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City as a geopolitics: Tbilisi, Georgia — A globalizing metropolis in a turbulent region

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ABSTRACT

Tbilisi, a city of over a million, is the national capital of Georgia. Although little explored in urban studies, the city epitomizes a fascinating assemblage of processes that can illuminate the interplay of geopolitics, political choices, globalization discourses, histories, and urban contestations in shaping urban transformations. Tbilisi's strategic location in the South Caucasus, at the juncture of major historical empires and religions in Eurasia, has ensured its turbulent history and a polyphony of cultural influences. Following Georgia's independence in 1991, Tbilisi found itself as the pivot of Georgian nation-building. Transition to a market economy also exposed the city to economic hardship, ethnical homogenization, and the informalization of the urban environment. The economic recovery since the early 2000s has activated urban regeneration. Georgia's government has recently promoted flagship urban development projects in pursuit of making Tbilisi as a modern globalizing metropolis. This has brought contradictions, such as undermining the city's heritage, contributing to socio-spatial polarization, and deteriorating the city's public spaces. The elitist processes of decision-making and a lack of a consistent urban policy and planning regimes are argued to be among major impediments for a more sustainable development of this city.

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1. Introduction

Tbilisi is the capital of Georgia, a post-Soviet country in the South Caucasus.[1] The 2014 census estimated its population at 1.118 million (Geostat, 2015).[2] Tbilisi is not only the largest city in Georgia, but is also one of the key socio-economic hubs in the Caucasus as a whole. The city presently accommodates 30% of Georgia's population, but produces almost a half of Georgia's GDP and, furthermore, contributes 60–75% to the country's key statistics in entrepreneurial and construction activities (Geostat, 2014a; Geostat, 2014b).

'Tbilisi… is like a Janus: one face towards Asia, and the other Europe', wrote the *Zakavkazskiy Vestnik* newspaper in 1847 (Vardosanidze, 2000). Such hybridity remains a hallmark of the city located at the conjunction of the European and Asian continents, different cultures and geopolitical realms.

Tbilisi rose to its prominence through the centuries of a turbulent history. Its location on the edge of ancient and modern empires (Persian, Byzantine, Arab, Mongol, Ottoman, Russian) and on major trading routes, rendered the city geopolitically and economically significant — if only guaranteeing a continuous struggle for survival. The historical dynamism has left its marks on the social and cultural hybridity of the city. Tbilisi traditionally featured a cosmopolitan and multicultural character, as well as the tolerance of ethnical and religious differences (Frederiksen, 2012). Its urban forms and spatial fabric similarly inherited a peculiar mix of different cultural layers, superposed on the city's rather peculiar topography.

The modern Tbilisi could have recreated itself through this indigenous tradition of distinctiveness, polyphony and tolerance. Becoming the capital of a newly independent Georgian state in 1991, the city, however, found itself entangled in the turbulent economic and political processes. The installation of a market economy coupled with an economic freefall in the 1990s, the rise of nationalism and the territorial disintegration of Georgia, as well as its government's entanglements in the geopolitical tensions between Russia and the NATO powers have all produced a myriad of previously untested challenges — which have also left their marks on the city's social and physical change.

As a globalizing city in a small nation in an economically peripheral and yet geopolitically strategic region, the case of Tbilisi can make an important contribution to urban studies, such as with respect to the meaning-making of the trajectories of "ordinary" non-Western cities

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[1] The South Caucasus region refers to Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. It has also been historically referred to as Transcaucasia, from the Russian *Zakavkazye*, "the far side of the Caucasus", reflecting the Russo-centric geopolitics of the previous eras.

[2] This was a 3.4% increase in comparisons with the 2002 census, although this growth was mainly due to the expansion of the city's administrative territory.

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in global urbanism (Robinson, 2006), to comparative and conceptual post-socialist urban studies (e.g. Borén & Gentile, 2007; Golubchikov, Badyina, & Makhrova, 2014; Sjöberg, 2014; Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012; Wiest, 2012), to a better understanding of variegated pathways of transition and neoliberalism (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010; Pickles & Smith, 1998), or even to the critical urban pedagogy of transition (Golubchikov, 2015). However, despite attention to Georgia from the disciplines such as international political studies, there is still a lacuna of internationally circulated knowledge of urban change in Tbilisi (although see Van Assche, Salukvadze, & Shavisvili, 2009; Van Assche & Salukvadze, 2011). With this contribution, we intend to further unlock Tbilisi for urban studies by providing an overview of its urban trajectories as a basis for hopefully further localized and comparative investigations. By doing so, the paper outlines some of the essential, even if controversial, processes, problems and outcomes of the city's convoluted past and present.

The paper is structured as follows. We start with outlining the location, demographic and physical conditions of Tbilisi and then proceed with its main historical development phases — from the medieval period to the Russian Empire and Soviet eras and to the more recent period of post-socialist transition. We then consider the establishment of the real estate markets and recent urban policies and transformations in the built environment, and pay particular attention to the current urban development initiatives and associated political, planning and governance issues and concerns.

2. Physical, administrative and demographic settings

Tbilisi is located 120 km south of the Great Caucasus Mountains, on the Kura River (*Mtkvari* in Georgian). It shares the latitude of cities such as Rome or Barcelona, similarly enjoying a mild climate. The city has a complex topography, shaped like a large amphitheater surrounded by mountains on three sides. These physical conditions, once favorable for controlling the valleys, today represent a physical obstacle for urban growth. However, the climate, topography, and hydrography have also granted Tbilisi a unique cityscape, attractive panoramas, and peculiar architecture featuring laced wooden balconies and internal patios, traditionally used as places for socialization (Fig. 1).

The present-day Tbilisi has a special status of the capital of Georgia. Internally its territory is divided into six administrative districts, with five of them being further subdivided into *Ubani* — 30 in total. These spread on the territory of 504 km^2. However, the city topography circumscribes an island-like geography, with a few densely built-up areas surrounded by undeveloped land: more than half of the city's incorporated territory is not built-up. The mountainous environment particularly limits new development on the right bank of the Kura River; at the same time, the built-up area on the left bank of the Kura stretches for 40 km.

Tbilisi's present spatial structure is a product of a long historical process and expansion (Fig. 2). However, the city's territorial expansion mostly occurred during the Soviet era: between 1921 and 1991 Tbilisi expanded six times in terms of population (Fig. 3) and ten times in terms of incorporated territory. Tbilisi's Master Plan (Fig. 22) illustrates the city's resultant layout, including built-up areas squeezed between mountainous areas. The city expansion has recently accelerated even further, aggravating the problems of the integrity and connectivity of the city.

After gaining the independence, Tbilisi experienced a dramatic 15% population reduction. This was due to a mass outflow of population, mostly to Russia, coupled with a very low natural growth to compensate the out-migration (Meladze, 2013; Salukvadze & Meladze, 2014). However, the population growth reversed to positive in the 2000s, fuelled by migrants from rural Georgia. The city has consequently undergone 'Georgianization' — the acceleration of even a longer-term trend of the replacement of its once multinational composition by ethnic Georgians, due to a disproportional outmigration of Russians and Armenians (Fig. 4). Recent demographic trends have also included: aging population; a smaller family size; decreased levels of marriages and increased divorces. Coupled with lifestyle change, these factors have amplified demands for housing and developable land.

Fig. 1. Traditional wooden balconies in Old Tbilisi. Photo by author 2.

