



Cities of the South Caucasus: a view from Georgia

Edited by David Gogishvili & Alessandro Coppola

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Cities of the South Caucasus: a view from Georgia

“There Was Communality.” Narrating Transformations in Old Tbilisi

by Joseph Sparsbrod

Tbilisi
Memory
Narrative
Commercialization
Post-Socialism

Relying on intense ethnographic fieldwork, the article deals with the memories and narratives of the residents of the historic center of Tbilisi (Old Tbilisi). Assuming that memory is constituted within the current conditions of a society, I show that people refer to currently available narrative templates when presenting the past. The Georgian intelligentsia established Old Tbilisi as a concept and romanticized its social life and built environment, it became a spatial image. Even though this image did not, and still does not, correspond with the residents' difficult living conditions, they rather refer to romantic narrative templates when they describe the neighborhood and its transformation in the past decades. They perceive the construction of new buildings and the alteration of the demographic structure of the neighborhood, as an assault to the spatial image of Old Tbilisi and thereby on their memories.

Introduction

“Old Tbilisi was nicer, it was very different on Elene Akhvlediani's pictures. Now more is destroyed and built, much superfluity has been added [...]”, stated Ana, a Georgian woman in her 70s, who lives in the old center of Tbilisi. With the aim of illustrating the changes in the cityscape of the Georgian capital, she referred to the paintings of the “Georgian folk painter” Elene Akhvlediani (1898–1975), who is, among others, famous for her paintings of the historic center of Tbilisi (Old Tbilisi).



Fig.1 Elene Akhvediani, "Old Tbilisi", 1969, Oil on Canvas, Source: soviet art 2017.

neighborhood. Maidan as a neighborhood is multi-ethnic: Georgians, Azeris, Iranians, Armenians, Jews, Yezidis, Germans, Ukrainians among other diverse ethnic groups have lived, and are still living here. The Muslim cemetery was located here until the middle of the 20th century. Nowadays this graveyard is part of in National Botanical Garden of Georgia (formerly known as the Tbilisi Botanical Garden). Grishashvili Street had hosted the Armenian Saint Sarkis Church which was destroyed in the 1930s by the Bolshevik Government (Elisashvili 2013, p. 15). Mirzoev Bath – a Turkish Bath of the 17th century (Kvantidze 2012, p. 142) is also located on this street and is still open to the public. The Georgian cemetery, located on the same street, was replaced by a school during the Soviet era. Maidan was not regarded as an attractive neighborhood until recently which is why the area has undergone very few regeneration or restructuring initiatives during Soviet times while its territory today is experiencing redevelopment and is extensively utilized for tourism-related businesses (e.g. lodging, sightseeing, recreation).

My study is inspired by the examination of the neighbor's narratives structured by their memories living in Maidan area in Tbilisi. Many authors have described the acquisition as well as the presentation of memory as a process embedded in society. Remembering is rather seen as a collective than an individual act (e.g. Halbwachs 1980, 1992; J. Assmann 1988; Wertsch 2002). James Wertsch especially stressed the point that people refer to the commonly accepted "knowledge" of the respective society and present it within "narrative templates" (2002, pp. 10, 11). National elites often have a stake in the production of communities. They create cultural benchmarks (Assmann 1988, p. 12), for example through the production of imagery (e.g. painting, literature, film) or through the establishment of places for commemoration, like monuments and heritage sites. Halbwachs claims that collective memory

¹ Maidan neighborhood is located in the administrative district K'rts'anisi. Locals mostly call the area "Maidan" (square or market) which is related to today's Gorgasali Square (the central market until the 1950s). Other names for the neighborhood are Abanotubani, Kharpukhi or, more seldom, Seydabad (Georgian Academy of Science 2002, pp. 261, 826, 987). From now on I will use the name Maidan when speaking about this area.

