


## The role of architecture in the Republic of Georgia’s European aspirations

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Alignment with Europe has been a popular foreign policy objective among post-socialist nations. In the Republic of Georgia, discourse surrounding the country’s Euro-Atlantic orientation surged in the decade after the 2003 Rose Revolution. While such discourse has been examined in the context of political reforms and national security goals, this article foregrounds how it was incorporated into alterations of the built environment. Focusing on the urban transformations of the city of Batumi after the rise to power of the United National Movement government, it demonstrates how architecture served as a tool for selectively rewriting Georgia’s contemporary European identity. This article concentrates on two parallel initiatives to transform Batumi into a contemporary European city: the reconstruction of portions of the Old City and the new development along the seaside boulevard. Using evidence collected through qualitative methods, it further highlights the contradictions that emerged during this process of redevelopment and rebranding, as the state balanced initiatives for new development with other post-revolutionary state-building objectives, such as political reform and tourism-market production. Accordingly, it unpacks the various national and international politico-economic forces at play in the process of developing Batumi into the image of a contemporary European city.

**Keywords:** Georgia; European identity; architectural symbolism; nation branding; post-Soviet urbanism

### Introduction

As Communism disintegrated in the late 1980s and early 1990s across Eastern Europe, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union, the emerging nation states were left to forge new geopolitical alignments. For those nations attempting to gain Western support or to exit the sphere of Russian influence, alignment with Europe became a popular alternative and a clear foreign policy objective (Kuus 2002; Lindstrom 2003; Hooghe and Marks 2004; Czaplicka, Gelazis, and Ruble 2009; Larivé and Kanet 2013).<sup>1</sup> For the countries outside the heart of old Europe, assertions of their pre-existing European character have required a more active process of “Europeanization” through identity construction and selective retellings of history (Dobrenko 2011; Ó Beacháin and Coene 2014; Tonkin 2015). In many of these aspiring nations, including Georgia, such politics of nation building have coincided with efforts toward physical state reconstruction (Diener and Hagen 2013). This has meant that architecture has frequently served as a tool for rewriting national identities.

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Claims to European affinity in Georgia have been made on the basis of geographic proximity; historic, religious, cultural, and anthropological ties; and contemporary geopolitics. While such assertions have been examined with regard to both their historic content and contemporary political ramifications (Brisku 2013; Asatiani 2014; Ó Beacháin and Coene 2014), there has been less attention paid to their specific means of conveyance by the government through media other than political rhetoric. The United National Movement government, led by President Mikheil Saakashvili, that came to power after the 2003 Rose Revolution employed a particularly aggressive visual and symbolic embrace of Europe. This included the comprehensive use of architecture to communicate foreign policy objectives.

By integrating research about Georgia's politico-economic transformations following the revolution with aspects of architectural analysis, this paper concentrates on two specific questions. First, how was architecture used by the Saakashvili government after the 2003 Rose Revolution to support Georgia's foreign policy objective of alignment with Europe? Second, what contradictions emerged during this process as the state balanced other post-revolutionary nation-building objectives? These questions are addressed by describing two parallel government initiatives to transform the city of Batumi into a contemporary European-style tourist destination on the Black Sea: the reconstruction of portions of the Old City and the new development along the seaside boulevard. This paper explores not only the government's use of architecture to selectively rewrite Georgia's contemporary European identity, but further examines how the coinciding introduction of a market economy for tourism interfered with this process. The coming together of identity politics and economic forces in this manner was expressed in very different ways in the two study areas. In the Old City, there was a concerted effort to convey an aesthetic of historic European authenticity through the construction of neo-classical architecture. In contrast, along the seaside boulevard, no effort was made to appear historically authentic. Instead, the boulevard projects possess a modern aesthetic that was used to contemporize the city and elevate it to a level equal to that of its European counterparts. Despite these different manifestations, both types of new architecture by the Saakashvili government share the market-driven logic of reducing culture to easily identifiable symbols for branding purposes. Indeed, efforts by the government to market the Old City as "historic" can themselves be seen as exercises in tourism-market branding (Ashworth and Tunbridge 2004).

Architecture is a rich material expression of political power. It not only encapsulates direct symbolic references in aesthetics but is also further indicative of more implicit politics through its ties to allocations of state funding, shifts in economic industries, replacements of existing properties, and the exclusion of certain societal groups through the shaping of building programs. Thus, examinations of political rhetoric in architecture can provide great insight into the objectives of governments as they relate to state, sub-state, and international politics, particularly at times of political transition, such as after a revolution (Minkenberg 2014; Vale 2014). Architecture is also capable of encompassing the everyday narratives of a population itself, a process that complicates and adds nuance to those narratives originally formulated by the commissioning government. This domain of understanding state architecture represents a crucial area of research, as core questions related to a nation's collective identity are ultimately as fundamental to the successful development of the state as its security and economic structures. Indeed, misguided domestic policy could lead to counterproductive deterioration of both national security and economic prosperity. As all six of the EU's Eastern Partnership countries continue to pursue state-building initiatives while expressing interest in stronger European alignment, understanding the role that architecture has played in the historical reframing of Georgia's

European bid is instructive as a case study – both for the future of Georgia and for its neighbors.

