

# The Essence of Nowadays Caucasus's Communal Spaces

Reyhane Hojjati

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M.A in Landscape Architecture

Reyhane.hojjati@yahoo.com

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**Abstract**

Understanding the urban landscape requires familiarity with the past stories and history of the city. Cities and also urban landscape formation is affected by various factors, including environmental, historical, social, cultural, political factors. These factors may not have the same effect, and one of them may have more strong and prominent role in shaping the landscape of the city than any other factor. There are three visible historical periods (tradition, socialism and independence) in the Caucasian cities (Armenia and Georgia), which were play a more prominent role in the construction of urban landscape. The Soviet government has more effective role in changing the urban landscape of the region throughout a special look at the philosophy of socialism. Socialist governments have been planning and designing a special framework in order to establishing equality among people, which caused major changes in the landscape of the cities and its components. In this era, communal spaces as interactive space of a city had turned into a turning point with anthropocentric scale, which were only used for political gatherings. This paper emphasized that the success of urban communal spaces rooted in behavior patterns and needs of their citizens, and must be founded based on a human-centered and community-centered approach, something that has not happened in the Caucasian cities. Today, cities' authorities trying to organized urban places of the region with a similar approach and goal of globalization with imitation of European cities, regardless of the customs and traditions of the people of this country. Although, cities that traditional behavior patterns has been flowed in the people lives, just have a expository and propagandistic look without any common and shared soul, and there aren't any community-centered thought and design in their construction.

**Keywords**

Urban landscape, Communal Spaces, Caucasus, Social Interaction, Globalization.

## Introduction

Urban landscape as the manifestation or expression of its prevailing thoughts always has been influenced by several factors. One of the fundamental factors affecting the urban landscape is governing approaches prevailing in each period, in which not only the urban foundations would altered, but also impacted their soul and metaphysics, and shape the urban landscape based on their own conceptual and theoretical basis. It may seem that communal spaces won't be affected by policies and procedures due to their special nature, which is dependent on the public relations and social interactions of people, but in practice, it has been proved that the attitude of politicians and urban planners toward the city led to major changes in the city, and to a large extent influence the success or failure of the urban spaces and the communal spaces too. Based on inspections and field research, it can be said that before the Soviet government occupation, communal spaces of Caucasian cities (countries visited, Georgia and Armenia) were consistent with the pattern of the traditional city, and their communal spaces were formed based on the corresponding community events and group activities of citizens. Soviet Union government as a turning point in the history of this area had left such an impression on the landscape of the cities that their historical and geographical contexts are largely ignored. During this period, the cities and their past history have been vanished extensively due to the anti-historian approach of communist; and the cities were shaped according to authoritarian and justice-centered school of thought of socialists. Therefore, present view and landscape of Caucasian cities are more a product of the Soviet regime and the independence eras. After a brief overview of the concept of communal space, we will consider socialist thought and attitudes first and then contemporary urban management of communal spaces in inspected cities. In this paper, we will try to analyze the urban communal spaces of the Caucasus region using field observation and analyzed inspected samples and also, their historical trend and governing schools of thought.

## Hypothesis

Today's urban management approach in Caucasus region has been derived from the notion of government-centered approach in comparison to communal spaces. This approach is similar to the communist authoritarian approach, and in attempt to enter global system, turned communal spaces of the region's cities into exhibition spaces, which is lack of real life of their community, and is not derived from the social development trends.

## Communal space, expression of urban social life

Communal spaces are locations for expression of civic and social interactions that stemmed from economic, social, and cultural relations found in the urban communities; therefore, it's an essential and integral part of the urban landscape. Communal spaces are physical manifestations of the citizen's mind and thoughts; moreover, it reflects political, intellectual, thoughts, and cultural view of any nations; and it is account for one of the most important elements of city landscape at different periods of history of every nations. These elements where contains different cultural, social, and economic activities are always concurrent with historical evolutions and have many stories to tell. Throughout history, the compliance of localization patterns of the city's important elements with ideological ideals of a society was a representation of society's originality (Erfani, 2010). Communal spaces has special importance among the various spaces which is used for a variety of leisure activities; where people met each other, mutually communicate, and exchange their social and spiritual experience (Mansouri, 2001). Communal spaces are spontaneous and organic founded places where social presence of people could signify them, locations for civic life experience (Atashinbar, 2010). These are the only elements of the city in which most people find their own values and identity in an interesting environment. The presence of shared memories in special places can act as a communicating link, which made urban environment lively, extend the civil life, and increase social interaction among people of the community and visitors of these places. The political and cogitation impacts of any era on urban communal space's functions could be shown throughout historical study and analysis of communal space's different roles. For example, urban squares in traditional cities have been played the communal space role. Urban squares often have been major social and cultural components of cities and basic element of their formation and evolution. In the past, most economic activities and various formal official and social functions has been carried out in these places (Rezaii & Abbasi, 2010). It should be noted that the difference between milestones and urban spaces with communal spaces is in its social and community-centered nature. Communal spaces are sites for formation of collective memories of a city that increases the sense of belonging to a place in each city. As a result, the urban landscape is one of the strategic components of very city that can greatly reflect the character of the city.