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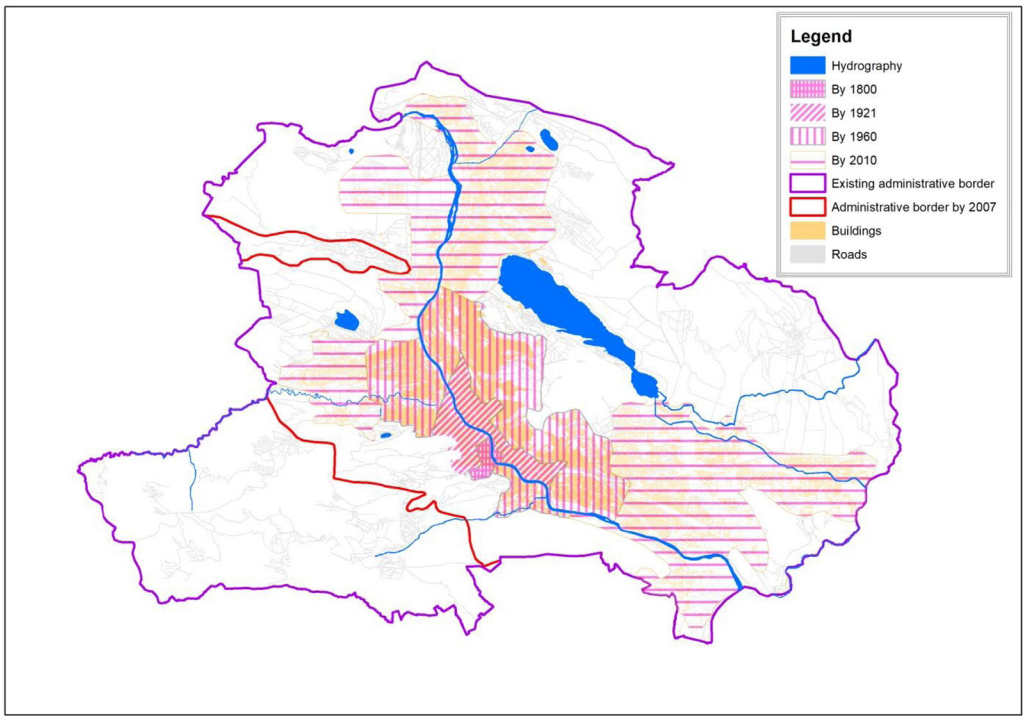


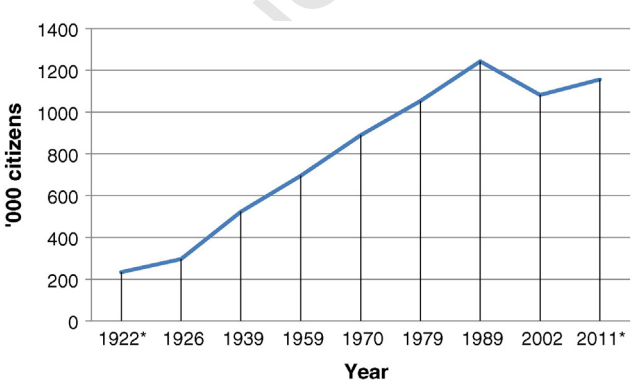
Source: Van Assche and Salukvadze, 2013

Fig. 2. The administrative expansions of Tbilisi. Source: Van Assche & Salukvadze, 2013.

3. From a medieval capital to an imperial powerhouse

Tbilisi was founded in the 5th century AD, although archeological findings reveal even earlier settlements. Emerged as a stronghold in the Kura valley, in the vicinity of the ancient Eastern Georgian capital and a religious center of the Orthodox Christianity — Mtskheta, Tbilisi eventually became a strategic settlement for controlling the lowlands between the Greater and Minor Caucasus ranges and major trade routes. In the 6th century AD, Tbilisi was made the capital of the Eastern Georgian kingdom Iberia. Since then it has maintained its status of the chief city of either Eastern Georgia or a united Georgian Kingdom.

The strategic location of Tbilisi between Europe and Asia made it vulnerable in the context of the rivalries between the main powers in the region, including Persia, Byzantium, Arabia, Mongols, and Ottomans (Lang, 1966). At the dusk of the Middle Ages, Georgia, the only Christian enclave retaining its statehood in the otherwise Muslim region found itself squeezed between hostile powers — Persian and Ottoman Empires, and North Caucasian tribes. Due to constant wars, Tbilisi shrank in population and economically. This required seeking protection from the growing Russian Empire in the north, sharing the Christian Orthodox religion, with whom Irakli II signed a treaty in 1783. This did not avert, however, a devastating Persian invasion in 1795. The Russian Army eventually liberated the Kingdom, but this cost the abolishment of the Georgian independent kingdom altogether in 1801. At the time of the incorporation in the Russian Empire, Tbilisi had only 15,000 survivors (Lang, 1957).



Source: General Population Censuses; * Estimates

Fig. 3. The population of Tbilisi, 1922–2011. Source: General Population Censuses; * Estimates.

The consequent rebuilding of the city under the Russian rule marked the start of a post-medieval era in Tbilisi's development. Known as *Tiflis* in the Russian Empire (like even today in some languages), the city retained its primacy and started serving as an important administrative center of the empire; from 1844 Tbilisi became a seat of the Emperor's representative (Governor) in the Caucasus (*Namestnik Imperatora na Kavkaze*). The political importance of the city also boosted as the authorities regarded the city as a strategic military stronghold for protecting the south-western borders of the empire, as well as for monitoring and controlling political processes in the Ottoman and Persian Empires, on the one hand, and preparing further territorial expansion in the Near and Middle East, on the other hand. Tbilisi had retained the status of the largest trade center and the most populous city of the region until the oil boom made Baku a larger city in the second half of the 20th century.

Tbilisi, hitherto a compact settlement with a medieval social organization and an irregular oriental-style layout, started a transformation towards 'European-style' patterns. Through an active city-building process, it gained the feature characteristic for a colonial 'dual city' with oriental-type, irregular, topographically diverse and culturally mixed Old Town, and newly-built European-style areas, established in accordance with a regular plan on relatively plain terrains (e.g. *Sololaki*). This changed the main axis of territorial development from the Kura River to the new wide avenues, which were named after the Governors Golovin and the Grand Duke Michael Romanov (today named after, respectively, Rustaveli and David Agmashenebeli) — one stretching westwards from the Old Town and the other located on the left bank

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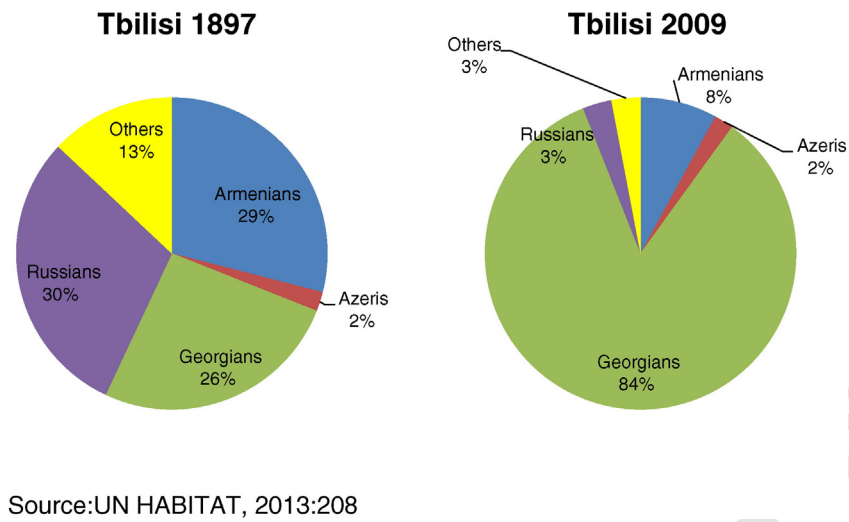

Fig. 4. Historic change in the ethnic composition of Tbilisi. Source: UN HABITAT, 2013:208.

of the river. The new districts were socially more homogeneous, residing the emerging strata of bureaucrats, affluent entrepreneurs, and Georgian aristocracy.

