FUTURE SHOCK

In Tbilisi, Georgia, a shiny new architectural skyline has become a political issue as much as an aesthetic one — is it slapdash commercialism ruining the culture's authentic history or a step toward a more progressive society?

BY JOSHUA LEVINE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON ROBERTS

CRISIS OF FAITH
A monk looks on at Tbilisi's half-built theater and exhibition hall, designed by the Italian architects Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas.

REZO GABRIADZE'S PUPPET THEATER stands in the heart of Tbilisi's Old Town, which is very old indeed. Around the corner are the sulfur baths, where, according to legend, Georgian King Vakhtang I decided to build the city in the fifth century. Up the street is the great Sioni Cathedral from the seventh century.

Gabriadze himself is a Georgian national treasure. I saw his marionette version of the Battle of Stalingrad when I first came to Tbilisi 10 years ago and fell in love with the city. I was ushered into a dank, run-down basement, where I watched, enthralled, as Gabriadze's tiny puppet tanks advanced to the rousing strains of Shostakovich. It was unforgettable.

The theater was a dump, but then, so was the rest of the city. The old buildings were missing many of the elegant narrow bricks first introduced there by the Byzantines. The covered balconies with their delicate latticework, a gift of the Ottomans, were listing and rotting. There was litter everywhere. An apartment's garbage disposal was often its front window.

None of this made the city any less romantic or delightful. Houses still clung to the cliffs above the Kura river as they did centuries ago, looking as though they might suddenly lose their grip. A faint smell of sulfur hung over the shallow domes of the old baths, where Pushkin once ogled Georgian women bathing. From high up on the cliff, the stones of the ruined Narikala fortress gazed over the town from the fourth century, and the eighth, and the 13th, and the 17th.

History has played rough with Tbilisi for a very long time. Persians, Byzantines, Ottomans, Russians and Soviets have all had their way with her. Each has left a little of its best self there. The

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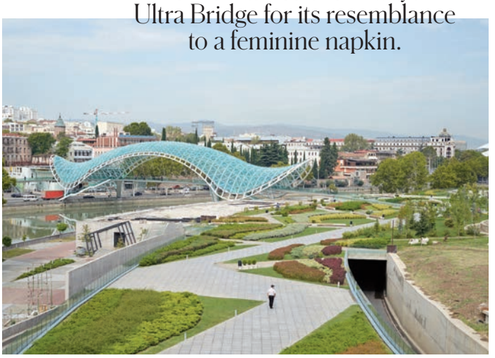


result is a city that Boris Pasternak called a chimera — a fanciful beast with a Western head and an Eastern body. Tbilisi has gotten even more fanciful recently. Italian architects have been busy with glass and steel, adding the sleek vernacular of modern capitalism to the city's Babel of building styles.

The new buildings are striking, and some are beautiful. Do they belong here among the ruins of dead empires? It turns out that question is as much political as aesthetic. Georgia's new buildings have become pawns in a power struggle over its place in the world. Does it belong in the cosmopolitan sphere of the European architects who built them? Or should it remain somewhere lost in time, ''a city as if not of this world,'' as Pasternak puts it?

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE not to be struck by how much the city has changed since I had last seen it, maybe four years ago. Gabriadze has a renovated theater, which opened in 2010. He designed it with the same cockeyed whimsy he puts into the puppets he makes. A crooked clock tower, encrusted with Gabriadze's handmade tiles, sprouts a pomegranate tree from its roof. A gold-winged angel strikes the hours.

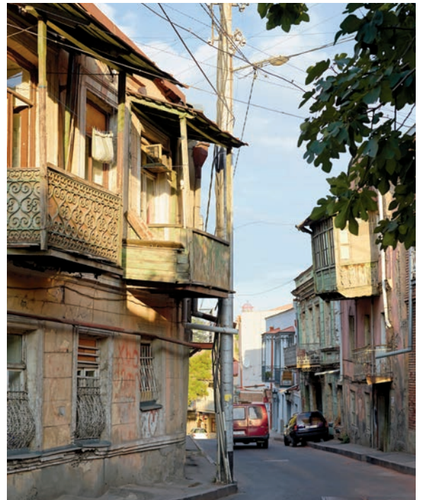
The changes go well beyond the theater. The whole surrounding neighborhood, what the history books used to call Old Tiflis, looks freshly minted. The houses wear bright new paint, and their sagging balconies have somehow pulled themselves up straight. The streets are clean, or at least much cleaner, and there are scores of new cafes and restaurants.

This was the first time I'd had a chance to see the Peace Bridge over the Kura river — it opened in 2010. The Italian architect Michele De Lucchi gave the bridge a wavy glass roof lit by more than 1,200 LEDs for maximum twinkle.