The first part of this paper provides a description of the case of Batumi and charts the city's development from the nineteenth century to the present day. The nuances of this extended history offer a basis for better understanding why, under the Saakashvili government, portions of Batumi's Old City were selectively redesigned in a manner that disassociated Georgia from Russia, foregrounding instead abstract references to ancient Greece, Renaissance Italy, and nineteenth-century Spain. The second part unpacks the various national and international politico-economic forces at play in the process of developing Batumi into a contemporary European tourist city. The use of much of Batumi's architecture to promote the tourism economy during state building has meant that the city's emerging European-style identity has been heavily manipulated by market forces. Looking at the use of architecture for tourism branding, this section further situates the development of Batumi relative to its emergence as a global capitalist city – an aspect that also contributes to its aspirations to be Western. Finally, through evidence collected via qualitative methods, this paper describes the specific ways in which the transformation of the built environment has been used to undergird Georgia's existent claims to historic Europe. Ten semi-structured interviews conducted with local academics, design professionals, and government officials are analyzed and combined with the author's architectural field observations. The analysis of documents such as presidential speeches, architectural drawings, historic site photographs, and archival news articles is also included throughout.

The aim of this paper is not to corroborate or disprove Georgia's authentic European character through understandings of its post-revolutionary architecture. The paper is positioned from a constructivist point of view that recognizes the capacity for identity to be subjective and self-produced (Gellner 1987; Geertz 1994; Anderson 2006). Indeed, the notion of European identity remains elusive and contested even within the official political geography of contemporary Europe (Delanty 1995; Reinelt 2001; Risse 2001). Instead, this paper examines the specific capacity of architecture to reframe history in a manner that is strategic for a nation's contemporary geopolitics. In this regard, it joins literature that looks at how state power authorities have instrumentalized architecture to facilitate the realization of their nation-building projects in the post-socialist sphere (Manning 2009; Aksamija 2011; Ter-Ghazaryan 2013; Grant 2014).

### **Batumi case description**

While claims regarding Georgia's European character have risen and fallen in relevance throughout history (Manning 2012; Rayfield 2012; Ó Beacháin and Coene 2014), they resurfaced with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Many Georgians saw this historic moment as a second opportunity to pursue the promise of national liberation carried forward from the first independent Georgian republic of 1918–1921 – a process cut short by the Soviet occupation (Kandelaki 2014; Matsaberidze 2014). Independence came at a high cost to Georgia's sovereign territory, with the autonomous regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia both unilaterally declaring succession just as Georgia was gaining its own independence. The backing by Russia of these unrecognized states introduced national security concerns and made alliances between Georgia and the West – particularly NATO membership – all the more desirable (Priego 2008).

Following independence, Georgia first established a relationship with the EU in 1996 through the international energy cooperation program of INOGATE, which supported the transportation of oil and gas to Europe via the Caucasus. In the first decade of

independence, however, Georgia faltered in its diplomacy with the West, as it became a corrupt semi-failed state. President Eduard Shevardnadze was overly preoccupied, managing the competing political personalities that surrounded him, and thus was unable to address crucial issues of national reform (Kukhianidze 2009). The 2003 Rose Revolution produced a change in government and introduced a dramatic new period of state building in the country (Cheterian 2008). The Revolution brought to power the young, American-educated President Mikheil Saakashvili, who was a driving force behind Georgia's rediscovered ambitions for Euro-Atlantic alignment and resurrected assertions of historic Europeaness. As Europe itself grew in strength and cohesion in the 2000s, the promise of EU and NATO membership became all the more luring for post-revolutionary Georgia. The 2006 agreement, the *Georgia-European Union Action Plan*, within the European Neighborhood Policy further established ties between the two parties and signaled a positive trajectory for Georgia toward Europe.

After 2003, architecture began reflecting government reforms and ambitions toward the West across Georgia through such things as new glass-and-metal public service halls and police stations (De Leonardis 2016) as well as the restoration of classical architecture. However, the deployment of architecture for such political goals was not always uniform across the country. In the capital, Tbilisi, for example, a more complex range of contemporary and historic architectural references were used to tie Georgia to Europe, while other references chose instead to selectively capitalize on the city's "Eastern exoticism" for marketing purposes – topics warranting their own analyses beyond the scope of this paper's focus on the Batumi case. Although Georgia's European aspirations are noticeable throughout other urban transformations across the country, Batumi is a particularly strong case study for such phenomena on account of its proximate western location closer to Europe and its purported historic affiliations with the ancient Greek kingdom of Colchis.

Prior to the revolution, Batumi was the capital of the reclusive enclave of Adjara within Georgia ruled by the pro-Soviet despot, Aslan Abashidze. The ousting of Abashidze, combined with the territorial loss of Georgia's previous tourist hub of neighboring Abkhazia, created the perfect conditions for Batumi to realize its untapped development potential. The city was therefore transformed into a model tourist destination with new neo-classical and modern aesthetics, a process that further aimed to elevate it to the status of a global city on par with Barcelona, Geneva, Singapore, and Hong Kong.<sup>2</sup>

### **Geopolitics in the architectural symbolism of Batumi: nineteenth century to the present day**

Since the nineteenth century, the urban image of Batumi has been the product of perpetual shifts in regional geopolitics. Over this time, the city has been passed back and forth by Russian and Ottoman hands, and it experienced the brief moment of Georgian independence at the beginning of the twentieth century (Kvachadze 2014). In this manner, the transformation of Batumi after the 2003 Rose Revolution can be read within a larger historical cycle of transformation. The contemporary legacy of change in the city has its origins in the 1860s, when the *Tanzimat* reforms of the Ottoman Empire were being locally propagated within Adjara.<sup>3</sup> These reforms intended to combat the slow decline of the empire by proposing modernization and Westernization initiatives (Erdem 1996). In Batumi, *Tanzimat* "aimed at eliminating Georgian traditions and establishing [new] Ottoman traditions instead" (Kvachadze 2014, 220), introducing geometric street layouts and regulated street widths. Through these policies, architecture and urban design were used by local

power authorities for geopolitical means – in this instance, by the Ottomans as a way of asserting allegiance throughout the broader empire.

