

GEORGIA

Batumi Urban Heritage at Risk

The urban development of Batumi began in the second half of the 19th century. The city on the Black Sea coast of Georgia developed fast due to the increasing economic development processes in the 1880s. “Porto Franco” operating in 1878–1885 had greatly contributed to the capital accumulation in Batumi. The most convenient way for oil transport from Baku to the rest of the world



Fig. 1: Former post office before the modernisation of 2009
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was via Batumi Port. The layout of the town was defined by the setting and topographic features of Batumi cape. The settlement, spread in the valley along the coast, was characterised by an unusual sense of place. The specificity and universal value of historic Batumi are defined by its homogeneous urban fabric, peculiar landscape and coastal town identity.

From an artistic-stylistic point of view, the architecture of Batumi features a variety and synthesis of styles – eclecticism consisting of neo-classical, baroque, Renaissance or Gothic motifs characteristic of the period. Later, these motifs were replaced by motifs inspired by Romanticism, Modernism or Constructivism.

Batumi’s urban pattern of the late 19th to the early 20th centuries consisted of a regular street network, uninterrupted blocks of buildings, cosy streets, moderate buildings on a human scale with plain, modest facades, “closed” indoor courtyards, and diverse exotic greenery, which are characteristic only of Batumi. Therefore, Batumi belongs to the list of historic towns, which are rich in cultural heritage and exceptional settings. The creation of this extremely expressive artistic-architectural image of the city is due to the harmonic conformity of these two components.

The main challenge of Historic Batumi’s preservation is how to protect its homogeneous urban fabric formed during one short historical period. The so-called rehabilitation/reconstruction activity launched in Batumi in 2009 was based on a modernisation of the cultural heritage, rather than on conservation principles for historic buildings. Many listed buildings were altered and lost their historic features. Some of them were demolished on purpose. In some places, old buildings were replaced by multistorey,



Fig. 2: Former post office after the modernisation of 2009
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large-scale buildings inappropriate for this area. The moderate and human scale of the historic town, the intimate environment of the old quarters, the urban rhythm, stylistic simplicity, traditional landscaping were sacrificed to the “renovation” of Batumi. The historic context of old Batumi – the urban fabric created from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries – which was the main attraction of the old city, and the “spirit of the place” have been greatly compromised.

The study and recognition of Batumi’s urban heritage have a long tradition. The first Protection Zone for the historic district of Batumi was designed in 1987 and expanded later. In 2007, in accordance with the Law on Cultural Heritage, the Ministry of Culture funded the elaboration of a “Historic-cultural Framework Plan for Batumi Historic District”. The plan justifies further expansion of the Protection Zone borders and defines basic principles for the conservation of the historic district. 250 heritage sites are recorded and listed in the cultural heritage list defined by law. Despite this, processes have become unmanageable in the historic centre and the urban heritage of Batumi is at risk, which has provoked protests in professional groups as well as in heritage advocacy groups and among the local community.



Fig. 3: Former bank building before and after the 2009 modernisation (© Shota Gujabidze)



Fig. 4: Former Hotel London before its demolition (© Shota Gujabidze)

Fig. 5: Former Hotel London, demolition of a listed building (© Shota Gujabidze)

One of the key problems is that values of historic Batumi are not clearly shared by all stakeholders and interested parties. This is confirmed by the inconsistent position of the local authorities and the weak political will, when it comes to the management of the historic centre and decision-making processes. An example: In October 2018 the fact was revealed that the City Hall had arbitrarily removed part of Batumi’s historic harbour area, so-called Batumi Riviera, from the Protection Zone. The construction of five skyscrapers and of an artificial channel for the yacht club are planned in this area. One of the main attributes of the authenticity of Batumi as a coastal town is Batumi’s old town harbour. The

Historic-cultural Framework Study attaches special importance to this place for the preservation of old Batumi’s setting, its spatial layout, its harmonious connection with the historic core of Batumi, and for the integrity of the historic district. The study also refers to the protection of the seaside panorama and concludes that the construction of residential blocks in this area is unacceptable. The proposed plan will eventually destroy the identity of Batumi as a historic coastal town and will block the only remaining open space, which connects Batumi’s historic core with the sea and the surrounding environment. This issue provokes justified protests permanently held by the local community.



