



Reshaping of Urban Open Spaces and Waterfronts in Post-Socialist Cities

The Case of Tbilisi

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ABSTRACT

Cities which have gone through the long period of integration in the ex-Soviet Union naturally incorporated a set of urban, environmental economic and social principles that are now under pressure. One of the issues that now need to be addressed is the relationship between city and river, now subject to a very different set of written and unwritten rules from that of a few decades back.

The early part of the 1990s was a very difficult time for Georgia. In its first few years as an independent country political and social turmoil hampered the transition to a new social structure, and led to severe economic constraints that lasted several years. At the turn of the XXI century the country was able to gradually overcome stagnation. In the case of urban planning, this period saw the introduction of new legislation which provided the foundation for a new era of urbanism more attuned to the reality of modern European urban legislation and the new political-economic reality.

At present, territorial planning, as a single system of state spatial planning, is highly unstructured and has very little practical influence, with several urban planning decisions being made with little regard for formal urban planning agencies. One of the key issues in the capital city, Tbilisi, is the lack of social recreational zones, which is also expressed in the loss of public space along the urban riverfront.

The dissertation explores the changes to the economic and social conditions and how this influenced urban policies and planning standards, during the Soviet-era and in Post-Soviet years. It provides international examples of riverfront interventions. An analysis of positive elements, problems to avoid, and opportunities identified in those examples is used as a basis to produce a set of recommendations that could influence positively the way riverfront interventions and Georgian town planning are conducted.

Keywords: Urban Space, Riverfront, Urban Rehabilitation, Post-Socialist City, Tbilisi.

RESUMO

As cidades da ex-União Soviética desenvolveram-se sob influência de um conjunto de princípios urbanísticos, socio-económicos e ambientais que estão, desde a mudança de sistema político, sujeitos a uma forte pressão de mudança. Num contexto onde diversas regras escritas, ou práticas informais, são hoje postas em causa, um dos aspetos que requiere uma nova abordagem é a relação entre rio e cidade.

O início dos anos 90 do século passado foi um período muito conturbado para a Geórgia, Nos primeiros anos enquanto nação independente, a instabilidade política e social foi um obstáculo a uma transição mais suave para um novo modelo social. Esta transição foi acompanhada por graves restrições a nível económico que se estenderam por largos anos. Na viragem para o séc.XXI, o país foi finalmente capaz de progressivamente vencer a estagnação económica. Durante esta fase, foi introduzida nova legislação, finalmente capaz de servir de base a uma nova era de desenvolvimento urbanística em acordo com a realidade contemporânea na Europa Ocidental, e mais ajustada ao novo regime socio-político.

Ainda assim, o sistema de planeamento do território está ainda muito desarticulado e desadequado à nova realidade. A capacidade efetiva de influência do mercado imobiliário e mecanismos de desenvolvimento urbanístico, por parte do setor público, é ainda fortemente limitada, com várias decisões de desenvolvimento urbanístico a serem tomadas à revelia das entidades (teoricamente) competentes. Um dos focos deste problema situa-se precisamente na capital e maior cidade, Tbilisi, onde vastas áreas de espaço público têm vindo a ser transformadas, com criação de zonas privadas ou concessionadas e redução das áreas destinadas ao lazer.

A dissertação explora as mudanças das condições socio-económicas e como estas se podem relacionar com a transição das políticas e padrões urbanísticos vigentes na era soviética para a nova realidade pós-soviética. Através da análise de exemplos internacionais de intervenção em espaços urbanos ribeirinhos, procede-se a uma análise dos elementos positivos, bem como ameaças a evitar, identificadas nos diversos projetos. Pretende-se que as recomendações daí resultantes possam servir de referência à criação de padrões de desenvolvimento urbanísticos masi adequados à nova realidade socio-política da Geórgia e, em particular, à forma como as margens do Rio Kura, em Tbilisi, são intervencionadas.

