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Tbilisi reinvented: planning, development and the unfinished project of democracy in Georgia

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In this paper, we highlight the changing developmental patterns and planning strategies for the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, from late communism till the present day. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, interviews, analysis of documents and plans, we reconstruct the change of course from Soviet planning to fragmentation of plans and policies. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow, Moscow actors and Moscow knowledge disappeared behind the horizon. New actors and new knowledge were introduced in the planning and design system. Most notably, architects-turned-developers introduced Western architectural forms and development practices. Foreign advisors and Western-educated Georgians gave weight to Western economic visions of transition. With the Georgian leadership, as well as with the audience at large, attitudes towards planning are very ambiguous, disputing the relevance of government intervention in spatial development, at the same time cherishing certain results of Soviet planning or planning as such. We argue that the developer-led renaissance of urban design ought to be embedded in a reinvented planning system, and that such system in turn can only function in an improved institutional frame. This should include a more clearer separation of powers and unambiguously enforced property rights. Whatever system of spatial governance the Georgian people and its government prefer in the end, choices will have to be made and the coupling of political institutions, law and planning has to be reflected upon, for developers and their creations to contribute sustainably to spatial quality and economic development.

Keywords: planning; development; Georgia; institutions; knowledge

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Introduction

Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia (Ill. 1), was considered one of the most attractive cities of the former Soviet Union: rich in history, a splendid landscape setting, excellent food, a pleasant climate and an easy-going atmosphere.[1] Soviet development peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, then slowed down with the economic decline of the Union.[2] After independence (1991), the city went through a very turbulent period, and stabilization around the turn of the century ushered in a wave of intense development activity (Worldbank, AMCHAM[3]). With the dramatic changes in Georgia, new issues emerged in Tbilisi: lack of public sector housing, green space and public space in general, homelessness, poor construction quality (not entirely new), chaotic development practices, leading to problematic densities and environmental problems.[4] Meanwhile, Tbilisi's renowned historic centre was in urgent need of renovation (Figure 1).[5]

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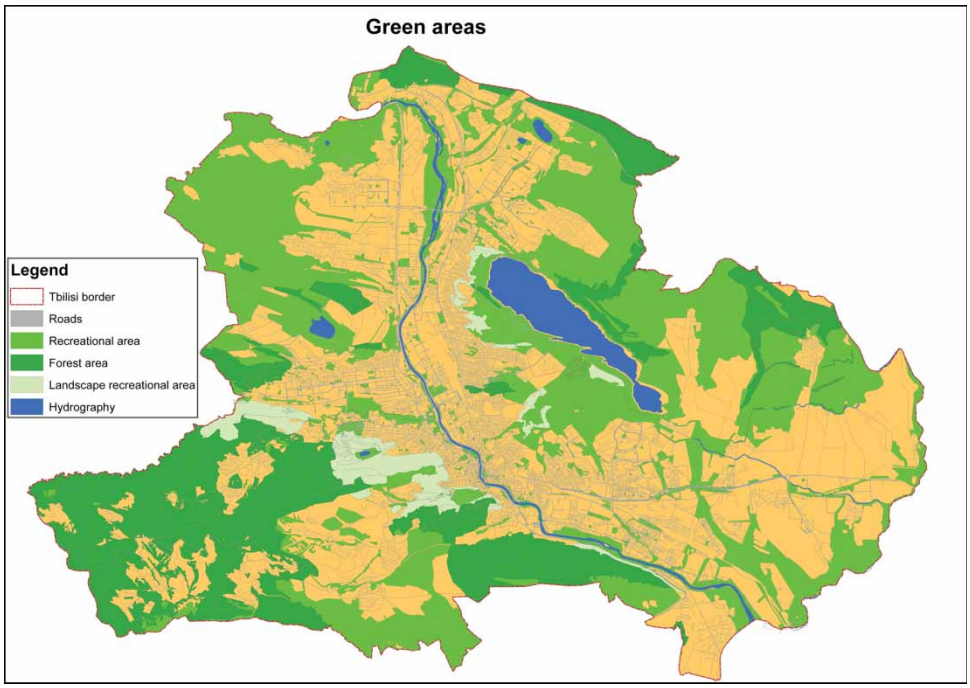

Figure 1. Green Tbilisi. Tbilisi is, like few other post-Soviet cities, embedded in the landscape.

We will briefly describe the changing development patterns, where possible the underlying planning strategies, from the communist era to the present day, and try to explain the shifts in planning and design after independence. For most citizens, issues remain, and we argue that planning has to be part of the solution. By means of a succinct analysis of driving forces and institutional frames of development practice, we demonstrate that an over-reliance on private initiative in combination with unclear legal frames is a risky strategy, both in terms of economic development effects and in terms of the quality of resulting spaces. Paradoxically, in the specific context of the political, legal and economic development of Georgia, that same private sector, the guild of real estate developers, is open to re-framing of itself, to an embedding in consistent planning laws and visions that can stabilize and grow markets. We will analyse this situation and derive context-sensitive policy recommendations from it.

Method

We reconstructed the evolution of Tbilisi development and identified actors by means of in-depth interviews (35 in 2006, 30 in 2007, 20 in 2008 and 30 in 2009). Our respondents included developers, architects, geographers, critical intellectuals, students, planners at city government, Georgian and foreign non-governmental organizations, historians, ecologists, political scientists, journalists, foreign and Georgian investors. Interviews varied from 1 to 3 h in length, were semi-structured and took place in offices, café's, parks or at the university. Questions revolved around the evolution of the profession or the organizations, respondents were most familiar with and their framing of the wider changes in Georgian society.

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Additionally, 200 questionnaires were completed (in 2006) by inhabitants of 5 Tbilisi neighbourhoods, of different income levels and perceived architectural quality. Two Georgian geography students assisted in the survey. It consisted of 14 questions, on the quality of Soviet and post-Soviet neighbourhoods, on Soviet planning and current planning, on the actual and desirable roles of several professional groups (planners, architects, lawyers, developers, politicians and scientists). We also asked about chief remaining issues in the planning and development of Tbilisi, about possible improvements and possibilities for increased participation. The survey provides additional insight in lay perceptions of the planning process, the players and the results. Finally, local and regional planning documents and auxiliary literature have been analysed to enrich our understanding of the Georgian planning context (Figures 2–6).