Fig. 6: Former Hotel London, imitating the reconstruction of a historic building (© Shota Gujabidze)



Fig. 7: Batumi historic harbour area, so-called Batumi Riviera (© Shota Gujabidze)



Fig. 8: Rendering of the proposed plan for the Batumi Riviera by Silk Road Group Presentation (Courtesy: NGO "Batomi")



Fig. 9: Rendering of the proposed plan for the Batumi Riviera by Silk Road Group Presentation (Courtesy: NGO "Batomi")



Fig. 10: Rendering of the proposed plan for the Batumi Riviera by Silk Road Group Presentation, view of the coast (Courtesy: NGO "Batomi")



Fig. 11: Batumi historic district in the 1920s (Courtesy: Shota Gujbidze)

An analysis of the institutional structure showed that the management system of the urban heritage of Batumi is based only on procedural issues and it is completely deprived of any meaning. This system focuses only on issuing permits in Historic District Protection Zones, which works without professional expertise. There is no management agency for Batumi urban heritage that coordinates processes within the historic district.

The conservation experts' community and local heritage groups demand:

- Establishment of the relevant management system/plan for Batumi historic district, which will ensure the application of those important management tools that fortunately are already available;
- Establishment of a management agency for urban heritage within the Batumi urban management framework;
- Encouragement of the local population to commit themselves and considering their position in the decision-making process;
- Cancellation of the project to build skyscrapers on Batumi Riviera and to stop the demolition of Batumi historic district.

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Davit Gareji Monasteries and Hermitage

The Davit Gareji Monasteries and Hermitage are among the most important Georgian cultural, religious and natural heritage landmarks. They were founded in the 6th century and are located 25 km from Tbilisi, on the Iori Plateau in Eastern Georgia. The site occupies a 100 km² semi-desert area and consists of 22 independent rock-hewn monasteries and more than 5000 sanctuaries

be emphasised: along with single-nave chapels, there are cases of imitated dome churches, such as cross-domes, drum-less, etc. The complex also includes several built churches like “Lavra” and “Udabno”. Many of the Gareji Monasteries are characterised by a significant number of preserved mural paintings ranging from the 8th to the 18th centuries. The site is also notable for its natural environment. Situated in the only semi-desert area of Georgia, it is distinguished by its biodiversity, eco-system and landscapes, which makes the site also a significant natural landmark. The



Fig. 1: Lavra, 6th century, general view (© Marita Sakhltkhtsishvili)

and caves/cells, some of which extend to the present territory of Azerbaijan. The combination of historic rock architecture, medieval murals, prehistoric archaeology, rich paleontological fields and bio-geographical features makes the site a masterpiece of Georgian culture and an important part of Eastern Christian heritage. The monastery complex is registered as a Monument of National Importance of Georgia and is included in UNESCO's World Heritage Tentative List. In 2018, it was listed among the “7 Most Endangered” heritage sites of Europe within the programme run by Europa Nostra in cooperation with the European Investment Bank Institute as founding partner.

Each of the Davit Gareji monastic complexes consists of main churches, sanctuaries, cells and refectories hewn into the rock on several levels. There is a variation of rock church architecture to

Gareji Monasteries were an important cultural centre for centuries. The earlier mural paintings testify that the development of monastic painting in the 9th and 10th centuries was linked with the emergence of a distinct school of painting in Gareji, which founded one of the largest and most significant schools of medieval Georgia. Its best examples are represented at “Bertubani”, “Udabno”, “Didi Qvabebi”, “Dodos Rqa”, and others, depicting the medieval iconographic schemes as well as the royal portraits of King Tamar and Lasha Giorgi. Gareji is also interesting from the archaeological point of view. Discovered stone and bone tools and remains of early Bronze-Age settlements reveal additional data regarding the development and geography of inhabited areas in this territory. Therefore, the site has a great academic value for researchers working in the fields of cultural studies, archaeology,

