state of construction. Through site analyses and local interviews, this paper discusses the politico-economic forces driving vacant buildings in Batumi and assesses their impact within the context of the country's post-independence state building. Batumi is used as an extreme case study of the urban transformations underway across Georgian cities in the name of post-independence rebranding, neoliberal market reforms, and tourism development.

Introduction

During warm summer months, Georgia's western city of Batumi overflows with tourists. They come to be near to the Black Sea, to relax on the beach, and to soak up an abundance of sunshine. In the twentieth century, such visitors were mostly families from nearby Georgian regions or neighboring countries taking short-term vacations and participating in family activities. Following Soviet independence and a change in government in 2004, the city has additionally become a prime destination for those seeking exciting nightlife, five-star hotels and gambling.

Batumi has in-turn seen a dramatic rise in the amount of new construction and real estate speculation aimed at expanding the city's tourism sector internationally, and at shifting it towards a destination for entertainment. Between 2008 and 2012 specifically, when the United National Movement (UNM) government of President Mikheil Saakashvili was in its second term in power, over fifty new buildings for apartments, hotels and casinos were constructed across this small city, further increasing its density and amplifying available retail and residential space. During this same period, tourism in Georgia grew from 1,500,049 visitors (2009) to 5,392,303 visitors (2013), a 360% increase (Georgian National Tourism Administration 2015) In 2017, this number grew to 7,554,936 tourists (Georgian National Tourism Administration 2017). Throughout Batumi's Old City core, along the waterfront boulevard, as well as in the more recently developed south-western district adjacent to Ardagani Lake, new mixed-use, mid-to-high rise buildings feature prominently on the skyline, yet many stands unoccupied and with unfinished interiors.

The construction boom underway in Batumi mirrors a global trend in real estate speculation that relies upon luxury development and entertainment. It further reflects the growing use of the tourism sector as a catalyst for urban development during periods of state building, something particularly present in the post-socialist countries surrounding the Black Sea (Bethmann 2013; Bulin et. al. 2014; Hall et. al. 2006; Light & Dumbrăveanu 1999).

In line with this trend, Batumi has become a local example of what Aihwa Ong (2011) has termed "hyper-building," and what Saskia Sassen (2001; 2011) describes as the desire for cities to emulate and "catch up" with global cities. Batumi further represents a more amplified case study of the urban changes underway across Georgia after its 2003/04 Revolutions. Similar vacant new construction exists in Tbilisi, Gudauri, Signagi, and Kutaisi. Understanding the specific changes that took place in Batumi can thus draw awareness to comparable issues now appearing across the country during its ongoing development.

A byproduct of this process of rapid and dramatic urban transformation has been the proliferation of brand new buildings being left with either unfinished construction or no occupants upon completion. Such vacancies are the result of a number of forces both local and global: from developers not fulfilling their construction obligations or pulling out of projects prematurely due to market volatility, to absent foreign owners creating so-called "ghost apartments" through protracted unit vacancies. Empty buildings also reflect a lack of government regulation and planning foresight. Even the more straightforward reason of poor project design has contributed to the emergence of a new urban landscape of mass building vacancies in Batumi.

While academic work has foregrounded the economic logics of real-estate cycles that produce high rates of unit vacancies and ghost apartments (Pyhrr et al. 1999; Malpezzi & Wachter 2005; Haramati & Hananel 2016; Sorace & Hurst 2016; Mera & Renaud 2016), less attention has been paid to the

political manipulations of such processes for city branding purposes, or to the daily impacts of high vacancy rates on local communities. In post-socialist cities, the trend toward empty buildings has not only been tied to shifting market forces, but also to volatile shifts in government, local corruption, and the political difficulties associated with transition during the initial phases of state building. The challenges of post-Soviet state building have been discussed at length by authors such as: Diener and Hagan (2013), Isaacs and Polese (2016), and Kolsto (2018) and in the city of Batumi specifically by: Frederiksen and Gotfredsen (2017), Khalvashi (2015), and Pelkmans (2006).