## Socialism and City

Socialist city defined as the product of "Marx" and

"Lenin" thought in the 1920s. The poor living condition of weak social classes and workers have been the main philosophical focuses of the founders of socialism. Some of the most important indicators of socialism school of thought dominance in the city were abolition of land ownership and use of rent fee for public purposes, tax collection from heavy and progressive income and use for funding the community, exclusive credit concentration, formal (governmental) communication and transportation means (Atashinbar, 2010). "Marx" and "Engels" viewed urban spaces as precinct in which complex processes led to capital accumulation and class struggle would focus in it; growing and progressive conflict between workers and capitalists appear there (Taghvaei and Tabrizi, 2005).

The main feature of planning in a socialist city is inflexibility and imperative design. Some years after the Communist revolutions, these governments were planned and implemented urban and regional development projects, because the leaders of these countries viewed political and social significance in these programs, and could represent the power and awe of these regimens (Ebrahim pour, 2007). We can study four criteria or constituent principle in exploring communal spaces as an element of the city landscape: (1) scale, (2) applications, (3) layout, (4) structural characteristics and spatial qualities; which can be used to interpret as aesthetic features of these spaces. These criteria could be used for assessing the extent of the sociality and social life of these spaces. It should be noted that each of these could result in communal space definition and quality of social life flowing in them.

#### **Communal spaces of the socialism era: social or power show?**

• **Scale:** The scale communal space is the same as the rate of associated users with these spaces. A space that appears as a public arena for the citizens in the context of the city must serve on the human scale and activities, so that people perform their social interactions in it. Communist government has been considering communal spaces of Caucasus region as strategic components for imparting social equality and authority of government. Communal spaces of traditional cities have been replaced with large scale urban spaces in this era. Urban communal spaces of socialist government were used as gathering centers, public plaza for magnificent public demonstrations and gatherings (Szeleni, 1996). Hence, the scale of communal spaces in these cities is meta-humanistic scale, solely a tool for power show of the rulers of the time. One can observe an instance of this meta-humanistic scale (anthropocentric scale) next

to justice building at Rustaveli Avenue in Tbilisi, which is represented as vast area with fountains in the margins of high building's walls. The majesty of the building and vast open space on the side of the street induced a magnificent entrance for this building which is not in a people-centered space scale. Meta-humanistic scale of the main square of Kutaisi in Georgia and the Republic square of Yerevan in Armenia has minimized humans meeting and daily social interactions in these cities. Authoritarian approach in the design of urban spaces without considering social life of the city and the imperative planning was applied in the layout of these spaces.

• **Function:** Functional characteristics of communal spaces can influence on quantity and quality of people attraction and also their stay and interaction in these spaces (Daneshpour & Charkhian, 2007). The applications of communal spaces is forming the second component of the structure and system of a communal space, including the presence of sufficient spaces to sit and the occurrence of special events such as street performances, public arts, and self-organized events that lead to stronger bond between more people, which could add to charm of communal spaces. But public spaces in Socialist cities are places for showcase the power of government than a place for social activities. In a socialist city, public spaces were plaza for protests, government or military parade and demonstration, and have not constructive role in interaction and memory-making of the people.

• **Aesthetic:** In a public arena, the quality of places can be considered as an aesthetic factor for attracting citizens, and complete the definition of a communal space.

