

Commonality Beyond the Boundaries of the Post-Socialist

Anna Khvyl

The research component of the SPACES project was dedicated to the observance of selected areas of the city through the prism of urban studies, and to formulate a concept of the transformation of the public space in four post-socialist capitals – Chisinau, Yerevan, Tbilisi, and Kyiv. Due to the dynamics of personal observation, reflections, and impressions, the project did not respond to the query as stated, and revealed the variety of discrete contexts latent in a generalized term like “post-socialist”.

Characterizing the selected cities as “post-socialist” links them *via* fragmentary joint histories, giving birth to unvarying mental images of typical housing blocks, of an industrial landscape alternated with a kitschy interior, featuring photo-print wallpaper and a pre-fab sideboard. It can seem at times that the term “post-socialism” so encapsulates a single idea, that there is little need to compare levels of urban modification; everything is so similar, typical, and ubiquitous, that this effort is just a waste of time. Whenever a Yerevan sociologist, a Tbilisi architect, or a Chisinau anthropologist start talking about the exclusion of the population from the public space, you automatically begin to nod your head knowingly. Parked cars filling Kyiv sidewalks, churches under construction in public parks, and architectural monuments renovated as shopping malls. Due to these “significant commonalities”, it can be difficult to give full service to one’s local context, valuable as it may be in altering the understanding of the common terminology we employ when describing the transformation of the post-socialist urban space.

The post-socialist realities of Chisinau, Kyiv, Yerevan, and Tbilisi – much as their socialist past – originate at different junctures and exist under varying economic and political conditions. The events occurring in the 20+ years following the disintegration of the Soviet Union are often more felicitous in understanding the contemporary state of the public space than are any policies handed down from the Regional Development Ministry a half-century ago. The Armenia-Azerbaijan border closing, the Russian-Georgian War of 2008, Chisinau’s 2009 “Brick Revolution”, the neoliberal reforms that followed Georgia’s 2003 “Rose Revolution”, the intensified pressure of big capital and commercialization so well-represented in Ukraine, have altered the development dynamic of these nations, and provided lessons writ large in the public space.

Yerevan, December 2012

The research component of the SPACES project here was comprised of four field tours, each lasting roughly five days, beginning with a trip to Yerevan in December 2012. The flight from Kyiv required a four-hour layover at Sheremetyevo Airport in Moscow – a pointed reminder of the construct of Ukrainian-Armenian cultural interaction – that is, both in its absence and its nonlinear nature.

An initial unaccompanied walk along the streets of the city elicited surprise at the rational organization and the less aggressive (in comparison with Kyiv) approach to new construction. It was less reminiscent of the residential monstrosities that line the Dnipro, and more of the odd mix of Rotterdam’s office quarter and Stalinist New Empire. Following a random course around the city it soon grew evident that Yerevan – or at least its downtown – followed a logical structure comprised of ring boulevards and a cleanly delineated center. This city, which is in the running as one of the most ancient on the territory of the former-USSR, brings to mind a kind of modernist architecture utopian vision: built from nothing on land purged of historical blunders and the complications of nature.

Over the next several days, our hosts – Utopiana.am – took us, researchers from four countries, on a series of guided walks about the city conducted by civic activists, urban studies researchers, and architects. During these group tours the topic of Yerevan’s reconstruction at the start of the city’s term as a soviet state capital was one to come up often. In contrast to the other three SPACES capitals, Yerevan did not simply undergo some reconstruction, it was entirely built anew. At the start of the 1920s the city’s population was roughly one tenth of that of Kyiv, four times smaller than Tiflis (Tbilisi), and two-and-a-half times smaller than Chisinau. More a town than a city of some 50,000, whose inhabitants were employed primarily in winemaking and horticulture, and it was restructured as a soviet capital. Soviet Yerevan was developed as much to serve industrial purposes as to carry out the symbolic role of a capital city with the full slate of cultural attractions and administrative functionality.

Our initial impressions of the city’s seemingly less aggressive contemporary building scheme also turned out to be entirely mistaken. If visually the spatial construct of the ‘new-builds’ along the central boulevard appeared decidedly more reserved than Kyiv’s “Diamond Hill”, the social conflict which accompanied its construction was significantly more pronounced. And if Kyiv’s aggressive path to post-soviet development has resulted in damage to its parks and architectural crowding, then in the case of post-socialist Yerevan this has led to egregious property rights violations, a substantial loss of functional housing and an increase in homelessness.