In considering the various impacts of empty buildings on the city of Batumi, this paper first describes the political-economic conditions that have led to mass development for touristic use. It then identifies three main typologies of building vacancy and discusses the most effected neighborhoods in Batumi. Finally, the political-economic uses of many of the spectacular new vacant buildings are described, as are the challenges these projects face in being more effectively absorbed into the everyday life of the city. The study period for this research is between 2003 and 2017, with emphasis placed on the present-day conditions of Batumi. A mixed-methods approach has been used that combines document analysis with field observations, site documentation, and five interviews conducted in Batumi in 2016.

The rapid transformation of Batumi

Prior to the political transformations of the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, Batumi was a quiet and insular waterfront city of 121,800, home primarily to ethnic Georgians, with Armenians (6%) and Russians (5%) being the largest minorities (Geostat 2002). At the time, the Autonomous Region of Adjara (with Batumi as its capital) was ruled by the pro-Russian autocrat, Aslan Abashidze. The city received tourists primarily from neighboring parts of Georgia and the adjacent countries of Armenia, Russia and Azerbaijan. During Soviet times, Batumi was an integral part of what was then known as the Soviet Riviera, a stretch of resort cities from Novorossiysk, Russia to Sarpi, Georgia, which connected visitors along the eastern coast of the Black Sea.

Following the November 2003 Rose Revolution protests in Tbilisi which brought the UNM Government to power, political unrest grew in Adjara and led to calls for the resignation of Abashidze. In May 2004, heavy public protest and political volatility forced the ousting of Abashidze and led to his exile in Moscow. As the central government re-seized control of Adjara, it began introducing neoliberal market reforms and privatizing state-owned property, making both buildings and land parcels available for private-sector purchase. Some of the city's most iconic buildings were sold to private-sector investors for redevelopment. Between 2008 and 2012, the largest amount of development took place in the city under the UNM government. Then in 2012, development patterns once again changed when the UNM government lost elections and was replaced by the opposition *Georgian Dream* coalition. The new *Georgian Dream* government promptly took to freezing many of the development projects formerly led by UNM, a process further described below.

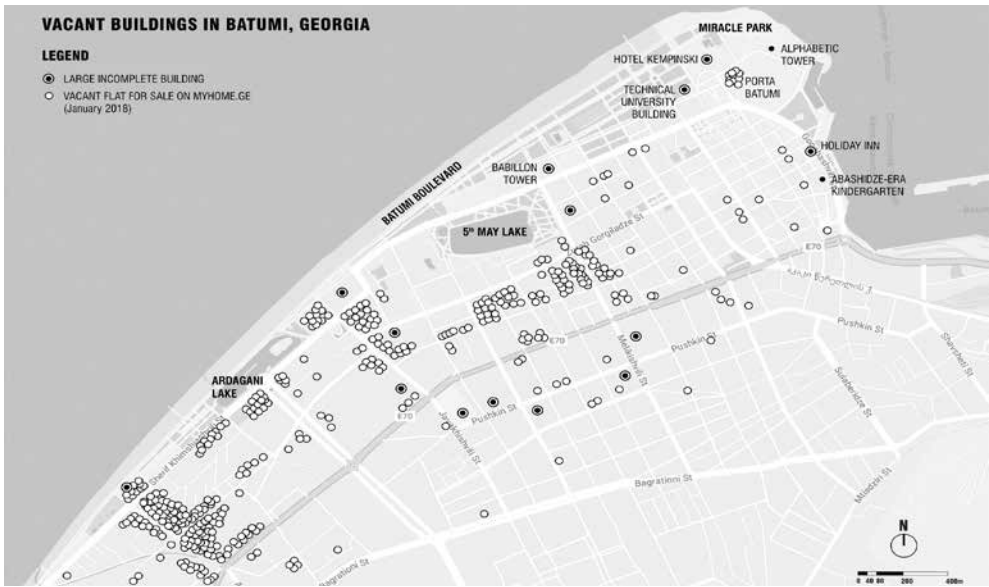


Fig.1 Map of Batumi highlighting large, incomplete buildings and vacant flats for sale on myhome.ge (January 2018)