The appearance of the city and its internal structure and centrality changed dramatically (Fig. 5). The old town, rebuilt from ruins, with its labyrinthine of courtyards and balconies, contrasted with the new districts of neo-classical architecture (Fig. 6) (Suny, 1994; Rhinelander, 1972). The involvement of European architects had also resulted in Western influences: neo-renaissance, neo-baroque, Italian Gothic and Art Nouveau (Ziegler, 2006; Baulig, Mania, Mildenberger, & Ziegler, 2004). Among newly introduced components were administrative buildings (e.g. the City Hall, currently the City Council) and palaces (e.g. the Governor's palace, currently the Youth Palace), usually located in commanding heights and conspicuous locations, as well as squares connected by boulevards (e.g. on modern day's Rustaveli Avenue), and parks (e.g. the Alexander Park, currently the 9th of April Park). A botanical

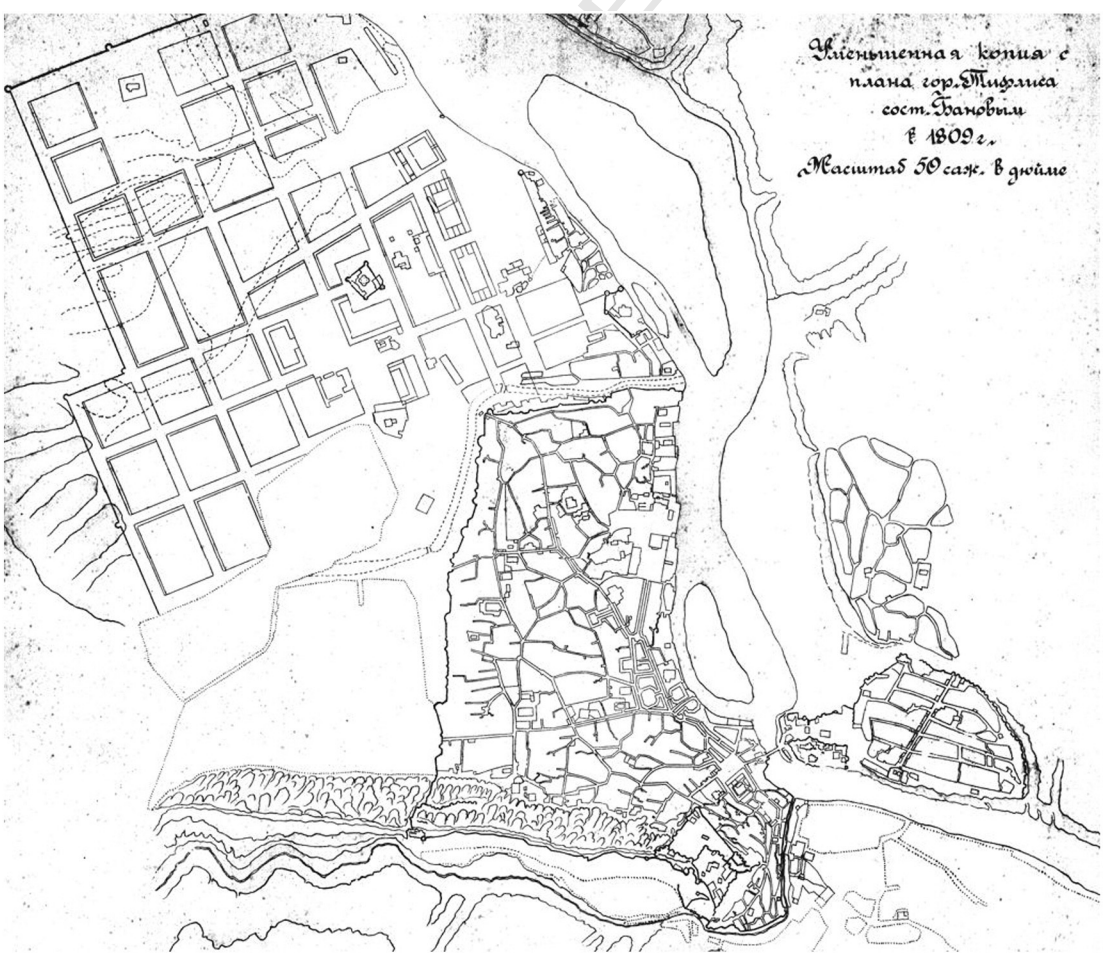

Fig. 5. A plan of Tbilisi in 1809 (compiled by Banov).

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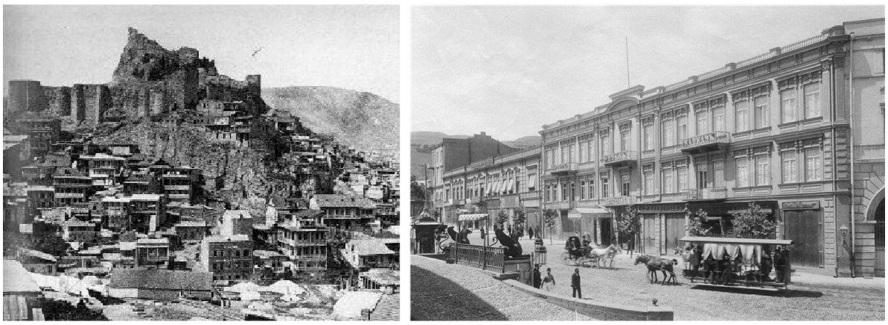

Source:http://church.ucoz.com/photo/

Fig. 6. The old town (left) and a new district of Tbilisi in the early 20th century. Source: http://church.ucoz.com/photo/

garden, an opera house, theaters, museums and schools also emerged in the city over 19th and the early 20th century.

Tbilisi of that era became a visiting venue or a place of residence for many prominent people. Writers, intellectuals, and artists who then visited or lived in Tbilisi, included, among others, Russians Alexander Griboyedov, Alexander Pushkin, Lev Tolstoy, Mikhail Lermontov, Piotr Tchaikovsky, Feodor Chaliapin, French Alexandre Dumas the father, Norwegian Knut Hamsun, German Arthur Leist and Friedrich Martin von Bodenstedt, British diplomat Sir Oliver Wardrop, German businessmen the Siemens brothers, Armenian oil magnate and financier Alexander Mantashev, German architect Otto Simonson.

By the late 19th century, Tbilisi had grown as a major trade, culture and manufacturing center of the Russian Empire. The railroad (built in 1872) and new roads were built to connect Tbilisi with other major cities of Russia's Transcaucasia – Batumi, Poti, Baku – and other parts of the empire. The abolition of serfdom in Russia and the growth of capitalist manufacturing and trade attracted many rural residents, mostly of Georgian origin, to Tbilisi. Some informal settlements emerged accommodating the growing in-migrant population turned in the proletariat on the slopes adjacent to the newly built railway (e.g. *Nakhalovka*).

The social composition of the population also diversified across ethnicities and confessions (Suny, 2009). Several neighborhoods (e.g. Avlabari on the left bank) had a strong Armenian flavor; some others were Muslim (mostly Azeri, but also Kurdish, Persian — e.g. Abanoebisurani: 'a neighborhood of baths'), Jewish (e.g. Bread Square in the Old Town) and even German (e.g. Alexanderdorf or 'German Colony' built from the 1840s). This composition made the city's life cosmopolitan and multicultural: Tbilisi developed a distinct urban culture that transcended ethnic origins (Gachechiladze, 1990).

The transformation of the city also touched upon the way of life of Tbilissians. For example, the traditional meeting places such as bazaars, baths (especially the sulfur baths in the Old Town), and feasting places (like Ortachala gardens) were succeeded by new gathering places, such as the opera, literary salons, and even the Georgian national drama theater (opened in 1850, then closed in 1855 and reopened in 1879).