City of Poti in Georgia is one instance of the cities that socialist ideology influences are evident noticeably. Checkered structure and homogeneous urban spaces are quite far from public life in this city. There aren't any attractions in these uniform and repetitive spaces for people visits. Moreover, the lack of differentiation factors and unique features in these spaces towards each other is preventing the recognition of one space as main communal space of the city (Fig.1). Another aesthetic features of this spaces that affect the quality of spaces are furniture and related elements as well as original structure and shapes and design. There are two soldiers on either side of the entrance to the justice building in Tbilisi which planned for intensify government authority and made by Tbilisi urban management officials; and led to a heavy feeling of space for the audience, and not only don't attract them, but also repel them from open urban spaces (Fig.2).

Communal spaces were often adorned with sculp-



Fig.1. Poti is an obvious example of a socialist city where communal space has not any place in it, and only large-scale urban spaces present in it. Photo: Zohre Shirazi, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.

Fig.2. Provided space next to Rustaveli Avenue in Tbilisi indicating that these spaces have been created for the expression of authority of the state in the communist cities and social interaction had no place in it, Georgia. Photo: Zohre Shirazi, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.



tures and a symbol of socialism in addition to homogeneous and monotony of the physical structure, which is aimed to instill more power and authority of the government in the people life.

•**Layout:** City as composition of different social units and physical bodies and elements have certain urban management, localization, and layouts according to the ruling ideology. Layouts of city's communal spaces will have special instructions based on the goals pursued by the government. The socialist cities like Kutaisi city in Georgia, the main square of the city opened the heart of its historical context. Rustaveli Avenue is running long distance as a wide cross shear in the historical context of the city and joined Republic square. Locating squares like Republic in Tbilisi or Freedom in Yerevan city are signs of the manager's approach which placed them in the urban center as much as possible and not as the center of activity to all citizens. There are not any fundamental relevance to social presence and civil interaction in these layouts.

### From Socialism to Globalism

In the late twentieth century and early 21st century and with the advent of new communication technologies, enhancement of the influence of transnational corporations and collapse of the socialist bloc; the world entered a new realm of economic, cultural, political, and social interactions (Rahmatolahi, 2005). There are many aspects and dimensions of the cities that have been affected by the globalization process including management, economics, policies, procedures, urban hierarchy, metropolises connection with other cosmopolitan cities and urban areas (Rezaei & Abbasi, 2010). Caucasus was divided into independent countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and each country has adopted different policies for development. In the meantime, some countries that have been released from the bondage of the socialism was drafted their urban development policies modeling developed nations and aimed to joining the global system and staying ahead of Western technology convoy. It should be noted that the globalization process is not either positive or negative. Globalization is some kind of coping, and depends on the balanced adaptation of countries to new conditions (Rahmatolahi, 2005). In Armenia and Georgia, policies pursued by government to join the European Union has shifted toward absolute imitation and distancing from the indigenous origin and identity. Hence, the process of globalization is negative and deteriorating trend in procedural aspects of development, including the development of an urban landscape.

### Communal spaces after independence: Identity or duplications?

Communist states have not any special plan for creation

communal spaces as place for social interaction and communication despite the creation of urban spaces. Tbilisi city's administration follows the previous trend and forgets the culture and traditions of the people in city landscape planning. If the radical socialist cities changed the city landscape to the cities empty of people with goal of authority showcase; today, blind imitation of European cities and uncontrolled fast pace of urban managers toward globalization has been led to city landscape that one cannot assume them as a humanistic and popular cities.

• **Scale:** Since the overall structure of the colonial era in most cities of the region have been preserved and just altered the upper layers, it can be said that all the descriptions about the scale of communal spaces in the colonial era has been repeated in the current era too. The independence era's urban managers didn't seeking to establish a humanistic or citizen oriented scale for new communal spaces, and only decorated communist squares with a modern and European looks. The scale of communal spaces of this period are likewise remains meta-humanistic and out of dimensions of the citizens collaborative activities.