Vacancy typologies in Batumi

Vacant buildings in Batumi exist in three main forms: buildings frozen with partially-completed construction; buildings whose exteriors have been completed but whose developers are unable to finish or sell their interior spaces (residential and commercial); and residential buildings that have reached full completion and have had many of their units purchased by absentee owners (so-called “ghost apartments”). These three types are frequently clustered in the same districts due to the nature of development speculation, which tends to see certain city districts undergo rapid change all at once. To-date, there is no official data on the amount or distribution of vacancies in Batumi. In order to obtain a more accurate portrait of the situation, I have personally documented street level retail vacancies and the locations of partially-completed buildings. This activity took place in mid-2017 and does not reflect the city’s ongoing conditions; new construction continues to emerge and some existing projects have advanced over time. Specific quantitative data related to the total number of single-unit residential vacancies was not trackable due to their private nature. Instead, broader qualitative reflections on these neighborhoods are provided in this paper.

Such vacant interior units represent a form of “ghost apartments,” a phenomenon discussed in urban studies and real estate literature. Haramati and Hananel (2016), for example, describe the worldwide emergence of this phenomenon and its broader links to both tourism and real estate speculation. Their work focuses primarily on the Israeli cities of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, but their observations mirror much of the trend in Batumi. They conclude that the unregulated inflow of foreign investment capital tied to ghost apartments “changes priorities in the city, shifts funds and attention to the needs of foreigners instead of those of local residents, thus influencing the diversity of the city” (Haramati & Hananel 2016, p. 116).

In line with Haramati and Hannel's (2016) findings, similarly it is the case that the areas of Batumi most effected by a spike in new vacant buildings are those where rapid new unregulated development of vacation properties has taken place (Fig. 1). In this fashion, the phenomenon of Batumi's empty buildings can be understood as linked to the city's tourism sector development. The areas most affected by newly constructed empty buildings are the districts around Ardagani and Fifth-of-May Lakes and the strip of land adjacent to the newly-extended waterfront boulevard running northeast to southwest along the coast for approximately five kilometers (Fig. 1). In these areas, over forty percent of all new buildings have high rates of residential unit vacancy (more than fifty percent vacant) and over fifteen incomplete construction sites currently exist. Among the latter are some very large projects, like *Babillon Tower*, a proposed forty-seven storey building intended to be one of the tallest in Batumi. Since construction started in 2013 its construction has been frozen at the fifteenth floor.

As a result of the desire to transform the city into a regional hub for tourism, these city districts experienced intense change after the revolution, at a pace and scale unprecedented in earlier decades. Along the waterfront edge, a number of the most prominent projects planned for Batumi, such as the aforementioned *Babillon Tower* and others like the *Hotel Kempinski*, *Holiday Inn*, *Porta Batumi Tower*, *Alphabetic Tower*, and the *Technical University* building, have suffered years of frozen construction, with most still remaining incomplete today. The prime reason for these projects not reaching completion is that their developers have not lived up to their contractual agreements. The implementation of projects has been delayed because developers lack sufficient financing, have not sold a sufficient number of units in advance, or because they have more pressing priorities in other countries. Incomplete construction has also at times been the result of political corruption and shifts in government policies, as was the case with the *Technical University* building initially constructed under the UNM government and then frozen prior to occupancy for a number of years before being sold to a new developer in 2015 under the Georgian Dream government. Collectively, the frozen status of these projects embodies the volatility of rapid urban transformation during state building and the vulnerabilities that can derive from the inability of governments to select less-than-reputable investors, or from its proclivity to corrupt business transactions.

The Holiday Inn project is another clear example of this type of delayed construction in Batumi. Situated in a prominent location on Gogebashvili Street between the northern waterfront boulevard and the Old City, the incomplete building was sold to *Arai Georgia* in July 2008 under the condition that construction would finally be completed by summer 2010 (Transparency International 2015). This deadline was not met and the contract was further amended in 2013 and again in 2014 to extend the construction deadline to May 2015, a deadline that was equally unmet. For over seven years the property has sat unfinished, surrounded by sheet metal and growing piles of illegal waste. As of 2016, the property was instead being developed as the *Crowne Plaza Hotel*, a franchise name later switched to the Georgian brand *Rooms*



Fig.2 Multiple towers blocks are under construction—or with frozen construction—in the district around Ardagani Lake.