As Batumi was passed from the Ottomans to the Russians in 1878, the city was again manipulated by shifts in regional geopolitics. Georgia became a governorate within Imperial Russia and Batumi was declared a tariff-free trading hub, or “Porto Franco.” This caused development to take place rapidly across the city (Kvachadze 2014). A second construction boom occurred in the last decade of the nineteenth century, when the Batumi-Tiflis-Baku Railway line was built (Nasmyth 2006; Davtyan 2014). As this new construction emerged under the jurisdiction of Imperial Russia, much of Batumi’s Ottoman architecture was selectively destroyed and replaced by Russian-commissioned buildings with a classical design aesthetic popular in Europe (Kvachadze 2014; Orbeladze 2016). The image of the city was thus again reinvented, this time in a manner disassociated from its Turkish past and instead aligned with its Russian future.

During the Imperial period, much of the construction in Batumi was designed by architects originating from Germany and Switzerland practicing their trade within the broader Russian Empire (Kvachadze 2014; Orbeladze 2016). When designing locally, their work was influenced by the European aesthetics of their home nations, as well as by their cross-exposure to St. Petersburg and Moscow, cities that had themselves come to be established in part with a classical design aesthetic (Hughes 1986). This Euro-Russian influence in architecture followed the introduction of other European cultural practices to Georgia by way of Russia, such as literature, music, and performance (Brisku 2013; Ó Beacháin and Coene 2014). As these new cultural influences imbricated Georgian society, architecture was produced to house their programmatic needs, leading to the further construction of classical-style buildings such as theatres, concert halls, and cinemas. In tracing the lineage of Georgia’s architectural and cultural heritage back to Europe, it therefore becomes difficult to decouple this narrative from its deep historic associations with Russia.

During the Soviet era, the architecture of Batumi underwent further changes, primarily through the expansion of the city with modernist housing blocks and the conversion of religious facilities for secular use. In line with the architectural developments elsewhere in the Soviet Union, Batumi saw the urban ambitions of each Soviet administration replaced by that of its successor. The opulence of Leninist and Stalinist architecture were thus followed by the utilitarian designs of Khrushchev’s and Brezhnev’s times, when architecture’s primary purpose was the mass provision of housing (Humphrey 2005; Hudson 2015). In the transition from late socialism to post-socialism, many of Batumi’s Soviet-era buildings fell into disrepair and became overcrowded. Originally proposed as temporary housing solutions, the deterioration of their form came to symbolize the obsolescence of the Soviet Union itself and more broadly the failed ambitions of Communism. These conditions of stagnation stubbornly continued into the first decade of post-Soviet independence in Georgia when capitalist reform failed to take off effectively.

In exploring the disparities between the desires for a clean transition to a market democracy after Communism and the actual post-socialist realities of life in Batumi in the 1990s, anthropologist Mathijs Pelkmans (2003) draws attention to the all-encompassing nature of Georgia’s attempts at a return to Europe after independence, which involved such things as implementing European regulatory standards and the renaming of streets and signs in English. While Pelkmans’s work provides an insightful view into the political manipulation of Batumi’s built form after the collapse of Communism, it chronologically falls short of an assessment of the transformations that took place after the Rose Revolution. Published in 2003, his work pre-dates this period of Batumi’s history, leaving open the question of

how the city underwent a second round of post-Soviet, pro-Western change under the Saakashvili government.

The transformations of Georgia's built environment after the Rose Revolution are addressed in part by the work of anthropologist Paul Manning (2009), who looks more broadly at the role of capitalist brands within Georgia's post-revolution turn to Europe. Manning describes how visual symbols, including architecture, participated in the government's erasure of the nation's post-Soviet failed state status:

The Rose Revolution has been characterized by its particularly thorough, one might say obsessive, attempts to *erase* any and all visible signs of the socialist and the immediate post-socialist past. Since Rose Revolutionary discourse involved an absolute orientalist identification of "civilization" and "modernity" with "westernization," and their opposites with "the Orient," this means at the same time erasing all signs of the Orient: replacing socialist-era buildings and monuments; eradicating post-socialist "oriental" bazaars, kiosks, shops, and garages; building scores of fountains and new monuments, such as "European" supermarkets; and most of all, painting old socialist things in bright new pastel colours.

Manning's work demonstrates the carrying forward of Georgia's historic legacy of selectively rewriting history through urban design. Yet, his focus is not directly on architecture and thus there is still room for further reflection on this topic.

### **Economic transition to neoliberalism and the post-revolutionary development of Batumi**

Debates surrounding the degree of authenticity in Georgia's claims to a historic European identity miss the more crucial question of *why* being recognized as such was so desirable at the time of the state's revolutionary transformation. Beyond the clear security threats that Georgia faced from its secessionist regions and Russia, there were incredibly strong economic incentives for Georgia to turn to the West in the face of collapsed socialism.<sup>4</sup> The conversion from socialism to capitalism had been a rapid and violent politico-economic event that had left the country in disarray in the 1990s. Transitioning away from this past with colonial Russia and the Soviet Union was therefore not merely about a disassociation from its political hegemony, but also the state's processes of economic transition into neoliberalism – which was both ideological and economic. According to President Saakashvili, his new government "offered a radical course that would transform [the] old nation by the young independent state into a regional laboratory for reforms" (Brookings Institution 2011). The construction of numerous buildings across the country was directly tied to these neoliberal reforms, including through the privatization of state property and the attracting of foreign capital for investment with government incentives (Cheterian 2008; Mitchell 2008; Lazarus 2010).