In order to lay the Northern Prospect through Yerevan’s center, portrayed by investors and city leaders as an objective called for in the city’s inviolable zoning plan (approved 1924), hundreds of families were forcibly relocated from their homes. Officially, the process resembled the city council’s buying up of residential properties. The compensation offered, however, did not reflect the properties’ market value, rendering families unable to purchase comparable housing. Those who refused to leave their homes were removed compulsorily by government special forces. At the time of our December 2012 visit, a woman had been living on the street near the Presidential Administration building in protest of her illegal eviction for nearly half-a-year. All together, approximately 10,000 area residents were displaced. Twenty families filed suit in the European Court of Human Rights, with only six cases being decided in seven years, though the plaintiffs in these were awarded appropriate financial compensation. The Northern Prospect case also figures in the destruction of the city’s architectural heritage, with 27 of the buildings which were leveled in the forced relocation having enjoyed landmark status. As of this writing, the elite housing erected on the site of the former farmsteads remains largely vacant.

Tbilisi, March 2013

The next stage of our research project took us to Tbilisi in March 2013. In Ukrainian popular consciousness, Georgia under the Saakashvili Presidency represents a kind of economic wonderland – a land that overcame corruption and accomplished the effective reform of law enforcement. Yet, immediately upon leaving the airport the city’s “renewal” put us on our guard. From one side, while driving through the city center it was impossible to ignore the futuristic architectural enthusiasm – lit up for all to see – of the Peace Bridge, the Hall of Justice, or the Concert Hall: all highly visible projects driven by Saakashvili and employing Italian architects. From another side however, an impression formed that this “new city” was designed intentionally to be appreciated through car windows. An impression confirmed when you begin to explore the city on foot. The recently completed highway planned to relieve traffic congestion in the downtown area is reminiscent of the river that divides the city and reconnects it via bridges.

A popular location in the city, and featured prominently in Tbilisi tourist photo albums, is the Rike Sculpture Park. During our evening walk through the park a vital element of the spatial organization of the place was made evident by the security guard who followed our progress from one sculpture to the next at a distance of about ten meters. In the spirit of social experimentation we attempted to sit in an area/object designated as an amphitheater. Our “accompanist” then approached us and roughly the following dialogue ensued: “You can’t sit here.” “Why not?” “Because the Head Administrator is coming through now.” The brevity of our interchange didn’t allow us to establish who was this Head Administrator, nor what restrictions had been envisioned to regulate sitting in the amphitheater. Kyiv residents are quite familiar with the sense of the monitored control of the public space, and this comprises part of what we are accustomed to citing when delineating our post-socialist argument. Yet, despite our separation in time from the soviet era, these aspects of authoritarian supervision and regimented public behavior are not necessarily subsiding. The Georgian example demonstrates the reverse: monitoring carried out by the regime – which portrays itself as progressive and open to innovation – is on the increase.

Georgia’s neoliberal policies of the early 2000s took on a particularly radical form in comparison with other countries we researched as a part of this project. A closer look at these improvements, visible during our first walk on the newly constructed illuminated bridge – at a cost of tens of millions of *lari* from the state budget – reveals a protracted housing shortage. The thousands of homeless families who have been living for years in abandoned structures without water or heating remain a black mark on the Georgian capital. A portion of these homeless is made up of refugees from Abkhazia and Ossetia who came to Tbilisi in the early-90s, settling in hotels, hospitals, and abandoned buildings. The rest of the homeless – whose numbers grew during the Saakashvili Administration – are those who lost their homes after defaulting on mortgages or losing their jobs. There are no reliable statistics for these cases. Housing petitions on file in these cases number more than 7,000. According to civic activists addressing this issue, however, the actual number is significantly higher.

CHISINAU, September 2013

Following a May visit to Kyiv – detailed in an additional report – this stage of the project finished up with a trip to Chisinau in September 2013. This capital of a country of four million impresses with its combination of the great and the tiny, as well as the seeming absence of anything in-between. Broad soviet-era boulevards designed for the parading of military hardware and mass demonstrations cut across a region of one-story structures dating from the close of the 19th century. Moldova’s soviet period differs from that of the others included in the project in that it joined the USSR only in 1944, having been governed by Romania during the inter-war period. Nearly three-quarters of city structures were lost as a result of the combination of a 1940 earthquake and the subsequent bombardment during the War. Thus, the capital of the new soviet republic rebuilt itself, configuring itself in line with its preferences in form and function. Yet its massive government structures, opera theater, modernist “Daisy” housing development, and circus invoked not merely the soviet spirit, but the syndrome of capitals of small countries which would imbue themselves with the privilege of being rightly viewed as “The Capital”.