Palavras-chave: Espaços urbanos, Frentes ribeirinhas, Reabilitação urbana, Cidade pós-socialista, Tbilisi.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem Statement and Aim of the Thesis

Unmanageable growth of post-socialist city, expiration of the term of the last general plan, and ignorance of historical traditions of city planning resulted in an abnormal and complex problem of interplay between Tbilisi and River Kura. The river misplaced its architectural-planning significance, which is more apparent nowadays.

Interrelation between Tbilisi city and the River Kura constitutes complex and complicated urban problem. Kura, as an essential active element of the landscape, used to influence city's planning character. Moreover, throughout times, the River has become as one of the integral component of Tbilisi face.

In Tbilisi, since the late 1930's during sovietization, decline has become the predominant character of the relationship between urban centers and the water. Fast urban, demographic and economic growth alongside extensive land reclamation and the channelizing of the Kura River have progressively changed the nature of the waterfront. Currently, there are highways at the both banks of river. Time by time these barriers have become the main reason that city has problems with less public access and open space connections to the riverfront. Cities are growing at the same time also increasing urban planning problems. The city has undergone severe transformations to its urban landscape, losing much of its original character and becomes not friendly with citizens. Also increasing demand of society related with access to river, open public and leisure spaces. At the present time for Tbilisi this case is really actual and problematic. In the world many develop cities have equally faced similar challenges.

In Georgia, practice of development and eradication of problems related to the riverside areas simply does not exist at all. Therefore looking to this issue through the lens of international experience, introducing foreign principles and methodology of planning would doubtless support development of the city and resolution of town planning problems. Developed countries have experienced loads of instances, when attempts were made to approximate river with the city and its inhabitants, to reorganize existing coastal areas and transform it into the recreational and leisure parks, which indicates on consistent and pre-planned urban policy of the city and attracts more and more tourists. Besides, this process largely effects shaping up the overall image of the city.

Sideways of river banks should definitely be utilized for advancing ecology in the city. Those areas should be reopened and brought closer to the various factions of city centre, in order to elevate the

number of social spaces and upgrade the role of the river Kura riverside and its surrounding in Tbilisi make it possible to use its track for forming and further expanding the city.

The research is targeted to studying and analyzing methods of planning and design of interface zones between urban rivers and surrounding plots of land and means of connecting river stream front space with other urban spaces. Establishment of recreational systems in profit of population should consist of the following set of zones: river stream, waterfront and open space.

The main objective of thesis is to explore river and waterfront space designs as a sub-area of open space and makes it subject of this particular study. The background is the contemporary urban landscape of promptly developing metropolitan areas and large cities. Various set of rules, regulations or policy mechanisms play important role in affecting environment and also in determining public pedestrian zones and biking tracks. Only smart planning will enable creation of spacious structure of urban river oriented open zone, which will fully meet people's recreational needs. One of the specific objectives of this dissertation is to question the City of Tbilisi project in light of its attitude towards the waterfront greening programs.

1.2 Methods

This research resorted to the following methods: literature review, collection of thematic publications, observation and analysis of urban policies and programs, and the interpretation of inquiry method Google Trends.

Literature review was based on the gathering of information from different topics, such as urban history, land-use planning, waterfront redevelopment, or post-socialist urban transformation. A major document source was the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, which includes the archival plans of Tbilisi, before and after sovietization. Books and articles related with the case of Tbilisi are mostly in Georgian and I have translated them by myself where appropriate. Moreover, important materials were obtained from online libraries and scientific journals, regarding riverfront development, urban design, International planning and architectural reviews and from the other thematic publications.

The method of observation helped to understand data collection through a comparison with the present state of certain locations with older maps, historic imagery and photography. This comparison produced a clear image of the evolution of certain locations that underlines the main changes produced through interventions of those areas. Comparing historic documents, the evolution of

certain locations, and the timelines in the implementation of urban policies and programs, allowed for an integration of information necessary to the interpretation, evaluation, and criticism of the different urban interventions and development patterns under analysis.

Inquiry method Google trends is a public web source, based on Google search, which produces as an output how often a certain term is looked for in relation to entered in the total amount of search queries in various regions of the world. It was used in identifying patterns of public awareness/interest regarding different case study related to the waterfront space design and interventions.

