

Beyond the Ruin

Soviet Georgian Architecture in Context

Angela Wheeler & Vladimer Shioshvili

This exhibition examines the cultural legacy of Georgian architecture in the late Soviet period—often known as the Era of Stagnation. The era of aging bureaucrats, stifling censorship, and that most potent symbol of crushing conformity: drab concrete housing. Today, Soviet buildings are frequently presented as ruins, reduced to little more than poignant symbols of a failed empire and crushed dreams of socialist utopia. Georgia's lively Soviet designs, then, may come as a surprise. They are, at first glance, the wrong buildings in the wrong places at the wrong time: custom designs in the age of prefabrication, Soviet celebrations of Georgian national heritage, cultural innovations in an era remembered largely for inertia.

These structures appear to be anachronisms largely because the way we currently view Soviet architecture obscures the diverse ways architectural history unfolded behind the Iron Curtain after Stalin. The rise of “ruin porn”—fetishized images of abandoned Soviet buildings—has stripped Soviet architecture of its history and geography. Neither architect nor location nor chronology matter; Soviet architecture as a symbol has eclipsed Soviet architecture as a lived reality. That reality may have produced monotonous workers' housing, but it also underwrote bold experimentation that varied widely across decades and republics.

This creative ferment was particularly pronounced in Georgia, a small peripheral republic that punched well above its weight culturally, in large part thanks to self-styled patron of the arts Eduard Shevardnadze, First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party as of 1972. Shevardnadze made good use of Leonid Brezhnev's “developed socialism,” a reinterpretation of Marxism that emphasized the present quality of life over a future utopia. Although Georgia was far from Moscow's oversight, Shevardnadze still had access to its coffers and so was able to foster a cosmopolitan atmosphere in which architects were free to draw inspiration from both national and international influences. This porousness of the Iron Curtain can be seen as architects increasingly broke from the dictates of mid-century modernism by combining foreign and local, historical and contemporary elements. The buildings captured in these photographs speak to this trajectory as it occurred in Georgia and in doing so provide the context so often lacking in images of ruin.

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Art Academy, Gori

Late 1960s-early 1970s

Unknown architect

Not far from the Stalin Museum and Birthplace, the modest Gori Art Academy represents a bold departure from Stalin's preferred architectural style: towering masonry structures embellished with classical detail. Khrushchev condemned such "excesses" as a waste of labor and materials, ushering in an era of mid-century modernism that celebrated all things concrete, prefabricated, and right-angled. This new approach did not, however, preclude unique designs, particularly for cultural institutions. After years of neglect, the Gori Art Academy is currently under renovation with support from local authorities and will return to its original function this year.



Olympic Training Center, Tbilisi

1970s

Unknown architect

Painted with exhortations to bring home the gold, this sports complex was likely built in the 1970s to prepare Georgian athletes for the 1980 Moscow Olympics. The left side of the building served as a dormitory for visiting teams or athletes from the provinces; the right side houses training facilities and an indoor stadium illuminated by geometric windows. Although the two halves of the building appear to be pulling apart (causing substantial water damage), it is still home to several youth martial arts and football teams.



Expo Georgia, Tbilisi

1961-1971

D. Paninashvili, L. Mamaladze, V. Nasaridze, V. Peikrishvili

Expo Georgia is a permanent exhibition site from the mid-century age of world's fairs. Modeled after the VDNKh (Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy) in Moscow, these ensembles appeared across the Soviet Union and functioned as sites of "cultured leisure," international exchange, and nation-branding. Expo Georgia was initially developed in the 1960s to commemorate Tbilisi's 1500th anniversary, with pavilions added or redesigned through the 1980s. The original structures (including the arch shown here) reflect the unembellished modernism of the 1960s. Today, it survives as one of the few preserved Soviet parks in a city with ever-diminishing public space. Among the gallery spaces, cafe, and garden center, visitors can still stumble upon techno-utopian sculptures and mosaics extolling the achievements of Georgian industry. A private company currently maintains the site and plans to develop it into a conference and entertainment complex.



Former Ministry of Roads, Tbilisi

1974

G. Chakhava, Z. Jalaghania

An early example of Soviet architects' growing interest in postmodern eclecticism, Giorgi Chakhava's building garnered accolades across the Soviet Union and abroad. The structure combined El Lissitzky's horizontal skyscrapers with Japanese metabolic architecture and also drew inspiration from the traditional practice of setting Georgian mountain villages into hillsides. For much of the 1990s and 2000s, the abandoned Ministry sat neglected and defaced, until the Bank of Georgia acquired it in 2004. After a full renovation, the company moved their national headquarters to the building in 2011. Imagery of the building now features prominently in bank advertising, and—in a promising development for local Soviet architecture—the Ministry of Culture declared it an Immovable Monument under the National Monuments Act.



