

# The Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club: an Example of Preserving Late Soviet Modernist Architecture

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This contribution is something like a project report, detailing the intentions and goals of the project and the specific outcomes it has achieved. The project “Conservation of Modernist Architecture and Its Sustainable Use in Georgia” was funded by the Getty Foundation *Keeping it Modern* initiative and was implemented by the Georgian National Committee of the Blue Shield.<sup>1</sup> The article shares the project team’s experience gained while implementing the project and hopes to encourage further initiatives to protect modernist architecture. It presents an example of a specific site, namely the Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club (Figs. 1 and 2), and describes the actions taken to preserve and promote its values.

## Background

Before detailing the goals and activities of the project, the following is a brief overview of the various previous attempts to protect the building and their tangible results. Nini Palavandishvili, researcher and curator, started to research the building back in 2015; soon after, this was followed by the visit of three international artists as part of the GeoAir art residency and the joint creation of sculptural artworks on the theme of Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club.<sup>2</sup> Nini Palavandishvili’s research was presented in 2017 at an exhibition in Berlin<sup>3</sup> and was also reflected in two different European articles and in the book named “The War of Perception” that was published in a single printed edition as an art book.<sup>4</sup>

## Challenges

The challenges that the team has envisaged to overcome through this project were largely connected to the conservation of the Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club, but at the same time they concerned the general problem of inadequate respect towards the architectural buildings of that particular era. Despite the fact, that the building has preserved its initial functions and is fully utilised, the building has experienced several interventions and losses. All of these are reflected in the degree of its authenticity and integrity. There have been several threats of expropriation throughout the history of the building. And in recent years, there have been several unsuccessful attempts to grant the building the status of cultural heritage monument. These problems have become even more acute in relation to the general context and the current situation in the city. There are cases of listed buildings being demolished, severely altered in the name of adaptation, or



Fig. 1 The Main Hall of the Chess Palace and Alpine Club

expropriated without any obligation to maintain the values of the building, and so on. Thus, this is the context in which the project idea and its detailed implementation plan were elaborated.

## The project *Conservation of Modernist Architecture and Its Sustainable Use in Georgia*

The project proposal for the Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club building, to be submitted to the grant competition announced as part of the Getty Foundation’s “Keeping It Modern” initiative, was prepared in early 2018. The aim of the authors was to identify a building that had universal artistic and historical value, held an important role in public life and at the same time required a conservation management plan. As a result of the research, a late soviet modernism building dating back to the 1970s, the Tbilisi Chess Palace and the Alpine Club, was selected. Designed by architects Lado Alexi-Meskhishvili and Germane Ghudushauri and built for two sports, the building played an important role in the development of both sports and public life over the years.

The existing research of the building was a solid foundation for creating the proposal, followed by the study of its current condition and an action plan for its conservation and promotion. During the preparation of the grant proposal the team met with representatives of the owner of the building – all the relevant department heads of the Tbilisi City Hall – and representatives of usufructuary organisations, the users of the building, in order to inform them about the proposal and to explore their positions.



*Fig. 2 Chess Palace and Alpine Club, exterior*

The main goals of the project were identified as follows:

- To develop a first-ever conservation plan for a Late Soviet Modernism building in Tbilisi which will serve as a prototype for other similar period buildings,
- To facilitate future proper restoration, conservation and continued maintenance of a Late Soviet Modernism style building;
- To increase the awareness of the values of Late Soviet Modernism architecture among city authorities and the wider Georgian public through listing of the site and carrying out public awareness activities with the help of international experts and the use of various types of media.
- To train young architects and heritage professionals in documentation, conservation planning processes etc. of buildings of the same period.

In May 2018, the project proposal *Conservation of Modernist Architecture and its Sustainable Use in Georgia* was announced as one of the winners of the grant competition. Since the start of the project, multidisciplinary research for the study of the state of conservation of the building, archival and art historical studies, measured architectural surveys, and regular meetings with the building users and the owner were carried out simultaneously.

