

**Resource Architecture – XXI World Congress of Architecture
22 to 26 July 2002 in Berlin**

Forum 2 Public Space and New Media

Name Prof. Vakhtang Davitaia

**Modern Architecture in the context of national culture and
psychology**

Dear colleagues,

While I begin my report I should like to show some slides and give short information about my country, Georgia. This is important for understanding my basic creative conception too.

Georgia is situated on the border of two continents-of Europe and Asia, between Black and Caspian Seas. Georgia borders the main Caucasian Range and Russia from the North and Turkey from the South. It is washed by the Black Sea from the west. The area of Georgia is 70000 km². The mountains occupy two thirds of its territory. The population is about 5.5 million. About 12 thousand relics of the past are situated on this small territory. Archeological findings testify that primitive man inhabited the territory of Georgia in the Paleolithic era. Many settlements belonging to the Neolithic era, especially to the Bronze Age are located here. In 337 Georgia adopted Christianity as an official religion.

The earliest surviving Georgian written records belong to the 5-th century. I would like to remind you that 3500 languages are registered in the world and only 14 written languages, alphabets are known: Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, Ethiopia., Japanese, Indian, Korean, Latin, Mongolian, Syrian, Slav-Cyrillic, Chinese, Armenian and Georgian.

The building of central-dome temples began in Georgia in the second half of the 6-th century. The temple "Jvari" is one of the first churches of this type. The 11-12 centuries are the period of the Georgian Renaissance. In this period brilliant poetry was written such as the poem "The king in the panther's skin" by Shota Rustaveli, magnificent examples of wall paintings and miniatures were created, gold mining was developing particularly intensively.

The history of Georgia is a kaleidoscopic alternation of wars and short peaceful periods. Under these conditions the rulers' permanent preoccupation was to build fortresses, signal and watch towers. Even today they impress us with their power and building techniques.

Many cave-complexes in monastery towns were built in the epoch of mature feudalism. House-fortresses and houses with defensive towers of the mountainous regions take a special place in the architecture of Georgia. The forest of towers of Svanezia has much impressed travelers. The castle-houses differ in local peculiarities and reflect hard historical fortunes of the nation, the necessity of defense against foreign enemy's internal war and existing old traditions of blood-feuds.

According to records since the 1930s about 400 towers were discovered in Svane-tia. Unfortunately, there are many fewer today only about 200. Ushguli, the most elevated settlement in Europe is located at an altitude of 2700m, above sea level.

More than one million and 300 thousand people live in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. It has been the capital for more than 1500 years.

This is almost all that I wanted to say to you about Georgia, in this short time

This is the intellectual orientation of a single individual who was born and has grown up in, a specific historical, cultural and ethnographic environment.

I realize that in today's highly developed world, given contemporary scope and means of communication, the words "National", "Regional" are to a certain extent taken as synonyms for backwardness of views. However, a closer consideration of one's cultural traditions does not run contrary to the creation of modern art.

The question arises today, under the conditions of wider information and active development of cultural relations- which in their turn-affect-national psychology, character and peculiarities of life - what are the distinctive features of a frame of mind and disposition that can have an influence on Architecture. Which traits inherited from history have an influence on moulding the national character?

I'll attempt answer this question on the example of my country – Georgia.

The hard historical path traversed by Georgia and the threat of physical annihilation have formed the peculiar features of relations between nationalities- a loyalty, a feeling of compassion, mutual support, national and religious tolerance.

The concrete evidence of this tradition is the peaceful co-existence of Georgian Orthodox and Armenian Gregorian Churches, a Synagogue and Mosque on a small square of Tbilisi. Of course, this fact cannot be explained by architectural diversity. Its basis lies in philosophy, in the way of thinking. The evidence of it is the fact "Ubani" - residential districts in Tbilisi, Kutaisi and other towns of Georgia have evolved around court yards, supranational in structure rather than formed by national and religious belonging of its residents. The Georgian national character doesn't feel comfortable with the notion of a personal dissociated secluded life. The concept of "my home is my castle" is alien to Georgians.

Georgians sympathies with an architectural environment notable for its high communicability, an environment which unites and provides a co-residence for people. It has been tried and tested during centuries of good tradition.

The traditional dwelling unit of a Tbilisi yard, surrounded from three sides by tiers of balconies, was a sort of arena, where the life of many families of different nationalities was going on. The yard actually was an integrated large family, where everyone was trying their best to take into account the interests of others. This was the bases of co-existence.

Trying to understand the mystery of this atmosphere of benevolence of similar yards, I have many times felt that the essence lies in the equality

between man and space, in the psychological and most favorable state of the people, which determines the favorable microclimate for co-existence, for the of sense an indivisible family, rather than in the planning principle of the cell, which determines a special level of communicability.

There is something festive, theatrical and sometimes even ostentatious in the Georgian character. These features are best expressed in cult buildings and popular dwellings, especially in West Georgia. One more point in Georgian character: predominance of form over function. The requirements of spiritual satisfaction repress rationalism. This is expressed both in social life and in art. Here is an example: the cult of a "pure yard" has existed in West Georgia since olden times. A yard in front of the house, which sometimes occupied 1/3 of the plot, does not perform a direct utilitarian function. The "pure yard" serves as a sort of sign, a symbol of the family. Its principle function is aesthetic it is an effect a delight, an invitation. The "pure yard" tradition has become so strong, that during the World War II years, cases of this part of the plot being used for agricultural purposes were extremely rare.