The Georgian national theater and Georgian newspapers played a significant role in raising a national liberation spirit and consolidation of national identities. Additionally, the new education system – schools, gymnasiums and seminaries – brought in not only literacy but also anti-Tsarist attitudes, which eventually lead to spreading socialist, nationalist and liberal ideologies, the formation of political parties and their struggle for workers' rights, on the one hand, and anti-imperialist values, on the other hand. Notably, Joseph Stalin (born in the neighboring town of Gori with the birth surname Jughashvili) was converted Marxist while studying at the Tiflis Seminary at the turn of the century. Tbilisi effectively became the site of the early revolutionary activities for the later most powerful Soviet leader.

4. Soviet Tbilisi: urban growth and industrialization

In the period preceding and following the 1917 Russian Revolution, Tbilisi was in the center of political struggles over the future of the nation. After the February Revolution of 1917 in St. Petersburg, the Russian Provisional Government installed the Special Transcaucasian Committee (*Osobyy Zakavkazskiy Komitet*) to govern Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Tbilisi took the function of the de-facto centre of the Committee. Following the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, on 24 February 1918, the Transcaucasian Commissariat proclaimed the establishment of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic with the capital in Tbilisi. The new political entity was short-lived as its members showed divergent geopolitical preferences — Georgians' orientation was perceived to be pro-German, Armenians' — pro-British, whiles Azeris' — pro-Ottoman. As a consequence, the federation fell apart, following the proclamation of an independent Georgian Democratic Republic on 26 May 1918 and the declarations of independence in the two other republics within two days.

During a brief period of independence of 1918–1921, Tbilisi became a seat of important nation-building projects, including Tbilisi State University, the first university in the Caucasus.

In 1921, the Bolsheviks finally gained control over Georgia and the republic was integrated into the Soviet Union. Remarkably, Tbilisi took the function of the regional capital once again. In 1922, the three South Caucasus republics were organized into yet another confederation, the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (TSFSR). It was disbanded in 1936, after which Tbilisi became the capital of a separate Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Under the Soviets, Tbilisi was transformed from a medium-sized and relatively compact settlement into a large industrial metropolis. It was an important political, social, and cultural center of the USSR — even if remaining behind the 'first-tier cities' of Moscow, Kiev, and Leningrad with regard to its economic status. While the main driving force in the 1930s through the 1950s was the expansion of industrial activity (during WWII also fueled by the evacuation of manufacturing from the European part of the USSR), since the 1960s, industrial growth slowed down, and mass housing became the main driver of the city's territorial growth.

Tbilisi developed according to the master plans (*Genplans*) of 1934, 1953 and 1969 (Van Assche et al., 2009). The growth of Tbilisi was in line with the Soviet policy of stimulating hyper-urbanization of the capitals of the Soviet republics to ensure 'agglomeration effects', i.e. additional economic gains from the concentration 'of decision-making, diversified employment opportunities and better infrastructure in the capital city and its neighborhood' (Gachechiladze, 1995: 157). The growing city enjoyed diversified public transport services with different transportation modes — busses, trolleybuses, trams, cable roads. In 1965, Tbilisi became the fourth Soviet city, following Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev, to gain an underground metro system. The Tbilisi

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Metro has proven to play a pivotal role in the city mobility, not least by providing accessibility to remote and otherwise isolated districts.

Architectural approaches evolved over the Soviet era (Bater, 1980). The Stalinist monumentalism with neo-classical and national elements, as well as the Soviet constructivism is notable in the Rustaveli Avenue (Fig. 7) and other main streets (e.g. buildings of the *Zarya Vostoka*/*East's Dawn* newspaper, and the *IMELI* Institute of Marx, Engels and Lenin). However, from the late 1950s, with the shift in policy to mass housing, the preference was given to mass-produced cost-efficient and uniform built environment (Fig. 8). Among architectural complexes of the late Soviet era, internationally renowned still were, for example, the Road Department (Fig. 9), the Palace of Celebrations (currently a private residence of the family of late tycoon Patarkatsishvili), the Sport Palace, and the Dynamo Stadium. Many engineering mega-projects were completed — such as the embankment and retaining walls for the Kura River, a large water reservoir (18 km^2) inside the city administrative boundaries (known as the Tbilisi Sea), the metro. All of these remain essential for the city's functioning.

In 1978, with a growing attention to heritage protection, a large-scale reconstruction of the old town was launched. Old Tbilisi had remained largely untouched in the Soviet period (apart from some destructions occurring for new roads and embankments) and therefore preserved its historic unity and ambience. Although the reconstruction was criticized for its 'facadism' (Khimshiashvili, 2001), it had a positive effect on the pre-Russian sections of the city and boosted tourism. The project also enhanced the urban environment of Old Tbilisi and prolonged the lifespan of many buildings.

Soviet Tbilisi was not only an important economic and administrative center of the Soviet Union; it was also a center of political struggles of various factions, including those breeding the Georgian identity (Suny, 1994). As a rare scene of mass protest for that era, Tbilisi witnessed ethnic-based riots in 1956 in protest against the de-Stalinization policies of the new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev; these were violently suppressed by the Soviet Army. New mass demonstrations took place in Tbilisi in April 1978 in response to an attempt by government to change the constitutional status of the Georgian language from being the sole state language in the republic to giving an equally official status to the Russian language. Moscow conceded to the popular demand to allow the status quo to continue, thus boosting the morale of Georgian nationalism. However, this also stirred up discontent in Abkhazia, an autonomous republic within Georgia, some fractions of which began seeking to split from Georgia. The radicalization of the anti-Soviet opposition and protests in the late 1980s also culminated in the so-called Tbilisi Massacre of 9 April 1989, when the army violently dispersed an anti-Soviet demonstration, resulting in several deaths. In both the popular and political culture, this event still demarcates Georgian struggles for independence.

5. Post-Soviet transition

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Tbilisi, like other ex-Soviet cities, stepped on the post-socialist transition treadmill. Following the *laissez faire* political ethos and conditioned by the expediencies of capitalism-in-the-making, the city turned away from planned development in favor of spontaneous real estate markets. This was, however, against the backdrop of a civil war and political and institutional disorganization and instability in Georgia under Gamsakhurdia Government (1991–1992) and the early years of Shevarnadze Government (1992–2003). Violent conflicts erupted over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which declared independence, but also in other parts of Georgia and even in Tbilisi itself, which witnessed a militarized outbreak of violence in winter 1991/1992 over state power, which eventually ousted Gamsakhurdia. As a cumulative effect, the Georgian economy was one of the most hit among the former Soviet republics. By 1994, its real GDP collapsed to less than a quarter of its value five years before.

That was a shock to Tbilisi; as documented by Gachechiladze (1995:164),

> Factories stopped; so did most urban transport; electricity failed; central heating radiators became useless decoration in the apartments… The city emerged as unprepared for the new situation, unable to purchase raw materials, fuel or machinery at market prices and in the quantities required for an urban settlement of such a size.

In just a few years, trolleybuses and trams disappeared from the streets of Tbilisi and public busses significantly limited their operations. Private mini-busses (*marshrutkas*) alongside the metro became the only street public transport routes for many years.

These problems coupled with the increased levels of crime and interethnic tensions promoted the out-migration of many Tbilisians to Russia and other countries — starting with ethnical Russians and Armenians but followed by Georgians themselves (Gachechiladze & Bradshow, 1994). The majority of these were educated white-collar workers. The population loss was offset by in-migration from provincial towns and rural areas and less educated and poorer groups. Rural in-migrants often struggle to adapt to the urban way of life, especially as employment was curtailed due to the crisis. The omnipresence of the

Fig. 7. The 'Stalinist' architecture: the Georgian National Academy of Sciences building. Photo by author 2.

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Fig. 8. Late Soviet neighborhoods suffering a lack of maintenance. Photo by author 2.

newcomers was perceived by the native Tbilisians as the 'provincialization' of the capital (Gachechiladze & Salukvadze, 2003:20). Tbilisi also witnessed an influx of so-called internally displaced persons (IDPs), fleeing, particularly, from the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Soviet-era image of Tbilisi as a well-off and educated city, albeit somewhat exaggerated, in a short period transformed into its opposite.