And so it is with the new construction realized in Chisinau over the last twenty years; it strikes one as discordant with the city’s overall development. Elite-level housing projects and commercial office blocks crowd the city center, popping up in any available space among squares and historical structures – a situation which certainly recalls post-socialist Kyiv, but also the decidedly *non*-postsocialist city of London. Still, the city has a flavor all its own, something intrinsic to Chisinau of the 2010s – reflecting

the big dreams of a small country in the process of forming a historical mythology of self which revolves around an artificial construct of remnants part Romanian and part Soviet.

The battle for self-identification and the social tensions engendered by the same are reflected in a singularly pragmatic dynamism during urban protest movements here. A number of social initiatives are actively at work in the city, battling for free access to public spaces, opposing construction in parks, and the destruction of historic landmarks. Though in possession of similar agendas, a number of singular initiatives fail to marshal their efforts as they tend to attract separate social groups – Romanian-speaking or Russian-speaking – to themselves. Activists from the Romanian-speaking “My City” group do not attend protests organized by the Russian-speaking “Keep Chisinau Green” movement. Again, this is a situation not unknown in activist circles in Kyiv, where opposition to one form of exclusionary policy is often unresponsive to other forms of protest of exclusionary policy.

Momentarily leaving aside the reflections of the invited experts regarding Kyiv, let’s consider the conclusions – rather the question – with which we began this report – the relevance of the term “post-socialist” to analysis of social processes at work in the contemporary context. The control of public space, the violations of housing rights, unsystematic urban expansion, disputes around identity – is it actually possible to address these types of phenomena in a strictly post-socialist context? The answer: Yes, but only to a degree. Conditions cultivated by the prevailing, chaotic transformation of the centralized policy-making structure and the absence of professional experience in local and/or grassroots organizations bolster this view. As do similar characteristics manifested in public incidents in countries which were never part of the socialist camp “second world”: the protests in Istanbul’s Taksim Gezi Park, or the commercialization of the public space in relation to London’s 2012 Summer Olympics. Designating the region as “post-socialist” brings with it the risk of overlooking more recent hazardous tendencies, and attempting to measure the challenges of the present exclusively through the failures of the past.

KYIV IMMERSION

This joint research program was comprised of four parts: personal travel to the cities involved, encounters with civic activists and analytical studies, internal discussions, and public action. In preparing the research team for its trip to Kyiv, we attempted to arrange the program in a way that would allow each participant to develop his or her individual take of the Kyiv context. Personal experience in the short study tours of other cities left the impression of a lack of sufficient opportunity to collect one’s thoughts about the surroundings one found oneself in. The overabundance and concentration of information received frequently lent itself to hastily assembled conclusions and restricted us to visits only to designated locations. In the hopes of fashioning a more favorable environment for a personal, subjective immersion into the city, we decided to create a questionnaire which researchers could work on while simultaneously taking part in the organized, joint program.

We included several blocks of questions on the form regarding their subjective impressions of Kyiv’s public space. These collected thoughts more accurately represent random considerations drawn from one’s anthropologically oriented intuition. The effectiveness of the approach lay in the opportunity it afforded individuals to step outside the group busy with formulating its discrete, urban studies oriented conclusions of Kyiv. In the subsequent process of rebutting or clarifying these proffered free

associations which inevitably arise during a fragmentary introduction to a city, we were presented with an opportunity to regard a context with which we were already deeply familiar from a new perspective.

Kyiv Notes, May 2013

Responses drawn from researchers taking part in the Kyiv stage of the SPACES project.

Do residents of Kyiv feel that the public space of the city belongs to them? If yes, where can this be observed? Do public spaces contribute to interaction among residents, or create a sense of neighborhood or community participation? If so, how? If not, why not?

“In general, residents possess a sense of belonging in the public space. This is observable in the attitude of residents in outlying regions to the limited public spaces available there. Social interaction is more common in these small, partly secluded areas, though it is less observable in larger, designated public spaces.” Ledian Bregasi, architect, Tirana, Albania.

“The greater part of the population evidence low levels of activity in the city’s public spaces. This impression is drawn from the open event held at the space of the former Yunist plant, attended by people who were already previously familiar with one another. It seemed to lack a cross-section of social groups.” Arevik Martirosian, sociologist, Yerevan, Armenia.