## Conservation plan

### *The process*

The conservation plan is the result of numerous studies, such as: archival research, an art historical study, documentation and study of the building's current physical state, study of the building materials, engineering study, studies of the communication systems (including: water supply and wastewater disposal system, electric network, heating and ventilation), study of the stakeholders, sociological research, and initial study of the economic potential of the building.

As part of the art historical study, a video interview was recorded with Germane Ghudushauri, one of the architects of the building. Also, Alexander Slovinski (Fig. 3), one of the members of the interior designer's creative group "Sameuli", was recorded. The videos were integrated into the video story of the project that is accessible on the project website: [https://chesspalaceandalpineclub.ge/https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JD6OeVjdvv88htkpU5oAiMX4qz\\_BD-JmU/view?usp=share\\_link](https://chesspalaceandalpineclub.ge/https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JD6OeVjdvv88htkpU5oAiMX4qz_BD-JmU/view?usp=share_link).

During the process of analysis and decision-making, the project team arranged several meetings with the stakeholders. The team presented the proposal and facilitated the discussion. The key principles of the Conservation Management Plan (CMP) were discussed and agreed with the owner of the building – Tbilisi City Hall – and with two main users of the building: the Chess Federation and the Alpine Club.

A significant part of the CMP is dedicated to the investigation and description of the current structural condition of the building, which served as a basis for providing separate conservation recommendations for each space. For certain parts of the building a specific concept for its adaptive reuse was proposed, which is also justified with research results. A one-year maintenance plan for the building was prepared, which also includes the recommendations for the building users. The Conservation Management Plan is the only document of its kind designed for the modernist architectural monument of Georgia. The CMP document of the Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club can be accessed on the website, both in English and Georgian: [www.chesspalaceandalpine-club.ge](http://www.chesspalaceandalpine-club.ge). An English version of the document can also be accessed on the Getty Foundation website under the *Keeping It Modern* initiative's report library: [https://www.getty.edu/foundation/initiatives/current/keeping\\_it\\_modern/report\\_library/index.html](https://www.getty.edu/foundation/initiatives/current/keeping_it_modern/report_library/index.html). In addition to developing a CMP, the project team worked in two main areas: raising public awareness and capacity building of field specialists, young professionals in preservation of the modernist heritage.

### Raising awareness of the architectural values of late Soviet modernism

The goal of raising public awareness regarding late Soviet modernist architecture was fulfilled in two different directions. The immediate target audience of the first direction was architecture and restoration professionals and students. Another target audience was the general public. Therefore, those activities can be divided into two directions: capacity building and public campaign.

#### 1. Capacity Building

Below is the list of activities targeting different audiences:

##### A. Heritage documentation winter school<sup>5</sup>

The four-day workshop in Tbilisi united 15 Georgian participants, students from three different universities in Tbilisi and young specialists working in the preservation of architectural heritage. The workshops were led by four international experts as well as representatives of Blue Shield Georgia. During the workshop the participants covered three relevant topics for heritage documentation:

- photography;
- photogrammetry; and
- laser scanning.

##### B. Adaptive reuse workshop – finding compatible uses for modern icons

The workshop was held in the Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club and aimed to reconsider the spaces of the building, including the Main Hall (Fig. 4). The workshop was led by the international expert Rand Eppich. Among the participants were young architects and restorers as well as graduates of economics faculties. Their mission was to propose ideas for the adaptive reuse of parts of the structure that



Fig. 3 Video interview with Alexander Slovinski, November 2018

would be in line with the financial needs of the Chess Federation and the Alpine Club and, most importantly, would help preserve the values of the building.

Over the course of five days, the participants explored concepts of adaptive reuse and documentation of the current functions of the building, anticipating the future needs of the building's users and making an innovative and financially sustainable decision. The project team provided the workshop participants with the necessary information regarding the building; they explored its values and mapped out the current uses of the building. During the second stage of the workshop, participants held interviews with the current owner and the stakeholders to discuss future plans for the use of the building. Participants also analysed the key financial issues of the building in mixed groups, such as the future financial prospects for maintenance and the financial stability of the building and its users. As a result, the groups came up with plans for potential alternative projects of adaptive reuse of the building that were based on financial analysis and consistent with its values.