Tbilisi's IDP population is still estimated at up to 10% of the city population. Many of IDPs have struggled with the integration into the mainstream society. The unemployment rate exceeds 50%; most of them live in the so-called Collective Centers. These are state-owned buildings converted from other functions such as hotels, schools, kindergartens. The IDPs adaptation strategies have involved changing these buildings to accommodate their everyday needs, building extensions, and illegal occupation of surrounding spaces (Salukvadze, Sichinava, & Gogishvili, 2013). Until recently, IDPs occupied almost all Soviet-era hotels, including those in the city center, giving these areas a slum-like impression. The attempts of the Government of the

Fig. 9. The 1975 Road Department building (since 2007 Bank of Georgia Headquarters). Photo by author 2.

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President Saakashvili (in power between 2004 and 2013) to clear up such areas by removing IDPs to other parts of the city (e.g. providing moderate funds to buy apartments in remote districts) and to rebuild those deteriorated structures has improved the appearances of many areas (Fig. 10). However, a lack of a coherent strategy towards the resolution of the problems of IDPs, along with a virtually non-existent social/public housing sector, ensures that these problems will be haunting the city.

6. The establishment of the housing and real estate markets

A cornerstone of the market reforms in post-Soviet Tbilisi was destatization and the privatization of land and real estate. As early as in 1990, the mass privatization of housing already started, followed by leasing out of urban plots and sale of non-residential buildings. Although the Soviet system maintained a considerable portion of public and cooperative housing – which made the entire stock of the apartment bock buildings – by the late 1990s, more than 90% of the housing stock in Tbilisi was privatized. In 1999, the privatization of urban land began. The land and real estate market, however, emerged under the conditions of incomplete and weak institutions, poor governance and murky practices. A poorly regulated land market was locally described as a 'wild market', emphasizing its violence-based nature (Salukvadze, 2009).

In the 1990s, almost no investment went into important development projects. Emerged institutionalized developers focused on businesses that did not require large investments but could generate fast returns: petrol stations, car repair shops and washes, restaurants and bars, open markets, guesthouses. The most desirable places were those located between residential neighborhoods, in proximity to major street and highway junctions or easily accessible from metro stations.

Large housebuilding activities disappeared; rather the episodic construction of villas and otherwise cheap homes took place, often ignoring formal permission systems. A more widespread phenomenon was a 'do-it-yourself' extension of homes and apartments. That process was actually triggered by the late Soviet decrees of the Georgian Republic, particularly the 1989 resolution "On attaching of loggias, verandas, balconies and other auxiliary spaces to the state and cooperative houses at the cost of the dwellers/tenants". Following that, apartment building extensions (ABE) mushroomed across Tbilisi. Initially, the construction was carried out by state companies following prescribed procedures; however, after the disappearance of the public construction sector as such and especially following the housing privatization, this process went out of control. Tens of thousands of ABE were completed — in various forms and materials, and violating the norms of security, safety and esthetics (Fig. 11) (see Bouzarovski, Salukvadze, & Gentile, 2011).

Despite the possibility to marginally increase living spaces through ABE, housing conditions of the population generally deteriorated. The new homeowners showed institutional and financial inability in managing multi-family apartment blocks (UNECE, 2007). There were no effective obligations on apartment owners' to maintain common spaces in privatized houses. Problems rapidly grew with leaking roofs, broken elevators, lack of thermal insulation, and other structural problems. All these have become problematic and, in some cases, have rendered buildings unsafe. In order to improve the situation, from the early 2000s several municipal programs for housing maintenance were initiated, centered on the establishment of homeowners' associations (HOA). In 2004, the city of Tbilisi established Tbilisi Corps, a municipal unit for supporting the development of HOAs. Buildings managed by HOAs are eligible for municipal co-financing for repair of common spaces (roofs, staircases) and public spaces (courtyards). Between 50% and 90% of the cost is covered by the municipalities. Currently there are more than 6000 HOAs in Tbilisi; almost all multi-apartment buildings are managed by them.

The period from the early 2000s witnessed improved macroeconomic conditions, including resumed economic growth in neighboring Russia and increased volumes of FDIs (including by Georgians) and remittances. This bolstered economic growth in Tbilisi and changed the demand of the population and the business sector towards housing and the built environment. The development of the real property registration and cadastral systems assured better property security and facilitated the establishment of the credit market and the involvement of banks and other stakeholders in property transactions.

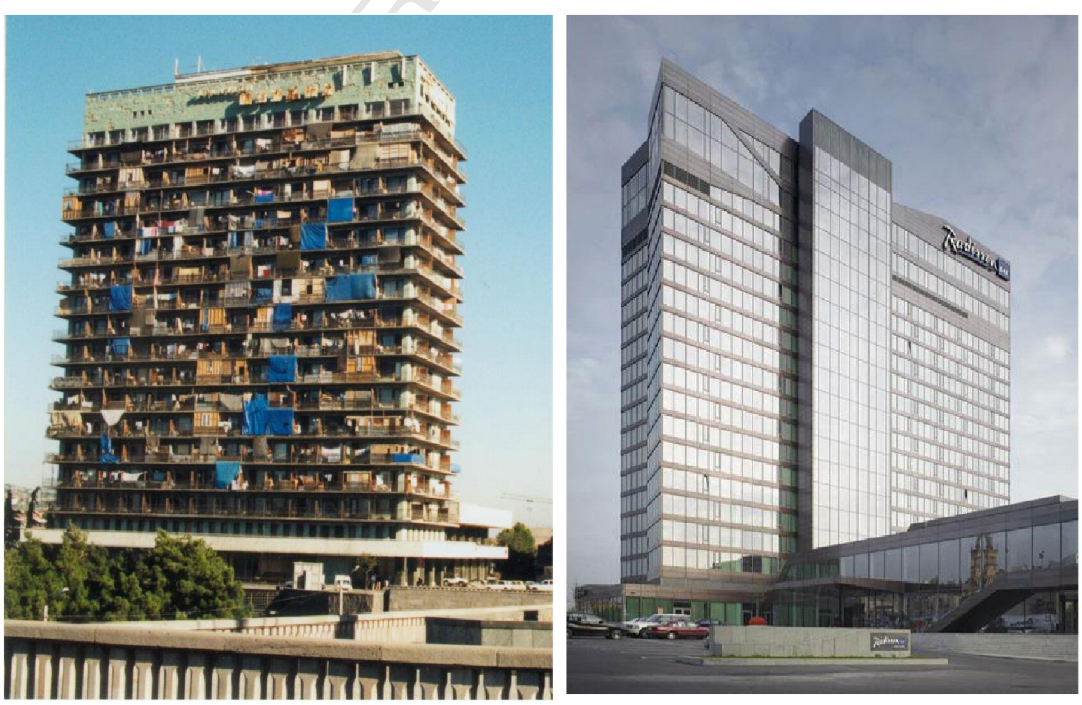

Fig. 10. The Iveria hotel used as an IDPs collective centre (left) and rebuilt as the Radisson Blue.

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Fig. 11. Apartment building extensions in Tbilisi. Photos by author 1.

7. Urban policies and transformations in the built environment

The spatial development of Tbilisi has been lacking plans and planning laws for a long time (Ziegler, 2009; Salukvadze, 2009; Van Assche & Salukvadze, 2011). Rather, the building and planning activities were guided by the old Soviet legislation unless they were substituted by new rules. Such a regime was supported by the 1995 Constitution and a decree of the Minister of Urbanization and Construction of Georgia from 5 February 2002 on the *Prolongation of the Terms and Validity of Construction Norms and Rules and Other Normative Acts* (UNECE, 2007:8). However, in eyes of many, the old Soviet legislation was already outdated, if not lost legitimacy, and was not obligatory to follow. At the same time, when the new rules were introduced, they were increasingly relaxed, following the new worldview rejecting the Soviet planning practices as 'unreasonable restrictions' (Golubchikov, 2004).