"We lived together in our neighborhood – like one family. It is not like this anymore since none of these people are [here] anymore," stated Alex, an Armenian man of approximately 55. By saying so he was referring to the residents which left Tbilisi at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Both neighbors described how they remember the physical and social character of the Maidan neighborhood¹ and how it has been changing. In this article, I will explore why they often refer to narrative templates established by the Soviet Intelligentsia, when they speak about their neighborhood and the transformation it has undergone in the past two decades.

Therefore, I focus on narratives, everyday life and imagery of Maidan neighborhoods, presented by the neighbors living in Ioseb Grishashvili Street, one of the main streets of the

is related to “spatial images” since people adapt their habits to the space in which they settle and show discomfort if this space is altered (1980, p. 133). I consider Old Tbilisi to be such a “spatial image”. It is charged with a variety of meanings, ranging from a specific epoch to a physical space and its corresponding social relations.

Narratives, social practices and social systems have changed over the course of time. Wertsch therefore, postulates that “collective memory tends to be loyal to a narrative at the expense of evidence” (2002, p. 13). Meaning that the presented values do not correspond to the current social system or practices. In the case of Old Tbilisi, several now-vanished social realities (e.g. state socialism, close neighborhood relations and ruined houses) often diverge from social circumstances and its (material) representations (e.g. capitalism, newly built infrastructure). It is therefore likely that individuals’ narratives refer to a different set of power structures and bear different values and socio-cultural realities belonging to a declined era. They can be full of inconsistency and uneven facts which are neither logical nor plausible. Based on these premises, neighbors’ narratives are precisely the focus of my research: they provide a deep insight into the ideas, desires and values of the residents which often oppose the background of actual change that has taken place in their environment.

The history and city planning of Tbilisi has been documented through a rich literature that was mainly produced during the Soviet Union, for example, the folklorist characterization of Old Tbilisi by Grishashvili (1927), Shota Meskhia’s “History of Tbilisi” (1958) and the examination of Old Tbilisi’s architecture by Vakhtang Beridze (1960; 1963). Over the past two decades, new anthropological and urbanist research has been carried out and currently supersedes the studies from Soviet times. Namely, the works in the volumes edited by Wolfgang Kaschuba, Joseph Salukvadze, Tsy pylma Darieva, Madlen Pilz e.a. (Van Assche. e.a. 2009; Darieva & Kaschuba 2011; Kaschuba & Pilz 2012), show a wide range of approaches, methods and topics. The researchers address urban planning (or better its absence), commodification and heritage protection. The transformation of the cityscape and its perception has been examined on a large scale by Paul Manning and Zaza Shatirishvili (2009; 2011). According to these scholars, locals react towards privatization and the restructuring of the “city of balconies” (dominated by balconied houses which are considered to be the “traditional” Tbilisian housing setting) by turning towards nostalgia. Small case studies of neighborhoods and urban communities are the exception. Locals’ ideas are sometimes recognized in academic research, but almost never in urban planning.

The study was realized through extensive fieldwork conducted from March - June 2014 and from March 2016 until March 2017. Three key informants proved to be critical in the access to the field: Ana who introduced me to the Maidan neighborhood and Alex who was my landlord. They grew up and spent most of their life in Maidan neighborhood. This is where they experienced the transformation of the city and the country. Maya, a neighbor in her 30s, was another important informant. She grew up in Vera, another district

of Old Tbilisi, and moved to Maidan neighborhood only ten years ago. My informants have to struggle to satisfy their daily needs; they rely on networks of friends and relatives within the neighborhood as well as beyond. Besides the extensive attendance of these two main witnesses, my research has been further informed by 20 additional interviewees and by participant observation techniques that I used to analyze residents' behavior within the neighborhood. I analyzed the perspective of the elites and different discourses of the last 60 years by the study of written (literature, websites, public campaigns, development plans, heritage legislation and realized projects) as well as visual (photographs, paintings and cartographic material) sources.

The paper is organized as follows. The first part specifies how Old Tbilisi is actually presented. I then proceed by presenting my informant's narratives of their built environment and their housing situation. I then examine the ways in which my interviewees narrate social life in the Maidan neighborhood. In conclusion, I show why Maidan residents refer to specific narrative templates when they present their neighborhood.

