



Truso valley. Photo by Lali Partenava

HERITAGE PLATFORM

Newsletter, November 2023



ევროკავშირი
საქართველოსთვის

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About the platform

The Heritage Platform was created as a space for informing on, sharing and suggesting solutions to, heritage-related challenges in Georgia. It brings together civil society organizations (CSOs) working in cultural heritage and environmental protection fields – for the promotion and protection of the nation's tangible and intangible heritage.

Created in February 2023 with the support of the EU, the Platform has been actively involved in the above advocacy processes in Tbilisi and across Georgia.

The Platform consists of 13 Georgian organisations.

- ICOMOS Georgia
- The National Trust of Georgia
- Blue Shield Georgia
- Georgian Craft Association
- Community Development Centre
- ICOM Georgia
- I Am the City
- Society Batomi
- Green Alternative
- Georgian House
- Sustainable Caucasus
- Solidarity Museum
- Lomeki

The platform also welcomes new members, especially CSOs or initiative groups whose voices need to be heard in their support of heritage.

Main Issues of Concern

- Tbilisi's threatened historical district
- Renovation and replacement laws concerning historical buildings in Tbilisi's Metekhi area.
- The legal assessment of the new Alaverdi Monastery hotel
- Consultations on measures to preserve the Truso Valley
- Zinobiani

Activities

During 2023, the Heritage Platform have discussed in depth;

- Street Okromchedlebis Mrudi (The Goldsmiths' Curve) presented by Maya Mania;
- New replacement/rehabilitation programs by Nano Zazanashvili;
- Okros Cahrdakhi by Sofo Zviadadze;
- Khada Valley by Mariam Devidze;
- Truso Valley by organization Lomeki;
- Dusheti rehabilitation process and local ethnographic museum by Lia Roinishvili;
- Presentation of the study "Metekhi Commune", by Nano Zazanashvili and Tinatin Khomeriki
- Rehabilitation of the Tsiskarauli Tower by Marine Misandari;
- Botanical Garden Muslim Cemetery,
- Art Museum Building by Tsira Elisashvili
- Batumi construction-rehabilitation project by Union Batomi.



Oqromchedlis St. sketch by
Beka Buchashvili 2023



Oqromchedlis St. Tbilisi 2023
Photo by Lali Partenava

Tbilisi's historical zone under threat

Tbilisi's historical district was once suggested for inclusion in the UNESCO's World Heritage sites list. In 2001 a UNESCO Committee recognised the area's "outstanding universal value," but asked that the Georgian government create an appropriate legislative environment and management structure to protect it. This included proper and enforced guidelines for restoration and sensitive regeneration.

This was never done, in spite of the many professional and local body advocacies. As a result the city's unique heritage has been substantially damaged, and continues to be so. Old Tbilisi's views, planning structures, urban guidelines, and natural environment have been repeatedly disregarded. Protected lands designated for communal use have been sold off, and listed buildings delisted for the benefit of private owners, rather than the public good. Acts that most other European capital cities wouldn't allow. To name a few examples;

- Rikhe Music Centre.
- The Justice House.
- The Sakanela and Mirzashafi streets developments.
- Tbilisi Panorama.

Since 2006, concern has been raised for the heart of Tbilisi's mediaeval district - Kala. It has been mostly demolished and replaced as a pastiche of itself, most buildings given extra floors. The pace of demolition and replacement was unusually fast, and much of it unsupervised or even understood. Which has set the tone since then. Even today new projects planned in Zemo Kala, close to Okromchedlabi Street, demonstrate a similar disregard for the old town's integrity and historical presence. The established Historical Zonings and protection laws were originally established to safeguard Monument status buildings, as well as street design, architectural fabric, and views. According to this, historic buildings have to be conserved. Replacement is permitted only in very rare circumstances.

But these are being disregarded at alarming rates – to the degree that the entire architectural fabric of old Tbilisi is now severely under threat.

The plans, protective zones, guidelines, cultural support plans, databases, cultural heritage law of Tbilisi's historical areas are mostly in place. However since 2006 they are too often ignored, or given only lip service, or simply overruled.

Additionally the government has given Tbilisi City Hall power to protect and maintain historical buildings and zones, by creating financial assistance via the Tbilisi Municipal Development Fund. However its system of providing management / renovation permits for historical buildings are increasingly issued in favour of developers rather than those concerned with historical preservation. There is no enforcement of adequate monitoring, research, analysis, nor effective policing of planning violations. In mid November 2023 the government announced it will offer amnesty to all previous illegal constructions – a dangerous precedent for any further enforcement of preservation legislation.