The arrival of the liberal president Saakashvili, who came to power in 2004 via the so-called Rose Revolution, only further legitimized a liberal urban development policy regime. On the one hand, such policies significantly reduced corruption in planning, architectural and land administration systems; the acquisition of land plots and getting permissions for construction became relatively easy. For example, according to the *Doing Business* survey Georgia is ranked 3rd worldwide for the ease of issuing building permits and 1st for registering ownership rights (The World Bank, 2014). On the other hand, the same neoliberal approach has failed to attune to public needs. Hence, it is capital/investors that have determined the urban development process through the past decades, with one result being that the development is focused on the more lucrative central areas of Tbilisi, producing many infill constructions, over-densification and urban congestion.

Several key dimensions further characterize urban transformations more recently. Housing construction has skyrocketed after a near-stoppage in the 1990s, and reached the volumes of the 1960–70s (Fig. 12). The peak was in 2007–2008 when almost 2 million m^2 a year was completed. The global financial crisis and especially the brief 2008 Russo-Georgian war over South Ossetia resulted in a rapid drop in construction activities, with many suspended projects (Fig. 13). However, Tbilisi municipality moved to inject confidence into the market by guaranteeing to purchase all finished developments at the cost recovery price of US$400/$m^2$. This guaranteed at least a cost-basis return on investment and while no significant amount of such transactions was actually pursued, it lowered the perception of risk, unlocked banks' willingness to offer credits, and encouraged developers to unfreeze projects (Gentile et al., in press).

The new housing projects, even if customary delivered as 'core-and-shell' (i.e. without any internal decorations or installations), exceed the quality of the previous-era constructions. However, the majority of the population cannot afford buying homes in organized housing developments. New projects rather cater for those with high disposable

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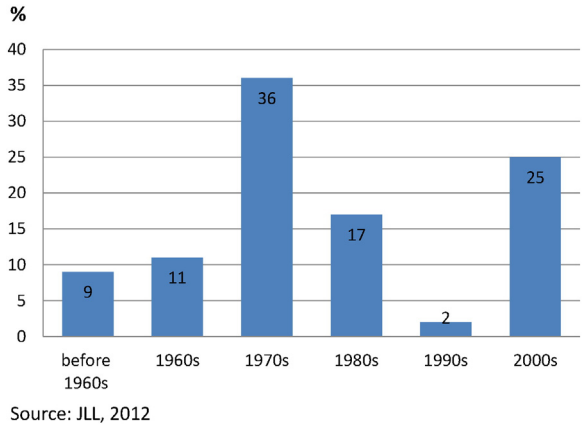

Fig. 12. Distribution of the housing stock in Tbilisi by the period of construction. Source: JLL, 2012.

incomes, so that the proportion of so-called luxury apartments in new construction has been 40–50% (Fig. 14).

Again, some projects, seeking high profit, fail to comply with the preservation regimes and damage the historical and cultural identity of many areas. This is encouraged by widespread neglecting (even relaxed) building norms and rules, as well as by allowing developers to purchase 'additional height limits' over those specified in zoning regimes. This has had a negative impact on the quality of urban space, architectural composition, traffic, car parking and public spaces. In many neighborhoods, old structures are torn down to give place for new high-rises (e.g. Barnovi Street, Paliashvili Street, Piqris Gora, Sairmis Gora).

Old Tbilisi has been particularly vulnerable. The retreat of the state from the housing sphere had damaging effects on the older housing stock in Old Tbilisi, which due to its age is prone to deterioration (Fig. 15). This was aggravated by the retrenchment of conservation protection; according to Khimshiashvili (2001), Georgia's monument protection authorities had the budget in 1999 which was less than 1% of their 1990 budget. The local population, often living at the edge of survival, could neither afford investing in the maintenance of their estates. Many buildings in Old Tbilisi have become unsafe for habitation and a few fell apart (Khimshiashvili, 2001) — the situation was further aggravated by an earthquake in 2002. Some areas now appear slum-like with collapsed homes amid a deteriorating built environment. However, the potential land value in such central locations is high. Even so, the unwillingness of the local residents to move to distant parts of the city, coupled with still extant heritage restrictions in these areas, for many years curtailed commercial redevelopment projects (Van Assche & Salukvadze, 2011). In the 1990s and early 2000s, few rebuilding projects were accomplished here – mostly as hotels, restaurants or small estates – often lubricated by corruption and enforced through violent means such as a deliberate damage to the existing structures to force the residents to move out. Despite this, the process of gentrification, like in in many other ex-socialist cities in the 1990s, was more piecemeal than systematic.

However, more recently, the gentrification of Old Tbilisi has become rather policy-led (cf. Badyina & Golubchikov, 2005), as the government began providing investor-oriented funds and programs for the reconstruction of the old town, such as the *New Life for Old Tbilisi*. The scheme was described in the following terms:

> The government provides working capital that allows developers to finish residential blocks. Slum dwellers, if they agree, then move in to the new housing, vacating land in Old Tbilisi. The government puts the land out to tender for property developers to develop, sell off and use the profits to repay their original debts to the banks (Economist, 2010).

This approach targets particular neighborhoods and has helped to improve some areas both in the old town (Fig. 16) and in the 19th century part on the left bank along the David Agmashenebeli Avenue (part of former Alexanderdorf) (Fig. 17). Hundreds of families have been given a chance to acquired better homes through this scheme. At the same time, the process mediates gentrification, changing the social composition and cultural diversity of the historic areas. It also causes the criticism of heritage professionals, because buildings are normally not repaired but demolished and 'rebuild' creating replicas of traditional houses, but destroying the original authenticity of the neighborhoods (Fig. 18).

Policy-driven gentrification of the old town appeared, however, only part of the urban ambitions of Saakashvili. His policies were particularly

Fig. 13. A suspended construction of a luxurious estate in Tbilisi in 2010. Photo by author 2.

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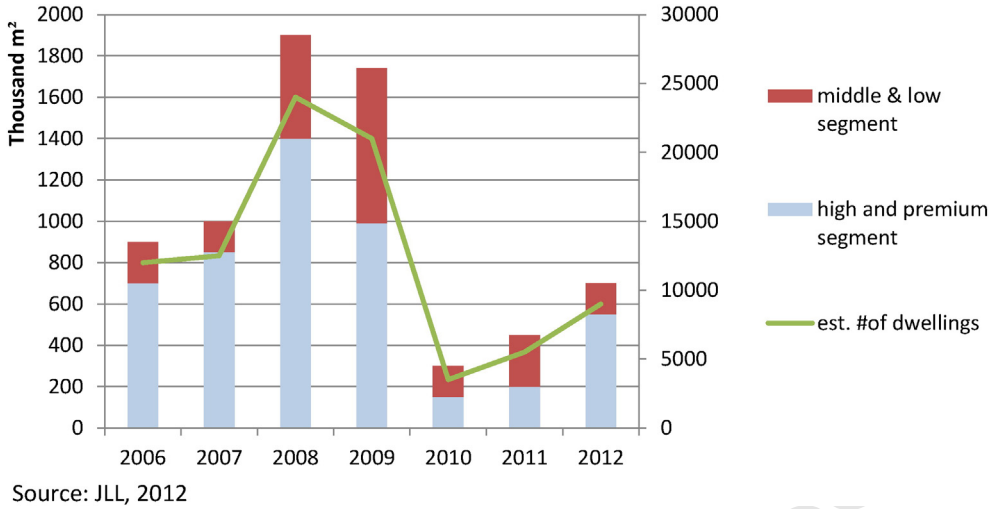

Fig. 14. Sold residential spaces by price segments (left scale) and the number of sold dwellings in Tbilisi in 2006–2012. Source: JLL, 2012.

aggressive in promoting the construction of 'shiny' glass-and-steel structures. Investments especially focused on the historic center. As a result, Tbilisi began changing its spatial structure even more rapidly — which at least until the late 2000s was happening in the absence of any urban strategy framework. Investing in flagship projects is a common feature of neoliberal urban entrepreneurialism, including in ex-socialist space (Golubchikov, 2010; Kinossian, 2012). Similarly, Saakashvili regarded extravagant post-modernist structures designed by world-renown architects as a quick fix in achieving a modernized and globalized image for the capital and, by implication, in linking the whole nation to the 'European civilization'. Dozens of such 'geopolitical' projects were inserted in the fabric of the old town or its vicinity, at a considerable public cost. While the projects such as the Bridge of Peace (designed by Michele de Lucchi), Public Service Hall and Rike Park Theater (both by Massimiliano Fuksas) are certainly nothing short of masterpiece, many find them distorting the scale and flavor of historic Tbilisi (Fig. 19). Among other new-built dominants are also the Presidential Palace, the Trinity Cathedral (Fig. 20), as well as some hotels and commercial buildings (Fig. 21).