##### C. Seminar on preserving modernist architectural heritage and importance of its adaptation

The seminar was led by Riin Alatalu, an Estonian cultural heritage preservation expert, who presented the experience and best practices of conserving modernist architectural heritage and its adaptation (Fig. 5). The participants were familiarised with the technical characteristics of Soviet modernist architectural heritage, its importance and the means of its safeguarding, as well as with some of the endangered buildings and successful examples of their preservation in Esto-



Fig. 4 “Adaptive Reuse Workshop – Finding Compatible Uses for Modern Icons”, June 3–7, 2019

nia and other countries. The invited expert also spoke about sustainable use and adaptation of this type of architecture.

The aim of the seminar was to raise awareness for the safeguarding of the architectural heritage of modernism. Among the participants were public officials from the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia, Tbilisi City Hall and specialists from the Georgian Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport.

D. Workshop: creation of the concept of an interpretation centre for Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club

This workshop aimed to improve the skills of graduates from the faculties of design, digital communication or museum studies and to create a concept for an interpretation centre for the Chess Palace and Alpine Club. During a one-day workshop, students analysed various historical aspects of the building and its current challenges. In a special lecture, they learned about interpretation centres and in the following days worked in groups to create a concept for a museum interpretation centre for this building. Some of the selected works were displayed at the exhibition as part of the European Museum Night initiative (Fig. 6).

## 2. Public Campaign

A. Listing as a cultural heritage monument

The proposal for the nomination of listing the Chess Palace and Alpine Club as an immovable cultural heritage was prepared and submitted to the National Agency for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage of Georgia. As the building is situated in the Vera Park, which is listed as cultural heritage, the National Agency was hesitant to grant a separate status to the building. The official nomination submitted by Blue Shield went through all the instances required

by the law, and after a few months, by decree of the Georgian Government, the Chess Palace and Alpine Club was granted the status of an immovable cultural heritage site.

B. Media campaign

Considering that nowadays it is a challenge to attract media attention to cultural topics, the project team carried out an excellent media campaign for the monument and to draw the attention of the general public to the architecture of this period in general. As a result, more than ten media features have been produced, including: video blogs and appearances in digital publications, interviews and visits to TV shows.

C. Website

In order to give the general public, individuals or groups an opportunity to become familiar with the results of the project, even after its completion, a special website was created (<https://chesspalaceandalpineclub.ge>). It combines all the materials created during the project and also the archival materials regarding the Chess Palace and Alpine Club.

D. Videos

For the purpose of attracting the interest of a local as well as international audience in the Chess Palace and Alpine Club building, two separate videos were produced. The videos are in Georgian with English subtitles. The first video is of an introductory character and informs about the history and values of the building. The second video was produced towards the end of the project and is more comprehensive, reflecting the results of the entire project.

E. Manual<sup>6</sup>

A manual entitled *How and Why Should We Conserve Late Modernist Architecture* was created. One of the goals of the

manual is to raise public awareness, but at the same time it serves as an educational resource. It communicates the project implementation experience and compiles valuable recommendations for potential initiative groups that might decide to be involved in similar activities in future. It is hoped that it will be useful to the Tbilisi City Hall, students and young professionals in the field of cultural heritage conservation and management, and that it will help to raise public awareness of the late Soviet architectural heritage and change societal attitudes towards the architecture of this period, at least a little.

F. Public lecture on importance of safeguarding late Soviet modernist architecture

A public lecture dedicated to the importance of preserving the late Soviet modernist architectural heritage was held in the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia. Riin Alatalu, cultural heritage preservation expert from Estonia, spoke about the importance of preserving Soviet modernist heritage and common challenges faced by former Soviet countries in conserving and adapting architectural masterpieces of the Soviet era. During the lecture she presented best practices of conservation in Estonia, Finland and Russia. Up to 50 visitors attended the lecture and all of them were actively involved in the discussions.