The Heritage Platform appeals to Tbilisi City Hall that they:

1. Create a detailed conservation plan for the mediaeval heart of Tbilisi, Kala in particular, ensuring its preservation, rather than ongoing demolition.
2. Develop a management system and regulatory documents in accordance with international standards of urban cultural heritage conservation. Its first step would be the establishment of a Tbilisi Cultural Heritage Protection Service - staffed by properly trained professionals with real powers of enforcement.
3. Encourage residents, the general public, and professional bodies to participate in the cultural heritage decision-making process in Tbilisi. Provide them with opportunities to actively collaborate.



Tbilisi 2023 Photo by
Nano Zazanashvili

REPLACEMENT AND REHABILITATION OF OUT-OF-DATE BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES IN TBILISI'S HISTORICAL DISTRICTS

By Nano Zazanashvili

On March 15, 2023, Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze proposed a number of projects for the replacement and renovation of decrepit buildings in Tbilisi's historical districts. Furthermore, on March 17, 2023, Tbilisi City Council Resolution #23-18 "St. Chapters V2 and V3 were added to Tbilisi Municipality Council Resolution No. 14-39 of May 24, 2016, "On Approval of Rules for Regulation of Use and Development of Tbilisi Municipality Territories." The first project involves the repair and replacement of decrepit buildings and structures with private sector participation. In the second, Tbilisi City Hall offers to assist residents of Tbilisi's historical district in auctioning off their old properties and land.

QUESTIONS:

- 1.What is the launch and completion dates for the programme?
- 2.Have all the deteriorating buildings and structures in Tbilisi's historical district been clearly listed and identified?
- 3.How many buildings and structures in total might be covered by the programme?
- 4.How many are prominent, background buildings to those with Monument status?
- 5.What exact powers are given to the respective bodies of this project?
- 6.What is the difference between replacement and rehabilitation process?
- 7.Are both to be allowed equally in all cases?
- 8.Is the cost of building restoration based on estimated or professionally generated calculations?
- 9.What are the financial limits of any individual project?
- 10.What percentage of private funding is allowed in each renovation case, and how is it assessed?
- 11.Can these limits be exceeded if during the project, additional factors are found – if they don't effect the individual parties or owners?

Can more detail be given to the below points, to clarify the publicity and decision-making process.

- 1.Please provide clear legal definitions and limits on the proposed process.
- 2.Can the full transparency of the decision-making process please be ensured.
- 3.What is the profession fee guidelines on this process?
- 4.Please can the public be provided with more than mere general statements from public figures on these changes in the law.
- 5.The greater population need to be given clear instructions on where to find out more information on this important new process for the city.

Clarifications needed.

- 1.It seems the programme is concerned with both the inside and outside of Tbilisi's historical zones. Is this true and if so, what are the physical areas concerned?
- 2.There seems no adequate clauses for the overall protection of the historical urban fabric. A clear and professional statement on this issue must be provided.

The social components of the second programme - for the legal expropriation of buildings and structures:

- 1.The second part of the program, unlike the first, suggests that citizens can be forced to vacate certain properties to allow their renovation.
- 2.This has the danger of collapsing local neighbourhood structures and destroying communities. As well as creating considerable distress to older individuals.
- 3.There is a strong danger of excessive gentrification and the oversaturation hotels, Air BnBs and accompanying amenities permanently ending local communities that have been present for centuries, creating a general exodus of locals.



Metekhi District, shamkoretsi
church 2023 Photo
by David Grigoriani

TBILISI'S METEKHI DISTRICT

By Nano Zazanashvili,
Tinatin Khomeriki,
Lali Pertenava

The Metekhi district is one of Tbilisi's oldest. A richly historical zone that includes 53 historical Monuments - a significant number. Its 9 hectares are also densely inhabited with a strong local community. But many of its monuments are either already gone or are about to be so. Two of the four Monuments on Isani Street are now replaced. Of the four on Chekhov Street; one has a brand new and different facade, while the others simply wait on in disrepair for the same treatment. One of Metekhi Lane's three Monuments is unrecognisable from its original character.