The public opinion has been divided over such major infills. One could argue that some of these projects are better tolerated than the others. For instance, out of the signature projects the glassy Bridge of Peace and mushroom-looking building of the Public Service Hall are better accepted than the 'the tubes' of the new musical theater or the Shangrila Casino buildings, which are almost universally considered as inappropriate for the Old Town fabric.

Even so, these projects have created a new powerful landscape that has significantly modified the perception of the city, and project the city in a new light onto the international scale.

A common feature of ex-socialist cities has been a rapid suburbanization (Stanilov & Sykora, 2014). While the booming housebuilding sector in Tbilisi has aggravated the pressures on suburban land and made the city further sprawl, some authors note that the suburbanization trends in Tbilisi do not qualify as 'strong' (Sulukhia, 2009). This is because suburbanization is not necessarily taking the conspicuous form of detached homes or gated communities as in many ex-socialist cities (Hirt, 2012), but rather continues the Soviet patterns of (sub)urbanization through the expansion and absorbing of existing

Fig. 15. Dilapidating historic buildings in Old Tbilisi. Photo by author 2.

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Fig. 16. Part of Old Tbilisi after reconstruction. Photo by author 2.

satellite settlements or high-rise developments on the metropolitan periphery (Golubchikov & Phelps, 2011). Gated institutionalized developments do exist around Tbilisi but so far not on a scale of a phenomenon that creates its own dominant urban patterns (e.g. in Digomi, along the E-60 highway, and Tsavkisi: see Sulukhia, 2009).

8. Urban planning and future developments

In the context of rather chaotic and ad hoc development process, the establishment of a new planning system for Tbilisi has been long advocated by concerned professional societies (Van Assche & Salukvadze, 2011). The adoption of a new general/master plan for Tbilisi in 2009 might be seen as a substantial step towards finding a balance between planning and the market. The plan envisages a number of strategic changes in Tbilisi (Fig. 22). Inspired above all by the US zoning system (Van Assche & Salukvadze, 2011), it divides the city into different functional zones, separates commercial, residential and industrial areas, identifies heritage protection areas, and introduces the layouts of land-uses and general regulations for building and development for each functional zone.

It is important to note, however, that the production and implementation of the city plan has not been without its own controversies. Firstly, many urbanists, architects, and planners complain that the plan was drafted and adopted without participation of professional and public circles. Secondly, the plan fails to incorporate sufficiently detailed schemes for transport and infrastructure development, thus raising questions over its usefulness for spatial development. Thirdly, it is rather a declarative document, as it lacks a solid view of what kind of city with what priorities will be developed. Furthermore, the emerged tradition of ad hoc development has not ceased after the adoption of the new city plan. The provisions of the plan can be changed by the Building Development Council of the Tbilisi City Council; for example, from December 2009 to February 2014, more than 1500 changes were applied to the functional zones, such as changing recreational and landscape protection areas into a residential, commercial or transport use. Besides, the government officially allows developers to buy 'excesses' deviating from designated building parameters in certain zones, thus actually allowing them constructing much larger and taller buildings.

The city plan still envisages several larger-scale projects. One of those is moving the railway line – rerouting it along the east side of the Tbilisi Sea to bypass the central districts of Tbilisi – thus releasing

Fig. 17. David Agmashenebeli Avenue after reconstruction. Photo by author 2.

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Fig. 18. Rebuilding Old Tbilisi (the same street photographed in 2012 and 2014). Photos by author 2.

Fig. 19. The new signature projects dominating historic Tbilisi's panoramas. Photo by author 2.

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Fig. 20. The Trinity Cathedral (built in 2004). Photo by author 2.

the city from transit traffic. This is envisaged to free up more than 150 ha of centrally located land for redevelopment and to better integrate otherwise isolated parts of the city. The space under the current railway infrastructure will accommodate a new public-business center with offices, retail, convention facilities, recreation and luxurious housing. Among other large-scale projects, the priority is given to the (re)construction and installation of high capacity motorways that should relieve the congested traffic regime in many parts of the sprawled city.

With the arrival of a new government in 2012 (the Georgian Dream coalition), the city authorities started a revision and partially stopped some projects approved by the Saakashvili government. For instance, the already initiated project of the bypassing railroad was halted for several months, although resumed with some changes in 2015. Some dimensions of the 2009 Master Plan have been reconsidered and it is likely that Tbilisi City Council will be requested to revisit the plan. As a step in that direction, the city government has prepared a City Development Strategy. It proposes a vision for Tbilisi in 2030 to become 'a hub for global supply chains — creating a bridge between different civilizations in the competition for talent, technology and market' (Tbilisi 2030, 2013: 5).

For its part, the new national government has also begun promoting new strategic projects in Tbilisi, continuing the practice of ad hoc interventions. For instance, a new flagship megaproject is envisaged to be *the Panorama Tbilisi*, which is to embrace formerly protected landscape areas of the Old Town. It is advertised as "the largest ever real estate development in Georgia's history," consisting of a multi-functional development of hotels, serviced apartments, offices, exhibition centers, conference halls and swimming pools linked by a series of cable cars. Financed by the Georgian Co-Investment Fund (GCF), driven by the tycoon, ex-Prime Minister and informal leader of the Georgian Dream coalition, Bidzina Ivanishvili, it envisages a total funding of USD 500 million, supported by a number of foreign funds (Anderson, 2014). However, numerous opponents – urbanists, architects, planners, cultural heritage protectors – argue that its implementation will finally kill the authenticity of Old Tbilisi (as well as ruining the hopes of including it on the UNESCO World Heritage list) and will aggravate the traffic conditions and environmental problems. Yet, after an initial refusal in March 2014, Tbilisi City Council, following a pressure from the national government, has hinted that it will approve the project.

Although so far the powerful stakeholders manage to overplay other voices, protests increasingly disturb the former. Urban activism fuelled by younger groups begins to make a strong presence in Tbilisi and often manages to halt some projects (e.g. in Gudiashvili Square). The activists efficiently use social media to consolidate the public opinion. This tendency of a growing public interest and involvement of social groups in the urban development process gives the hope that a more balanced and participatory processes will finally gain momentum.