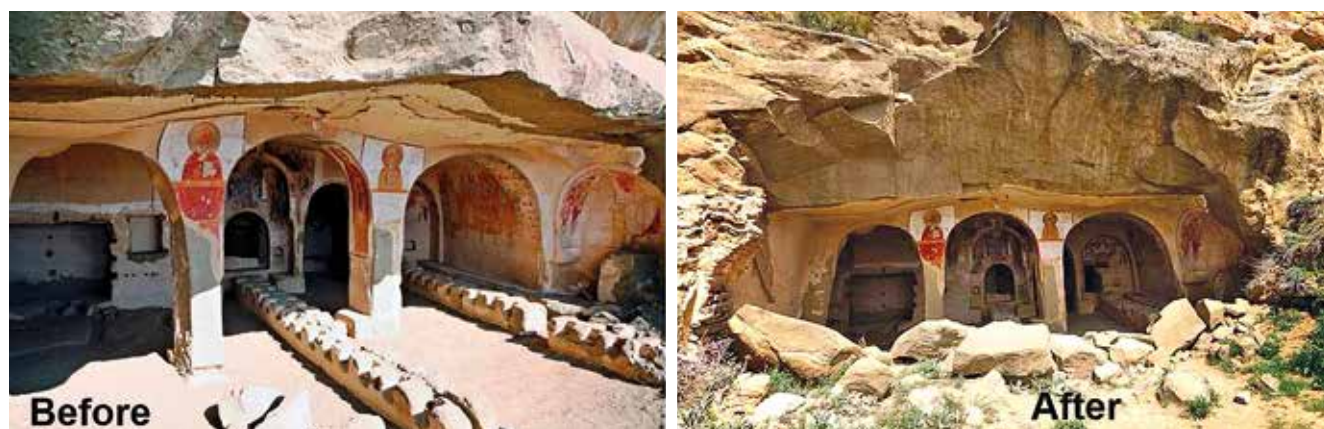


Fig. 2: Uدابno Monastery, recent collapse along the cliff (© Mikheil Elashvili)



Fig. 3: Sabeerebi Monastery, slope façade with recent pillar collapse, situation in July 2019 (© Mikheil Elashvili)

anthropology, art and religious history, biodiversity, ecology, sociology, etc. However, more in-depth studies and investigations need to be conducted.

The main problem the Davit Gareji Monasteries are currently facing is the instability of the physical condition due to the disintegration of the rocks, which causes irreversible deterioration. The intense erosion badly affects the rock-hewn churches, with some structures partially collapsed, which aggravates the process.

During the second half of 2018, two separate field surveys were carried out in the Davit Gareji monastic complex area. The monasteries Dodo, Lavra, Natlismcemeli and Sabereebi were jointly investigated by an Italian-Georgian team: the UNESCO Chair at Florence University (Italy), the Italian National Institute for Environmental Protection and Research (Italy), and the Prevention and Sustainable Management of Geo-hydrological Hazards and Cultural Heritage and Environmental Studies Centre of Ilia State University (Georgia).

For each, the following has been carried out: laser-scanning topographic survey and drone-based digital photogrammetry



Fig. 4: Mravaltskaro Monastery, rock collapse (© Mikheil Elashvili)



Fig. 5: Sabereebi Monastery, general view (© Marita Sakhltkutsishvili)



Fig. 6: Sabereebi Monastery, 6th church, 9th century (© Marita Sakhltkutsishvili)



Fig. 7: Dodorka Monastery, 13th century (© Marita Sakhltkhusishvili)



Fig. 8: Dodorka Monastery, upper level of the church, 7th to 9th centuries (© Marita Sakhltkhusishvili)

with UAV (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle); structural and geo-mechanical surveys; infrared thermographic surveys and global kinematic analysis; samplings for laboratory tests. The distribution, typology and frequency of the potential instabilities have been identified, and possible triggering and/or predisposing factors have also been highlighted, both endogenous (e. g. lithology, structural setting) and exogenous (e. g. water infiltration, thermoclastism, weathering), as well as the triggering factors (e. g. heavy rainfall).