G. Round-table meeting with stakeholders

Several round-table meetings with stakeholders were held throughout the project. Most important was the one during which all parties were present, discussed, and agreed on the final version of the conservation management plan. The main users and the owner of the building expressed their positions and eventually agreed upon the concepts and proposals offered by the project team in the draft conservation management plan.

H. Exhibition

The Chess Palace and Alpine Club hosted a photo exhibition organised by the project team in the framework of the museums' week celebrating the International Day of Museums. The exhibition displayed digital photos and videos of late Soviet modernist architecture in Georgia. Visitors had a chance to take a tour in the main hall of the building which is currently unused and not accessible for the public. The audience also had an opportunity to visit the Museum of Alpinism, which is not open regularly, either. On this day the venue also hosted an exhibition of interpretation centre concepts created by students. Furthermore, several thematic posters and stickers were printed and distributed.

The exhibition and the building itself attracted several visitors on that day, which confirms that there is an interest in this monument and in Soviet modernist architecture (Figs. 7 and 8).

I. Thematic cards – late modernist architecture in Tbilisi

In an effort to promote late modernist architectural heritage in Tbilisi, special thematic cards were created. Each of the 45 cards shows a unique architectural monument created between 1960 and 1989. The graphic illustration of the archi-



Fig. 5 Seminar “Preserving Modernist Architectural Heritage and the Importance of its Adaptation – Examples of Best Practice”. September 24, 2019

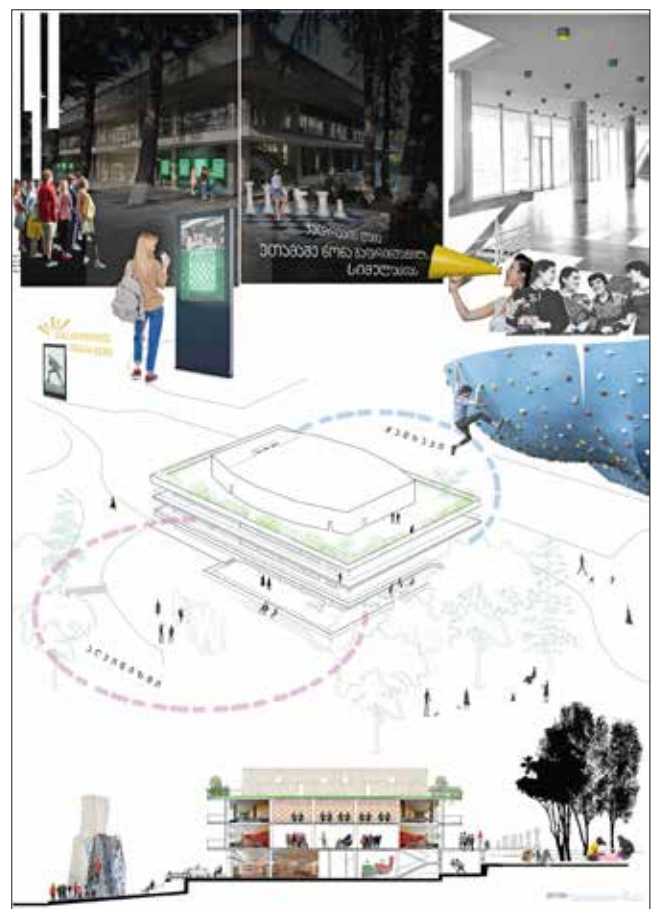
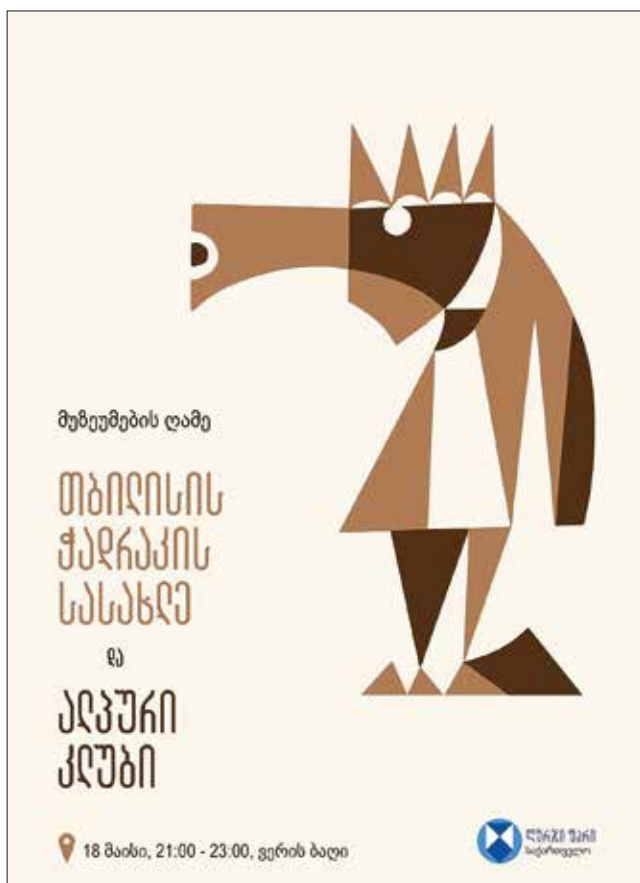