Ungrounded is the assertion that given levels of scientific and technological progress and communication, leveling of national and regional character takes place so that the aspiration for "citizenship of the world" is strengthened. Such a view is an over-simplification of the issue.

I'd like to illustrate the above mentioned traits of the Georgian character resorting to some parallel comparison between two countries Lithuania and Georgia. At the beginning of my professional career, I along-side with my friends had to make a project of the entry-gates to the city of Kutaisi. We made a project in the form of arch 30m high. No less "pompos" are the entries designed by other architects leading to Gori, Rustavi, etc. when traveling in Lithuania I saw that an identical task was solved in much simpler way by Lithuanian colleagues either a wooden plack with an inscription or just an inscription.

In Vilnius there has been built an office building of the former central Committee of the Communist Party of Lithuania. It is three-four storey building rather unobtrusive and coordinated in scale with urban environment. While in Tbilisi an analogous buildings has become an architectural prominence dominating the whole city.

The architectural concepts of wedding palaces in Vilnius and Tbilisi are also poles apart. The first one is located in the nature; the second aspires to the skies. In Tbilisi we have the highest tribune in the world.

I brought these parallels here not to show the advantage of one position over the other, but to demonstrate the difference of national perception.

The fact that people in many countries on different continents wear the same clothes, dance the same dances, drive similar cars and of similar joys and aspirations does not mean at all that they have the same dispositions, perceptions of facts and ethnic stereotypes.

My long preamble can briefly be formulated as follows: architecture as a social art should be up-to-date and express the spirit of a place, the spirit of a nation, the spirit of a country. Architects who adhere to close links between the

present and past, to liaison with traditions, with the spirit of the architecture of a certain place and who view this liaison as an independent and continuous process, use the same term. But how can we attain this goal? Is it attainable at all? I don't claim to have a recipe for all, but I'll tell you, about the method I apply and I'll give examples from my practice. This method is context.

To me context does not mean only the balance of scale or stylistic compatibility. First of all it is preservation and, if possible, the development of a new emotional registers of the atmosphere, ambience of the existing architecture and the landscape. It is a professional honor for any architect to succeed in activating the emotional potential dormant in an old urban situation and impart to it new impulses of esthetic influence.

To me context does not mean adherence to this or that style. It is a formal indicator, but a revival of those features which define the atmosphere and mood that is understandable and close to people.

Often, this atmosphere is determined not by a single building, but by the urban environment. For instance, the atmosphere of old Tbilisi or Svane ti, specific constructions of Kolchishi or ancient Shatili, the mood conveyed by Melnik or Veliko Timovo, Samarkand or Suzdal.

1. On the left of the screen an ordinary country-side of the low lands of Georgia, on the right-my project of the culture centre of the village of Tsunkuri. The method is that of evoking one's memory, remembering old villages.

2. On the left, there is a traditional house of a peasant in mountainous Khvetsureti, on the right-my interpretation of a modern residential house for this region.

It is of great importance that new architecture, in accordance with modern tendencies should be presented to the people in such a way that they should feel a continuous relation with the past, with the spiritual and material culture of the nation. To provoke such emotional sensations in man is the main task for me.

Methods of eliciting those emotions may vary.

3. The architectural image of the museum "the Hunter's Village", the museum of

Georgian nature in Tbilisi, somehow suggests the mountainous villages of Shatili and Omalo, with some parts of Ushguli and old villages of Kakheti.

4. A small church or a fortress on the top of a hill or a mountain is a characteristic scene in Georgia. We are accustomed to this. I attempted to create this familiar emotional atmosphere on a new level. This memorial is called "the Algeti Basilica" and it is dedicated to the builders of the irrigation system and the artificial lake. The lake is behind the mountain.

5. The Memorial for the city of Smolian, Bulgaria, Radop region, this is the territory of ancient Greek culture influence, the birthplace of the mythic Orpheus. Smolian is a completely new city, without of any architectural styles. It was built in 30-40 years ago. Unfortunately here nothing revives the memories of its magnificent past. With my work I tried to recall the memory of its history.

6. On the screen you see a memorial ensemble in Kutaisi. Above I mentioned the presence of the festive, the theatrical in Georgian nature. True, those features are to be found in our life. This fact is especially perceptible in one of the most ancient towns of Georgia. The Kutaisi memorial represents a kind of a stage, 30m in diameter exhibiting, 5 sculptures, the architectural setting alongside with its pedestals is permanent, and the sculptures are replaced every three years.

7. Mostly I try to recreate an atmosphere in a new capacity rather than to operate with traditional forms. I see in this the contemporary understanding of traditions and symbols of history and future. The administrative, cultural and shopping centre of the Khomabugi village (Eastern Georgia) has been created as a theatrical stage. Considering all orient and rich traditions of folk festivals in this part of Georgia, I have tried to ensemble all the projected buildings with facilities like a theatre stalls. The balconies, loggias and galleries and stairs, with a terraces and flat roofs serve the purpose of accommodating public during the festivals.