Demonstrating that Georgia was economically successful was a key component in proving that the state would be an appropriate addition to the European Union. Urban development was one particularly concrete and visible way of showcasing this progress and working toward European integration as a foreign policy objective. In restructuring the economy after the revolution, tourism was seen as an industry that could be coupled with these state development goals in order to achieve economic prosperity ("Saakashvili on Three Pillars" 2010). New architecture not only provided the facilities to accommodate tourists, but further created the key sites that would attract them to visit in the first place. This production of attractions for leisure and entertainment had a mixed reception, with some feeling the funding could have been better allocated elsewhere ("Georgia: Living beyond Its Means" 2010). In the face of this criticism, in August 2012, President

Saakashvili described why he felt it was imperative to continue to use new architectural attractions to reposition the nation for tourism:

I receive a lot of letters from people. Some of them write that we should have delivered the money that cost construction of Alphabet Tower in Batumi, Parliament Building in Kutaisi, Akhaltsikhet Rabati Fortress ... to people – or for instance to build roads in all villages. I want to answer to everyone that I'm the most impatient [for these improvements]. Our final aim is to do everything to take the people out of the hardship, but we don't have gas and oil mines. We are a country which has to have income from artificial sources. We started from minus. That's why, if we didn't build what we did, no tourist would have arrived here. ("Mikheil Saakashvili Opens New Hotel" 2012)

This use of new buildings to represent the progress being made by the government further served an *ideology of construction*, a process wherein new construction is envisioned as the key to kick-starting a country's economic and societal development. This concept is in keeping with the policies of *perestroika* proposed during Gorbachev's time, when construction was used as a means of alleviating the grave conditions of economic crisis. Construction therefore has a strong ideological link with progress that overlaps local and international identity politics in the country; the new buildings of Batumi were not just about the image of the city improving the daily lives of residents, but also aligning Georgia with foreign expectations of what it means to be a twenty-first-century, "developed" capitalist nation.

These facets of the local and international in architecture's political economy are in line with what Roy and Ong (2011) call "worlding" cities. As a testament to how such cities must increase their competitiveness and position their attractiveness both internationally and domestically, new architecture serves the triple purpose of city marketing, investment attraction, and identity communication. Applied to Georgia, it can be seen that architecture played a role in both aesthetically rewriting the nation's Communist past toward a future with Europe while financially facilitating the emergence of its new capitalist economy. The development of Georgia after the revolution can thus also be seen as an effort at international place branding: at situating Batumi within the global market. When the Saakashvili government was establishing a tourist industry during state building, therefore, it was not enough for Batumi to merely have some semblance of Europe through a few of its existing underrated heritage facades. In order to appeal to tourists and transform the city's economy, it needed to provide the familiarity of Europe while propounding enough differentiation to claim novelty and intrigue for the tourist consumer (Aronczyk 2013). This differentiation was achieved through the combination of Georgia's newly rediscovered European image with commodified experiences and themed environments.

Describing a similar process in the former Soviet nation of Estonia, Jansen (2008) shows how the brand Estonia was able to emerge within a broader context of globalization following its Cold War reconceptualization. In doing so, Jansen argues that, "nation branding is an engine of neoliberalism that explicitly embraces a reductive logic which privileges market relations (market fundamentalism) in articulations of national identity" (1). The same reductive logic of place branding can be seen in Batumi's development. It is in this regard that much of the city's new architecture created to promote tourism has caused government assertions of a European identity to be sensationalized and manipulated.

### **The re-creation of Europe in Batumi's Old City**

The transformation of Batumi's Old City by the Saakashvili government to make it appear more historically European was conducted through three different yet simultaneous types of urban intervention. These types can be understood as ranging from modest renovations to

highly dramatic new construction (see Figure 1). The first type is the existing buildings with neo-classical aesthetics that were restored to their original glory. The second type is the existing buildings with neo-classical aesthetics that were renovated, with additional facade embellishments and floors added to enhance their purported European character. The third type is existing, non-classical buildings from the Soviet period that were completely demolished and replaced with new buildings resembling the historic image of Europe through emulated design aesthetics. In line with the latter, notable public statues were also removed and replaced with alternative works that made explicit reference to Europe. The majority of the transformations that took place in the Old City from 2004–2012 belong to the second category (existing buildings with neo-classical aesthetics that were renovated), with true historic preservation being the rarest of the three processes. Beyond the scale of individual works, the broader urban realm of Batumi's Old City was transformed through the repaving of streets with cobblestones and the installation of antique-style street lighting, bollards, and signposts. These public-realm characteristics worked to unify the overall historic image of the Old City.

One project that received much attention in relation to Batumi's resurgence as European is the Piazza Batumi. Since its completion in 2009, it has also become one of the city's most celebrated tourist attractions (Nakashidze 2016; Nikadutaoto 2016). The piazza project is a form of new construction indicative of the third above-mentioned category of urban intervention. It occupies an entire city block on the site of a former Soviet public school demolished to make room for the new construction. Its ornate, Italian-style facade stands in stark contrast to the austere, modernist-school building that it replaced. Likewise, the programming change from a local public educational amenity to a tourist destination and hotel facility reflects a shift in the government's focus.