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Development patterns and planning strategies

The context of post-Soviet cities

Tbilisi does not exist in a vacuum. Very quickly after the collapse of the USSR, planning experts wondered what would happen to its extensive planning and developmental machinery, and,

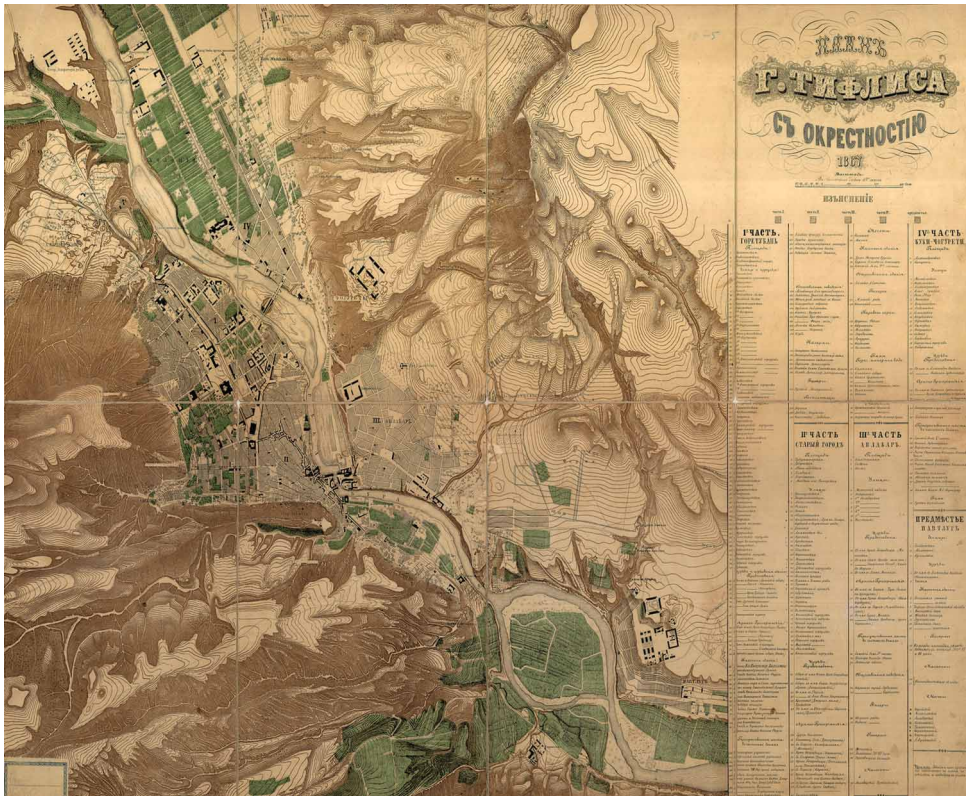

Figure 2. Tbilisi in 1876, on an imperial Russian map. Under the Russians, Tbilisi was thoroughly reconstructed and Western town planning entered the scene.

Figure 3. Old Tbilisi under renovation. Few buildings in old Tbilisi predate the Persian attack and fires of 1795.

consequently, the production of urban space.[6] French,[7] among others, had discerned long before the dissolution how low urban planners were ranked in the real power games shaping urban development (cf. note[8]). Industrial ministries, the military, regional party leaders, popular kolkhoz directors, even well-connected city architects (*de facto* city planners) could overrule and overturn the plans that emerged from the ministries officially responsible for spatial planning: *gosplan*, the overarching organization for economic planning and its subsidiary *gosstroi* devoted to physical planning.[9]

Ruble[10] analysed in detail how money gained importance in post-Soviet planning and developmental processes. Money gradually became the dominant medium that allowed for things to happen, including urban development (cf.[11] also). Moreover, he demonstrated how the emphasis moved quickly from planning to development, as the place where money could be made. Urban planning became real estate development and the size of consequential plans shrunk to the project level. Simultaneously, various people with an understanding of formal and informal Soviet planning turned into 'developers', people that could bring together the technical, legal, organizational expertise to initiate and implement large construction projects (cf. note[12] also). The suitability of real estate development for money laundering increased the flow of money to the sector, and accelerated the rise of the developers as a professional class. In most places, both planners and citizens were relegated to a relatively marginal position in the planning

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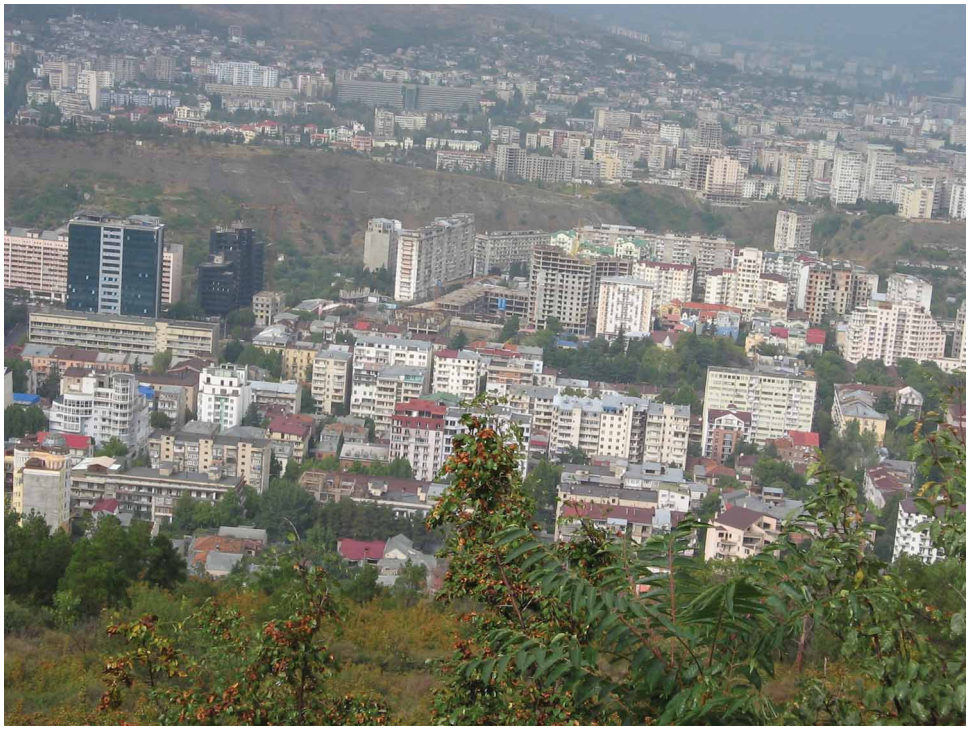