Hotels, all operated by the same property owner. Other than changes to advertising on the construction hoarding, the site continues to show no signs of transformation. News announcements in August 2017 claim that the project will open in the summer of 2018 (Charkviani 2017). In the face of its rapidly developing urban context, this unfinished hotel is an unwelcome reminder of the turbulence associated with poorly-regulated development.

Likewise, a number of projects across the street from the *Holiday Inn* in the new tourist area of *Miracle Park* have suffered from years of frozen construction. The government-owned, *Alphabetic Tower*, an elevated restaurant pavilion decorated on the exterior with the letters of the Georgian alphabet and designed as a prime tourist attraction, is a leading example. Built in 2010, the project remained unoccupied for six years, when it was finally leased to a Spanish company and opened under new management. Constructed as part of the building fervor led by the UNM government, this incomplete project initially had its funding allocated elsewhere once the *Georgian Dream* coalition won power in 2012. The city endured substantial financial losses from both the cost of construction and ongoing maintenance of the building.

Adjacent to *Alphabetic Tower* and the vacant *Hotel Kempinski* is the large Porta Batumi residential tower, itself experiencing protracted delays in its construction schedule while further impacting the livelihood of this area. Complemented by a nearby abandoned clock tower, the overall result has been the creation of an entire district of newly-built yet vacant properties. Prior to all this construction, the area had served as an important site for sports and recreation. A large football stadium previously existed in the area of the *Hotel Kempinski*. Adjacent to it sat a public swimming pool, which was also widely used. The stadium was partially demolished in

2002 under Abashidze in order to make room for new development, an initiative then carried forward by the UNM government. Further down the waterfront, UNM also took to demolishing existing Soviet era buildings in order to clear room for new residential, hotel and casino complexes. In this fashion, the complete overhauling of the development adjacent to Batumi's boulevard can be seen as driven by both tourism development and a nation-building ideology attempting to erase the Soviet past.

Also further southwest, adjacent to the 2009 extension of the waterfront boulevard, significant vacancy levels affect a newly-developed district bordering the man-made Ardagani Lake (Fig. 2). In this area there are multiple new high-rise residential towers that are incomplete or that visibly lack occupants. Located on former marsh lands, the area was dredged in 2009 to form the lake and to make room for the expanded development of the city, a process primarily driven by the UNM government's desires to generate additional residential real estate investment property. The majority of these residential units have been sold by developers, yet many are now for resale and most of the year they remain uninhabited due to non-resident foreign owners, rendering them "ghost apartments". Many units rely solely on seasonal tourists and are posted on online rental websites, such as *AirBnB* and *MyHome.ge*. Overall, there is still far more supply than demand for residential space in this district. Particularly since the area is perpetually under construction, it has an alienating atmosphere and lacks street-level activity. Vast amounts of the retail space provided at street level remain unoccupied and at times have been vandalized or used for illegal dumping, attracting stray animals and further dissuading long-term residents and tourists.

Beyond these vacant and frozen projects along Batumi's waterfront, other newly-constructed vacant properties can be found in the older parts of the city by the Fifth-of-May Lake. These typically take the form of four-to-ten-storey infill projects built by demolishing existing single-family residential properties. These new projects are overwhelmingly residential, yet many also possess unoccupied retail spaces at street level. Collectively, they have shifted the character of the old parts of Batumi which used to be comprised of small neighborhoods of one or two-storey buildings (Fig. 3). Beyond dwarfing adjacent houses, the construction hoarding around partially-completed buildings has detracted from the street life of the city. Coupled with the large rates of retail vacancy, these trends are slowly eroding Batumi's older neighborhoods.



Fig.3 An incomplete twelve-storey building dwarfs its neighboring traditional Adjara-style single family home in Batumi's Old City.



Fig.4 The cover image for a guide book produced by the Ministry of Culture, featuring the then-vacant Alphabetic Tower and Technical University Building.

