

GEORGIA

Georgia is one of the oldest countries in the South Caucasus. The country has preserved its rich and age-old cultural heritage, comprising monuments dating from the pre-Christian epoch through the late Middle Ages to modern times. Due to this, heritage protection had always been a subject of special interest from the government and relevant professional bodies. Since its independence in 1991, Georgia has been deeply involved in the well-publicised and devastating warfare that affected all ex-Communist countries after the break up of the USSR. This campaign cost thousands of Georgian lives, not to mention the resulting political and economic weakness and moral and cultural damage. At present, the country remains devastated by the lasting economic crisis and a transition to the market economy, but is seeking ways for revival: cultural heritage is considered to be one of the major resources for future sustainable development. However, for a number of reasons, this process is slow. The major among these are the extremely scanty financial resources of the country, as well as a lack of necessary skills in cultural-heritage conservation planning and management. In addition, officials and the public are unaware of the acuteness of the problem, or of the potential significance of cultural heritage for the socio-economic development of the country. Consequently, and without exaggeration, it can be stated that the entire cultural heritage of Georgia is endangered at present.

In the global context, it is possible to discern several issues of special concern. The war-damaged heritage of Abkhazia represents one of our most vulnerable cultural properties. The still-unresolved political situation in this region of Georgia greatly hinders any reasonable action in response to the man-made disaster. Continually, cultural heritage in the region falls victim to the ever-present ethnic and political confrontation.

Serious problems have arisen in the field as a result of the changed relations between the State and the Church. The just and positive rehabilitation of the Church and its rights has greatly preceded the formulation of relevant legislation, resulting in inappropriate interventions on certain religious sites, which form a significant part of Georgian cultural heritage. In addition, a lack of co-ordination of the activities of State protection-bodies has fur-

ther aggravated the situation, even affecting Georgia's World Heritage sites. For example, inadequate alterations were undertaken on the structures within the territory of the 11th-century Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta; as well, an agreement was signed between the State and the Church on the reconstruction of the dome of Bagrati Cathedral (also 11th century) in Kutaisi, which is inscribed on the World Heritage List as an archaeological site.

The case studies that follow have been selected to highlight different risk categories:

- *Tbilisi Historic District* – endangered due to socio-economic changes and development pressure, directly linked with the lack of specific skills in the field.
- *Ikorta Church of the Archangel* – endangered by the 1991 earthquake.
- *Uplistsikhe rock-cut complex* – endangered due to the unsolved problems linked with financial and technological issues.

Case Study 1: Tbilisi Historic District

Tbilisi, one of the oldest Christian cities in the world, is a 'city-chronicler' as it offers a fascinating narrative of its historic life from the 5th century AD to the present. The Tbilisi Historic District is characterised by 19th-century urban fabric, with samples of monumental architecture of various styles and periods (5th–19th centuries) scattered throughout the quarter.

The city, which had always been and continues to remain a multi-national unity, has up to the present preserved its unique cultural identity. It reflects the integration of diverse cultural and spiritual traditions, revealed most prominently in its distinct architecture. The spatial organisation of the city is preconditioned by the peculiarities of its landscape. Especially valuable is the urban vernacular architecture, which is a significant feature of the historic Tbilisi urban fabric.