Conceptualizing Old Tbilisi

In a chapter of the book published in 2010 called the "Identity and Spirit of Old Tbilisi", architect Giorgi Batiashvili stated that

"the historic areas of Tbilisi possess their own particular characteristics. Here, the features referred to as 'Tbilisuri' (of Tbilisi origin) and 'Tbiliseli' (resident of Tbilisi) are formed and displayed. This is the 'spirit' that gives life to the historic environment. The landscape of the local area and the urban component formed therein constitute the 'Mother of the place' that gives birth to the spirit which is revealed in the architecture and the psychological make-up of the area and its inhabitants. [...] The nest of Old Tbilisi's 'spirit' - [is] the 'Tbilisuri' [sic] dwelling and the 'Tbilisuri' [sic] courtyard" (2010, p. 34).

Old Tbilisi is presented not only as a space in Tbilisi but as "the Mother of space" representing the city as such. It is said to be constituted by the spirit "revealed by the [...] psychological make-up of [...] its inhabitants" and the architecture, especially its "nest [...] the 'Tbilisuri' courtyard". Batiashvili claims that Old Tbilisi is inextricably linked with two important, specific Tbilisian elements: The courtyard and its inhabitants.

Ana and Alex live in the Maidan neighborhood, which forms part of so-called "Old Tbilisi". They depict it, similarly to Batiashvili, with architectural and social components like the "Tbilisian Courtyard" (often called "Italian Yard" – probably to create a more romantic tone)² and its Tbilisian residents ("Tbiliselebi"). Both can observe the panorama of Tbilisi from their windows: the Botanical Garden, the mosque, the historic public bathhouses, Narikala Fortress, new hotels, the newly built Peace Bridge and Metekhi Church. Both have experienced the Soviet Union and its collapse – the following unrest, the establishment of a market economy and the Rose Revolution³. According to their observations and experience, the "identity and spirit of Old Tbilisi" has been vanishing over the past decades, meaning that the neighborhood has lost its specific character.

2 The terms "Tbilisian" or "Italian" courtyard refer to the characteristic houses of the old center with inner courtyards. It is unclear when the concept exactly came up, but the term is an inherent part of the discursive reality about Old Tbilisi and widespread in today's Georgian media (e.g. Batiashvili 2010, p. 34; GDS morning 2013; Taktiridze 2016; Samadashvili-Kordzaia 2014, p. 209ff.). Therefore I use both terms equally from now on.

3 The Rose Revolution took place in 2003 and ended with the election of Mikheil Saakashvili as President of Georgia (2004 - 2012) and far reaching anti corruption measures and economic and political reforms, leading to a gradual recovery of the countries economy and state institutions (Jones 2013, p. 107).



Fig.2 Old Tbilisi as seen from Ana's window: newly built houses, the mosque, Narikala Fortress with the new built church, photo by the author.

Many features have changed due to the collapse of the Soviet Union: numerous residents left the city in the 1990s when the economy of Georgia collapsed and left residents facing extreme social insecurity. Additionally, minority rights were abolished by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first president of independent Georgia (Jones 2013, p. 43). Therefore, members of minority groups migrated more frequently than ethnic Georgians. Due to conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the former were sometimes substituted by IDPs (Internal Displaced Persons) from these regions (Golubchikov & Salukvadze 2016, p. 44). Since the Maidan neighborhood was dominated by minorities, it was hit particularly hard by this development. Additionally, as already mentioned, the neighborhood is becoming more and more dominated by tourists and tourism-related businesses since it is located in the very heart of the historic center of Tbilisi. These changes can be visually perceived since the old center is restructured according to the needs of consumption, recreation and commodification. Starting from the 1990s many old houses were demolished and rebuilt – especially during the time of the Saakashvili government. In 2008, an entire street (Mirza Shafi Street) was destroyed in the Maidan neighborhood to make a place for new housing, hotels and commercial buildings. Widely circulated examples of eye-catching constructions that have taken place are the Peace Bridge and the Hotel Tbilisi Veranda.