Fig. 6 One of the concepts created by participants of the workshop “Creation of a Concept for an Interpretation Centre for Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club”



Fig. 7 Exhibition of digital photos and videos about Soviet modernism, European Museum Night initiative, May 18, 2019



tectural heritage is followed by the year of its creation and the name of the architect. On the other side of the card is a QR code that leads to an online map with exact location of the site. These cards were distributed at the Architecture Biennale in Tbilisi, and in architecture schools, their libraries and thematic exhibitions and galleries.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, all objectives envisaged by the project were achieved. In addition to the planned activities, several additional events were implemented by the project team. Later on, a number of indirect results became visible, such as helping groups to plan campaigns for heritage listing of monuments of the same period. All the initiatives carried out with the aim of raising public awareness and the tangible resources created, which remain accessible online, will continue to support and facilitate the preservation of modernist architecture.

Moreover, the project further revealed society's inadequate attitude towards Soviet architecture. The authors are confident that the project succeeded in demonstrating the real potential of Soviet architecture to relevant stakeholders, including representatives of the municipality.

Apart from the mission of raising public awareness, which was successfully accomplished, the authors expect that the CMP will help the owner and the users of the Chess Palace and Alpine Club to conserve the building and present its values accordingly.

## Credits

Figs. 1, 2: photo Davit Gurgendidze

Figs. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8: © Blue Shield Georgia

Fig. 8 Poster created for the exhibition of digital photos and video about Soviet modernism, May 18, 2019

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.blueshield.ge>

<sup>2</sup> More information about their works can be found on the GeoAir website: <http://geoair.ge/project/iza-tarase-wicz> <http://geoair.ge/project/david-berg%C3%A9> <http://geoair.ge/project/yip-kai-chun>

<sup>3</sup> <http://geoair.ge/project/pop-chess-palace>; [https://www.baunetz.de/meldungen/Meldungen-Ausstellung\\_uber\\_Architektur\\_und\\_Ideologie\\_5076403.html](https://www.baunetz.de/meldungen/Meldungen-Ausstellung_uber_Architektur_und_Ideologie_5076403.html)

<sup>4</sup> Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club, in: Adolph STILLER (ed.), *Between Caucasus and the Black Sea. Architecture in Georgia*, Vienna 2018 and *Long Live the Queen*, in: N. PALAVANDISHVILI, D. CHIGHOLASHVILI, M. SPLINT (eds.), *Tbilisi – It's Complicated*, Eindhoven 2019.

<sup>5</sup> <https://chesspalaceandalpineclub.ge/2020/01/21/winter-school/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://chesspalaceandalpineclub.ge/manual/>