During the missions, different monasteries were surveyed in order to collect additional parameters, verify and calibrate preliminary stability models, define preliminary mitigation measures and implement the monitoring system. IRT and global kinematics surveys were carried out in all of the selected sites in order to define landslide processes affecting the sites and potential factors of damage (e. g. ledges-niches system, moisture sectors, erosional patterns). As preliminary conclusion the following main predisposing factors were recognised:

- The Davit Gareji monastery complex area consists mainly of soft sedimentary rock promoting instability processes and weathering, especially under climate change conditions;
- Geo-structural setting, joint and stress release promote rock instability processes in all the investigated monastery complexes;
- Rock sample collection and laboratory tests are underway; they will define the main strength and deformation parameters useful for future stability models;
- Geological and geomechanical models are useful tools to define landslide mechanisms and activities as well as the priority of mitigation measures;
- A monitoring system is one of the main non-structural, sustainable and low-impact mitigation measures for the management of the tourist use of the sites.¹

The collapse of the rocky structure also results in the deterioration of the wall paintings, which are losing their foundation and thus collapse: “In all the monasteries the mural paintings are in

a state of advanced deterioration. In general, the main problems encountered affecting the mural paintings are:

- the collapse of some plasters that leaves visible the rock support in areas that in some cases are wide (on the left Natlismsemeli and on the right Bertubani);
 - the detachment of wide surfaces of the plasters from the rock support with risk of collapse;
 - the cancellation of the faces of the saints and the presence of graffiti that in some cases, as in Bertubani and Sabereebi, cover all the paintings without any respect for their artistic and cultural values;
 - the fading of the paints that in many cases are not easily readable anymore as in Udabno;
 - the deteriorations of the colour of the pigments that in some cases appear very different from how they were originally (sadly some of these processes are not reversible);
 - the presence of superficial deposits such as dirt, black smoke, powders, salt concretions, etc.
- In some cases, the eventual intervention is complicated by the presence of two different layers of painting from two different epochs that cannot be separated.
- the presence of cracks and the percolation of a solution of water and mud. The main causes of deterioration for the mural paintings are strictly related to the context in which they are inserted: the instability of the rocks, during time, leads to cracks, collapses and water penetration and to the opening of some spaces that used to be closed, thus exposing the paintings to the sunlight and, in some cases, also to meteoric precipitations.”²

Another important problem of the site is man-made destruction. Since the Middle Ages the site was invaded numerous times and ravaged by the invaders. However, the most recent substantial damages were caused in the 1980s by the artillery range of the Soviet Army, which contributed to the demolition of the rock, thus speeding up the processes of destruction.

Another human impact is non-regulated tourism. Presently, with no tourist trails, signage, guidance or monitoring the site is completely open to tourists who access the site independently and create the high risk of inappropriate handling. It is obvious that the monastery complex needs significant improvements to meet the requirements of its tourist use.

And finally, the site is affected by a territorial problem: as part of the Davit Gareji complex is situated on the territory of Azerbaijan, that part is less accessible for the Georgian researchers. The complex measures for the safeguarding of the site will be subject to inter-state negotiations.