Case study method serves as a kind of strategy for probing into the different aspects of riverfront intervention and the transformation of land-uses and public spaces therein. The different case study subjects were selected based on its relevance to the Tbilisi main case study areas, but also as a transept of different solutions, based on the diverse scales and scopes of the interventions. This allowed the identification of differences in the implemented urban design projects and the analysis of existing practices, related to the planning and functional aspects of the reshaping of waterfront zones and recreational areas. Applying these methods will result in shaping different viewpoints on how to enhance the planning process and design quality, namely by foster accessibility with river and enhancing the allocation of different land-uses and public spaces in future waterfront interventions.

2. RECENT CHANGES AND PROBLEMS OF TBILISI'S RIVERFRONT

Urban problems of Tbilisi, emerged in the aftermath of independence, should be resolved through applying planning and urban design strategies. This latter, however, cannot constitute part of regular strategy without placing it under planning framework and planning itself may not be just without existence of democratic institutions (Kornai & Rose-Ackerman, 2004).

In subsequent years, environmental issues raised concerns in Georgian politics and thus had effect on Tbilisi planning. For a certain period it was perceived that every large project would be based on environmental impact assessments and green urbanism fundamentals would lead the planning process. However, very important green zones were turned to defenseless spaces and parks and protected areas now become residential settlements (Salukvadze & Duineveld, 2009). Some forms of environmental planning were inherited from the Soviets, but largely lost in the nineties. There is the legacy of green cities (White, 1980), which is demonstrated in Tbilisi through the combination of parks, tree-lined avenues, hills, and valleys with construction bans.

The decrease of public space and overall shortage of public domain indicates government's inability to organize special zones for public and common usage. It also indicates that public good still exists, but is badly damaged due to the post-independence wild capitalism effect. Moreover, it also suggests that nowadays mechanisms are still lacking to redefine public space and public domain generally in a democratic way without applying strict power of capitalism or old fashioned Soviet solutions (Shavishvili, 2009). Besides, open spaces between historic part and newer Soviet period areas, are victim of "investor urbanism" (Gachechiladze, 1990).

During the last decades, visual perceptions of natural-landscape and architectural environment of Kura embankments, have been radically changed. Not only the bank highways and large dams, but also functional and esthetic inconsistency in surrounding settlements causes undesirable disintegration of bulky parts of Tbilisi from the river. One of the core issues is current situation on Kura embankments, alongside of which mostly petroleum stations, auto washing and reparation stands and other service objects are located. Apparently, the river plays significant role in organizing municipal places for relaxation. This approach is particularly notable in case of Tbilisi due to the lack of green plants. The ratio of recreational territories in close vicinity of central zones is unsatisfactory, while in suburban areas this index is lowered up to minimum. In light of the increased auto mobilization, municipal transport system, currently at place in Tbilisi, cannot meet the needs of transport flows.

Over the years, state actors involved in planning have been replaced by different actors in Tbilisi. Some people engaged themselves in the process, some left it, new faces have emerged and same

applies to certain organizations, professions and disciplines. During the Soviet time, everyone knew that official plans for Tbilisi and its surrounding were factious (Salukvadze & Duineveld, 2009). Planning process becomes effective if people are involved in it and if they believe in it. This inclusive and stable system allows all interesting parties and stakeholders to make own calculations (Luhmann, 1997).

Tbilisi follows steps to democracy and rule of law, wish more diverse society. New changes in Tbilisi planning brought new approaches such as collapsing of fictional scientific planning, acceptance of equitable planning law, imposing central role on capitalist economy in planning. Since Georgian society is still experiencing transitional period towards democratic differentiation, the empirical data to not always show the equitability of actions of the planning administration, interest balance or securing rights (Salukvadze & Duineveld, 2009).

3. CASE STUDIES: MADRID, PORTLAND, PARIS, WARSAW, MOSCOW

Pursuing international practice and experience it becomes apparent that projects aimed at development of riverside parks are selected through open competition for public debate and discussions, which is subsequently followed by approval and fulfilment. High developed countries have already realized the importance of such urban projects for suitable improvement of the city (see Figure 1 as an example on page 5).