Just down from Freedom Square at the city's heart stands a boxy block of glass shaded by huge droopy white petals on tubular stems. It's the new Tbilisi Public Service Hall by two other Italians, Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas, and if it seems overscaled, it's meant to. Inside the cavernous hall, Georgians are getting married, buying new houses, paying their taxes and conducting all manner of official business with an absence of humiliation and indignity that is quite fresh here. The grandiose architecture is meant to amplify the virtues of Georgia's kinder, gentler bureaucracy. ''I'm done in five minutes, which is almost a shame because it's so pleasant here I don't want to leave,'' one of my Georgian friends tells me.

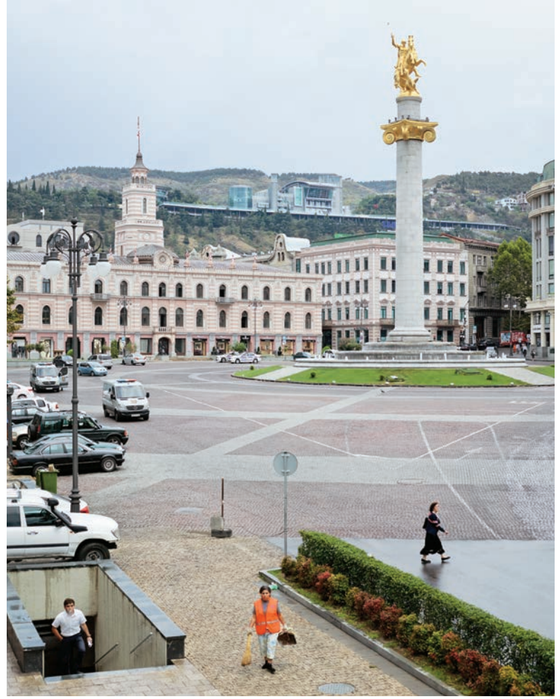
Do not expect rousing applause for any of this, however. For all their charm, Georgians can be maddeningly querulous. Tbilisi's face-lift has gotten many of them particularly riled up. The complaints come in a variety of voices, some shrill and some shriller. The preservationists accuse the government of handing out inducements to private developers, who favored slapdash commercialism over historical authenticity in restoring Old Tbilisi. The local artist Gio Sumbadze calls it ''facadism.''

Sumbadze does have a point. There is indeed a Ye Olde quality to some of the jazzed-up facades. But in fairness, the government needed to make some concessions to induce private developers; it could never have afforded to restore Old Tbilisi on its own. Meanwhile, the Soviets had crammed four or five families into



CROSSOVER APPEAL Clockwise from left: unrestored houses in Old Tbilisi; the Michele De Lucchi–designed Peace Bridge, which spans the Kura river, has been compared to many things, including a piece of sushi, since its opening in 2010; inside the Fuksases' controversial theater project.

BUILDING BLOCKS The city's buildings have undergone much transformation, including Rezo Gabriadze's old puppet theater, which has been updated with a new clock tower.



MODERN SOCIETY Clockwise from top left: a view of Freedom Square in the center of Tbilisi, with the Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili's $50 million compound just above it; inside the Tbilisi Public Service Hall, a municipal building with soaring steel canopies; Tbilisi's mayor, Gigi Ugulava, one of the former Rose Revolutionaries, on the roof of City Hall.

houses built for one, and the wear and tear was dismantling the area from the inside.

I take a walk around the historic district with Maia Mania, a professor at Tbilisi's State Academy of Art and one of the new Old Tbilisi's fiercest adversaries. ''Look at that!'' she says, pointing a withering finger at one old building. ''They took out the old bricks there and used brick cladding! And they attached a balcony there — what for?'' Finally we come upon a lovely open courtyard, a characteristic feature of traditional Georgian houses. Mania finds it quite harmonious, except for ''those three red things. I wish they weren't there.'' They are two women in red sweaters and a red car. ''I am ill with what they have done in Old Tbilisi,'' she says, looking genuinely ill. ''If they had done a real restoration on 10 houses, I would be silent.''

More than a few Tbilisians find the new buildings incongruous and jarring, and sometimes just plain bad. The Peace Bridge, a source of much raillery, is nicknamed the Always Ultra Bridge for its resemblance to a feminine napkin. ''I think the new buildings would be marvelous, but maybe someplace far away, like in the suburbs,'' says Nino Sukhishvili, who, along with her brother, runs the Georgian National Ballet founded by her grandparents.

No local animus quite matches that of Bidzina Ivanishvili, the quirky billionaire who entered public life expressly to topple former President Mikheil Saakashvili, the man behind Tbilisi's architectural revival. Ivanishvili, now Georgia's prime minister, has made no secret of his disdain for Tbilisi's new buildings, sucking them into a wider Kulturkampf over Georgia's identity. He has called them a waste and an eyesore.

Saakashvili was swept into power by the Rose Revolution in 2003. He was young and dashing, and so were the good-looking men and women who joined his government. They enjoyed overwhelming popularity and good will. Like Russia's Peter the Great, Saakashvili set out to usher in a golden age of Western-leaning modernity, using Italian architects to fashion the iconography.