Taking into account the scale, number of objects and existing threats of Davit Gareji Monasteries and Hermitage, the full conservation and rehabilitation of the site is a long-term process, which apart from studies and rehabilitation works includes continuous maintenance every day. The measures to be taken include providing a full inventory and a multidisciplinary study of the complex for clarifying the existing situation and outlining the priorities. The next step should be the elaboration of conservation and master plans of the site. Considering the significance and potential of the site, it should be included in different regional and national documents such as the regional development plans of the Sagarejo, Signaghi and Gardabani municipalities, in strategy documents of the Ministries of Education, Science, Culture and Sports; Regional Development and Infrastructure; as well as in those of the National Agencies of Tourism and Recreation, and of Protected Areas. The fundraising for the implementation of emergency works and of the mentioned steps for the safeguarding of the site has been started.

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Khada Cultural Landscape at Risk

The Government of Georgia has initiated a Regional Development Program (2018–2021) aiming to improve the country's major roads, including the modernisation of the Zhinvali-Larsi road that crosses the Caucasus Mountains. It is to support transport and transit of goods between Georgia and its neighbouring countries and Russia.

The Zhinvali-Larsi road plan, developed by the Roads Department of Georgia, consists of three stages. The first "Kvesheti-Kobi Section" is the most difficult one and the implementation of its major part is planned in the in many ways exceptional Khada Valley. Thus, it is essential to study the impact of the road plan on the cultural heritage in the area.

In July 2018, in response to a letter (No. 6049/01; 13.07.2018) from Ms. Nino Tandilashvili, Deputy Minister of Environment and Agriculture of Georgia, the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia (No. 10/3026; 03.08.2018) underlined that the Khada Valley is characterised by an abundance of important cultural heritage sites. At this stage, these sites had not been completely identified and studied. The letter also stated that an environmental impact assessment had not been carried out and the documentation on the archaeological assessment of the territory, required by the Georgian Law on Cultural

Heritage (Article 14, paragraphs 3 and 4), had not been presented to the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia.

In the framework of the project, a thorough assessment of the impact on the cultural heritage in the Khada Valley – unique from various perspectives – has not been undertaken to date. It should be emphasised that the Khada Valley (Dusheti region) with its early medieval defensive and ecclesiastical sites, and its high concentration of epigraphic monuments plays a special role in North Georgia's cultural heritage. That clearly demonstrates the actual importance of the Valley for the country's past political life. Furthermore, its largely untouched natural environment and setting are of exceptional beauty.

Located near Tbilisi, the nine-kilometre-long Khada Valley has a diversity of landscapes with scattered small villages and remains with traditional housing patterns, as well as magnificent architectural monuments, such as Korogo Church (10th c.), Tsetskhlisjvari Castle (9th–10th c.), Iukho Tower (9th–10th c.), and more.

An outstanding example of the quality of the monuments in the Khada Valley is the Korogo architectural complex, listed as monument of national importance, which has a completely different spatial arrangement of the interior. The interior and its relief on the west façade's cornice reflecting the construction process indicate that Korogo occupies an important place in the Georgian architectural heritage and has no analogy.

Furthermore, archaeological remains accidentally found in the Valley confirm the continuous life of man here from the Eneolithic period. An abundance of rock castles and castles with embattlements, scattered single towers, churches, memorial sites (Kaishauri Valley, old cemeteries), inscribed stones and high crosses create the harmonious unity in this magical, pristine natural environment, while its cultural and historical value has not yet been studied and evaluated.

It should also be noted that the architectural heritage sites – churches, five-to-seven-metre-high towers, stone walls and other structures (9th–10th, 18th and 19th centuries) – are in very poor physical condition and require serious maintenance due to their age and the dry construction of slate slab masonry. According to the proposed project, one group of historic buildings is only 50 metres away from the planned construction zone, which will cause significant losses.

This issue is briefly pointed out in the stakeholder engagement plan submitted by the Georgian Roads Department to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) in March 2019. It states that most of the material and cultural resources are more than 100 metres from the proposed road. However, "Along the project corridor there are cemeteries, churches, towers, war monuments, religious crosses that are 50 meters away and construction work may have some impact on them."