Designed by one of Georgia's oldest and most renowned architects, Vazha Orbeladze (2016), the project diverges from his early design style to reflect the spectacle-rich whims of his client, President Saakashvili. As a preferred architect of the president, Orbeladze was commissioned to design many projects in Batumi and elsewhere across Georgia. Orbeladze described the piazza project as one of the most important in the development of Batumi after the revolution:

Especially in Batumi, we wanted to create a European style. Of course, we could have made a renewed version of old Georgian architecture or implemented the architectural details from one of the neighboring countries, such as Turkey. But, our country is striving towards Europe and

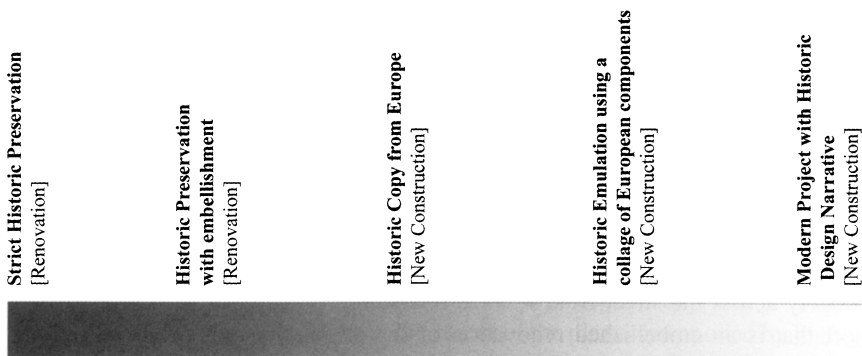


Figure 1. The spectrum of European Aesthetics in Batumi's architecture, ranging from the historic preservation of existing buildings (left), to historic copies from Europe (center), to the creation of new modern projects that have historic design narratives (right).



we wanted to underline that Georgia wants to go towards Europe and [therefore] take the European elements that we would like to see in our country.

During clement weather, the 5700-square-meter piazza space is used for alfresco dining by the adjacent European-themed restaurants, including a meticulously detailed replica of an English pub. The piazza further serves as an open-air performance space, frequently hosting notable international pop musicians and classical music ensembles. In the quest for Batumi to gain relevance on the international stage, these events mirror the objectives of their architectural settings, working toward the construction of new European traditions in the reformed spaces of the city. The choice to name the square the Italian *piazza*, instead of the Georgian *moedani* (მოედანი), further attests to its European pedigree. The project's central location in the heart of Old City provides it with a false sense of historic provenance. Its clock tower, with gold embellishments and musical bells, extends vertically from the northern corner of the site, creating a strong presence in the Old City skyline. Nestled between blocks of low-rise vernacular residential architecture – with their metal loggias and small commercial shops at-grade – the Piazza's ultimate giveaways are its clearly foreign Italian opulence and contemporary construction techniques. Increasingly, however, the opulence of the Piazza's architectural embellishments is finding a contextual home. The Saakashvili government commissioned a surge of “European-style” facade redesign projects in the Old City, and as a result the piazza began to appear less foreign and more naturalized within its progressively Europeanizing surroundings. It is now the nondescript, modernist low-rise buildings from the Soviet era that feel out of place within this district.

Kiknadze (2016), a principal architect at *Architects.ge* in Georgia and the chief designer of much of Batumi's historic European-style facade emulations, described the particularities of this newly emerging style to me:

What we did in Batumi, you cannot call it “restoration” because restoration has its own rules. So, when you are destroying the old and building something bigger which sometimes looks like it's old, but it's not a restoration, it's not even a reconstruction, you can call it ... imitation, I suppose.

Orbeladze (2016) described Batumi's transformation in similar terms: “To say it in one word, it can be called *reminiscence*, meaning a glance at an old memory or remembering something old, but not clearly and therefore [doing so] in an interpreted way.” Kiknadze described how his office had been commissioned by the Saakashvili government to introduce a wide range of such imitative European facade designs – projects that fall under the above-mentioned second and third categories of urban intervention. In many instances, the projects served the dual purpose of quiet urban densification through the addition of upper floors that could be secretly assimilated into the reconceptualized design. In other instances – on account of the rushed nature of such projects – additional floors were added in the form of dormers and towers, but they were erroneously inaccessible from the interior, as they had not been reconciled with the existing buildings' layouts. Such redesigns performed more as faux facade extensions, completing the aesthetics of the newly conceived building without serving any function (Chichileishvili 2016; Inaishvili 2016; Nakashidze 2016).

Piazza Batumi is only one of Orbeladze's projects in this portion of the Old City. Immediately across the street from it is his renovation of St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, a project that is an embellished renovation of the original design. The existing form of the church was retained during a 2011 renovation, when the entire facade was redone. Originally dating from the Ottoman period (1865–1871), “this church was built by local Greeks, but with the influence of Russian architecture. The main achievement of this [renovation]

project is that we *returned* the Greek style to the building” (emphasis added; Orbeladze 2016). In keeping with the Europeanization of old Batumi, the renovation of St. Nicholas Church presented an opportunity to add a higher degree of authenticity by making the project more closely resemble its historic Greek counterparts. This involved the fabrication of facade details not present in the original building’s design, such as bands of red brickwork and gold accents on the domed roofs. In the words of Orbeladze:

It was an old white building; we reconstructed it according to the style of Greek churches of that age. It is not copying any specific one [church], but mainly using the same materials which are *reminiscent* [of that type of Greek church architecture]. (emphasis added)

In contrast to the overtly foreign opulence of the piazza project, the subtle embellishments to St. Nicholas Church are not immediately evident to visitors of the city unfamiliar with its architectural past. The presence of a range of these second type of urban interventions across the city has blurred its historic image and produced ambiguity regarding Batumi’s real European character. Strategically, this process has provided the city with a stronger European image than it would have been able to convey solely through historic preservation. In the absence of any newly constructed churches in the city, it has also drawn fresh attention to these older religious buildings.