Figure 4. A typical late Soviet development, seen from the hills near Turtle Lake.

game,[13] a marginality further increased by the general distrust of citizens in planning and an overly optimistic view of the free market and its heroes.[14]

Verdery[15] demonstrated meanwhile that 'property' emerges from the same web of formal and informal institutions that enabled the rising significance of money. Indeed, as Luhmann[16] argued, the generalized meaning and use of money can only take place in an economy that differentes from law and politics, with law and politics more and more in the role of guarantor of property, of future economic transactions. In other words, money and property can only rise together, and their combined rise will, as Kornai[17] and others argued, necessarily restrict the steering power of the state of politics (see also[18]). Since the first investment wave in real estate had shady origins, transparency was not in the interest of the major players and citizen participation was not high on the agenda.[19] The interweave of business, politics and in some cases organized crime made it very difficult to distinguish who was deciding on what, where the ideas and the money for a certain project came from (see especially[20]). It also made it very difficult for politics, and hence planning, to respond to the wishes of citizens.[21]

Property only means something if you can actually use it, if the value is not only nominal. Allina-Pisano,[22] Verdery[23] and Ledeneva[24] all demonstrated that in post-Soviet societies, the real value of property usually does not come from formal property rights, but rather from the informal connections that give access to protection of use rights and can create real options for use. This reinforces the position of people in the circle, and makes it harder for new

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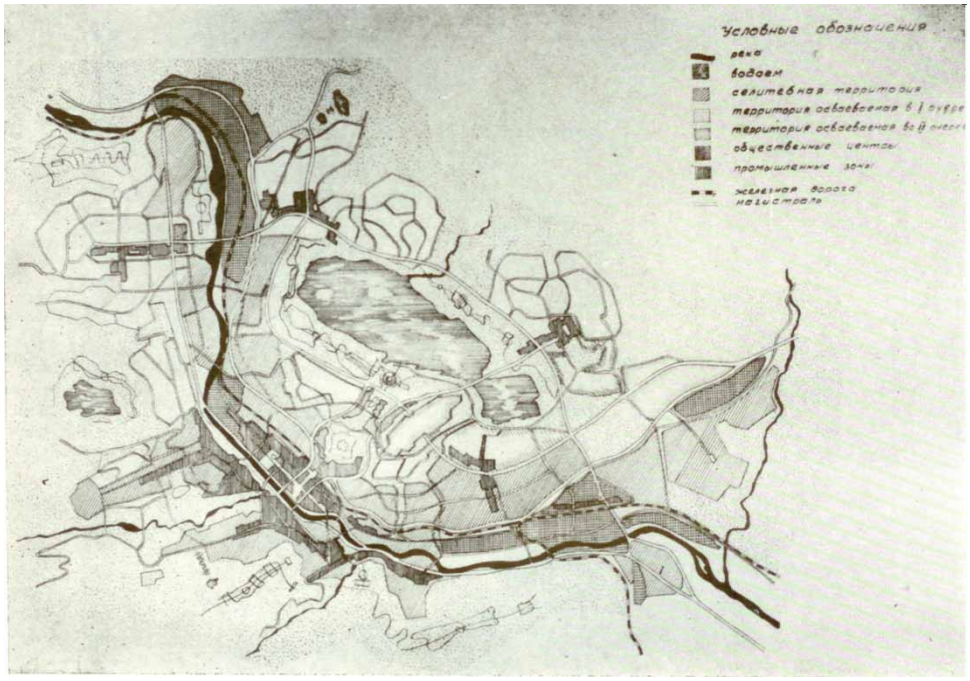

Figure 5. The last Soviet General Plan or comprehensive plan (1970) under the Soviets, Tbilisi expanded, industrialized and became a more (ethnically) Georgian city.

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players to enter the scene of real estate development. Without connections there was no protection, no loans, no permits, no eminent domain and no forced eviction.

This points at the value of what Luhmann[25] calls *differentiation.* A differentiation of the legal, political and economic systems did not take place under the Soviets, where officially politics and the common interest dictated economic and spatial development. In most places, such a differentiation did not come about after independence either. With dependent courts, legal protection of large real estate investments was hard to get, and without political connections, the money was hard to find. Thus, banks and the developers dependent on them cannot fully think and operate as economic actors, courts cannot function as legal actors and politicians and their planning administrators cannot act as political actors, i.e. representing and pursuing the public interest.

In these general terms, the rise of developers, the decline of planning and the difficulties to engender citizen participation are predictable and certainly not unique to Georgia. However, differentiation and the lack thereof exist in many shapes and varieties, and any attempt at increasing differentiation, e.g. to improve spatial planning, hinges on knowledge of specific developmental pathways of law, politics and economy[26] (in line with North and Greiff 2007[27]). Just as there is no single or ideal form of democracy or market,[28] there is more than one configuration of law, politics and economy under the heading 'democracy', and, consequently, more than one possible role for planning in coordinating spatial development.[29]

Figure 6. An upscale new development in Vake, an attractive early Soviet neighbourhood.

Reconstructing local pathways then becomes an irreplaceable part of the analysis of planning and development[30] (cf. also Shaw[31]). Planning, development and politics cannot be separated in the analysis. Recommendations for the future can only make sense against this background.[32] In the following sections, we will describe the development of Tbilisi in terms of the evolving linkages between the function systems of law, politics and economy, enabling the co-evolution of planning mechanisms. It will be shown that the pre-eminence of the developer in Georgian planning is the product of a specific Georgian evolution, while the risks posed by that pre-eminence are also specific, resulting from the same pathway of differentiation.