The protection regimes of historical zones should, according to law, provide special regulatory protection for development. Currently this is proving completely ineffective in the Metekhi district – where it's urban legacy may soon completely disappear.

The decaying infrastructure is added to the fact of a substantial number of old residential buildings in very bad condition. The district also offers very few communal, recreational areas. This when combined with already low quality home living conditions is encouraging the local population to leave, making way for a new spate of hotels, offices and carparks. Yet there are many empty spaces that could be developed for the community – as in other city districts. This would help preserve, not only some of the local population, character and colour of the region, but also the buildings themselves.

A local qualitative study was conducted from April to June 2023 as part of the National Trust of Georgia's "Metekhi Commune" project assessing the challenges and needs of the residents of Metekhi, Isni, Feritsvaleba, Chekhov, Jorbenadze, and Mefe Solomon Brdzeni streets in Metekhi district. As a consequence of the research, the following recommendations for national and municipal governments were offered.

Central government recommendations:

1. Adopt an integrated planning approach to ensure cultural heritage protection and continuous social improvement of the area. A thoroughly researched plan for the Metekhi district development should be prepared, with the active participation of the local population. This should include a conservation scheme and development regulations to ensure compliance with international standards for historical zones. The Metekhi district's well-defined boundaries and small size makes this far easier than in other Tbilisi regions. It could be used as an example.
2. Develop a set of careful intervention guidelines that allow for locals not to lose their homes during the district's renovation. Also to assist the quality of everyday life via some communal spaces and recreational infrastructure. The relatively small Metekhi area could easily become a model for urban development motivated by cultural heritage preservation.
3. The rehabilitation would be carried out only according to an overall development plan.
4. The impact of the new building on the older structures should be rigorously managed during the construction. Permits should be issued only after ensuring the structural stability of existing buildings isn't degraded in any way.
5. Encourage public engagement in decision-making processes, such as public hearings and information campaigns;
6. To improve the public's access to services.

Local government recommendations:

1. To stop the local buildings' rapid deterioration via some interim measures - such as building strengthening and infrastructure replacement (drain and pipe repair). Carried out carefully so as not to undermine building structural stability.
2. A proper regulation of the construction process, following the advice of professional structural engineers, before any permits are issued. This would involve a strengthening of the Board.
3. Create recreational areas adjacent to Ketavean Dedofali Avenue and Machavariani Lane, near to Shamokoratsi Church. In the first, the unregistered land resource can be used. In the second, the private land redemption mechanism should be used.
4. When designing the recreational space, the needs of locals combined with design principles should be considered.
5. District maps, billboards, and information indicators should be placed in prominent locations to assist tourism activities and raise knowledge of historical buildings (Forakishvili Darbazi, Shamkorats Church, Darejani Palace, Jorbenadze House, Mrevlishvili Theatre).



photo from publica.ge

LEGAL ASSESSMENT OF THE HOTEL BUILDING ISSUES IN THE IMMEDIATE VICINITY OF THE ALAVERDI MONASTERY

By Sul Khan Saladze

In the village of Alaverdi, Akhmeta municipality, a private company ('Badagoni') is constructing a high-end hotel on the property of the church of Alaverdi. 'The Alaverdi Resort' amounts to a direct violation of Georgian cultural heritage legislation.

All seven monuments in the Alaverdi complex are designated as National Monuments in Georgia's database of immovable cultural heritage - as seen on the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation in Georgia, website. The legal area of visual protection for such sites is 500 metres. The 'Resort' is well inside that limit.

Since 2007 Alaverdi Cathedral has also been on the provisional list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. This suggests that UNESCO's 1000-metre radius designated for World Heritage status, might also apply to the Alaverdi complex.

Whether the construction company operates with or without permits is irrelevant in this case. The hotel construction breaks existing cultural heritage protection law - articles 2592 and 2593 of the Criminal Code of Georgia. There could also be signs of official crime here, deserving of official investigation by the relevant bodies.