### **Heritage destruction in the quest for a historic aesthetic**

The government’s absence of due protocol for heritage assessment and disregard for maintaining the integrity of much historic nineteenth-century classical architecture in Batumi led to criticism. Some members of the local population felt that the transformation of the built environment was primarily being done to make false appearances of success and economic growth, rather than to work toward the true development needs of the residents (Chichileishvili 2016; Inaishvili 2016; Zvhania 2016). The strong demand to show that rapid reform was underway in the country meant that the projects were expedited without due democratic process (Ramishvili 2016). This meant little time for public consultation or heritage assessment. The disconnect between rapidly constructing a historic European image of the city while actively disregarding its existing heritage is one example of the type of contradictions that emerged as the state balanced its thirst for visible progress with other state-building goals, such as political reform and democracy promotion. Remarking on the absence of historic preservation and heritage committees during the period of post-revolution construction fervor, Kiknadze (2016) noted the difference he perceived between these reinterpreted historic-style constructions and more rigorous preservation practices underway in Europe:

So, this was [originally] a building of the 1930s. In a country like Poland, for example, they would restore it and call it a historical building of the 1930s. Here [in Batumi] we were asked to add two floors and to make some accents to the building to make it look like a building in Barcelona.

A few blocks north of St. Nicholas Church and the Piazza exists a more explicit example of urban homage to Europe, falling under the third category of intervention. In the public square outside of Batumi’s State Theatre building, a complete replica of Giambologna’s 1567 fountain of Neptune from Piazza del Nettuno in Bologna, Italy, can be found.<sup>5</sup> The fountain occupies a dominant position in the center of the plaza, surrounded by highly manicured, symmetric Renaissance-style hedge gardens. The fountain outside of the State Theatre replaces the former monument to Ilia Chavchavadze, a notable Georgian figure, which was relocated to the other side of the building. Unlike St. Nicholas Church, which had its historic image embellished, or the piazza project, which had been inspired by the

architectural aesthetics of Renaissance Italy, the fountain of Neptune was a direct European copy with no local connections.

Neptune is further complemented in the urban fabric of Batumi by a statue commemorating the Colchean princess, Medea, in nearby Europe Square. Here, Medea replaces a bronze eagle formerly symbolizing Adjara's previous ruler, Aslan Abashidze. The statue of Medea supported claims of a connection between Georgia and Europe via the ancient Greek myth of *Argonauticus*. This third century poem by Apollonius describes the voyage of Jason and the Argonauts from Greece to the ancient city of Cochlis (Hunter 2005). Arriving on the eastern shores of the Black Sea, the Argonauts dock proximate to present-day Batumi. Jason is assisted by the local Colchian princess and sorceress, Medea, who helps him acquire the Golden Fleece before they return to Greece. Out of this myth, the Saakashvili government claimed an integral contemporary link between Europe and Georgia via Colchis as a core site of shared European history. Speaking at a ceremony in Batumi, Saakashvili stated that "the first myth through which Georgia became a part of European consciousness is the story of the Argonauts."<sup>6</sup> Both Neptune and Medea therefore explicitly communicate Georgia's current shift in geopolitics and foreign policy, replacing figures of contemporary Georgian history with more abstract ancient icons used to strategically foreground a connection with Europe.

While the resurrection of the myth of the Argonauts was strategic for Georgia's extra-national political goals, it caused serious disagreement among locals, thus making its propagandistic use during state building problematic. In Greek mythology, Medea is portrayed in a variety of different manners, sometimes as a woman and helper maiden who has been unjustly scorned and sometimes as an evil sorceress and murderer of her family. This divisiveness was reflected in civilian opinions of her statue in Batumi (Khalvashi 2015; Inaishvili 2016; Nakashidze 2016; Nikadutaoto 2016; Zhvania 2016). The shift in public statuary further signaled a change in the ideological underpinnings of urban development in Batumi. If, during Soviet times, statues positioned prominently in public squares stood to convey the authoritative power of the ruling party, then the whimsical presence of foreign mythological figures today appears anachronous. Yet they represent the arrival of a new era of capitalist production, mass spectacle, and location branding for tourism, where they speak not only to the ambitions of Batumi to be European, but further to the government's desires to be a part of a larger network of global capitalist cities. Promotion of culture as sensational kitsch and displays of emulated famous statues are a part of this process and come at the expense of deeper cultural meaning. Such was a phenomenon that emerged most pronouncedly in the new development along Batumi's seaside boulevard.

### **European spectacle on Batumi's seaside boulevard**

Originally constructed in 1881, Batumi's seaside boulevard has long been a leisure destination for both locals and visitors. From its early days, the boulevard has primarily served as an un-programmed waterfront boardwalk situated between the beach and a belt of verdant parklands. Portions of this property were developed during the Soviet period with three- to four-story concrete buildings. In the 2000s, these vacant projects were not only expressive of their obsolete era, but further lacked the site density and iconic prominence of a state-of-the-art contemporary waterfront city. The greenfield properties interspersed throughout these concrete projects were also seen as prime real estate for development by the Saakashvili government, on account of their proximity to the beach and ability to offer spectacular waterfront views. The transformation of this district after the revolution was described to

me by local archaeologist and native Adjara, Dr. Nino Inaishvili (2016), who had experienced both periods of history in the city first-hand:

Where there is now [the hotel] Sheraton, there was before an old building with Cultural Heritage status. This whole quarter was occupied: there was first a professional education center, like a community college, then, for example, where there is now the Hilton [hotel], there was Soviet-era buildings. But, I can say that most of the heritage buildings were destroyed during the Rose Revolution period, unfortunately. They were destroyed everywhere – in one moment they [the Saakashvili government] destroyed everything then they started to build new buildings.