Tbilisi before communism

Tbilisi is the historic capital of Georgia. It was founded in the fifth-century AD, and one century later became the capital of the Eastern Georgian kingdom. In times of unification of the country, it served as the national capital. For most of the Middle Ages, it was a prosperous, multi-ethnic, multi-religious city, thriving on long-distance trade, located on one of the few routes connecting Central Asia and the Black Sea region.[33] However, Tbilisi also experienced devastating invasions (for a historic overview refer note[34]). The last Persian invasion, in 1795, virtually razed the city to the ground. The Russians, with whom the Georgian King Irakli II, signed a protection treaty in 1783 (the Georgievsk treaty), stepped in only after this tragic event. Protection, however, turned into a takeover of the Georgian Kingdom.[35]

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After the devastations of 1795, Tbilisi had to be rebuilt, and this took place in the nineteenth century, under Russian rule. Russian and European architects participated in the reconstruction and expansion of the city. The Mtkvari river (Kura in most European languages) remained the city's defining structural feature, together with the surrounding landscape of volcanic hills, ravines, streams, springs and waterfalls.[36] Armenian merchants dominated the economy until the early twentieth century and had a strong say in city politics.[37] Several neighbourhoods (especially north of the river) had a strong Armenian flavour, others were predominantly Muslim (mostly Azeri, also Kurdish, Persian and others), but one cannot speak of strict segregation.[38] Over the centuries, Tbilisi developed a distinct city culture that mixed elements of many ethnic origins, transcending its original ingredients: many people felt Tbilisian before Armenian, Georgian, Azeri (Manning in Van Assche et al., and Vardosanidze[39]). The Georgian language, and a unique Tbilisi culture, marked all neighbourhoods in the city; Georgians differentiated themselves from the peers in the countryside, while Tbilisi Armenians and Azeri's spoke mostly Georgian.

Russian rule brought neo-classical architecture and city planning to Tbilisi (Ill. 2), with squares connected by boulevards, with parks, a botanical garden, and an opera house, theatres, museums, schools, government buildings on conspicuous locations in this spatial structure,[40] (Suny in Van Assche[41]). Quite often, despite the generic neo-classical architecture deployed, Russian city planning efforts tried to capitalize on the surrounding landscape: the splendid botanical garden in a narrow valley (the former Royal forest), the new main boulevard, currently Rustaveli Avenue, stretching out on a terrace south of the river, punctuated by open spaces allowing for excellent views are prime examples. The old town (Ill. 3), surrounding the eastern sections of the new boulevard, was rebuilt from its ashes, but it did not attract much interest from the new administration – the density was too high, the road pattern and spatial structure too distinct and 'unreasonable' for Imperial town planning. The old town was also perceived as potentially hostile to the Russian ruling elite, bureaucracy and army-men. Therefore, the new administration turned its back to the old city, ignoring the river as a natural axis of growth, and started building a second city, in mostly a neo-classical fashion.[42] The old town was mostly rebuilt in a style that reflected the older Persian-influenced architecture, maintaining street patterns, recreating the labyrinthine structure of courtyards, balconies, with fine shadings of privacy[43] (Manning in Van Assche[44]). Western influences are visible in neo-renaissance, neo-baroque and neo-classical ornaments and patterns, as well as a peculiar Russian orientalism that sometimes comes close to Italian Gothic.[45]

The Soviet period

This, in a nutshell, is the Russian imperial inheritance the communists had to work with. After a brief independence in 1918–1921, the USSR had a firm grip on Georgia, and the country remained an integral part of the Union until 1991. Tbilisi today is largely a Soviet city, where most people live in neighbourhoods that were developed under the Soviet rule (Ill. 4), and the overall spatial structure, including the transportation network, is Soviet-made.[46] A period of Stalinist neo-classicism (or, more precisely, monumentalism with neo-classical elements), most visible in the extensions of Rustaveli Avenue, gave way to generic Soviet architecture and neighbourhood design. A Soviet neighbourhood, a so-called *mikrorayon*, was supposed to have an array of amenities, local services, but in practice, the level of service provision

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was very uneven[47] (interviews). The neighbourhoods started to look different when buildings grew taller, from the standard 5 floors under Khrushchev, to 16 floors, sometimes more, under Brezhnev, the next Secretary General of the USSR.[48] In the beginning, most people were happy to have a home, and were also proud of the tall buildings and the rapid modernization of the city (interviews). Later, people became more critical of the late communist neighbourhoods.

Under the Soviets, three master plans (*Genplan*) were made for Tbilisi, the first one in 1934, the last one in 1970 (see[49] for analysis; also Kvirkvelia[50]). None of those plans was fully implemented, but local experts agree that the third one had the most impact (Ill. 5). As said, planners were not the most important players in the game of economic development.[51] Economic development was given priority over city planning; and economic ministries, as well as some industrial enterprises under their umbrella, could quite easily ignore the existing city plans.[52] Tbilisi is not an extreme case in this respect, but also here, large industrial complexes were plugged into the city fabric, in places that did not make sense for the early planners working (e.g. east of the old town, an eyesore according to many respondents) (Figure 7).

For planners, as well as for the enterprises, *production targets* were a prime consideration in their decision-making.[53] Within the sphere of planning, physical planning (*planirovka*) was most important because the physical planning agencies (*Giprogorstroi* and its branches) were responsible for meeting production targets in housing construction.[54] Urban design was much lower on the agenda and the same holds true for planning as the search was for better spatial organization.[55] Specialized design institutes existed, but they were mostly focused on

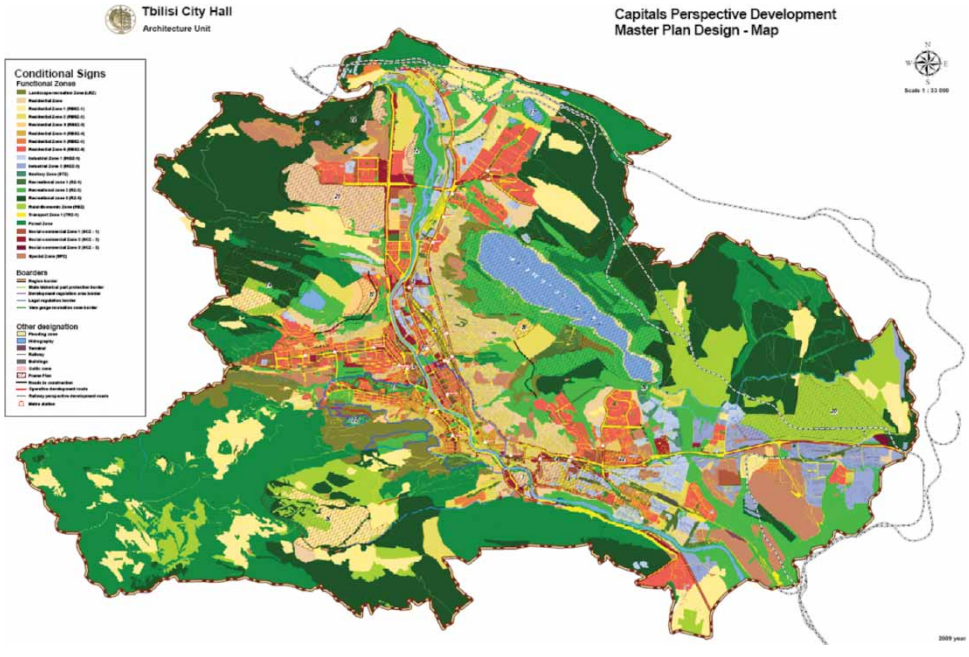

Figure 7. The 2009 master plan, the result of protracted struggles and negotiations.