• **Function:** The communal spaces of the independence era have been created based on different applications than prior to independence. Luxury shops with big signs and European and classical architecture, the use of modern materials and furniture are all the achievements of the region's cities management toward the globalized system (Fig.3). They only relay on structural measures, and copycat approaches for revitalization of urban centers. There are continuation of traditional patterns and behaviors in Kutaisi city and presence of self-organized behavioral patterns such as vending is an instance of this pattern, but these patterns have been ignored in the organization of cities. There is not any space tailored to citizen's needs, and in some cases people are hardly changed this communal spaces using their extension agents in order to better exploit spaces. There are some traditional activities like selling books in the corner of Rustaveli Avenue in Tbilisi's which is leads to Freedom Square. Here spatial elements such as vegetation encourage interaction between people and helped create shared memories in addition to creation of a more pleasant atmosphere. We can sense the poor attention to social functions of these spaces with comparing this part with the rest of the street such as the entrance of the justice building. However, studies shown that public spaces in which people can engage in activities like looking at the others, sitting, eating, retail activities, sports, and cozy events are more attractive and absorb more people (Daneshpour & Charkhian, 2007); (Fig.4). In Vanadzor, Armenia's second largest city, main communal space is formed as an opens rims sur-



Fig.3. Application of western classical architecture and imitative furniture in Kutaisi downtown in Georgia represents an approach which seeks to join the world and European system, Georgia. Photo: Reyhane Hojjati, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.

Fig.4. There is not any consideration for people activities in design of Tbilisi communal spaces, and people altered these spaces themselves through integration of additional elements, Georgia. Photo: Reyhane Hojjati, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013



rounded by streets and public buildings. In terms of mimicking approach in organization of this space, users do not make a deep connection with the place, and the physical presence of people show superficial memories that won't lead to any attachment to location. This space is the main gathering place for people. Viewers use this place in standing position due to lack of adequate and proper furniture. Even there isn't any proper lighting for night use. Most people in this space are youngsters that gathered through music and the activities of the kind. As a result, most audiences are young people and there is not any preparation for elderly and children use. However, one of the most important characteristics of the communal space is easy access and use by all age groups and in different hours of the day (Fig.5). Other remains of the Communist period in this country is Republic square of Yerevan which has the same approach of preventing growth of social life and interaction of its citizens. Communal space designed on the north side of the square has not been able to meet the needs of citizens for good social interactions due to the lack of appropriate design. In designing this space, not only the behavioral tradition of the citizens, but also the basic

principles of communal space's design have been ignored. The only actions have been taken in the design of this place as the main public space of the city was building a fountain in the middle of square and some bench surrounding it. There is not even the shadow of a tree in this space during the day to encourage people attraction. It is a crossing space during the day, and only it is at night that people enjoys some music and dancing of fountains (Figs.6 & 7). Thus, communal spaces of Armenia and Georgia are taking shape regardless of socio-cultural context of the history in the Caucasus region.

• **Aesthetics:** The aesthetic influences of this era on communal spaces can be traced in further details added to this space: The use of urban furniture with European pattern, the lack of arrangement, design based on the patterns of people's lives, low population areas without sprightly and vivacity of people, and places without collaborative soul and collective spirit in them (Fig. 8). A small but reliable example of westernized approach to urban management in Armenia is using urban furniture simulated from Paris in Yerevan.

Maybe it seems that the main reason for the failure of communal spaces is undesirable basis arose dur-

Fig.5. The lack of suitable and proper design in organizing communal spaces of Vanadzor city has led to inconsistency between people needs and spaces. Downtown Vanadzor, Armenia. Photo: Reyhane Hojjati, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.





Figs.6 & 7. The poorly designed communal space of Republic square of Yerevan is causes the emptiness of space and lake of passerby during the day, Armenia. Photo: Reyhane Hojjati, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.

ing the Soviet Union regimen. But in Mestia - one of the touristy cities in Georgia- which maintained its traditional context during the Soviet regime, there are a similar approach to management of city landscape and its European model. In this small town, the central area of the city which has played the role of the communal space in the past was lost its traditional features in the overall structure and function due to recent restoration. Large buildings with wide entrance and business applications in which most of them are empty and without prosperity and the use of furniture with European models are all product of Western-centric approach to

construction and were not derived from the needs of the townspeople. The people of this city are not able to finance acquisition of these commercial spaces, new spaces were not consistent with the scale of their activity (Fig.9). Hence, this central space which could be used for supplying the local crafts, holding the local carnivals, and space for locals chat is turned to an empty space with few visitors who are passersby and have not any information about life and livelihoods of local people.

• **Layout:** As previously mentioned, the communal spaces in this region's cities are continuation of the communal spaces of the colonial era. Therefore,





other than samples like Mestia, communal spaces in other areas composed of the squares, streets, and public areas which are intended for residents in the colonial era. Centrality of the structure, lack of attention to social and activity centrality, or even ignoring the local structure of the original texture of the city, showing the imperative and official layout of these communal spaces. Imitative approach to urban management in independence era is only looking to make a decorative layer to its urban environment. Hence, the Communist era procedures have been followed in preparation of this space's layout.