9. Conclusions: evolving urban governance

The modern-day Tbilisi reveals a peculiar juxtaposition of the layers of urbanization shaped around the successive historical and geopolitical rounds of empire building, industrialization, independence, marketization, and associated struggles. The present post-Soviet era in the

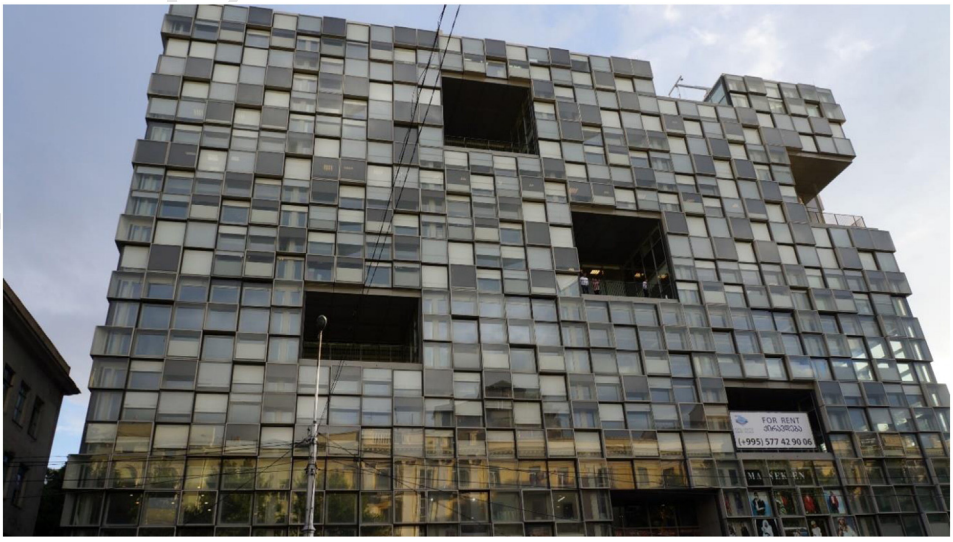

Fig. 21. The Pixel 34 mixed-use building in central Tbilisi (built in 2008). Photo by author 2.

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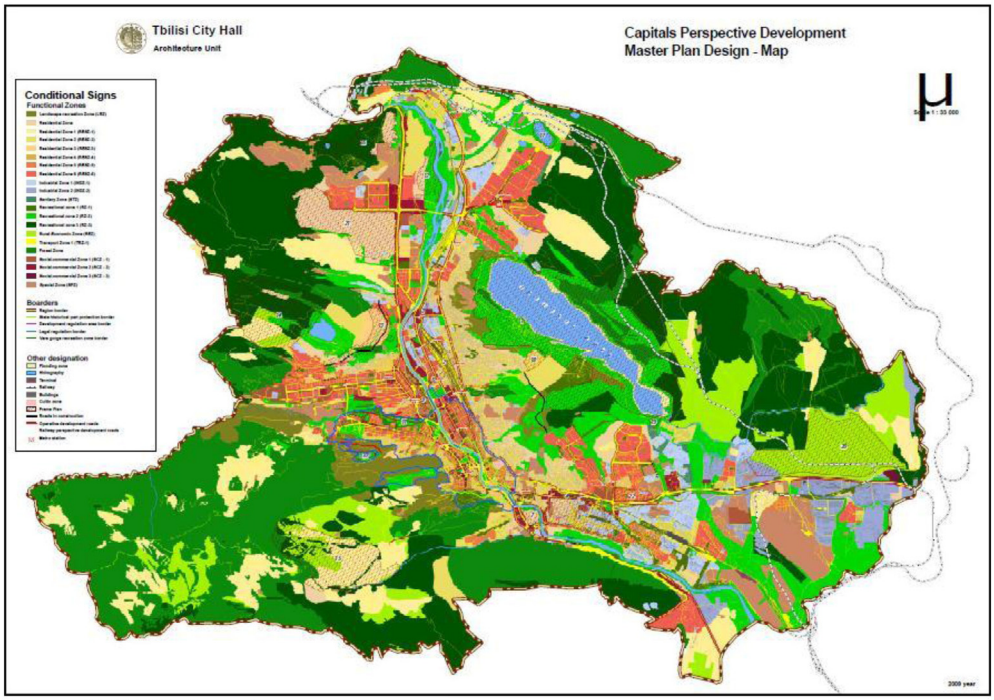

Source: Tbilisi City Council

Fig. 22. The Master Plan of Tbilisi of 2009. Source: Tbilisi City Council.

development of Tbilisi has yet been the one that lays bare the contradictions of transition and globalization. Basing on our analysis, the period can be conceptualized as consisting of three loose phases, following the evolving configuration of the most prominent actors in urban governance:

- In the 1990s, during the period of political instability, economic hardship, and weak state institutions, it was population's small-scale initiatives that dominated the development process — though in a limited way, due to a lack of capital. Their development practices were limited to 'self-help' small projects and fixes. That phase could be seen as a 'Do-It-Yourself Urbanism'.
- From the late 1990s, the improvement of economic situation and strengthening business and banking sectors allowed development companies to benefit from weak planning institutions. Developers found that it was possible to enter formerly restricted yet attractive public spaces. As a result of that opportunistic 'Investor urbanism' phase, infills mushroomed and filled up vacant public spaces in central areas of Tbilisi, over-densifying spaces and often ruining urban landscapes.
- The consolidation of the state power from the mid-2000s put national government as a major player in urban development. The 'Rose Government' initiated many development projects, most of which took place in the central city, dramatically changing it. The adoption of the new General Plan for Tbilisi in 2009 brought some regulatory frames, but the government still commonly violates them. This 'Politically-determined urbanism' phase has not finished with the arrival of 'The Georgian Dream' coalition in power.

Overall, the entire post-Soviet period has witnessed an imbalanced urban process. Tbilisi, the city that had been developed under the Soviet planning system for 70 years, has been largely rejected planning as a tool for urban regulation and consensus building. This situation is not unfamiliar in the South Caucasus more widely (Valiyev, 2014) or indeed in the ex-socialist space (Stanilov, 2007). Even during the Soviet era, Tbilisi was not a good example of a well-planned city and existing plans were not followed too strictly (Van Assche & Salukvadze, 2011). Nevertheless, the new practices of non-planning have been of quite a different scale.

While the early transition process was the one of institutional disorganization, which may be argued to be responsible for the initial neglect of urban planning processes, the more recent lack of progress in that direction, under the arguably neoliberal yet authoritarian government of Saakashvili, rather hinted at a more deliberate ideological choice, where geopolitical aspirations for integration with the European and Transatlantic institutions were sold to the population in conjunction with laissez-faire deregulations and a further neoliberal package of reforms. However, weak urban planning also meant fewer obstacles for arbitrary interventions, including from the government itself and other powerful circles, and by no means a non-interventionist approach. Indeed, a *modus operandi* that emerged during the Saakashvili rule was that the central government began acting as a de-facto principal 'driver' of urban change, even if in a peculiar, urban entrepreneurial format. Most notably, in the name of the renovation and modernization of Tbilisi, the government initiated and sometimes co-financed fancy post-modernist signature projects designed by famous architects from abroad. In combination with the historic areas' rebuilding, these have considerably changed the city's outlook.

From a certain perspective, these post-socialist unregulated and ad hoc urban processes are innovative, affording varied participants the opportunity to contribute in the creation of new spaces: liberated from planning regulations, they have transformed the city from the uniformity tendencies of the previous era towards a post-modern eclectic and irregularity. However, professionals and the public are seriously concerned about the impacts of this state of affairs on urban integrity, functioning and heritage. A sporadic character of such constructions, violations of building norms and rules, the occupation of public spaces by buildings of oft-questionable quality and esthetics, and the dramatic change of the historic cityscape all attract criticism of both professional community and the civil sector. More and more frequently, one could hear that Tbilisi deserves a more careful approach in order to protect its uniqueness and traditional features. Irregular infills by modern high-rises and other commercial projects in inner city are no longer easily tolerated by citizens. Both the city and national governments

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have recognized the need in a comprehensive urban plan for Tbilisi and have started working in that direction, as evidenced by the adoption of the new General Plan for Tbilisi in 2009. Overall, this suggests that the citizenry becomes more sensitive regarding city development. The population is increasingly recognizant of the importance of more ordered spatial processes. This also gives the hope that a more inclusive urbanism, which would balance different interests with a strategic vision as well as functionality, will eventually manifest itself more vividly.

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