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engineering innovation. The most influential research institute was the Moscow institute where building norms (the so-called SNIP, *Stroitel'nye normy i pravila*, e.g. 1981) were established, the construction codes (extending to street and neighbourhood design) determining the appearance of most of the Soviet city spaces.[56] So, despite a relative marginality of planners, cities still had a 'planned look'. In our survey, many respondents did appreciate the regular but boring look of Soviet places.

With overemphasizing of production targets came a very uneven quality of construction and planning.[57] Some neighbourhoods were mere collections of apartment blocks, devoid of services, lacking even elementary landscaping and street-scaping. There, city and countryside overlapped in the most literal sense; high-risers were simply dumped in the countryside, and chickens still roamed freely in the unfinished green spaces (interviews and observation). Other neighbourhoods, e.g. Didi Digomi in northwestern section, did receive some services, like a neighbourhood school, a pharmacist, but lacked easy connections, with the city center-extension of the metro system being too expensive. The quality of planning and construction was not always correlated: some neighbourhoods were poorly planned, but had sound and safe buildings ('*ugly but rock-solid*', according to a group of architecture students), and the other way around.[58]

It is too easy to blame one party here. It is the whole game of interactions between various actors that created an incentive structure leading to over-expansion.[59] Few people were in a position to complain about the quality of their living environment (one needed connections). Cities were rewarded by Moscow for growth, and growth created opportunities for black market operations, skimming off the flow of goods and services. Population growth attracted business, and business created jobs, attracting more people in turn.[60] Also in the USSR, good jobs were in the cities, and planning for the rural areas was even less successful than city planning.[61] Many ethnic Georgians from the rural areas moved to Tbilisi, and changed the ethnic composition of the city drastically.[62] According to many academics, gradually '*Tbilisi became a Georgian city*'. Despite the current local rhetoric about absolute control from Moscow, this was not the case, and local elites in Tbilisi (as in other parts of the USSR; see note[63]) were often able to get their concerns and projects into play (Figures 8 and 9).

In terms of spatial structure, seven decades of Soviet rule stretched Tbilisi even further along the Mtkvari river.[64] There is no ring road, and traffic was already a problem before independence. In the narrow valley, river, railroads, highways and local roads have to share space. Some new Soviet neighbourhoods moved up, into the highlands, still generally in an east-west corridor, and with very poor connectivity. In the last master plan (Ill. 5), there were ideas about a possible expansion around the artificial lake called 'Tbilisi Sea', altering the elongated city form, but this never happened. The focus on new construction (as opposed to preservation and renovation), combined with poor access and quality of the far-flung new developments, led to a clear local preference for the late imperial and early Soviet neighbourhoods, between old town and fringe[65] (and our survey). Vera and Vake are the most famous examples here, deemed desirable under the Soviets and up to the present day (Van Assche, Ill. 6).[66]

The old town, in the meanwhile, received some attention since the 1970s, because of local activism, good connections with Moscow and some Russian willingness to listen to arguments about the heritage of a small and old Christian nation to the south (expert interviews). Georgian architects were active and influential in Kiev Rus, contributing greatly to the style of twelth and thirteenth-century Russian architecture,[67] Georgian history was well known in Russia, and, last

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Figure 8. A project proposal by Arci developers for studio apartments in the Avlabari neighbourhood.

but not least, Russians enjoyed their vacations in Georgia. On the part of the Georgians, heritage protection was a relatively safe way to foster the national identity (cf. note[68]). Tbilisi (with Kiev) took a lead in the heritage protection movement in the USSR, and since the late seventies, some parts of the old town were preserved, renovated and rebuilt. Most of it, however, was further decaying, over-populated and impoverished (for Soviet heritage[69]).

After independence

The collapse of the USSR had profound implications on the development of Tbilisi. Large projects were hard to envision in absence of the resources and the organizational capacity of the USSR. '*The spoils of empire*' (words of a diplomat) were hard to come by, after the empire crumbled. Tbilisians left the country, to be replaced, largely, by new arrivals from the countryside, where agriculture completely failed for about a decade.[70] Much economic, social and intellectual capital disappeared. Due to the rapid privatization of apartments and the emergence of a new actor, the developer, small projects started to mushroom fairly quickly. In the 1990s, development was largely unregulated, small-scale and marked by low construction quality, shady financial deals and hit-and-run strategies. This emerged from many interviews, from direct observation, and it is hardly surprising, since in the 1990s, Georgia was a virtual reality, a failed state. Several regions were *de facto* independent, and the government could not provide safety and basic services to the citizens.[71] Tbilisi was a dangerous place for several years (especially 1992–1994), when private militia roamed the streets, and sometimes the

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Figure 9. A project proposal by CID developers.

president was forced to make deals with even the tiniest interest groups.[72] One can imagine easily that development could hardly take off in this risky environment, let alone regulated development. Because capital was so hard to come by for developers, as well as for home buyers – a mortgage market was a non-existent-development almost by definition relying on black market capital and shady connections (for protection, permits and supplies; cf. TrACCC and Transparency International).

The developmental pattern that slowly emerged in these years, which accelerated after 2000 and even more after the Rose Revolution in 2003, is sometimes called 'investor urbanism' (e.g. Ziegler[73]). What is left of government planning is located at the municipal level, but the few planners who are actually at work there, have little influence on the larger projects. Investors with political connections and politicians with real estate connections in all likelihood take the big decisions, decisions on large projects. Long-term strategies are not considered. Since even in the circles around the president, power is a gift that might not last very long, one needs to take advantage of the situation.[74] In 2009, after many tribulations, a new master plan was adopted (Ill. 7), but it was clear, right from the start that the key decision-makers would not be bothered too much – this emerged from interviews with local journalists and academics.

