

# GEORGIAN CINEMA ARCHITECTURE IN THE ERA OF SOVIET MODERNISM

(Modernity and Soviet Architectural Legacy)

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The topic of Soviet-era Georgian arts, notably architecture, remains quite controversial in Georgia. However, the West, unlike post-Soviet countries, has long taken an interest in this era. Here, on the contrary, we are still strongly influenced by the idea that something is unacceptable simply because it was created under Soviet censorship, that cherishing Soviet-era architecture and artworks equals the idolization of that period; and, consequently, Soviet legacy can be put on the shelf. Many interesting pieces have perished because of this attitude, a process that, sadly, continues to this day. Examples of Soviet Modernism have been dealt the heaviest blow, and yet it was in Soviet Georgia that numerous architecturally exceptional examples were created in the form of buildings serving a variety of functions: concert halls, cinemas, offices, resort architecture, restaurants, subway and cableway stations, and others.

Movie theaters make up a fascinating part of the Georgian architecture in post-World War II Soviet Modernism, though they have shared the tragic fate of their counterparts—most of them have been lost. The society of the 1960s-1980s valued the culture of moviegoing, making a habit of attending film premieres. Movie theaters of that time turned into venues of sociocultural contacts, and moviegoing came across as a ritual of sorts that brought together the public at large. Today, many reminisce about childhood memories, emotional moments, linked to going to the movies.

Given the significance of movie theater buildings, their loss has been quite painful for a large segment of

society, especially in the recent period. There used to be over thirty movie theaters operating in Tbilisi, though almost none has survived. On one hand, closing cinemas is a natural process, an attempt to get with the times—in the era of digital technologies and the internet, movie theaters are no longer in high demand. On the other hand, the public is losing major cultural spaces, and the disappearance of some exceptional monuments is detrimental for the city's history and architecture.

Some movie theaters from the era of Soviet Modernism represent fine examples of individualistic creative work, especially in light of the fact that, at that time, standardization and mass construction spread to cover all of the Soviet Union, including Georgia. To appreciate the value of the movie theaters built in Georgia at that time, we must consider them within the context of the then situation in architecture. And what we see in the Soviet Union of that era is a boom of mass culture construction, with far weaker emphasis on individualism. In the same vein, standardized movie theater designs were developed without giving due consideration to local characteristics, with the goal being to build them in any region with equal success. Designs were developed by the Institute for Designing Theatrical and Entertainment Facilities, an agency subordinated to the Ministry of Culture of the USSR. According to D. Ivanova, a researcher of Soviet movie theaters, “Soviet Modernism is not just lustrous buildings like the Road Ministry in Georgia or the Palace of Pioneers in Moscow. It is also a number of typical designs, from schools and kindergartens to theaters and circuses....”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Д. Иванова, Типовые кинотеатры советского модернизма, М., 2017, с. 8.

The mass construction of movie theaters started as early as the late 1940s. Cinemas with 200–300 seats (ill. 5) are considered the first typical examples known as the Leningrad design used in construction in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, a period when the mass construction of movie theaters started alongside residential neighborhoods. Later on, typical standardized designed were also developed for Moscow and other cities.

Interestingly, in defiance of the foregoing, individualistic examples of movie theaters were built in Tbilisi. The Nakaduli Cinema, built in the first floor of an apartment building, boasts an attractive Modernist façade (ill. 1). Presently, the facility houses a shop.

The Gazapkhuli Cinema (ill. 2–3), another Georgian architectural example from the era of Soviet Modernism, used to be favored by all in Tbilisi. Featuring quite interesting architectural approaches, it was nonetheless demolished in the post-Soviet period to build an apartment complex in its place. The design of the Gazapkhuli Cinema, initially proposed as the Saburtalo Cinema, was approved in March of 1958. As it turns out, the movie theater was authored by Sergo Demchineli (1906–1968),<sup>2</sup> a famous architect of his time, who designed numerous buildings of the Stalinist era, also Metekhi Bridge in Tbilisi. In the architecture of the Gazapkhuli Cinema, he deviated from the Stalinist Empire style by offering a new vision with different artistic approaches. The place allocated for the movie theater was unconventional and yet typical for Tbilisi, on a slope overlooking the Mtkvari River. The design's uniqueness lay in the fact that the building had to fit on a narrow, elongated strip between Anagi Street (presently Zhvania Street) and the steep slope. The architect opted for a minimalistic area stretching horizontally along the street, this way, among others, avoiding dull monotony, dividing the building into two parts of different heights (the auditorium and the foyer)—and, to lighten the horizontal line, placing a row of vertical concrete details on one side of the façade, an effective visual method, albeit made of concrete, to impart greater unpretentious simplicity to the structure. The horizontal concrete roof sections protruding onto the

side of the façade and the flat dot-lighting roof over the entrance would go on to become characteristic features of the Georgian Modernist buildings of that time.