Mukhatgverdi Cemetery Complex, Tbilisi

1974

V. Jorbenadze

Rather than design one building for his first independent commission, architect Victor Jorbenadze enthusiastically designed four—an office, a water tower, a ceremonial hall, and a stone-cutting workshop—arranged like follies along a ridge outside of Tbilisi. Taking advantage of increasing openness to international design influence, he drew on Le Corbusier’s 1955 Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut, with its textured stucco walls and sculptural form, seeking to echo stylistic gestures from the chapel in each building (earning him the nickname “Jorbusier” among his colleagues). This building was originally planned as a crematorium, but even nominally-atheist Soviet Georgians couldn’t quite accept this break from local tradition, instead using it as a hall for wakes. The isolated cemetery is still in use today, but the current operators have neither funding nor incentive to repair the buildings’ extensive damage.



Ilia Chavchavadze Museum and Birthplace, Kvareli

1979

V. Jorbenadze, K. Kobakhidze

This museum in the provincial town of Kvareli documents the life and times of Ilia Chavchavadze, one of Georgia's literary heroes. The local government originally proposed an extension onto Chavchavadze's early nineteenth-century birthplace, but architect Victor Jorbenadze pushed for a free-standing museum, hoping both to preserve the historic structure and to fully realize his own creative ambitions. He designed a small yet striking stucco building that reflects the Corbusian influence found at Mukhatgverdi Cemetery (at left), but also includes experimental elements that would appear later at his 1985 Palace of Rituals (at right), like stained glass and a spiraling tower.



Palace of Rituals, Tbilisi

1984

V. Jorbenadze, V. Orbeladze, Z. Nijaradze

Rising from the banks of the Mtkvari River, Tbilisi's Palace of Rituals dominates the landscape like an enormous abstract sculpture. Although built in 1984 by local architect Victor Jorbenadze, it draws on influences as diverse as Georgian ecclesiastical architecture, German avant-garde expressionism, and mid-century Corbusier. This "wedding palace" was intended to imbue secular wedding rituals with ceremonial splendor, socialist values, and a sense of continuity with Georgian traditions. After years of neglect, a local oligarch refurbished the palace as a private residence. While relatives squabbled over the billionaire's estate upon his death in 2008, a local events company leased the palace and returned it to its original use as a wedding venue.



Palace of Rituals, Tbilisi (interior)

1979-1984

V. Jorbenadze, V. Orbeladze, Z. Nijaradze

The interior of Tbilisi's Palace of Rituals is a colorful pastiche of references to Georgian tradition executed by a team of local applied artists: murals, metal and glasswork. The ceiling is modeled on a darbazi, a pyramidal vault (here rendered in gold-hued steel girders rather than the traditional wood) with origins in the ancient architecture of the South Caucasus. Stained glass clerestory windows reinforce the sacred nature of the space. When the municipal planning committee raised concerns that the building evoked religious imagery, the architect freely admitted his goal was to produce a "cathedral"—creating a minor uproar that had to be quelled by the Georgian SSR's First Secretary Eduard Shevardnadze, who saw himself as a patron of Georgian arts and culture.



Law office, Tbilisi

1980

V. Abramishvili, E. Vartanov, D. Jandieri

This office served residents of *microrayons* (mass housing developments) to the north of “Tbilisi Sea,” an artificial reservoir opened in 1953. Its playful arches and prominent location atop a hill, resembling a small modernist garden folly, belie its decidedly more mundane function: a legal office and book depository. It continues to serve in its original capacity, with the addition of an elderly squatter taking up residence in the back office.



Technical Library, Tbilisi

1985

G. Bichiashvili

Current use: mixed retail

Known locally as “the building with teeth,” the Technical Library’s unique façade shades archival materials from sunlight. Architect Bichiashvili initially proposed the design in 1963, but the custom concrete “sun cutters” were considered too extravagant an expense. Eduard Shevardnadze approved the project almost two decades later to promote Tbilisi as a center of arts and education—a function considerably diminished after the library’s public spaces were steadily occupied by a casino, strip club, and shops in the 1990s.



Archaeology Museum, Tbilisi

1988 (unfinished)

S. Kavlashvili

Intended to house the Georgian National Museum's collection of artifacts discovered in Tbilisi, Shota Kavlashvili's Archaeology Museum emerges from the city's northern hills like an ancient tumulus. Kavlashvili was among Georgia's first professional architectural preservationists, and his design reflects Soviet architects' growing interest in imaginative use of historical forms. The museum was only partially complete when Georgia declared independence in 1991, with several unfinished structures left to ruin. As it could afford neither to finish nor maintain the central building, the Georgian National Museum sold it for a pittance to a local archaeologist, who uses it to store equipment and artifacts from various local excavations. After twenty-five years without maintenance, the museum is deteriorating rapidly and may collapse if the Georgian National Museum cannot secure funding to intervene soon.



Bakery, Tbilisi Sea

1988

V. Davitaia, S. Bostanashvili

With brick pavilions floating above artificial ponds on pilotis, the connecting bridges forming a ring around a quaint garden, this ensemble might suggest a small country resort, or perhaps a kindergarten for the children of apparatchiks. It is, in fact, a bakery—and one of the last Soviet architecture projects completed in Tbilisi before independence. The architects freely combined modern design and historical references, pointing to a nascent postmodern sensibility. The bakery sat empty during the lean 1990s, but has recently taken a new tenant: a ceramics factory churning out novelty wine casks shaped like Stalin, as tourist demand for Soviet paraphernalia now outstrips supply of vintage originals.