The resulting developmental pattern is one of extreme densities in the already desirable neighbourhoods, like Vera and Vake (Ill. 6). Investment risk was deemed low there and quality of living high. Unfortunately, because of lack of regulation, the problems with 'investor urbanism' are the most important in these prestigious neighbourhoods[75] (interviews, observation). In the last few years, some restrictions were placed on land use. A land use plan for

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the central city was adopted in 2005, and was mostly enforced, but subdivision regulations that reduce the impact of the plan were missing. That means that even in cases where the 2005 land use plan and the 2009 master plan are followed, the quality of urban design can be deplorable. Parking space is too scarce, sewer systems not adequate, access unclear, public spaces, especially green space, too rare. Even if the Soviet plans were usually not fully implemented, these issues were usually handled adequately (cf. note[76] also).

In addition, open spaces and spaces that could be cleared relatively easily, between the historic districts and the newer Soviet neighbourhoods, are the victims of 'investor urbanism'. Here, the possibilities for larger volumes and the proximity to the attractive areas, creates the draw. In the 1990s, not even parks were safe, but the public outcry that resulted did motivate the political elite to step on the brakes in these cases. Also construction quality has improved since that chaotic era. The relative stability since 2000 rarefied the hit-and-run strategies among developers and forms of self-regulation in the developers' guild contributed to the improvement.

Since 2000, historic Tbilisi, the old town, enjoys protection, under the form of a special land use ordinance. According to most sources, that ordinance is more strictly enforced than the 2005 land use plan and the 2009 master plan. Combining old and new buildings in a harmonious manner is not only a topic of conversation, often controversy, among architects and intellectuals critics, but also among politicians, developers and the society at large.[77] Old Tbilisi is an important symbolic space for Georgia, a place with a high density of historical buildings, with many national identity markers.[78] Densities were always high; the urban fabric was very intricate, in a maze of courtyards and balconies which were already referred to. The special ordinance, together with the truly complicated divided ownership of many buildings, protected most historical neighbourhoods against ruthless redevelopment. Unfortunately, that very same legal complexity, in conjunction with the poor condition of most houses, makes renovation costly and reinvestment risky (according to local planners, architects, developers and also Transparency International observers).

Currently three projects under the common title 'New Life for Old Tbilisi' are under way and is worth mentioning: (i) restoration–reconstruction of the neighbourhood up the Meidani plaza (phases I and II); (ii) Kalaubani reconstruction and (iii) Agmashenebeli Avenue restoration on the left bank. The financing scheme of the project is as follows: the government provides working capital to developers, allowing them to finish residential blocks that were left unfinished after the burst of the housing bubble following the global financial crisis and Georgia's war with Russia in 2008. Slum dwellers, if they agree, then move into these new apartments, vacating land in Old Tbilisi. The government then organizes tenders where real estate developers can participate and compete with their proposals for the Old Tbilisi sites. After completion of these projects, they can sell the properties and use the profits to repay their original debts to the banks.

The benefits, Tbilisi officials hope, would be multiple: a reinvigorated construction industry, more jobs, better housing for the poor and a boost for Tbilisi's tourism industry. This system has proven to be effective on a number of occasions already. Under this project, 16 apartment blocks already have been finished, creating living space for 500 poor families [Source: http://ilovetbilisi.ge/tbilisi.ge/].

Meanwhile, the more recent Soviet developments generally lack reinvestment and reinvention. It would probably take a consistently enforced vision for the whole city, to direct

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investment to the fringes, but this seems unlikely in the near future. Now defunct industrial complexes within the city limits negatively affect the quality of life in adjoining Soviet-era neighbourhoods. They offer formidable challenges (and opportunities) for redevelopment, but once again, this would require a long-term vision and a scale of investment that can only come from a government interested in spatial planning. Outside the old city limits (in a few cases inside the new 2007 city limits), some suburban development can be observed. These are mostly gated communities of modest size (Sulukhia in Van Assche[79]). Further away, in the mountains and sometimes on the coast, the more prosperous strata in society own their *dachas* summer homes – Tbilisi can be quite empty in the hot summer months. There is some upscale development in a few recreational suburbs (such as Tskhneti, Tsavkisi), but the scale is relatively small.

This historic overview of the development of Tbilisi helps to explain the origin and the structural character of some of the current issues, as mentioned earlier. It also enables us to re-describe its urban development in terms of shifting ideologies and redefined actors. In the following section, we highlight the most important changes from this perspective, allowing us to reframe urban history as evolving relations between politics, law and economy.

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Changing ideologies, players

The shift towards market and democracy

Planning did not work properly under the Soviets, and people in Tbilisi knew it. People dreamed of freedom, of democracy and capitalism. Capitalism and democracy were often imagined as places of plenty, as permanent prosperity, resulting from quick changes in formal institutions. New laws, elections, a free press, a parliament, would bring the 'promised land' very close. Reality proved different and, many people, like in other post-socialist countries, got seriously disappointed (see e.g. Pusca[80]). A disappointment with planning was followed by a disappointment with unregulated and investor-driven development. Some citizens, and certainly some planning experts, remember Soviet planning with nostalgia now. Homelessness hardly existed, life was more predictable and basic services were usually provided cheaply, though insufficiently[81] (Vardosanidze in Van Assche[82]). The confusion about planning, its limits and its blessings is high among citizens. (This was brought out by both surveys and expert interviews.)

Despite this, the neo-liberal enthusiasm of the 'Rose government' (in power since 2004, after the Rose revolution) is untempered.[83] Urbanism and planning at the national government level were already largely disabled since the 1990s, but the new president abolished the still surviving Ministry of Urbanization and Construction and regrouped some of its tasks under the Ministry of Economic Development.