Due to its significant architectural and urban value, as well as



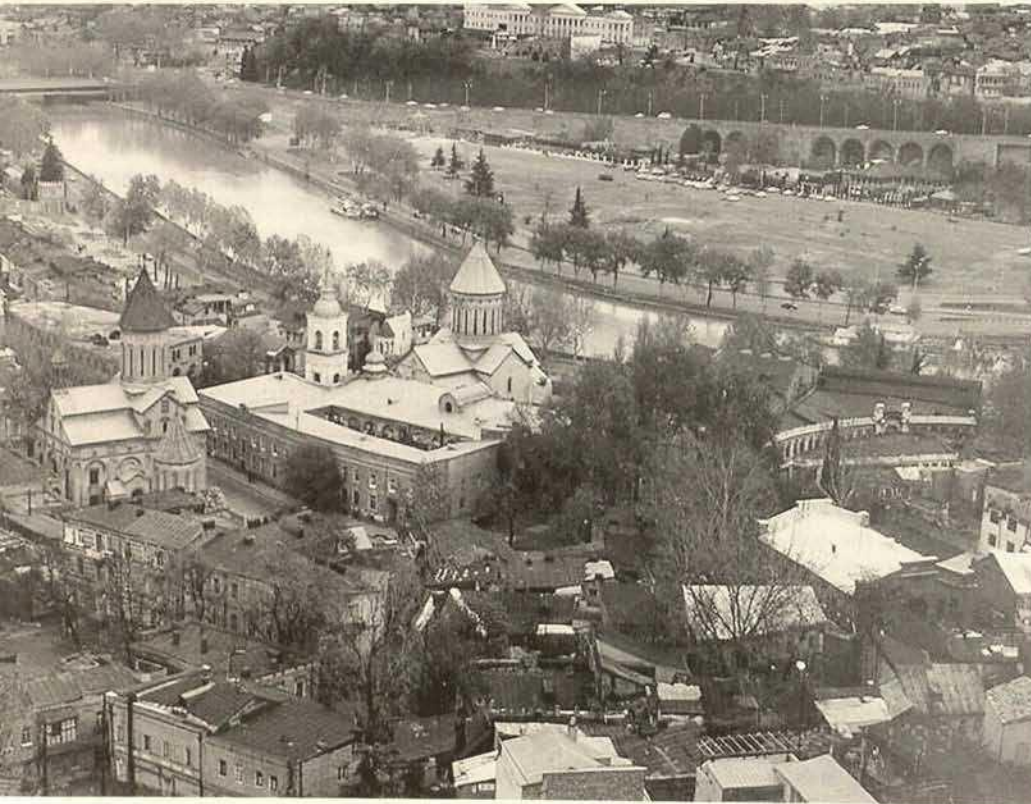
Brutal interventions in the historic urban fabric of Tbilisi

the threat to its survival, Tbilisi Historic District was added to the '100 Most Endangered Sites' list (World Monuments Fund, World Monuments Watch Programme, 1998-1999; 2000-2001, www.worldmonuments.org). Also, the nomination of the Tbilisi Historic District for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List in December 1999 testifies to the statewide recognition of its significance.

The extremely endangered and vulnerable state of the site has become a subject for acute discussions at government, professional and public levels. The urban fabric of the site is in very bad

physical condition, caused by diverse but related problems, among which the most important are: a decades-old lack of regular maintenance; malfunctioning of the water supply and sewage systems; breaches in the application of existing legislation, caused by changes in ownership, and improper interventions. Apart from the current economic crisis in the country, the causes of these problems are varied and often interrelated.

The site has inherited an earlier and questionable conservation policy and attitude towards the historic city as urban heritage. At present there is no adequate conservation strategy or policy, nor is



Tbilisi historic district



State of listed historic buildings in one part of Tbilisi historic district

there a conservation and management plan. Accordingly, the site does not meet the benchmark of an integrated conservation approach consistent with high standards of conservation. One reason is the lack of sufficient managerial, technical and multi-disciplinary planning skills. At the same time, the character of the site – with its predominance of ‘anonymous vernacular architecture’ – has led to an insufficient understanding and interpretation of the urban fabric. Yet these individual buildings, which appear to lack outstanding artistic value, are essential for creating the unique urban ensembles and environment. One result of the lack of an updated conservation master-plan is that decisions relating to individual non-listed buildings have led to their often-unjustified demolition, thereby giving a ‘green light’ to inappropriate and unsympathetic interventions. These are often justified by social and economic factors, such as a response to the demands of the local community and to free-market interests. Unfortunately, the economic and social value of urban conservation continues to be misapprehended, and the age-old debate – conservation versus development – is usually found in the foreground during discussions.

However, thanks to the efforts of local agencies, awareness of the problem is quite high at present and, in response, there is enhanced recognition of the problem at local authority and government levels. Unfortunately, this recognition is all too often no more than ‘lip service’, partially due to the inability of local institutions to find proper solutions and effective tools to implement the rehabilitation process and prevent improper interventions. On



Ikorta church of the Archangel before the earthquake

Ikorta church of the Archangel after the earthquake



Ikorta church of the Archangel during restoration



the other hand, corruption is flourishing in the country, thereby encouraging and sustaining the situation outlined above.

Case Study 2: Ikorta Church of the Archangel

Ikorta Church of the Archangel is an outstanding sample of 12th-century Georgian architecture. For ages it has been one of the significant cultural and spiritual centres of Georgia. It occupies a special place in the history of Georgian Christian architecture, being one of the earliest examples of the 12th-13th century Georgian domed churches. The building combines peculiarities of the 11th-century decoration system with artistic approaches characteristic of the new stage of development (12th-13th centuries). The artistic significance of the church is increased by the superb ornamentation of its exterior walls and the contemporary murals preserved in the interior. Due to its diversity and high artistic mastery, the Ikorta ornamental decoration is justly considered one of the great achievements of mediaeval Georgian sculpture.