However, some characteristics of the neighborhood have stayed untouched: some long-time residents still inhabit the neighborhood, mostly those who could not or did not want to leave their old homes. They still live “like one family” with close relations and mutual support, since some of them are socially vulnerable neighbors (e.g. minorities – often facing difficulties to find work, due to language barriers and structural discrimination (George 2010, p. 51) and elderly people, receiving only limited support from the state). In addition,

the built environment has also stayed partially untouched: old, neglected houses surrounding “Tbilisuri’ courtyards” with shared facilities and a weak infrastructure make life very uncomfortable for the neighbors.

“Not characteristic for us”: narrating spatial images

Tourism is the most important economic activity in the Maidan neighborhood. A lot of residents profit from the tourism exploitation since many of them conduct tourism-related businesses. In almost every yard at least one family rents out flats to tourists. As Maya explained: “The whole neighborhood is a hotel. This is a tourist’s neighborhood.”

As the neighbors prefer to buy products from cheaper bazaars or supermarkets and make use of their newly built private bathrooms it is logical that some shops and the historic, public bathhouses cannot survive without foreign clients.

However, neighbors often react negatively towards tourism exploitation that is the main factor in the reorganization of their neighborhood. But their reactions seem to arise from the ways in which this type of exploitation affects their habits and spatial image rather than being a refusal of tourism and business per se. Loud music is played and fireworks are burned every night. It is especially during summertime that neighbors complain about their disturbed sleep. The restaurants, as well as the bathhouses (formerly residents’ favorite places to socialize), are now too expensive for most neighbors. The exodus of many residents broke up the neighbors’ networks and friendships. The newly built structures even endanger their material existence. One resident for example, accidentally discovered that a building company was destroying the foundations of his home: he was not even informed about the constructions along the hillside where his house is located.

It is especially the constructions of the last two decades in the neighborhood and its periphery which evoke the neighbors’ discomfort. In Ana’s eyes the modernist buildings like the Peace Bridge are alien elements in Tbilisi:

“I personally don’t like this bridge, not only myself, also Aleko⁴ does not like it. [...] Our president⁵ and Ugulava⁶ went and saw [...] and they learned something, they came, spread golden things,⁷ made watches⁸ [...], which are not characteristic for us.”

Ana claimed a nation has to take care of its own culture and should not taint it with alien elements. Besides the Peace Bridge and the golden statue of Saint George, the demolition of Mirza Shafi Street and the building of new restaurants and hotels are further examples of the intrusion of new buildings in the old center. In their narratives, the neighbors condemn these constructions as “not characteristic” to the national culture. And they refer to activists such as Aleksandre Elisashvili who “also [...] does not like” the Peace Bridge.

What is “characteristic” for Tbilisi, was defined at the latest in the mid-20th century, when Old Tbilisi received an increase in attention from the Soviet authorities. Stephen Jones claims that the latter aimed to prevent further

⁴ Aleksandre Elisashvili – member of the City Council, one of the founding members of the NGO Tiflis Hamkari engaged in the protection of historic buildings in Tbilisi.

⁵ In this time Mikheil Saakashvili president from 2004-2013.

⁶ Givi Ugulava former Major of Tbilisi from 2005-2013.

⁷ The golden statue of St. George at Freedom Square.

⁸ A public clock placed at Gorgasali Square.



Fig.3_ Gravestone of Elene Akhvlediani at the Didube Pantheon, photo by the author.

political claims of the Georgian national movement by supporting its cultural demands. (2013, p. 31) Finally, in 1975, the old center of Georgia's capital was declared a "national protected zone" and its reconstruction and preservation envisaged (Tbilisi 9th Sept. 1989; Vardosanidze 2010).

