

Identity and Spirit of Old Tbilisi

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Old Tbilisi. Photo by Oriël Prizeman

LOCATION
GEORGIA

CATEGORY
BRITISH COUNCIL PROJECT

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Oriël Prizeman travelled to Tbilisi in April to contribute to a round table discussion ‘Identity and Spirit of Old Tbilisi’ focussing on the cultural heritage of Old Tbilisi.

It had been a long time since I had lain on my back stark naked on a wet marble slab whilst a bare breasted lady in enormous pants and flip flops scrubbed me violently with green Palmolive soap. It may, in fact have been an interval of my whole life, but apart from blowing large bubbles of gum as she went, I had an idea my mother had once treated me so.

My towel looked clean but through the smell of sulphur, an aroma of deep fried food was inescapable. I clattered down the cobbles outside with my heels sticking in the joints and paused in a rug shop. The joints were also widely spaced and the colours glib. There was to be no marriage of casual desire and patient handiwork.

Earlier, at [Uplistsikhe](#) with my back to the apse of a cave church, with a ceiling carved to mimic timber beams, I had surveyed the topography with the world embracing me. Imagine the sight of forty or fifty burning tanks of oil atop a peninsular of excavated territory. A tower provided by god but shaped by man. Nothing behind you, only in front. No game of chess; a hood of absolute protection. The panorama contained the tiny texture of rectilinear inhabitation. An extremely slow multi-coloured train of random containers crawled away from Stalin’s Gori birthplace.

On 19th April in “Freedom”, no longer “Lenin”, square, Tbilisi, I attended a round table discussion “[Identity and Spirit of Old Tbilisi](#)”. The day focussed on the Georgian Cultural Heritage Legislation, the chances for Old Tbilisi to be named a UNESCO world heritage site and nominated as a European Capital of Culture. The central area is composed of spectacular courts and Caravanserais with a social network of flat roofs now covered in copper or zinc. Its courtyards house families sharing space in a way that twentieth century architects dreamt everyone might do. Now dilapidated and in need of maintenance these buildings require significant thought and work to repair them, not least because of their shared ownership.

I talked about the role of private investment in helping to preserve heritage assets in England. In Gudiashvili Square in Tbilisi, however, the start of tussles for authority threaten the future of an intact but desperately fragile piece of city. The brittle fabric of the old city, its peeling nineteenth century stucco which is at once Paris and Tehran, its delicate timber-lined courts that could have been made in Lhasa or Seville, straddle a set of architectural references through their creation of shared, public and private spaces. Undoubtedly less ostentatious than Venice, Istanbul or Beirut, the porosity of its urban fabric is, conversely, more generous.

Ironically for a city that has been conquered successively, perhaps the

most distinctive feature of its architecture is its overwhelming sense of community. A mosque in which Shi'a and Sunni Muslims worship together lies a few paces from a synagogue in turn adjacent to an Armenian Church and a fervently active Georgian Church. These are located in close proximity to the seventeenth century sulphur baths, all of which are fully functioning today. The architecture carries these messages through the use of shallow four centred arches in churches which seem to share more with Islamic than Northern European Gothic relatives. The traditional height and restricted aperture of light entering these spaces is precisely placed and evidently well understood.

Some steps to the enormous new Holy Trinity Cathedral were being finished for Easter. Whilst a gigantic silver business centre gleams on an opposite horizon, the future undoubtedly presents diverse opportunities. The silk road city demonstrates missing links in its crafted connections between Asia and Europe from which there is much to read and learn. Overshadowed by the gigantic aluminium statue of the mother of Georgia, this small area of buildings and their subtle character is indeed in desperate need of sensitive care.

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BACK OF THE ENVELOPE