Branding vacancy

Despite the growing presence of newly-built vacant buildings in Batumi a decade after the revolution, in online media and international tourism marketing material the city has increasingly been depicted as a booming success story (The Australian 2012; Azhgibetseva 2017; Euronews 2017; Spritzer 2010). Government officials too have contributed to the reproduction of this image of the city as one of the hottest new destinations for tourists and real estate investors around the Black Sea (Real Estate Publishers 2011; OSCE-PA 2012). Interestingly enough, some of the empty buildings discussed in this paper have been used in the deployment of such an image. Two of the most widely circulated empty buildings in support of such imagery are the above-mentioned Alphabetic Tower and Technological University buildings, which feature on everything from fridge magnets to official Ministry of Tourism material (Fig. 4 & 5).

Similarly, the vacant high-rise residential buildings around Ardagani Lake have been showcased in aerial photographs used for city promotion online and in social media¹. They are represented in a manner that amplifies their spectacular building height and shiny exteriors, while down-playing the very limited street-life and empty retail spaces. Distant aerial camera shots of the illuminated buildings at night are particularly used in this regard, given their ability to obfuscate the true levels of a building's occupancy and neighborhood under-activity. Tellingly, in many photos featuring the Technological University building, the building is not actually illuminated like those in its adjacency².

As I have argued elsewhere, circulating images of the city's impressive new vertical skyline have been used by politicians as a way to assert the position of Batumi—and of Georgia's more generally—on the international stage (Harris-Brandts 2017). Coming to power after a revolution that was largely rooted in popular opposition to corruption and government inactivity, it was also important for the UNM government to make their reforms highly visible locally. As opposed to longer-term immaterial reforms, new architecture was one of the most explicit ways of accomplishing this goal. Rapidly-produced new architecture thus provided the government with a quick portfolio of trophies to show to the public and to prove that they were hard at work bringing about change. Ironically, many of these buildings themselves were created in less than democratic ways that perpetuated the practices of partisanship and continued the lack of due democratic processes rampant prior to the revolution (Inaishvili, Interview 2016; Ramishvili, Interview 2016; Zvhania, Interview 2016). Public discussions about the privatization of state property or the heritage status of buildings were mostly non-existent and many decisions regarding the fate of entire areas of the city were made unilaterally by President Saakashvili, despite protest from local activist groups (Inaishvili,

¹ For example, see: <http://enjoyinggeorgia.com/discover/batumi/>; <http://cbw.ge/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/maxresdefault-1050x525.jpg>; http://www.kancelariaeup.pl/images/Batumi/noc%C4%85_od_jeziora.jpg; <http://travel.wex.ge/images/rsgallery/original/batumi-2-1.jpg>

² <https://q-ec.bstatic.com/images/hotel/max1024x768/103/103923560.jpg>



Interview 2016; Chichileishvili, Interview 2016; Zvhania, Interview 2016).

Images of Batumi’s new vacant architecture were also used politically to contrast the success of the city with the shortcomings of neighboring Sukhumi, Abkhazia, the unrecognized de-facto state 230 km to the north which unilaterally seceded from Georgia in 1992. For decades Sukhumi had been the preferred holiday destination, but it lost this position while struggling with independence. The rapidly growing skyline of Batumi has frequently been juxtaposed with images of faltering Sukhumi—particularly in online memes and advertisements.³ Ironically, many of the buildings used to showcase Batumi as superior are themselves in a precarious state of partial completion or under-utilization, largely masked by exterior illumination and promises of imminent public openings. In this sense, empty buildings have played a crucial role in state political propaganda and have even contributed to rhetoric surrounding regional geopolitics.

With regards to circulating images of the city’s new buildings for tourism purposes, the advertising of Batumi as an already-successful and booming destination through re-framed pictures of its empty buildings became a necessary step in efforts to attract *actual* tourists. Without a large enough local demand to activate all the new entertainment and hotel spaces, the transformed face of the city was being displayed in branding campaigns and tourist media as *the* place to be while in reality sitting overwhelmingly vacant. In some cases, the vacant buildings were literally used as stage-sets for tourism promotional videos, using hired actors. The selective framing of new empty buildings contributed greatly to the false image of the city, eventually in-part effectively working to lure greater numbers of seasonal tourists, but also introducing new problems of vacancies through the rise of ghost apartments.

Fig.5_ Fridge magnet souvenirs for sale, featuring the then-vacant Alphabetic Tower and Technical University Building.