“Compared to Chisinau, Kyiv has significantly more public space which fosters interaction among residents – open beaches, parks, and abandoned locations like the Fishermen’s Bridge.” Vitalie Sprinceana, anthropologist, Chisinau, Moldova

To what degree are Kyiv’s public spaces to available to various types of events and applications? What kinds of social interaction predominate, and which are lacking?

Social interactions of a recreational form dominate in public spaces. Other forms, whether educational or vocational, are rarely observed. Political, community-forming events involving residents are also lacking. There are several reasons for this: the absence of the tradition of grassroots organizations, and the unpreparedness of public space utilities to manage local political gatherings.” Levan Asabashvili, architect, Tbilisi, Georgia

“Kyiv’s public space was zoned for a narrowly-defined, single functionality. This reality is incongruent with the types of social interactions which obtain in contemporary society. Yet there are occasions here where the presence of local activists has resulted in an interesting mix of events.” Ledian Bregasi, architect, Tirana, Albania.

“Community interaction in Kyiv is oriented less on the organization and use of the public space and more on personal use and family interaction. But the space could be employed to develop culture on the horizontal plane through redesignation of spaces which currently lack any specific function. It was pleasant to see that a number of activist groups working in the public sphere are addressing the issue of the visibility of the LGBT community in public life. Homophobia is a problem among the activist community in Yerevan, a problem which conflicts with the very idea of public space, the development of which is measured by the number of social groups which feel welcome and equally entitled to engage in urban life.” Arevik Martirosian, sociologist, Yerevan, Armenia.

“The effect of Kyiv’s commercialization is evidenced in the city in which the wealthiest are afforded unlimited opportunity and experience and the economically disadvantaged are more and more excluded from public space. An example of this is the banks of the Dnieper, and the building of shopping centers on parkland. For instance, the city center – St. Andrew’s Descent – modified for commercial purposes and filled with high-priced coffee shops limits access to this area to low-income families. It’s quite noticeable that the city expends significant effort to accommodate the needs of big capital, while simultaneously practically ignoring other segments of society.” Vitalie Sprinceana, anthropologist, Chisinau, Moldova

Do Kyiv’s public spaces elicit a sense of comfort and safety?

“A feeling of comfort and safety don’t necessarily flow from a local government’s definition of “comfort” and “safety”. This is clearly evident if you compare two types of public space in Tbilisi – one which was rebuilt and put under guard, and another which has not changed since soviet times and whose security is dependent upon an informal system of social oversight. Kyiv’s public space (at least, that which I saw) doesn’t look like the type which is accustomed to professional supervision, and despite that it exudes a sense of informality, of belonging, and safety. Concerning the potential to improve safety, there are a few ways to do it: 1)by diversifying the available use of the space; 2)by directly involving local residents in the improvement of the city; 3)through good design; 4) the reduction of formal supervision of the area – CCTV or police patrols, and development of confidence in community-based oversight.” Levan Asabashvili, architect, Tbilisi, Georgia.

“The comfort level in a city can be increased through expanding the sense of citizen’s ownership of public space.” Ledian Bregasi, architect, Tirana, Albania.

“Considering Ukraine’s record of sexual assault, which is similar to Armenia’s, it’s important to expend the necessary effort to make Kyiv’s public space safer for women. The women I spoke to here in Kyiv admitted that they are not always confident to go into the city alone come nightfall. The media often takes the approach of blaming the victim, claiming she was frequenting “the wrong place” at “the wrong time”. A first step would be to be to address a woman’s right to walk alone at any time, and refocusing on the root of the problem – assault by one person of another.” Arevik Martirosian, sociologist, Yerevan, Armenia

What will you find most memorable about Kyiv’s public space? Which historical or geographical characteristics could have been employed more effectively?

“For me it was its informality of it.” Levan Asabashvili, architect, Tbilisi, Georgia

“The amount of public space and size of the city differs significantly from most European cities. Big public spaces militate against small-scale use, but on the other hand, this limitation presents an opportunity for development.” Ledian Bregasi, architect, Tirana, Albania

(photo captions)

01 – Police evict a resident from her home, which is to be razed to put in the Northern Prospect. Yerevan, 2005. A still from the film “Disappearing Memories”, Hayk Bianjyan, Director.

02 – Tbilisi, 2012

03 – Chisinau, January 2013. Photo, Ramin Mazur