

# Citizens want their public spaces back

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In post-Soviet countries urban spaces are being radically transformed. Everything related to the socialist past has been renamed, ranging from streets to monuments. And every urban space has been filled with commercial activities. The centre of Yerevan today is the epitome of this free market 'wild' approach. The old part of town has become a mosaic of privately owned spaces with different tastes and purposes, but very little has been left for public gatherings... An EU supported project is trying to give public spaces back to urban residents via local art and culture. This is being done in a creative, provocative and alternative way. We sent a journalist from the EU Neighbourhood Info Centre network to take a look at what happens in Yerevan.

*Text and photos by Aghavni Harutyunyan*

YEREVAN - "Times change and a lot of things have become old fashioned even though it was our way of life. But they were the values we believed in and shared," says Mkrtych Samoyan, a pensioner living in Yerevan. He challenges the interests of today's society and remembers the days when public spaces were places to sit down with friends, talk or enjoy live music: "Yerevan had lots of open air spaces. We used to get together and listen to singers or watch performances... Today every centimetre is owned by someone and none of them cares about art, culture or traditions. They prefer to build glassy stuff and to make the city look as ugly as possible."

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia regained its independence. That in turn led to the city's urban spaces being radically transformed. Everything related to the socialist past was renamed, ranging from streets to monuments. And all the public spaces were filled with commercial activities. The centre of Yerevan today is the epitome of this

■ Victory park exhibits nearby the Mother Armenia monument.

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■ Hrach Bayadyan presenting the changes of urban spaces after the collapse of Soviet Union.

free market ‘wild’ approach. The old part of town has become a mosaic of privately owned spaces with different tastes and purposes, but very little has been left for public gatherings. This process leaves a lot of people feeling marginalised and seems to be irreversible, leaving most people unprepared to consider their urban space as a common, collective and non-commercialised space, off-limits to the logic of market valuations.

Against this background, the SPACES project is about breathing new life into public spaces so that they can be used for art and culture in a process that leads to their being handed back to urban residents. The project has chosen public spaces as a setting for cultural activities that tend to involve citizens and to show how independent culture can be a generator of civic (and cultural) emancipation. SPACES is financed by the European Union through the Eastern Partnership Culture Programme, whose overall objective is to support the role of culture in the region’s sustainable development and to promote regional cooperation among public institutions, civil society, cultural and academic organisations within the Eastern Partnership region.

### Residents battle against a tide of commercialisation

Taguhi Torosyan, project coordinator from Utopiana.am Cultural, a creative NGO, explains: “The problem of the loss of urban spaces in the city is a social problem and the matter of town planning has become a burning political issue. What do we do? We try to suggest alternative models in which artists and cultural workers create and organise events that take into account the local context. Our events are provocative and critical towards the culture of big shows and consumerism and reflect people’s sense of exasperation with the nationalist identity building process.” According to Torosyan, the residents and citizens of Yerevan have already started their struggle against the demolition and commercialisation of community spaces which should be commonly shared, accessible and intended for open, non-commercial usage. “People have opposed this trend, from the demolition of Old Yerevan district to the construction of the Northern Avenue to the issue of the Cinema Moscow Open Air Hall,” she says. “But the government – is continuing with its approach by adopting laws and regulations that provide a legal basis for such a policy”. Hence the importance of supporting civic initiatives and independent cultural subjects that manage to re-articulate the cultural field as an area of discussion among citizens, with a special focus on the public space.

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### The emotional co-ownership of a town

The ‘Caravan Concept’ has been identified by the project as a good way to appropriate urban space through arts and cultural initiatives. Every six months, the SPACES caravan travels to one city, combining theoretical debate, art events (or public space actions) and a participatory approach. In October the Caravan stopped in Yerevan for its ‘public talks’, bringing together artists, researchers, architects and students from Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to encourage networking, social research and debate. Many artists performed in various public spaces, and many speakers held presentations in different venues on different subjects, from the ‘Memorial to the fallen trees’ held in Northern Avenue, to the piano performance open to passers-by at Swan Lake with a piano tuned to play a single note. A public conference on ‘The Future Sustainable City’ was used to bring the curtain down on the event.

“In Yerevan people are concerned with issues such as illegal or inadequate constructions, the destruction of trees and green

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■ Barry Flanagan (North Wales), Acrobates, 1988.



**“We think it is essential to support such claims to civic resistance and to strengthen the potential of local cultural scenes”**

zones but also with the questions of citizens’ self-determination, and the prevalence of public interests over private ones,” says Heidi Dumreicher, the director of the Vienna Institute for Urban Sustainability, SPACES’ leading partner. “From the many discussions with small non-governmental groups that our partner had organised, we got a good view of civil society’ efforts to claim their emotional ‘co-ownership’ towards their own town,” adds Dumreicher. “We think it is essential to support such claims to civic resistance and to strengthen the potential of local cultural scenes. Our public space actions range from cultural performances in underground passages in Tbilisi to open air cinema screening in Chisinau.”

For Lena Kirakosyan, a 21 year-old university student in Yerevan, the new face of the city is better than “the old and ugly soviet buildings”. “But on the other hand, we would like to have more art, music and theatre venues instead of restaurants built everywhere.” “What a lovely place Cascade is,” she says, “with museums and art pieces and places to walk around and enjoy...”. Cascade is a public space that was granted funding on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Soviet Armenia. Lena hopes that it will not be the only public space left to enjoy life in Yerevan.

■ Fernando Botero, (Columbia), Woman Smoking, 1987.



## Euro East Culture

[www.euroeastculture.eu](http://www.euroeastculture.eu)

The Eastern Partnership recognises the value of cultural cooperation and inter-cultural dialogue as an integral part of all relevant external policies and has underlined the importance of cultural cooperation in addressing political processes and challenges. Therefore the Eastern Partnership has called for a specific Eastern Partnership Culture Programme that will strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector in the region and enhance the role of culture as a force for reform, promotion of tolerance, and social cohesion.

**Programme overall objective:** To support the role of culture in the region’s sustainable development and promote regional cooperation among public institutions, civil society, cultural and academic organisations in the Eastern Partnership region and with the European Union.

**Partner Countries:** Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

**Implementation Period:** 2011—2014

## SPACES

[www.spacesproject.net](http://www.spacesproject.net)

To develop new concepts for cultural governance that recognize the societal relevance of the independent art and cultural workers. To strengthen the local artistic communities as a civil society contribution based on participatory arts and culture concepts, fostering access to culture for all (especially youth and disadvantaged groups of society).

**Participating countries:** Armenia, Austria, Croatia, Georgia, Luxembourg, Moldova, Ukraine

**Project Duration:** 3 years (Dec. 1st 2011- Nov. 30st 2014)

**To find out more**

Eastern Partnership Culture Programme:  
EU Neighbourhood Info Centre fiche and news  
[www.enpi-info.eu/maineast.php?id=269&id\\_type=3](http://www.enpi-info.eu/maineast.php?id=269&id_type=3)

EU Neighbourhood Info Centre information pack  
The Eastern Partnership: a path to stability and prosperity  
[www.euroeastculture.eu/en/granted-projects/view-24.html](http://www.euroeastculture.eu/en/granted-projects/view-24.html)

SPACES Project fiche  
[www.euroeastculture.eu/en/granted-projects/view-24.html](http://www.euroeastculture.eu/en/granted-projects/view-24.html)

EU Neighbourhood Info Centre – Thematic Portal – CULTURE EAST  
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