³ For example: <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/CBU83T-nUBAAP8vb.jpg>

Living with vacancy

In understanding the impacts that empty buildings have had on Batumi's residents, it is important to consider the ways in which empty buildings can play an ideological role in the absence of any functional use. Just as politicians relied upon the circulation of empty buildings as marketing tools for tourism, they also effectively deployed them as local-level propaganda. The arrival of new architecture was frequently linked to the promise of an alternative collective future for Batumi's residents, one that would offer greater job opportunities and a chance for improved livelihoods. Anthropologist Mathijs Pelkmans (2006) points to "the social life of empty buildings" in his description of this phenomenon in Batumi during the post-independence period of the 1990s. He explains how vacant buildings enabled local residents to collectively participate in the hopes for future change, something that was accomplished through projections of their own imagined futures onto the yet-to-be occupied new projects. Overall, this helped to create a degree of public complicity and social cohesion during a crucial period of state-building. An example that Pelkmans discusses at length is the new kindergarten constructed under Abashidze's rule and sitting vacant for many years after completion. Nested in the heart of the Old City and fenced-off with iron gates, the building continues to be unused to this day, never truly finding its place in the city.

Sadly, this is the case for most of Batumi's vacant buildings. While some, like Alphabetic Tower, the Technical University building, and the Holiday Inn, have eventually been altered or are planned for re-activation, numerous others remain permanently frozen or abandoned. On top of this, the problem of ghost apartments in the city is especially chronic since there is little that can be done by the government to better activate units that are privately owned. On a more promising note, in other areas of the city with incomplete buildings, ad-hoc and informal uses are appearing in the form of un-regulated retail spaces. Second-hand goods or fresh produce are sometimes sold out of unfinished ground floors and even a number of the more prominent retail shopfronts in the Old City are occasionally being used as short-term showrooms for events like Fashion Week, or as front-window art and photography exhibitions (Fig. 6).

In comparing the empty buildings of Batumi from after the revolution to those of the earlier Abashidze era, it can be seen that there is much similarity across the periods, even though development during Abashidze's reign took place on a smaller scale. In both eras, development took place in an environment of low-regulation and was driven primarily by patronage networks, with key decisions being made solely by the ruling elite. Still, the Batumi that existed after the first decade of independence possessed different characteristics from the city that exists today. Its emphasis was less on mass spectacle and there was little-to-no celebration of Batumi as an integral part of greater Georgia since Abashidze had his own separatist aspirations. The previous use of empty buildings as propaganda and branding was therefore framed quite differently. Still, there are areas of ideological continuity from the 1990s and 2000s, including using new architecture to buttress an image of Georgia as Western, and to support the current ruling party more broadly.

Conclusions

Over the course of less than a decade, Georgia's resort city of Batumi has experienced dramatic urban transformations. Driven by the post-revolutionary UNM government's desires to amplify tourism development, the city has also suffered from the proliferation of incomplete and vacant buildings. Partially-constructed projects in Batumi signify much of the hastiness of development after the revolution and show how fully-functioning urban areas have been demolished and replaced with uninhabitable, fenced-in, and frozen construction sites. Prior to new construction, many of these areas had been home to flourishing communities that contributed greatly to the life of the city. In considering Batumi's post-revolution transitions then, it is important to note that it has not just been the physical buildings that have transformed, but also more ephemeral place meanings and community interactions. Shifts in building programming have further left a mark on the character of city streets and have changed the relationship between public and private space. Areas originally catering to local residents now mostly support the needs of short-term tourists.

Although in some respects Batumi can be seen as in-line with the broader market changes that produce vacancies in global cities like New York, Vancouver, and London—namely, due to international absentee owners—it is also a unique case study. The empty buildings of Batumi speak to the particular conditions of political instability that were present in Georgia following Soviet independence and after the country's political revolution. Over the past three decades, Georgia has struggled to undergo democratic reforms and transitions in government and this has also been reflected in the volatility of the construction sector. Equally, the transition from socialism to neoliberal capitalism has dramatically restructured the way the urban landscape is produced in Georgian cities.