According to the project, four tunnels (one of them on Kaishauri plateau; nine-kilometre main tunnel beneath the mountain in Tskere), six bridges, and in addition to the highway three secondary roads are to be constructed. Technical facility buildings will be located at the south entrance of the tunnel (within Khada territory), which will include storage facilities, a pumping station and a ventilation room. Appropriate landfills will be arranged for materials collected as a result of the tunnel and earthworks.

The risk is very high for the small valley and its unique cultural heritage sites situated along the project corridor within 50 metres of the roads, as there is no special inventory and no recording and study of the sites. This raises serious suspicion towards the project.



Fig. 1: Korogo complex, 10th century (© Natalia Chitishvili)



Fig. 2: Khada Valley, general view (© Natalia Chitishvili)



Fig. 3: Midelauri Castle and remains of the village (© Natalia Chitishvili)



Fig. 4: Holy Virgin Church of Korogo, apse conch (©: Natalia Chitishvili)



Fig. 5: Khada Valley, general view (© The National Trust of Georgia)



Fig. 6: Road plan: screenshot from the Road Department's own video of the proposed new road (© The National Trust of Georgia)

From the recent practice of implementing large-scale projects in Georgia, the case of the construction of the BP (British Petroleum) pipeline in accordance with the Georgian Law on Cultural Heritage (Article 14, paragraphs 3 and 4) should be mentioned. Two years (2003–2004) before the construction of the BP pipeline and later throughout the whole construction period, monuments above and below ground were studied and monitored along the pipeline in a two-kilometre-wide corridor. This happened in less sensitive areas than the Khada Valley.

Considering the above-mentioned, without any special studies it is clear that the road project Kvasheti-Kobi Section will create an alarming situation for the Khada Historic Valley characterized by the abundance and integrity of undoubtedly remarkable monuments of archaeology, nature, history and architecture. On this territory with its high cultural and tourist potential, the implementation of the road project will seriously damage the natural environment, cultural heritage, and local communities, and in the future will lead to an irreversible misuse of the resources

necessary for a sustainable economic development of the Valley.

The proposed plan provoked a number of protests from different professional organisations and advocacy groups concerned with issues regarding Khada Valley: Society for Nature Conservation (SABUKO), Green Alternative, Public Art Platform, Georgian Incoming Tour Operators Association, Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), Georgian National Committee of the Blue Shield, George Chubinashvili National Research Centre for Georgian Art History and Heritage Preservation, ICOMOS Georgia, and the National Trust of Georgia. These organisations are considering possible alternatives to the present road construction project. For example, the National Trust of Georgia has reviewed the plan and presented two alternative route options for the transportation road. Detailed information is accessible at the following link: <http://www.nationaltrustofgeorgia.org.ge/landscape/>. The severity of the issue imposes a responsibility on all of us to protect and save



Fig. 7: Kalaketi Tower (© Natalia Chitishvili)



Fig. 8: Tsetskhlijsvari Castle, 9th–10th centuries (© Shalva Lezhava)



Fig. 9: Villages in Khada Valley: Korogo and Tskere (© Shalva Lezhava)

the Khada Valley and makes it urgent to find an alternative decision to the “Kvesheti-Kobi section of Zhinvali-Larsi Road “, which is putting the exceptional Khada Valley and its priceless landscapes and cultural heritage at risk.

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Footnotes

¹ C. Margottini, D. Spizzichino, G. Gigli, W. Frodella, M. Elashvili, S. Alberti, A. Valagussa, G. Crosta, Instability processes affecting the rupestrian monastery complex area of Davit Gareji (Georgia), Paper at the International Conference “Davit Gareji – Multidisciplinary Study and Development Strategy”, April 18–20, 2019, Tbilisi, Georgia.

² Technical report on the rehabilitation of the Davit Gareji Monasteries and Hermitage in Georgia, published by Europa Nostra, 2019, pp. 39–42; link: <https://www.europanostra.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/7ME-2019-Georgia-DavitGareji-Monasteries-Report.pdf>.



Fig. 10: Tskere complex (© Shalva Lezhava)