The new government relied heavily on dynamic developers to steer the development of Tbilisi. Old Tbilisi, on the other hand, deemed symbolically important, received a lot of attention from the president, and its renovation and embellishment were high on his personal priority list. A new system of land (and real estate) registration was established, clarifying land ownership and simplifying transactions.[84] According to most experts, and also in the opinion of many international organizations (FAO, World Bank and others) the new land registry was considered a success. Most developers interviewed agreed to this. It did indeed help in jumpstarting real

estate investment in Georgia (i.e. in Tbilisi and on the Black Sea coast). Because of the varied rhetoric used by the government on different occasions and for different audiences,[85] it is not easy to reconstruct the real agenda for planning matters. But, even if the model for the land registry is German, the larger spatial development strategy is American-inspired: planning is development, development is initiated by developers. Planning as visioning, or planning as brokering deals between stakeholders, is rarely envisioned[86] (Hillier 2002, on roles of planners[87]). In the dominant discourse, property rights need to be clear and simple to encourage investors. Laws are necessary to protect property rights, but actual plans, in the sense of graphical representations of a vision for the future, are not considered useful. On the contrary, they hamper investment, and would unnecessarily restrict the ability of developers to create high-quality neighbourhoods while stimulating the economy.

The president and the political elite in general seem to be genuinely proud of Tbilisi, pearl of the Caucasus, and a stream of proposals and policies address urban problems. Still, the belief in free market solutions ('*the American way*'), and the suspicion of planning (perceived as communism), and of most remaining planners impede the articulation of comprehensive spatial policies and plans. This led to a situation where the political elite can intervene promptly but randomly when a new construction is defacing a beautiful site in Tbilisi. Unfortunately, the situation is complicated by the apparent difference between rules for small fish and big fish. In some older neighbourhoods, rule and order are imposed, and new developments are held with reasonable standards with regard to density and style. But larger developments attract the attention of the elite, and represent an entirely different game[88] (Wheatley 2005).

In other words, the free market ideology seems to be genuinely embraced to a certain extent, while some of the rhetoric is for Western consumption.[89] As extenuating factors, one might bring up that the expectations for the new regime (and for capitalism in general) were exceedingly high, and the pressure to deliver, e.g. by showing new development and significant clean-up in the capital, extreme. In the period 2005–2008, before the worldwide recession hit Georgia too, building volumes increased by yearly leaps (AMCHAM[90]). The size of developments increased and, in general, the quality improved. Financial markets started to function again, the political situation stabilized, foreign trust in the Georgian regime translated into investment and overall economic growth spurred domestic demand.

The president was surrounded by a small and stable circle of loyal collaborators, which was further surrounded by a larger circle. In this circle, people were moving quickly from one position to another, a situation that was provoking many murmured complaints in various ministries.[91] In 2008 and 2009, the government – including the local government – seemed to grasp the public relations (PR) power of city planning and development more acutely and, in conjunction with the adoption of a new Tbilisi master plan, several eye-catching renovation and reconstruction projects were accelerated (e.g. the 'New Life' projects mentioned earlier). However, the combination of neo-liberal ideology and continued elite power rendered the new plans either powerless (the Tbilisi master plan) or undemocratic (the Sighnagi plan, where redevelopment was carried out by trusted businesses). Elite-serving PR planning does tend to undermine free market principles and the rule of law.

Critics acknowledge that everyday life did improve in many ways: the police is much less corrupt, educators are better educated themselves, taxation is more or less fair, property rights are clear and mostly respected (according to Transparency International Georgia). One criticism that reoccurs very often is that of haste. The president is keen to modernize the country, to turn

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Georgia into a beacon of democracy. Yet he does not trust many groups in Georgian society, groups perceived as old-fashioned, as Russian-supported or plainly criminal (sometimes rightfully). And he wants to go very fast. The result is often hasty reforms, leading sometimes to inconsistent laws and policies, sometimes to laws that can hardly be enforced.

Another criticism, considering together the many observations made in the previous paragraphs, many strands of critique in Georgia and among international observers, is that of continued elite control.[92] After the fall of communism, the regional Soviet elite did loose grip of the country, and later, it disintegrated. Eduard Shevarnadze, former Soviet minister of foreign affairs, tried to bring back a semblance of order by reuniting several factions (often controversial and incompatible), and tried to create a new elite, consisting of old and new elements, and loyal to him. He opened the door for Western governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as for Western-educated young politicians, like Mikhail Saakashvili. While the Rose revolution was strongly supported by the NGO sector, and young urbanites in Tbilisi, in all likelihood it was only possible because a substantial part of the disintegrated ruling elite implicitly agreed. Major overhauls in state organization after the Revolution, mostly Western-inspired reforms, did leave the principle of elite control intact[93] (interviews). Subsequent shifts in the Georgian political landscape had a similar effect: different factions within the elite became more or less prominent, but elite control as such remained unaffected. A significant part of the political opposition comes from elite factions that fell out of favour.[94]

Elite control in general makes planning an unlikely endeavour, since planning affects large real estate transactions, and those that are prime occasions for elite intervention and enrichment. The combination of free market ideology, elite state capture, low trust levels, external conflicts and hasty reform is not conducive to the long-term perspective and careful balancing of interests that are essential to spatial planning.[95]

New players on the scene

This is the scene where the developer entered, a new actor. Compared to Russia and Ukraine, large development projects came late. This certainly has to do with the smaller size of the market and the chaos of the early nineties, but also, we argue, with different investment choices by the people that got their hands on state assets. Only with the improvement of financial markets (AMCHAM[96]), the size of projects grew[97] (Sulukhia in Van Assche[98]). Only around 2002–2003, banks were stable, large and independent enough to handle large mortgages and investment credits, and the developers were large, stable and independent enough to be trusted with the money. Developers and officials we interviewed recognized this as a process of co-evolution. The developers opted for self-organization and self-regulation before the government stepped in and imposed its rules. According to our 2006 survey, and more recent interviews, people still have great trust in developers, even if they do not like much of the development they see. (In 2009, that trust did decline, and in the current crisis, fewer people are willing to invest in condo's that are yet to be built.)

Many developers, especially in recent years, are not opposed to planning. Hit-and-run strategies are less prevalent now than in the nineties, according to most observers. Developers hope to be in business for a long time, and know that reputation counts (cf. Greif[99]). They are also aware of the fact that the actions of other developers impact quality of life – and therefore real estate values – in neighbourhoods they hope to work in. Coordination and regulation

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can protect and create value, it is acknowledged (reminding us how early American zoning was initiated by economic elites).