INITIATIVE GROUP SAVE 'OKROS CHARDAKHI' (KING'S PALACE IN KUTAISI)

The Heritage Platform has made an application to the Kutaisi City Hall and the Chairman of the Kutaisi City Council regarding the King's Palace 'Okros Chardakhi'. Members of the Heritage Platform are participating in the advocacy process for the monument's correct repair.

the "Okros Chardakhi," is the city's only building 17th century building with National Monument status. Its restoration was announced in the spring of 2023 by order of the Kutaisi Municipality City Hall. The idea has sparked a concerned debate in professional circles. The proposed project alters the authenticity of the structure as well as its overall appearance. In order to amend the proposal, the "Okros Chardakhi" multi-professional group was formed. A petition was signed by 1,500 people intending to initiate a discussion about the need to involve heritage professionals and public groups in this process. The Heritage Platform have approached Kutaisi City Hall and the City Council chairman twice, urging a participatory process and use of specialists. Two meetings were held in the summer with members of local self-government, initiative groups members, and architectural historians invited by the initiative group: Maya Mania and Irine Elizbarashvili. Public lectures are organised by the initiative group and supported by citizens.



Truso valley, village Kartsofeli. Photo by Lomeki

TRUSO VALLEY, ITS CULTURAL HERITAGE SURVIVAL

By Manana Suramelashvili

Located near the head of the Tergi River, the Truso Valley is one of the most important historical areas of Georgia's northern frontier. The valley, which is part of the Kazbegi municipality, has been designated as a protected landscape since 2021 and as an area of historical and aesthetic value. It currently contains 20 villages consisting of castles, churches, and towers, largely from the late Middle Ages, running its full 31km length. In addition there are isolated churches and watchtowers on the mountain slopes and ridges.

Nowhere in the valley is there any ancient inscription associated with villages or rivers, flag or indication of its original ownership by Georgian state.

Given that the cultural heritage agency lists 24 immovable monuments and 28 objects without status in the Truso valley, and the "Lomeki" lists 64 immovable and 10 movable monuments, clarification of the lists is now necessary. With this information it's possible for the National Agency to properly protect these cultural heritage monuments according to the law. An inventory of the valley's monuments should be made, preferably with the participation of a "Lomeki" representative. This will allow for thorough coverage of existing historical buildings and perhaps the discovery of hitherto unknown sites.

During the inventory, well preserved historical settlements should be registered as complex monuments, as required by law (Law on Cultural Heritage, Chapter I, Article 3, Clause ib). Separate buildings in the settlement of architectural value, will be a part of the structure. At the same time, some settlements, where the owner cannot be identified, the identification of separate monuments may be difficult.

To know the Truso Valley protected landscape properly, a variety of professional interests should investigate the sites. This will include a number of visits to the valley in order to assess its preservation and stop its harmful exploitation.

It is recommended not to set up border control checkpoints in the visual protection zones of monuments, as in the settlement of Zakagori. This runs contrary to Chapter VI, Article 22, 23. of the Law on Cultural Heritage. This has the effect of making the monument into a target in the event of any subsequent conflict.

The current evidence of arbitrary physical manipulations on the monuments is also unnecessary. An example is the renovated church hall at the entrance to the historical village of Tep. Its authentic slate roof tiles are spread around the building and tin sheets installed. The notable petroglyph stone embedded in the settlement's entrance wall is currently part of a shower and covered with a tent. Two floors have been built on the settlement's upper tower, and an entirely new house built directly above. The historical settlements of Truso will lose its architectural value if such construction continues.

In one of the most prominent abandoned villages, Burmasig, the bases of damaged buildings have been dug up by pigs ranging freely, clearly hastening their inevitable collapse. It is hoped the methods of private farming expansion in Truso's protected landscape will be encouraged not to impair its rich cultural heritage.

The watchtowers also require assistance. Only a few have survived to their full height, including the Kartsofeli Tower, though it is in considerable disrepair. A penetrating crack runs its full height and threatens full collapse. Given its historical significance a repair is needed urgently. It is recommended that photogrammetry or three-dimensional laser scanning be initially used to protect researchers. Expert restorers should be consulted soon, for some emergency stabilisation.



ZINOBIANI

The members of the Heritage Platform were invited by Georgian Udis representatives, to visit the village of Zinobiani in the Kvareli region. The historic house in Zinobiani village was measured, and the restoration project was evaluated.

Zinobiani is a settlement of the ancient Caucasian ethnic group known as the Udis. There are only 174 still surviving in Georgia. They arrived during the Armenian-Azerbaijani war at the turn of the twentieth century. Zinobi Silikashvili led the migration, and the village was named Zinobiani in his honour. The village has been constructed here since 1923.

In addition, on Zinobi Silikashvili's initiative, the Georgian-Udin community was established, with board members Ivane Javakhishvili and Shalva Dadiani.

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