The dramatic and rapid process of demolition described by Inaishvili made way for a series of high-rise glass skyscrapers that were inhabited by prestigious international hotel chains with five-star resort and gambling amenities. In speeches by the president, this tourist construction was propounded as evidence of Georgia's accomplishments as a newly emerging global country suitable for European integration. Speaking at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC in 2011, President Saakashvili boasted:

Adjara, for the region, has become the centerpiece of the new Georgian economy, the new Singapore to buy with the democracy of the world. Over the last several years, Adjara's capital, the seaside port of Batumi, has received 4 billion in private investments for a population of less than 200,000. They have more five-star brand hotels with the names of Hyatt and Sheraton, Ritz Carlton, Kempinski, you just name them. They have more of them than the city of Moscow. (Brookings Institution 2011)

Rather than expressing a historic connection to Europe directly through neo-classical facade aesthetics like in the Old City, these waterfront projects were intended to rapidly modernize Batumi and elevate it to a level equal to that of its contemporary European counterparts. The authenticity of such projects was underscored by the prestige of their international commissioning to European architects and their following of international design standards. Projects in Tbilisi, such as the Palace of Justice, the Peace Bridge, and Rike Park's Music Theatre and Exhibition Hall worked toward similar purposes. Likewise, the new airport and parliament building in Kutaisi did the same. The most prominent and tallest of the high-rises along Batumi's seaside boulevard is "Batumi Tower," a project originally intended to serve as part of a new technological university, but delayed upon the shell's completion since a suitable institutional partner could not be found (Kvirikashvili 2015). The 35-story modern glass project possesses a number of additional architectural embellishments that are intended to connect the project to Europe through its metaphorical design narrative, once again making reference to the ancient myth of Jason and the Argonauts. In an analogous reference to the Argonaut's ship, a rigid ornamental golden sail bridges between the main mass of the building and its narrower upper part, which terminates in a point intended to conjure the ship's bow. The most spectacular embellishment on the project, however, is a fully functioning eight carriage gold Ferris wheel that projects from the 27th floor, marked with a nautical emblem to signify the helm (see Figure 2). The opulence of the project can be read as the direct coincidence of Saakashvili's proclamations of a resurrected ancient European Georgian identity with the emerging forces of a capitalist economy driven by tourist experience – both were directed at marketing the city for approval by a foreign audience.

This sensational aspect of Batumi Tower was continued in a number of other projects further down the boulevard during its southern expansion in 2009. In order to secure the real estate for the boulevard's expansion, the marshy edge of the adjacent waterfront was drained and channeled into a controlled central water feature called Ardagani Lake. This waterbody now showcases colorfully illuminated "dancing" fountains, choreographed to

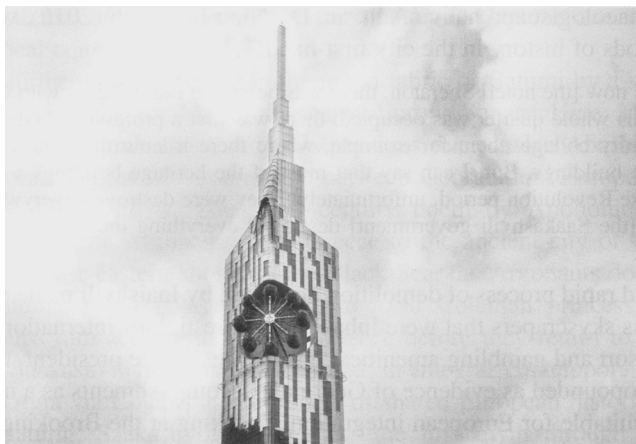


Figure 2. Detail of the eight-carat-gold Ferris wheel on Batumi Tower, a new skyscraper on Batumi's waterfront boulevard that takes the Greek myth *Argonautica* as its design inspiration.

contemporary French and North American pop music. An earlier, pre-revolution version of nearby musical fountains had strictly played Russian and Georgian music (Nakashidze 2016). Beside the fountains sits a cluster of globally themed restaurants in architectural copies transplanted from their home nations: a Greek-themed restaurant appropriately named *Acropolis* is housed in a replica of the Parthenon in Athens. Likewise, there is a German-themed beer house that occupies a structure resembling an old German lighthouse. There is also a Chinese pagoda and a traditional-style Adjaran house which provides a local contribution. Slightly west of the restaurants is a hotel in a copy of the Roman Colosseum and an upside-down version of the American White House. Similar upside-down White Houses exist in Orlando, Florida; Sevierville, Tennessee; and Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin, linking the project to an international network of tourist attractions whose main offering is spectacular kitsch rather than historic accuracy.

The use of such replicas of the Colosseum and Parthenon to attract tourists to the city serves as a prime example of how the government's state-building decision to promote a new tourism industry manipulated the *type* of European identity Batumi's new architecture ultimately conveyed. Travelling from the Old City to this district, one gets the impression that the government was attempting all magnitude of approaches to post-revolution prosperity. This cluster of seaside projects therefore represents a pinnacle in the reduction of European cultural signifiers for rapid tourist consumption. In part, this is economically effective due to the fact that the primary audience for such projects is not tourists originating from Europe, but rather from the neighboring countries of Armenia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan (Department of Tourism and Resorts of Ajara 2016). European copies and emulations were therefore novel ways of luring regional visitors to Batumi.