Developers employ many young architects. For them, Western architecture, in all its modernist and post-modernist variations, is the main source of inspiration (a second one being Georgian traditional architecture). At architecture schools, in discussion groups, and through exchange programmes or study abroad, many of them are very well informed about the latest trends and award-winning projects. Internet is a great leveller. Architectural magazines are expensive, as is travel, but much can be found on the internet. New trends and concepts in urban design are being explored. Several projects in preparation show influences of the Dutch, Scandinavian, Spanish urban design (Ill. 8, 9). Occasionally, foreign architects participate in development projects, especially when supported by the national government.

A Western orientation in design does not signify a Western-inspired financing structure or Western-style regulatory environment. For a Georgian developer, rules and regulations are more flexible than for his European or American counterpart, but the unpredictability is also higher, making investment riskier (and stressful). Sometimes, Soviet era rules or norms (the SNIP, see earlier) are imposed again, or suddenly, selectively, the letter of the recent law is followed. Law enforcement could be selective, depending, among other things, on the interests and mutual positioning of elite members (shifting connections and relations). For financing, the developer is dependent on banks that are still not as reliable as Western banks (we heard the curses), less stable and more expensive. An alternative is to work with private investors. In that case, there are usually political connections, few questions are asked and few rules are imposed.

Complaints about development practices or infringements on property rights do go to court, but there is very little trust in fair trial (as borne out by Transparency International surveys, by our survey and interviews). The same principle we observed elsewhere seems to apply here: the higher the stakes, the less reliable the courts. Larger developments are unlikely to be stopped by the courts, because of the political connections between courts, politics and developers. (This also emerged from George Mason University's project on money laundering; TraCCC 2006.)

Citizens are rarely heard. Both in the Soviet planning systems and in the new developer-driven system, the voice of citizens is often ignored (Vardosanidze in Van Assche[100]). New coalitions of actors take decisions, and the free market, ideally a rich source of signals about the citizen's preferences,[101] is not as free as it seems. The new elite, with foreign (and pseudo-foreign) investors, determines supply, and demand becomes even less relevant when a significant part of new developments is not meant to be inhabited, but acquired to launder money.[102] Citizens are often critical about Soviet planning, but they do expect the government to guarantee a high-quality living environment, in other words, they do expect a form of planning.

Conclusions

What is wrong? People do complain (cf. surveys, interviews and local press) about messy and chaotic development, about environmental problems, about a lack of public and green space, failing public transportation, lack of affordable housing and about lack of maintenance in the urban fringe. They also complain about the deterioration of Old Tbilisi, about distasteful combinations of old and new architecture,[103] and about the gated communities that start to spring up.

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The markets clearly do not address these problems, and complaints with courts, with politics and with administration not leading to better policies.[104]

Knowledge, we believe, is not the problem. Architectural knowledge is present, as is legal, political and economic knowledge. Many young professionals working for the government have degrees from the best American and European universities. Choices are the problem. Many different forms of planning are possible, and an appropriate form of planning is planning that fits a specific differentiation of law, politics and economy.[105] Or, in other words, if it fits the choices that are made in a country, if it fits the state model that is opted for.[106] As long as urban design and development are not embedded in a planning system that in turn represents these basic choices, urban development has a smaller chance to realize its full economic potential, to be fully protected legally and to represent the vision a political community has of its future (cf. North[107]).

In present day Georgia, the powers profess a neo-liberal ideology, but meanwhile impede the full application of free market principles and democratic principles. Whereas the neo-liberal recipe, we believe, has problematic features wherever applied (cf. Gerber and Hout[108]), the Georgian selection of ingredients is particularly harmful. The American model relies heavily on the rule of law, on a strong and independent judiciary, to protect the rights of active individuals who are not pampered by government.[109] That judiciary is not independent yet[110] and civil society is not active enough yet to reinforce individual advocacy.[111]

Because of the ideological choices of the Georgian government and the entanglement of interests, planners are marginalized. Few planners remained in their post, and their influence was minimal. Planning American style did come in, under the form of zoning plans for Tbilisi, as apparently deemed acceptable by the new administration, but rarely enforced (Sulukhia in Van Assche,[112] interviews, observation).

The present institutional structure does not readily allow for planning and development that are responsive to changing ideas and desires in society.[113] Urban design, in order to be democratically legitimate, should be embedded in a planning system that can integrate and balance the interests of various stakeholders, guided by laws and policies.[114] Differentiation is the only way forward. Effective, efficient and legitimate planning is planning in a differentiated society. Then, politics can pick up signals of changing voter preferences and in participation forums, and construct a form of planning that gives place to various preferences.[115] Then, law can protect both individual and community interests in a way that stabilizes expectations among all stakeholders,[116] making planning as well as coordination more easy over time.[117] This in turn shelters economic decision-making from politics, rendering decision-making to be more focused and efficient.

Some issues are more important, we cannot wait for the perfect democracy to solve urgent problems.[118] Short-term strategies and long-term strategies will have to be combined, and this involves a risk that cannot be ignored or reasoned away.[119] Some short-term solutions might undermine institution-building efforts (e.g. by reinforcing positions of power), while institution-building efforts might hinder quick solutions to real problems (because these solutions are perceived as illegitimate).

How to move forward then? Also in a democratic society many forms of spatial governance are possible. And, it ought to be underlined that not only negative feedback loops are possible – vicious circles where innovations in one domain are undermined by dysfunctions of others. Also positive loops exist in the real world, e.g. in the form of co-evolution of institutions, towards

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greater stability, complexity and interdependence.[120] In Georgia, the banking system and the developers guild grew together, and through a combination of self-regulation and more effective parts of a legal framework, avoided crippling by the courts, by politics and administration. Whatever the precise origin of the money, in the current situation, the development sector does not seem dependent on criminal money and on the games and motivations of organized crime.

Sector players are able to think as economic actors, interested in the buyer's preferences, in legal regulation to create and maintain value, in a level playing field for real competition. Moreover, the enlightened self-interest and high reflexivity of the developers guild, opening them for both planning and property rights legislation, is combined with an openness for foreign substantive knowledge-urban design, planning models and financing schemes. Thus, the sector is learning, adapting, creating diversity in its offerings to citizens, and is developing into a driver of differentiation itself. That increases the chances that a more consistently enforced and more clearly differentiated law, a more independent local government, interested in local planning, will spark off positive responses relatively easily in the development community. In the Georgian situation, with its substantial and specific role of developers, they seem susceptible to *create their own embedding* in a planning system. But they cannot make the key choices themselves.

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