The goal was a worthy one for a country mired in post-Soviet poverty and corruption. The problem was that Saakashvili pursued it more like a czar than an elected president. Dissent was ignored or overridden, sometimes brutally, and the Rose Revolution withered under his harsh care. By October 2012, Georgia had finally had enough, and booted out Saakashvili's United National Movement at the polls. (His own term as president ended in October 2013.)

Ivanishvili has been the opposite of gracious in victory. He often seems driven more by an implacable hatred of Saakashvili and all his works than by any particular vision of his own. He has brought various charges against more than 100 United National Movement politicians, and even put some of them behind bars while they awaited trial. And he has effectively stamped out any architectural renaissance in Tbilisi, old and new.

On the riverbank across from the Old Town, bulldozers sit idle on the site of a controversial music theater and exhibition hall, also designed by the Fuksases. It was to be housed in a pair of massive pipes that now lie there like two Ozymandian legs of steel. Most people I spoke to never liked them anyway, and they do look ungainly and strange where they are.

But that's not the point, or at least it wasn't Ivanishvili's point when the theater's Georgian developer was detained last November on suspicion of receiving illegal funds. Shortly after, Tbilisi's mayor, Gigi Ugulava, released a statement: ''The Prime Minister sees the building of the theater as the muzzle of a cannon directed at his residence and is threatening to destroy it. There is no point arguing about tastes, but I am getting the impression that people are being detained for their taste in Georgia now.''

I meet Ugulava in his office in one of Tbilisi's new high-rises. At 38, he is one of Saakashvili's eager young Rose Revolutionaries. He tells me: ''When Ivanishvili says he wants to destroy the theater or the Peace Bridge, it has nothing to do with architecture; it has to do with his wish to get rid of everything from Saakashvili's era. Besides, look at Ivanishvili's own home. It was the first big modern glass building in Tbilisi.''

You can't miss it if you look up on the hill above Tbilisi: a $50 million futuristic thingy that looks like it's waiting for George Jetson to land on its helipad. Ivanishvili, often described as a recluse, likes to work up there instead of in his offices in Tbilisi. The complex also houses his private zoo, not to mention artwork by Hirst and Koons down through Lucian Freud, Lichtenstein and Henry Moore (Actually, the paintings in Tbilisi are copies; Ivanishvili keeps the originals in London.) At $6 billion, Ivanishvili's fortune, made in Russia during the rough-and-tumble days of privatization, comes to around half of Georgia's G.D.P.

Georgians know better than most people that power comes and goes. They've had a lot of practice recycling imperial debris. Rustaveli Avenue, Tbilisi's main artery, is lined with the elephant skeletons of Russian and Soviet dominion. Temur Ugulava is currently transforming one of them, a gargantuan Soviet printing house from the 1970s, into two luxury hotels. He will keep all the old printing machinery, which churned out copies of Pravda in another lifetime. ''Temur prefers to buy Soviet buildings,'' says Natalia Kancheli, who is working with Ugulava on the project. The two of them recently converted an old Soviet hotel near Mount Kazbegi in the Caucasus mountains. ''Cost was no object to the Soviets. These buildings will withstand a 9.0 earthquake.''

Ultimately, however, there's a lot more at stake here than architecture. Farther down Rustaveli Avenue is the old parliament building, near where I meet Giga Bokeria, another ministerial survivor from the Rose Revolution. The parliament is a Soviet classic from 1938, with a colonnade of elongated arches rising up four soul-crushing stories. It's no longer used. Saakashvili moved parliament to a utopian complex he had constructed in Kutaisi, three hours away, by the Spanish architect Alberto Domingo. The new parliament is a big glass egg that looks intended to support human life on an inhospitable planet.

Which, in a sense, it is. ''All these new buildings were part of a package. We were trying to change the mentality of the whole apparatus,'' Bokeria says. ''In post-Soviet times, the government had an orgasm just finding ways to insult you. That's what we were trying to leave behind. The core of the debate was always, What kind of country should Georgia be?''

Lately, that debate has grown sharper teeth. Last May, gay rights demonstrators were badly beaten during a rally that had been condemned beforehand by the Georgian Orthodox Church. Ivanishvili denounced the violence, but the antimodern sentiment isn't just aimed at buildings anymore. ''That was the most shameful day in our history,'' Bokeria says. ''They're trying to make us un-Georgian.''

''I believe there's a tipping point for everything,'' Kancheli says. ''Saakashvili finally reached it, and now he's gone. I think Ivanishvili's government will ultimately reach a point on the other extreme, and then they'll be gone too. Hopefully, one day Georgians will learn how to live in the middle.'' Whichever way Georgia swings, a building somewhere in Tbilisi will commemorate it.

OUT OF THE PAST Clockwise from above: the 13th-century Metekhi church looms over the Kura river in one of the oldest parts of Tbilisi; the city at dusk; the Orbeliani Baths in the ancient bath district of Abanotubani.