Georgian architect and principal of the design firm Architects of Invention, David Dolidze (2016), described the challenge of generating economic prosperity for the city through tourism while maintaining its existing architectural character:

What happened in Batumi – when I'm talking about it as an architect, I'm being more cautious. First, I would keep Batumi as it was, but have it as full of tourists as it is now. But the two of them don't work together. And the image of Batumi, with so many constructions, with the tall buildings like that, Saakashvili was trying to create the image that the country is moving forward.

The creation of this image of the country as a prosperous contemporary European city by the president was at times rushed, haphazard, and with little governmental coordination, but was undeniably effective in beginning to rewrite the historic narrative of Batumi. As the Kiknadze (2016) insightfully noted: “You know, sometimes when you’re building an imitation of the old, after 50 years nobody will remember.” Likewise, Orbeladze (2016) saw his work as constitutive of a new future:

Architecture needs time, after which it can be properly estimated. It does not make an immediate impact, but it definitely changes the image of the city and makes a psychological impact on society over time. Especially it impacts youth, who will be growing up in this new environment.

In line with Orbeladze’s remarks, as Georgia’s youth grow up around these new projects, they will come to perceive their stylized European aesthetic as an integral part of the city. In this respect, regardless of Europe’s official acceptance of Georgia as a fellow nation, the country is coming to perceive itself as increasingly European.

### Conclusion

In the end, neither the transformation of Batumi’s Old City into the face of historic Europe, nor the modernizing development of the seaside boulevard were able to fully catalyze Georgia’s integration into the EU prior to the termination of the Saakashvili government’s period in office in 2012. Undoubtedly, the transformation of Batumi has elevated the city into the global sphere and selectively provided new sources of economic prosperity. But more than anything, the post-revolution development of the city has continued the trend of Batumi’s built environment being used to reflect ongoing changes in geopolitics. With the Georgian government switching to the opposition party after the country’s 2013 elections, yet another round of post-revolutionary politics has begun impacting the built form of the city. Many of the Saakashvili-era projects have been put on hold or cancelled outright. New buildings which erased existing history now sit stagnant and unoccupied. Although the exteriors of these projects may continue to support an image of Batumi as European, it is important to note that this has been accomplished through an immense loss of architectural cultural heritage. Much exceptional architecture from the twentieth century was irreparably damaged or demolished in the haste of the government to amplify the city’s new European image. This process of rapid faux construction further underscores the reform shortcomings of the post-revolutionary government which did not effectively balance their thirst for visible progress with other crucial state-building goals, such as political reform and democracy promotion.

The new architecture of Batumi embodied a particular shift in the geopolitical alignment of Georgia after the 2003 Rose Revolution. Building upon the momentum to reorient the country to Europe that commenced after the collapse of Communism in the 1990s, the Saakashvili government utilized architecture as a tool to buttress its foreign policy objectives. By focusing on two different locations of post-revolution development – the Old City and the Seaside Boulevard – this paper has described how particular aspects of architectural design were specifically deployed to make this connection in the city of Batumi. Drawing attention to the nuances of this process and to its multitude of stakeholders and audiences, it has further highlighted a variety of the contradictions and challenges that can be associated with the use of architecture for such political means.


Architecture is a tremendously powerful tool during state building, and one that operates on a number of different levels – from the reframing of history through new facade designs to the legitimization of the government through the visible presence of development

“progress.” As such, this paper has shown how understanding urban development in a post-revolutionary context can provide states with the awareness to implement their foreign and domestic policy objectives more effectively, as they relate to the national, sub-national, and extra-national politics of the country. Beyond places to live, for better or worse cities are branded commodities that must compete for prosperity and ongoing recognition. In addition to aesthetics and visibility, new architecture therefore serves as a vessel for capitalist investment, market speculation, and economic reform, providing an emerging nation with a means to participate in the global economy. Through these overlapping, complex roles of architecture, the particularities of the local are confronted directly by broader international forces. It is through the confluence of these forces that architecture’s symbolism becomes layered and overwritten with additional meaning throughout time.

## Notes

1. Since 1995, some 27 countries have officially declared their interest in European Union membership, with 16 accepted as of 2016. In 1995, Austria, Finland, and Sweden joined the EU. Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined in 2004; Bulgaria and Romania in 2007; and Croatia in 2013. As of 2016, there are five official candidate countries: Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Turkey. There are also six Eastern Partnership States that are potential candidates: Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are also considered potential candidates.
2. On various occasions, President Saakashvili mentioned all of these cities as inspiration for Georgia (“Georgia: Saakashvili Says Switzerland” 2010; “Saakashvili: Georgia is Next Singapore” 2010).
3. For more on *Tanzimat* reforms more broadly, see Weiker (1968).
4. Between 1992 and 2000, Georgia received \$778 million in American democracy promotion, development, and humanitarian aid. It therefore became the second-largest per capita recipient of American funding, after Israel (Jakopovich 2007, 213). Between 2001 and 2003, the USA allocated \$269 million for democracy promotion in Georgia, more per capita than any other post-Soviet nation (Mitchell 2008, 4). Georgia further received some €420 million in aid from the EU between 1992 and 2004, the majority funding projects for improved democracy and governance outcomes (Tudoroiu 2007, 320).
5. A difference between the two statues is that the Batumi version is more opulently gold plated, instead of cast in bronze like the Bologna version.
6. President Saakashvili (2011) himself underscored this connection in a speech delivered at the opening of the statue of Medea in Batumi.

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