Other valuable characteristics of the Gazapkhuli Cinema included new approaches—which nonetheless took into account traditional architecture—designed to make good use of the surrounding landscapes. Sergo Demchineli used a natural, typical principle accepted in the city and yet offered a bold approach, one previously unknown in the quintessential composition of a movie theater building. In particular, he turned the foyer's veranda-like area into an open space displaying views of the city. The movie theater faced the river and overlooked the city, much like the porches and balconies of royal palaces surviving in antiquated paintings and of old Tbilisi resident's dwellings. A few years later, this trend continued thanks to Giorgi Chakhava who designed the celebrated Soviet Modernist building of the Road Ministry (1975) further on the same slope, not far from the movie theater. Notably, said foyer provided viewers with a special environment as a space pleasant to stay before and after screenings, to socialize, communicate, and share impressions.

We must absolutely mention one aspect of the Gazapkhuli Cinema important and dear to the society of the 1970s–1980s. It is the movie theater's sociocultural importance lying in its repertoire that was different from all other cinemas—the movie theater screened films unavailable elsewhere in town. It was a place with what seemed to be slackened censorship, similar to the Moscow Illusion Cinema built in 1966 as a special branch of Gosfilmofond to screen foreign movies.<sup>3</sup> This cinema opened in a Stalinist-era skyscraper in the heart of Moscow, a street populated by the capital's cultural and party elite (for example, Faina Ranevskaya and Nonna Mordyukova).<sup>4</sup> The permit to build it was preceded by a special governmental Decree on the Gosfilmofond Cinema allowing for opening it for special screenings using Gosfilmofond's rich collection.<sup>5</sup>

Soon thereafter, the time was ripe for screening more or less “frivolous” foreign movies in Tbilisi as well,

<sup>2</sup> The design is preserved at the Tbilisi Archives.

<sup>3</sup> Кинодата. 50 лет кинотеатру «Иллюзион». Музей кино; История кинотеатра. Госфильмофонд России.

<sup>4</sup> Известные советские кинотеатры с непростой судьбой, московские сезоны.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

and the Cosmos Cinema, which opened in the 1960s in Didube, emerged as one such magical venue where one could peek beyond the Iron Curtain. So what if the name *Cosmos* had nothing to do with cinematography? Instead, it was a trendy name in those days, one associated with Yuri Gagarin's space flight. Today, however, I see those things in a different light, namely that the movie theater enabled an average Soviet citizen to catch a glance of the world beyond the Iron Curtain, something as unattainable as outer space. Soon, the Cosmos Cinema was replaced by the Gazapkhuli Cinema where, as film expert Giorgi Gvakharia recalls, screenings and subsequent discussions would be held. "... Gazapkhuli would be packed as early as 10 AM, with people flocking to see Vivien Leigh, Marlon Brando, and, of course, one another. Georgian sculptors, philosophers loved... in their own words, 'to watch movies in peace and quiet.'" Gazapkhuli was built for people like that, and so was its predecessor, the Cosmos Cinema, opened in Didube toward the end of the 1960s, back when the Soviet Union acceded to the Universal Copyright Convention. Yes, Soviet cinema officials signed the convention but never gave up on film piracy, copying foreign movies.... After all, the tradition of special screenings at Central Committee Secretaries' dachas was introduced by Stalin himself.... Next, Nikita Khrushchev became enamored with this practice, and so did Brezhnev after him.... Because the state was spending enormous funds on these special screenings, it was decided to cover the expenses, at least partially, by opening Gosfilmofond cinemas to throw a bone to ordinary viewers, that is, to allow them to watch illegal copies of foreign movies, those known as *trophy films* (starring Deanna Durbin and Marika Rökk), or those with expired screening dates.<sup>6</sup>

Unsurprisingly, then, everyone I interviewed for this publication had a sentimental expression on the face every time I brought up the Gazapkhuli Cinema. They were all—including those professionally uninvolved with arts—regretful of the closing of the movie theater, because their memories, special moments in life, were tied to Gazapkhuli. Besides being an exciting artistic and architectural example of its time, the Gazapkhuli Cinema was also a cultural hub defining society's *memory spaces*. In

the post-Soviet period, Saburtalo, one of Tbilisi's biggest neighborhoods, lost one such memory space subsequently replaced with a series of apartment buildings lined up in a chain and blocking access to the Mtkvari River.

A similar situation is found in other Georgian cities. For example, we recently lost another movie theater from the era of Soviet Modernism in Batumi, the Tbilisi Cinema (ill. 4) built in the 1960s in the heart of this coastal city. This plain rectangular space corresponded to the spirit of postwar Modernism. Shortly after construction, its main façade was adorned with mosaics celebrating an interesting motif: on one side, the façade's entire height featured a man and woman with a child with a red cloth flying behind them to evoke associations with the Soviet flag, and the whole composition standing for a Soviet version of the Holy Family. This ideological subtext does make sense, but what about the image of the cosmos in the upper section of the mosaic, one with astronauts, stars, and celestial bodies? Does it refer to the same conquest of space by Soviet man? Or was it the artist who used to be regular at the Cosmos Cinema and a secret admirer of the free world's filmmaking? However exciting Batumi's movie theater may have been, the utter disregard for Soviet legacy in the post-Soviet period sealed its fate. At first, it was remodeled and expanded, with the mosaic removed. Eventually, it was demolished altogether and replaced with a towered structure aping the pseudo-European historical style.