On the occasion of the 1500th anniversary of Tbilisi, the historian Shota Meskhia published "History of Tbilisi" (1958) and claimed that in the mid-19th century "the 2 or 3- floor houses of the citizens, wore features of national folk architecture. They were characterized by arched balconies with carved balustrades and brackets." (1958, p. 423) In the course of time the balconies, the inner "courtyard, terraced roofing, and loggias with stained glass" were declared an integral part of "the so-called 'Tbilisi house'." (Bulia; Janjalia 2002, p. 92) As Paul Manning showed, these "arched balconies" became the visual signature of Old Tbilisi (2009, p. 98).

It is exactly this image that Ana is referring to when she claims that the historic center should look like "Elene Akhvlediani's pictures". On Akhvlediani's paintings of the historic center, one can above all see these balconied houses – even her gravestone at the Didube Pantheon⁹ in Tbilisi consists of a sculpture presenting balconied houses.

But Ana also appears to have a personal relation to the painter. She spoke of how the artist came into her house and painted the panorama of Old Tbilisi which is visible from Ana's balcony. This is, in her eyes, proof that Akhvlediani's paintings are an exact reproduction of Old Tbilisi. The panoramic view which can be witnessed from Ana's balcony has changed over the past decades, and by now looks different from the one presented on Akhvlediani's paintings. Therefore, according to her, the view from the balcony "has to be

⁹ The Didube Pantheon is a cemetery in Tbilisi, Georgia, where some of the most prominent writers, artists, scholars, scientists and political activists of Georgia are buried. It was opened in 1939. The pantheon is located in the Didube District in the northern part of Tbilisi.

given back – maybe taken down and rebuilt, but in the old style and not in another way.” The building of entirely new structures, which are not “characteristic” Tbilisian, makes her familiar environment unrecognisable. In her eyes, it might have been necessary to renovate or to rebuild the houses in her neighborhood since they have been in a bad state, but the spatial image should not have been changed. She perceives the alteration as the erasure of her own memory.

“Tbilisuri dwelling”: narrating housing

Similarly to Ana, Maya claims that she likes “what is old, what is historic: the view, the churches. [...] The neighborhood itself is old and is the most beautiful and nice, there is no doubt.” This statement suggests that the residents positively evaluate their historic homes. But instead what they mostly lament about is their housing conditions. So did Maya, when she continued:

“Besides this, I like nothing [...], the neighborhood is not good. [...] Of course, I want a better apartment, so that I would have better conditions – a kitchen and a toilet in the apartment. [...] I don’t like this neighborhood not only because the people are naughty [...], it is not practical for living, because of the shops, because of everything – the transport, this and that.”

The housing conditions in the shared yards were the result of the Soviet housing policy, due to which communal apartments were established. Svetlana Boym argues that the communal apartment was not only the result of the post-revolutionary housing crisis but also of a revolutionary experiment of shared housing (1994, p. 124). The striven norm of 9m² of living space per person was a mere statistical device and was not related to the existing pre-revolutionary housing stock (Goldman 1988, p. 193). Therefore, the separation of existing flats became necessary and strangers had to share these newly created apartments. Housing committees were created to manage the communal apartments. This newly created institution served to control and educate “Soviet men and women”. The use of shared facilities (kitchen, bath, toilet) was, according to Boym, not only the result of the lack of space but also a political statement against the bourgeois way of life (1994, pp. 128, 129).

However, the specific Tbilisian version of the *Kommunalka* was the so-called “Italian Yard”. A multitude of neighbors used to live, and still live, in the apartments grouped around the “Tbilisian Courtyard”. Some of them still share facilities like the kitchen and the bathroom. The housemates formed the “yard community”, a context that forced them to get along with each other in a confined space.

In the film “April” (directed by the Georgian-film maker Otar Ioseliani, 1962) these difficult living conditions in the so-called “Italian Yards” are contrasted with newly built comfortable housing. In the film, a young couple leaves its shanty-like house and moves into a newly built, comfortable apartment. While the achievements of the Soviet housing policy are shown here, the final message is different. The couple becomes tired of material things as they fill their flat with furniture. Their property starts to disturb them and they



remember the modest, but yet romantic living conditions in Old Tbilisi.

Fig.4 Tbilisian Courtyard in Grishashvili Street, photo by the author.