The 1991 earthquake in Georgia greatly damaged the church: the walls were deformed, perforating cracks have emerged, facing masonry has fallen off and is weakened in many places; due to great deformation, fragments of the vault, pendants and supporting piers have collapsed; vaults of the southern and western cross-arms were severely damaged; the structural stability of the church interior had decreased to a great extent; a large portion of the dome (approximately one-quarter) had collapsed in its western part, damaging roofs and roofing constructions of the western and southern cross-arms. In the following years, preparatory conservation works conducted by the Main Board for the Protection and Utilisation of the Monuments of History and Culture of Georgia and supported by the local authorities were initiated on the site – metal scaffolds were arranged in the western and eastern parts of the church. The situation was aggravated by the repeated subsoil tremors, due to which another large part of the preserved dome collapsed and deep vertical cracks emerged on the extant dome. Collapsed dome fragments damaged metal scaffolds and the roofing of western and southern cross-arms; the pediment of the southern cross-arm was completely destroyed, and interior construction details and architectural fragments were damaged.

Ironically, metal scaffolds, which were to ensure the safety of the general body of the church, turned into a major risk factor in terms of further deterioration of the site. This clearly testifies to the lack of a risk-preparedness strategy and a well thought-out conservation methodology.

Since 1999 active efforts have been undertaken to protect the

site. In 1999 with financial support from the Open Society Georgia Foundation (Soros Foundation – US \$9,500 grant) protecting wooden-scaffoldings were arranged in the interior, deformed exterior metal-scaffoldings damaging the site were removed, the interior and roofs were cleaned of fallen stones, and a temporary roofing ('umbrella') was arranged in order to safeguard interior mural paintings.

In 1999 the site was listed on the '100 Most Endangered Sites' list (World Monuments Fund, 2000-2001; www.worldmonuments.org).

In 1999 with financial support from the Fund for Preservation of Cultural Heritage of Georgia – a joint programme of the World Bank and Government of Georgia (US \$9890 grant) preliminary research, recording and design of the conservation project were undertaken.

In 2000 a grant of US \$65,080 was allocated through the Emergency Rehabilitation Programme of the Fund for Protection of Cultural Heritage of Georgia for works to reinforce the main body of the church (up to the dome), based on the prepared conservation project.

In 2001 a US \$60,000 grant was allocated by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation through the World Monuments Fund for the fulfilment of the conservation works on the site. Hopefully, this last phase of conservation works will guarantee protection of the site. Ikorta Church represents a unique case in Georgia in terms of a successful response to the danger. It is also illustrative that the fund-raising was totally based on international aid.

Case Study 3: Uplistsikhe Rock-cut Complex

The Uplistsikhe rock-cut complex is located in eastern Georgia, 10 kilometres from the town of Gori, on a high rocky bank of the River Mtkvari. This is a composite archaeological-architectural site. As a rock-cut 'town' it functioned from the 5th century BC till the Late Middle Ages. This is a unique example of the rock-cut ensemble of the Antique period in the whole South Caucasus, having preserved its original identity throughout a demanding historical life. The complex is noteworthy for the co-existence of pagan and Christian cultures, as well as the combination of various styles of rock-cut architecture (Asia Minor, mainly Paphlagonia and Media-Persia).

The physical state of the site is under substantial threat: cracks resulting from intensive physical, chemical and biological deterioration have disintegrated rock massifs. Disintegration processes are of varied intensity in different areas of the site. Several parts of the most vulnerable areas were completely destroyed by an earthquake in 2000.

Because the physical stabilisation of the site is linked with complicated technical and technological problems, in 2000 the Fund for Preservation of Cultural Heritage of Georgia (a joint programme of the World Bank and Government of Georgia) financed the development of a concept plan to safeguard and consolidate the Uplistsikhe complex. Based on the geo-physical study, a pilot project was prepared, which envisages the use of a method of anchor joints and crack cementation. In order to ensure hydro-insulation of the caves, 'eco-friendly' materials were identified.

Regretfully, allocated funds will only cover works in a small part of the site. It would be helpful if professionals or agencies with experience in treating problems similar to those outlined above were to respond for collaboration on future works. Please contact the ICOMOS Georgian National Committee (icomosge@ip.osgf.ge).

Uplistsikhe rock-cut complex