Soviet Modernism-era movie theaters also operated in other Georgian regions, even in smaller settlements. The Mestia cinema, for example, boasted individualism and artistic effects using local stone for the building's façade side (architect Constantine Memanishvili). Although the building of Bolnisi's movie theater has survived, it is neglected and dilapidating. It is a simple rectangular structure designed specifically for a small town. Most of its façade is also adorned with mosaics (artist Vazha Mshvildadze)<sup>7</sup> with patriotic motifs, namely an image of Sul Khan-Saba, a prominent figure in medieval Georgian culture, with elements of ancient Georgian architecture and even fretwork discernable in individual details. The Bolnisi movie theater is still standing and, notably, the public has grown exceptionally active in

6 გვახარია, ცრემლიანი სათვალე, 2013, გვ. 154-155.

7 Palavandishvili, Prens. In: Baubezogene Kunst. 2019. S. 120.

terms of preserving this type of architecture and spaces. Protest has been voiced in Tbilisi, among others, as evidenced by the youth movement in Bolnisi decrying attempts to sell the building and trying to keep the structure's initial function.

Although the movie theater in Mtskheta, Georgia's oldest city, has been saved from ruin, its function has changed nonetheless. We have dedicated a separate article to the Karibche Cinema in Mtskheta.<sup>8</sup> Here we will only point out that the Karibche Cinema has an exceptional design in that it happened to be the only movie theater in the Soviet Union of that time to incorporate a museum. During the excavations of the cinema's foundation, ancient ruins were discovered, the remains of Mtskheta's Aragvi Gate, a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century BC structure. Consequently, a new design was developed for the movie theater—combining a monument of cultural heritage with modern architecture was something unprecedented at the time. To solve the dilemma of mixing these two functions, architects Grisha Jabua, Constantine Memanishvili, Giorgi Zakaraia, and Evgeni Tskhakaia utilized the principle of two stories: a museum hall with glass facades on three sides was arranged on the first floor where the monument of architecture had been discovered, while the second floor was reserved for a movie theater (ill. 6). A corkscrew staircase connected the floors. With its light spiraling proportions, it lent dynamic, lively overtones to the geometric shapes to resemble typical Tbilisi-style spiral staircases.

Mtskheta's movie theater had common traits with the newly opened Rossiya Cinema in Moscow, though the building in Mtskheta, and the architectural details of its composition and ornamentation, exhibit the Georgian architects' free approach and interpretation, determined primarily by the task of harmonizing the structure with the historical city. The architects tried not to accentuate the building's height to prevent it from dominating the area.<sup>9</sup> Equally notable is the fact that the walls feature natural stone cladding, and the interior uses wooden

materials, while the decorative ceramic panels are, on one hand, typical of Soviet Monumentalism, and draw links to national art, on the other. One of the movie theater's panels, *Sakartvelo (Georgia)* (ill. 6), is found on the façade, and the other, *Berikaoba*, in the interior. The decorative panels, created by artists Romualdo Tsukhishvili, Irakli Gabashvili, Vladimer Gelashvili, and Rodam Melikidze, were right away hailed as unique works.<sup>10</sup> In the 1970s, ceramic panel decorations were not as widespread as mosaics, though they did hold a prominent place in Georgia: the Tsiskari Pioneers' Camp in Tskhvarichamia, the Belvedere Panel in Gudauri, the bus stops near the villages of Boriti and Rukhi,<sup>11</sup> the interior panel of Tbilisi's Isani Subway Station, to name a few.<sup>12</sup>

Presently, the dual function of the Karibche Cinema is under reconsideration, and the ongoing remodeling seeks to transform it solely into a museum. It has been made possible so far to keep the building's main composition and monumental panels, another modern-era approach to Soviet legacy.

In conclusion, movie theaters, as artefacts from that period, reflect not only particular stages in the history of architecture, or individual artistic concepts, but also human memory in that they embody the spirit of that era, symbolizing it visually as parts of the population's cultural identity. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the grudge against that period has resulted in the destruction of many excellent examples, movie theaters among them, that were vitally important to the history of architect and culture. Presently, attitude change seems to be underway, with a part of society appreciating the importance of Soviet legacy, and individual cases of changing functions of defunct buildings present. Overall, however, indifference is still strong, which is indicative of the public's disorientation of sorts and, at the same time, of a lack of professional architectural evaluations. This article seeks to attempt to overcome this problem to some extent through studying the movie theaters of the era of Modernism.

8 გენგიური, კინოთეატრი „კარიბჭე“, 2020.

9 Architect Kote Memanishvili's recollections of his work on the design, as revealed in a conversation with me.

10 *Р. Воронов*, დასახ. ნაშ. გვ. 108.

11 *Palavandishvili, Prens.* Baubezogene Kunst. 2019. S. 210-211.

12 *ნ. გენგიური*, XX საუკუნის არქიტექტურული მემკვიდრეობა, 2021; In German: *N. Gengiuri*. Architektur der U-Bahn-Stationen von Tbilisi, 2020.

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