Somewhat ironically, the pressure on government officials to rapidly make explicit their efforts towards reform and state change through new architecture after the revolution in-part led directly to the by-passing of lengthy democratic processes associated with urban development, such as screening investors and considering the heritage significance of existing buildings. As such, the vacant spaces of Batumi represent not only the challenges of rampant real estate speculation. They are further associated with the problems of using the visibility of rapid construction as a means of displaying government legitimacy and state building progress.



Fig.6_ A make-shift men's hair salon is set up in front of a vacant building in Batumi.

On a social level, Batumi's empty buildings symbolize broader collective dreams and fears about reform, and about the nation's newly emerging identity. Such ambitions are also reflected in the images that circulate in promotion of the city to outside audiences. In tourism campaigns the empty buildings of Batumi continue to circulate widely as images for attracting foreigners. Presenting a fictitious narrative of life in Batumi, these images conjure a parallel reality—one that ultimately has concrete ramifications for residents, and for the economic prosperity of the city.

references

- Azhgibetseva O. 2017, "Wanna Get Rich? Make Batumi Your 'Second Home'! Georgia Today", Retrieved January 10, 2018, from <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/6772/-Wanna-Get-Rich%3F-Make-Batumi-Your-%E2%80%9CSecond-Home%E2%80%9D%21>
- Bethmann C. 2013, "Clean, Friendly, Profitable?: Tourism and the Tourism Industry in Varna, Bulgaria", vol. 28, LIT Verlag Münster.
- Bulin D., Miru, N. & Gheorghe G. 2014, "The Impact of Tourism Industry in the Economy. The case of Black Sea Region Countries", *Knowledge Horizons. Economics*, 6(2), 74.
- Charkviani N. 2017. "Adjara Group to Build an International Airport in Kazbegi and Invest More in Aviation", *The Financial*. Available at: <https://www.finchannel.com/american-business-in-georgia/62053-adjara-group-to-build-an-international-airport-in-kazbegi-and-invest-more-in-aviation>.
- Chichileishvili Maia, Professor and Department Head; Faculty of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences. Department of Art History and Theory, Batumi Art State Teaching University, Personal Interview, 15th January 2016.
- Diener A.C. & Hagen J., 2013, "From socialist to post-socialist cities: narrating the nation through urban space", *Nationalities Papers*, 41(4), pp.487-514.
- Frederiksen M. D. & Gotfredsen K. B. 2017, *Georgian portraits: Essays on the afterlives of a revolution*, John Hunt Publishing.
- Georgian National Tourism Administration, 2015, "Georgian Tourism in Figures: Structure & Industry Data". Available online at: <http://gnta.ge/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/2015-eng..pdf>
- Georgian National Tourism Administration, 2017, "International Tourist Arrivals 2017". Retrieved from <https://gnta.ge/statistics/>.
- Geostat 2002, "Ethnic groups by major administrative-territorial units". Retrieved from http://www.geostat.ge/cms/site_images/_files/english/census/2002/03%20Ethnic%20Composition.pdf
- Hall D. R., Smith M. K. & Marciszewska B. (Eds.) 2006, *Tourism in the new Europe: the*

challenges and opportunities of EU enlargement, CABI.

Haramati T. & Hananel R. 2016, "Is anybody home? The influence of ghost apartments on urban diversity in Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem", *Cities*, 56, pp.109-118.

Harris-Brandts S. 2017, "Europe Started Here. Thresholds 45", *Myth*, MIT Press, 126-137.

Inaishvili N., *Head of the Archaeological Department of the Niko Berdzenishvili Research Institute, Batumi*. Personal Interview, 13th January 2016.

Isaacs R. & Polese A. 2016, *Nation-building and identity in the post-Soviet space: new tools and approaches*, Routledge.

Khalvashi T. 2015, *Peripheral Affects: Shame, Publics, and Performance on the Margins of the Republic of Georgia*, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Department of Anthropology.

Kolsto P. 2018, *Political Construction Sites: nation building in Russia and the post-Soviet states*, Routledge.

Light D. & Dumbrăveanu D. 1999, "Romanian tourism in the post-communist period", *Annals of Tourism research*, 26 (4), 898-927.

Malpezzi S. & Wachter S. 2005, "The role of speculation in real estate cycles", *Journal of Real Estate Literature*, 13 (2), pp.141-164.