A similar plot is presented in the film “Sun of Autumn” (released in 1976). The wife of an artist exchanges their comfortable flat with a shanty like a house in the historic center. The artist gets inspired by the character of the old center and becomes very productive and his subsequent satisfaction results in a re-kindling of the couple’s love. In one of the last sequences of the film, the artist invites his colleagues to his exhibition in his “Tbilisuri dwelling”. The guests there, are among others, played by the most famous Georgian artists of the 1970s: Elene Akhvediani and Lado Gudiashvili (1896- 1980). In the film, the Georgian intelligentsia re-enacts their enthusiasm for Old Tbilisi. They explicitly legitimize their fascination for the historic center through the romantic atmosphere which is presented in the love of the artist-couple.

In a key scene, the couple is driving through the city in a carriage while a song, called “Be greeted my city Tbilisi [gamarjoba ch’emo t’bilis k’alak’o]”, is played. Many other Tbilisi-related compositions have similar titles and deal with the beauty of the city (Giorgi Tsabadze: Tbilisi, my city! [ch’emo t’bilis k’alak’o]), the friendship between neighbors (Vakhtang Kikabidze “Buba”: Toast [sadghegrdzelo]) and the love to the city (Vakhtang Kikabidze “Buba”: Tbilisian Love [t’bilisuri satrp’ialo]).

These songs as well as the two mentioned films were produced during the Soviet era and are broadcast on the radio and TV to this day. This media is therefore widespread and becomes common knowledge among the neighbors who can identify themselves with the romantic image of the city that is propagated. Residents may lament about the poor living conditions, but in their narrative, they compensate them with warm neighborliness. Also in the

movie “Sun of Autumn” a neighbor explains: “All the people you need are here: for example, if you need a living fish, the fisherman is your neighbor, if you want to come together in the bath, the Mekise [bath worker J.S.] is your neighbor [...]” This idealized image emphasizes also the specific Georgian form of Soviet communality, enacted in the “Tbilisian courtyard”.

“We lived together in joy and grief”: narrating communality

According to the neighbor in the film as well as the neighbors in reality “communality (urtiertoba)” existed in Old Tbilisi – especially in the “Italian Yard”. “Before it was better than now. At least [the neighbors] were good to each other, if you were in distress if you needed something, everything was provided for the indigent person. [...] Today as well, but back then it was more intense”, Maya’s mother-in-law explained. Alex narrated that, during war-time, his mother had worked in a food oil factory and brought oil and seeds back to the yard in order to share it with those who had nothing. As he stressed, in Tbilisi, there had been a time when all lived together, there was “communality” between all “Tbilisians” and they had lived according to “Tbilisiness” – a certain way of behavior characterized by mutual respect and help, as he specified. An Armenian woman in her 50s explained that “it is a beautiful neighborhood. [...] Different nations are living together [...] like a family. They used to live together both in joy and grief [literally: “in feasting and down on the ground – lkhinshi da dzirshi”].

Neighbors refer to a narrative template linked with the communality of the genuine urban population, the *Tbilisians*. As Alex claims Tbilisians are a “nation on its own”. This idea was elaborated by the “Georgian folk poet” Ioseb Grishashvili (1889-1965) in his book “Old Tbilisi’s Literary Bohemia” (1927) first published in 1927 and republished in 1986. From the beginning of the 20th century on, he conducted research about the life in the area which he called “Old Tbilisi”. In his view, Old Tbilisi had its own culture, different from that of other regions of Georgia. Tbilisians would see themselves as a folk consisting of different ethnic backgrounds (1927, p. 13). By publishing an “urban dictionary” (1997) he assigned a unique language to the capital of Georgia. He put stress on the peaceful mixture of different people who understood themselves as part of one big community, Tbilisi. (1927, p. 13) According to Manning and Shatirishvili, “during the twentieth century there began a process of idealization of Old Tbilisi on the ground of high culture, [...] as a result of which Grishashvili’s book became a ‘cult’ classic” (2011, p. 266). The concept of Old Tbilisi became widespread in the late Soviet era and the neighbors refer to its specific qualities (the Tbilisian housing, a unique language, one big community and a mix of different ethnic groups) in their narratives. The idea of “communality” is linked with the physical structure of Old Tbilisi. Batiashvili, as mentioned above, claimed: “The nest of Old Tbilisi’s ‘spirit’ - [is] the ‘Tbilisuri’ dwelling and the ‘Tbilisuri’ courtyard.” According to Maya’s mother-in-law, mutual help, community and understanding were integral parts of life in the Italian Yard, because “in this Italian... if you want to move or not, you have to go out, and then more communality emerges.” Alex draws a picture of a warm and polite community of friends