Figure 1. Location of All Case Study Projects.

Despite diverse features and characteristics of these projects, analysing their methodology will enable us to beware of challenges and problems nowadays Tbilisi is facing with. Notwithstanding drastically dissimilar territorial and planning character of Tbilisi, points of convergence still might be identified in order to elaborate on strategy for riverside territories pursuant to the relevant methods and principles of regulation as to enhance state of ecology in the city and at the same time to meet the demand of society on more and well-arranged social spaces.

Urban revitalization of Madrid Rio riverfront appeared very successful project in terms of picking up urban identity. About fifty percent of the whole project constructions are placed above the tunnels over the complex technical systems and large urban infrastructures. Project clearly demonstrates the necessity for coordination among the engineers responsible for lowering the motorway below ground and the landscape architects dealing with design of the public open space on top of it. The faded stream of water seems to have more attractive function and actual access to the banks of the River Manzanares. The key idea of this project entailed under covering and widening of one of the belt roads in the city. This process was accompanied with huge social, environmental and financial anxiety. All protesters expressed their dissatisfaction towards the high cost of the project.

Demarcation of major recreational facility in the city of Portland across the Harbor Drive is largely accepted as an important happening in urban planning, because for the first time the freeway was totally dismantled and not substituted. Establishing a waterfront park allowed the city of Portland to foster development projects around this park, which also brought economic benefits inside the city. Reducing of motor vehicle use caused decline of noise and air pollution in this zone.

The Paris Plage project was widely considered as a successful “urban experiment”, which provided transformation of urban boulevard used for car traffic to the attractive and accessible river bank, which draws lots of tourists and travelers. The idea of creating real summer beach with imported sands, life music and activities in the middle of Paris, later turned into a worldwide phenomenon. Development project of the Seine banks that Paris has probed highlights firstly a method by which it establishes long-term exchange of ideas between the users, designers, builders and the administrators who will be in charge of the installation and maintenance.

This paper mainly focuses on how conceptions of the public and public space riverfronts are being discursively reworked today in Western Europe and also in post-socialist countries. Also discusses altering stream of River Vistula and extension of Krymskaya embankment in Warsaw and Moscow. These developments served to cause changes in public space and the post-socialist urbanism in both cities.

These cities formed by the river, underwent through the long pass of development, and reflected the effect of the river and its renewal as their territorial development, as well as formation of architectural planning structure and especially the nature of the riverfront construction which changes citizen's social-psychological relationship with river and city.

Warsaw authorities conducted reshaping program of River Vistula basin and attached utmost importance to the development of this area. The project primarily aimed at reconstituting of the riverfront to create recreational zone and to emerge public space, which would give the place more attractiveness for population and tourists. The project is co-financed by the European Union, which covered expenses for the first phase of the project, while the City of Warsaw is expected to bear the rest of the costs related to the second stage of the work. This zone became more than the place of rest, it is also attractive for artistic action.

The City Hall financed Krymskaya embankment project, it is important and interesting at the same time in terms of analyzing the consequences of the closure of the site traffic. The project entailed the risk of collapsing auto traffic situation. In general, development of waterfront spaces and parks in Moscow is one of the key points for further improvement of the city.

Above described projects aimed at giving the places spirit of fashion, which would attract youth and elderly people as well. Recreational zones give opportunity to both generation to enjoy walking or taking other activities.

As mentioned previously, all discussed examples are unique and can't be directly linked to the situation in Tbilisi embankments, all these cases just share common structural pattern. Therefore, external experience would only serve positive developments in future regulation of Kura banks. Also pros and cons of all these projects should be properly analyzed and only afterwards be transposed in Georgian realm. For example: the scale of Madrid Rio project is impressive, but in light of the current worldwide economic crisis it is completely impossible to raise funds for such a huge project in Tbilisi, however its planning obviously suggests the ways how to tackle similar problems. The creativeness of the Paris Plage project definitely should be acknowledged, it stresses that re-connecting society and river may also occur even without high budget.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper stresses inclusion of the surrounding context to have impact on the re-programming of the riverfront. The landscape should be ready to support existing programs for linking neighbourhood with the riverfront. Therefore, riverfront is no more deemed as a separate faction of the city, but constitutes integral part of larger unified arena of different such factions. Moreover, it emphasizes gradual steps on how existing land use programs might be extended and mingled to the riverfront. Additionally, also provides efforts in diversification of the range of uses through letting, or even reinforcing, opportunities to renew stream circulation.