Mera K. & Renaud B. 2016, *Asia's financial crisis and the role of real estate*, Routledge.

Nakashidze L., Project Manager, UNDP Georgia, Former Head of the Department for Strategic Planning, Investments and Economic Development, Batumi City Hall. Personal Interview, 11th January 2016.

Ong A.H. 2011, "Hyperbuilding: spectacle, speculation, and the hyperspace of sovereignty", in Ong A. & Roy A. (Eds.) 2011, *Worlding cities: Asian experiments and the art of being global*, Wiley-Blackwell.

OSCE-PA 2012 "Batumi hosts Economic Conference. Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe- Parliamentary Assembly". Retrieved 10th January 2018 from <https://www.oscepa.org/meetings/conferences-a-seminars/2012-batumi>

Pelkmans M. 2006, *Defending the border: identity, religion, and modernity in the Republic of Georgia*, Cornell University Press.

Pyhrr S., Roulac S. & Born W. 1999, "Real estate cycles and their strategic implications for investors and portfolio managers in the global economy", *Journal of real estate research*, 18 (1), pp.7-68.

Ramishvili G., Former Chief Architect, City of Batumi. Personal Interview, 14th January 2016.

Sassen S. 2001, *The global city: New York, London, Tokyo*, Princeton University Press.

Sassen S. 2011, *Cities in a world economy*, Sage Publications.

Sorace C. & Hurst W. 2016, "China's phantom urbanization and the pathology of ghost cities", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 46 (2), pp.304-322.

Spritzer D. "Glamour Revives Port of Batumi", *The New York Times*. Retrieved 10th January 2018 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/12/travel/12next.html>.

The Australian 2012, "Batumi, Georgia remakes itself as tourism hotspot", *The Australian*. Retrieved 10th January 2018 from <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/archive/travel-2015-pre-life/batumi-georgia-remakes-itself-as-tourism-hotspot/news-story/2b1d41982913ee1943bc9b2de7f65ddc?sv=8e105d02113ee49b29086bb-395db2a59>

Transparency International Georgia 2015, "Hotel Construction in Batumi", *Transparency International Georgia*. Retrieved 10th August 2017 from <http://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/hotel-construction-in-batumi>.

Zvania Irakli, Georgian Architect and Activist. Personal Interview, 8th January 2016.

2011, Levan Varshalomidze, Chairman of the Government of the Autonomous Republic of Ajara", *Real Estate Publishers*. Retrieved 10th January 2018 from <http://europe-re.com/levan-varshalomidze-chairman-government-autonomous-republic-ajara/43231>.

2017, "Batumi: from strategic port to bustling sea resort", *Euronews*. Retrieved 10th January 2018 from <http://www.euronews.com/2017/09/05/batumi-from-strategic-port-to-bustling-sea-resort>.

Cities of the South Caucasus: a view from Georgia

After the collapse of the USSR and the regaining of independence, Georgia has experienced a dramatic set of political, economic and social changes which have had marked impacts on Georgian cities that further intensified with the early 2000s, political and economic stabilization and the greater role assumed by the state in leading urban restructuring initiatives. While similar developments in some other parts of the former Socialist Bloc have attracted much interest among urban scholars, the attention towards Georgian cities has been limited. With this special issue we make a step towards bridging this knowledge gap by providing contributions on topics such as spatial hierarchies and restructuring, urban regeneration, tourism, urban memories and lifestyles. But first, the editorial text by the editors of this special issue first introduces the reader to the broader transformations in Georgia and its cities since 1991, an overview of the topics treated by the authors and some conclusive points on further research on Georgian and South Caucasian cities.

QU3 - iQuaderni di U3

QU3 is a peer-reviewed scientific journal promoted by scholars working in the urban studies area of the Department of Architecture of Roma Tre University (Italy). The journal is edited by Giorgio Piccinato and has a Scientific Board of Italian and international scholars and an Editorial committee of lecturers, researchers, PhD students and department staff. QU3 provides space where current research on urban and territorial transformations could be shared. QU3 is part of UrbanisticaTre an online platform that gives researchers, PhD students and professionals an opportunity to present emerging research in a variety of media such as scientific articles, photoreportages, videos and other.