“we knew each other. [...] There was little evil, but we knew who is evil and what kind of evil. [...] In your house in your family you’re living, you know all of your family. Who is what, yes you know, brother, sister or who else they are, mother, father you know each other good, here it was the same at the Maidan, in general in Tbilisi”.

What is distinctively shared by all neighbors’ accounts is that they all deal with a lost past. Communality does not exist anymore or is not as intense as it used to be. Responsible for these alterations is the outflow of the long-established residents, the so-called “Tbilisians”, who knew the Tbilisian rules of cohabitation. Instead, new residents would come from the villages and would not know the rules of Tbilisi. Alex mainly refers to the above-mentioned migration processes, due to which former residents (“Tbilisians”, as Alex says) were substituted by IDPs (“villagers”, as he calls them). However, since Tbilisi was steadily growing in the Soviet era, due to intense industrialization, a huge number of the rural population migrated into the capital. This process is ongoing (with an interruption in the 1990s, due to economic and political upheavals), since Tbilisi is the economic center of Georgia (Golubchikov; Salkvadze 2016, p. 44).

Old Tbilisi, according to the neighbors, is not only altering its built environment, but also the attitude that neighbors show towards each other. “There has been communality” is a catchphrase which I heard from all the neighbors I had spoken with.

The yard community was established due to the creation of the Tbilisian communal apartment: the Italian Yard. This would therefore make the narrative template of Old Tbilisi appear as an effect of the Soviet housing policy. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the outflow of the urban population, the establishment of capitalism and a free housing market, the tourism exploitation of the Maidan neighborhood has made the communal apartment and the everyday life that was related to it, slowly disappear.

Conclusions: relying on “outdated narratives”

The Georgian, Soviet intelligentsia romanticized the built environment and social life of the historic center of Tbilisi, which emerged as a result of the shortcomings of the Soviet housing policy and the establishment of communal apartments in Tbilisi. As clearly demonstrated, it is present until this day and is presented as “the spirit of Old Tbilisi.” This concept was accepted as common knowledge in the neighborhood and thereby constitutes its memory. In the residents’ narratives they recall many aspects of the spatial imagery produced by the Soviet Georgian intelligentsia e.g. the representation of Old Tbilisi by historic buildings. In particular, the “Tbilisian Courtyard”; a ruined housing stock which formed the romantic atmosphere of love and communality between the long-time urban population – the Tbilisians. Neighbors automatically recall this romantic narrative template and contrast it with the negative connotations of current developments. “Old Tbilisi was nicer” than it is today – tourism altered the cityscape negatively; the houses were, and still are ruined, but it was romantic. Before, neighbors knew each other, whereas

today many of them have left. “There had been communality” among the neighbors, while today it is lost.

The neighbors’ idealized, collective memory serves as a self-assertion that they remain members of an “authentic” community while pointing towards an alternative society (located in a lost past – in the Soviet Union or even before) characterized by social security and close relations between the neighbors. Since collective memory is related to “spatial images” and people adapt their habits to the space in which they settle, residents show discomfort with alterations of their environment. Its transformation is perceived as the annihilation of memory and the past.

Further research should examine how the idealized image of Old Tbilisi is used as a form of city branding by the city hall and big tourist agencies. But also by neighbors who are involved in tourism-related businesses to cope with everyday challenges.

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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.

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