All above mentioned practical case study examples were mostly characterized with expanding over the large programmed areas. Spaces, demarcated under these projects, with plain accessibility to the urban fabric and the waterfront, could meet loads of cultural needs. At present, these areas are utilized as recreational zones and places for different events. Open public spaces are usually flexible and consequently changing urban conditions and preserve the riverfront as a large communal storage. Best practice in this regard are exposed through the practice described in the previous sections of this Paper. Most of the sources applied for this research, suggest that the marginalized riverfront area might be used more effectively. Bearing in mind these ideas, new models of riverfront for Tbilisi may have been sought. To that end, the researching this entire project shall be targeted to indicating how the marginal sections along the urban riverfront can be organized to create a more consistent riverfront, which would be better incorporated with the community and would have a positive effect on the city's image.

Urban planning analysis of Tbilisi city and Kura River certainly implies possibility to draw interesting conclusions and to work out all necessary steps for proper reconstruction, but notably, keeping in bounds of only architectural planning ways of solution, would serve a little purpose. Efforts should be made in drafting complex program following inclusive discussion with and participation of various stakeholders and civil society. Such attitude not only provides the creation of required material base, but also significantly reinforces the esthetical image of Kura banks, functional consistency, efficiency and prestige, which traditionally used to characterize the river throughout the different historical ages.

The fact that Kura cannot be the strong hub for transportation due to the non-profitability and hydro conditions had been hold yet back in 1932-1934 while drafting first general plan for Tbilisi development and reconstruction; However, relatively small sized means of transport may be introduced in the municipal transport system, mostly serving tourism purposes, especially in the area of historical center.

Current reality stipulates inevitable necessity for empowerment and improvement of links among territories of Kura basin and their use for transportation and pedestrian widths. Suitable utilization of transportation potential is crucially important for Tbilisi, as a linear developed city, whereas both embankments of the river are mantled with large living settlements.

In further advancing embankment line of Kura following considerations should be taken on board: establishing proper ties between bank highways and other districts of the city; analysing green dressing and territories adjacent to the river and identifying agenda for further actions; likewise inclusion of river banks, as important recreational reserve, into draft general plan of Tbilisi. The issue is rather multipart requiring complex resolution. Essential point of the General Plan, such as functional zoning of city and transportation schemes, should be focused on own key issues as well as on planning green social areas and consequently enhancing state of ecology in the city.

Whereas, many cities around the world spare no efforts to make large investments in establishing high class riverfront experience for the benefit of citizens and tourists, Tbilisi is not yet ready to take an action. Significant chance was missed during reconstructing the Rike embankment in Old Tbilisi. Waterfront parks requires rather different approach than other parks; riverfront areas should be intended for people and other activities to a larger extend.

It is a pity that everything is going to be sold mainly without urban documentation. Government as well as local government structures ignore this important (urban) constituents of the project documents. It is supported, to some extent, by the fact that there is no spatial - territorial or regional development contemporary planning documents of the country. Also some of the city's land use master plan is ignored. The country does not have a comprehensive and fully-staffed urban areas of legislation. Such large-scale constructions must be regulated in accordance with the recognized project documentation of the urban planning. Because of the development of Georgia the goal of which is fully, unconditional and non-alternative integration with Europe, such laws or acts in accordance with European standards should be harmonized.

The current faded role of Tbilisi's town planning was largely dominated by established malpractice of investment, which is inconsistent with planning documentation and is adapted to the rapid commercial gain. Therefore the momentum to undertake efficient legislative, institutional as well as managerial and planning wise reform in line with European standards, peaks its crucial importance.

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