Fig.8. The use of urban furniture as imitation of Paris urban furniture is an example of westernized approach to the management of Yerevan city, Armenia. Photo: Reyhane Hojjati, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.

Fig.9. Downtown Mestia is solely a superficial imitation of western models and the appropriate actions to create interaction between the citizens are not considered, Georgia. Photo: Reyhane Hojjati, archive of NAZAR research center, 2013.



## Conclusion

In the contemporary era and after independence of Caucasian region states, although there is not any trace of ruling Communist approach to urban management, but the unsuccessful experience of communism is being repeated. The difference is replacement of the authoritarian approach of government with imitative approach pursued by the city manager; who only seek to replicate European forms and spaces in their cities and won't consider the relationships of citizens (Diagram 1). In both cases, the government request and desire as the best available option is held as the governing template of construction, and the formation of the city structure is done by focused and imperative mode than development of activities and their social life of people and layout based on it. The lack of dynamism and the absence of life stream in communal spaces indicate the wrong approach to management in the city that continues from the ruling Communists and the governing spirit has been hidden under imperative management layers.

The inconsistency between type and arrangement of spaces with behavior patterns and needs of citizens is a sign of continuation of this mistake in urban management. People participate in these spaces for leisure, but they have not been given any opportunity to shape their own communal space. All features of these spaces are models imperatively and as imitation of European style. This superficial imitation is the result of objective and artificial view to the city, the urban landscape, and communal spaces. The lack of prioritizing the socio-cultural context of city has been led to a beautiful appearance without social spirit and without any livelihood role for these spaces. When city man-

agers trying to simulate European cities, the urban landscape is considered as a Figure in a frame, and the physical and objective aspects of it would be pursued (Table 1). The management of the urban landscape views it as a way to achieve their demands. It can be predicted that future face of the Caucasus does not have any trace of the history and culture of this land, and historical and territorial identity of cities will be hidden behind a one-sided and incorrect management vision; and the process of globalization and integration of the European Community will be lost.

Table 1. Analysis of communal spaces indices in the three eras of tradition, socialism, and independence. Source: Author.

Historical era Influential factors	Tradition	Socialism	Independence
Scale	Humanistic and based on citizen's social activities	Meta-humanistic, large scale, official, and ceremonial	Meta-humanistic, large scale, ceremonial, and decorative
Function	Small-scale commercial or recreational applications (wholesale, rest, etc.)	Protests and public gatherings, ceremonies and military and official parades	Recreational, imitation of Western models and proportionate to behavioral patterns of European cities
Aesthetics	Small, within the historical context, in relation to surrounding applications, such as market	Imperative, huge and ripped the context of the old city. In the city's structure as check board, homogeneous, repetitive and monotonous	Decorative, imitation of European aesthetic styles, the use of urban furniture fully Western and imitation
Layout	At center of parish and local shopping center, according to the centrality of citizens activities	At the geographical center of the city and irrespective of citizen's centrality of collaborative activities	At the geographic center of the city along the spaces of socialism eras

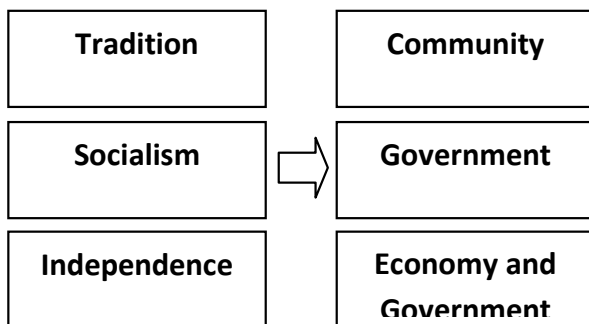


Diagram 1. Factors affecting urban communal spaces of the region in each of the three eras, Source: Author.

### Endnote

1. Those, whom adhere to globalization, view the earth as a physical environment, its citizens as global consumers and producers; and calls for collaborative action to solve the world's problems. Globalism contributes with promotion of globalization process. The relationship between globalism and globalization is same as the relationship of universalism and united nation (Golmohammadi, 2002).

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