

# Architektur im Ringturm



## Tbilisi

### Architecture at the Intersection of Continents

From 10 March until 27 April 2016

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- Concept:** Adolph Stiller
- Exhibition venue:** Exhibition Centre in the Ringturm  
1010 Vienna, Schottenring 30
- Opening hours:** Monday to Friday, 9 am to 6 pm, free admission  
(closed on public holidays as well as 25 March 2016)
- Press tour:** Wednesday, 9 March 2016, 4 pm
- Speakers:** Irina Kurtishvili, Rostyslaw Bortnyk, Adolph Stiller
- Official Opening** Wednesday, 9 March 2016, 6.30 pm (by invitation only)
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## Tbilisi – architecture at the crossroads of Europe and Asia

The name Tbilisi is derived from the old Georgian word “tbili”, which roughly translates as “warm” and refers to the region’s numerous hot sulphur springs that reach temperatures of up to 47°C. The area was first settled in the early **Bronze Age**, and **ancient times** also left their mark: in Greek mythology, the Argonauts sailed to Colchis, which was part of Georgia, in their quest for the Golden Fleece.

In the **fifth century** King Vakhtang I Gorgasali turned the existing settlement into a fortified town, and in the first half of that century Tbilisi was recognised as the second capital of the kings of Kartli in eastern Georgia. The city became the capital of Georgia in its own right in the **sixth century**. Only one building from that era still exists today: the three-nave Anchiskhati Basilica.

The city was conquered several times in the following centuries. **From the end of the seventh century until 1048** Tbilisi was the capital of an Arabian emirate. The writings of the Arab traveller Ibn Hawqal, who visited the city in 942 and 943, speak of the highly cultured inhabitants of the Georgian capital: *“The citizens of Tbilisi are welcoming and accommodating to strangers, and they cultivate warm relations to all newcomers who are relatively well educated and show an interest in learning.”*

The Seljuqs occupied Tbilisi from **1080 to 1122**, and were driven out by Davit Agmashenebeli (David IV, who was also known as David the Builder), under whom Tbilisi became the capital of a united Georgia. The Narikala fortress, which dates back to the fourth century, overlooks the city. Originally, Tbilisi extended below the areas south of the Kura River, on a high mountain plateau. The steeper northern bank was only later included in the built up area through creation of terraces.

### “The Paris of Asia” – the city on the Silk Road

Thanks to the favourable climate and its location on the Silk Road, trade and agriculture were the lifeblood of Tbilisi: cereals, fruit and vegetables are still an important source of income on the city’s outskirts and are sold at the capital’s bustling markets. On a trip in 1972 Henri Cartier-Bresson took a photograph of sheep herds against the backdrop of modern residential constructions in the industrial city of Rustavi near the capital.

New direct rail links to Moscow and Europe drove another leap forward in the country’s development – tobacco, leather and textile factories sprang up, and Georgia became one of the largest and most advanced producers of silk, with Tbilisi at the centre of Caucasian silk culture. A museum established in 1887 and still open today bears testimony to this.

Large parts of the capital’s much-vaunted “upper old town” have been preserved to this day. Traditional wooden pergolas and balconies are defining features of the buildings in this area, most of which were initially private homes and are still inhabited today. Houses resembling bird’s nests dot the cliffs that rise above the opposite bank of the Kura – unique remnants which pay homage to a form of construction that have shaped Tbilisi’s identity.

In the **final quarter of the 19th century**, many architects from outside the country – including Poles, Germans, Italians, Russians and Ukrainians – designed major urban constructions along European lines. These eclectic developments included a blend of elements from various eras, and are still an unmistakable feature of the cityscape. The 1909 census recorded around 2,000 inhabitants from Germany, including industrialists trying to gain a foothold in Georgia, as well as numerous artists and members of the cultural scene.

The city hall, Rustaveli Theatre, opera house or the gymnasium (grammar school) built around this time are still in use today, as is the former Temple of Glory, which is now home to the Georgian National Gallery and was designed by Albert Salzmänn (1833 – 1897). Salzmänn also came up with the plans for the Hotel Orient – at that time the stand-out structure on Rustaveli Avenue – which was destroyed in the 1991/1992 civil war.

Gothic, Islamic, Byzantine-Russian and Oriental architectural styles were less common, although the latter can still be seen today at public baths and caravanserais. But the most significant innovation was the emergence of art nouveau at the beginning of the 20th century. The most distinctive and purest expressions of this style are the Marjanishvili Theatre and a large property on Rustaveli Square known as the Melik-Azaryants House, but decorative features and clearly recognisable stylistic elements can also be found in numerous private residential buildings.

## **Independence and the age of revolutions and wars**

Although the entire **20th century** (or the period extending well into the 1950s according to the Soviet definition of the term) is referred to as the “age of revolutions and wars” owing to the succession of sociopolitical events that had significant effects on architecture and construction, this was also one of the most innovative and fertile periods for the arts and architecture. This history is captured in architecture that focuses on society’s aims and ideals, and art that reflects economic and technological developments.

The October Revolution of **1917** had a massive impact on Georgia’s development. Attempts were made to create a single state for the Caucasus, but after the collapse of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic, Georgia declared independence on 26 May 1918. The country remained independent until **1921** when it succumbed to the might of the Red Army.

As part of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, Georgia became a constituent member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in **1922**. Under Soviet control, Georgia was a cog in the industrial transformation of the former Russian empire. Georgia also became one of the USSR’s most important centres for tourism on account of its climate and diverse landscape.

The first ever map of the city was drawn up **between 1932 and 1934**. The pared-back constructivist design of the Zarya Vostoka (“golden sunrise”) complex that housed the offices of the newspaper of the same name, the ornamental mountaintop cable car station, visible from virtually any point in the city, and the adjoining Mtatsminda amusement park are among the few remaining examples of works from the 1930s. More widespread construction only began after the Second World War, known in the Soviet Union as the Great Patriotic War.

## **Phases of the post-World War Two era**

The most important projects after the end of World War Two concentrated on developing the structure of the city. Several arterial roads such as Ilia Chavchavadze Avenue were built, as well as Vake Park (1946) and the residential properties that sprang up on Marjanishvili Square **between 1947 and 1949**.

Two years after WW2, photographer Robert Capa, co-founder of Magnum Photos, and the author John Steinbeck travelled the country, and many of the striking portraits in Capa’s archive give a good impression of the building stock at the time, which formed an ensemble preserved almost in its entirety.

The second urban planning programme was devised **between 1948 and 1952**, and led to the development of new residential areas with numerous buildings. The architectural highlights of the Stalinist era, which lasted until 1953, included the main railway station (built in 1948 and demolished in the mid-1970s) and the Georgian National Academy of Sciences (1953 – 1958), both featuring regional motifs and an understated “gingerbread style” design. This style was consigned to history during the process of De-Stalinisation and the start of the **Khrushchev era**.

The influence of this period, which **lasted until 1964**, was reflected in the work of the so-called “60s generation” – artists striving to find truth in everyday life and freedom of artistic impression. This generation was the source of many examples of architecture from across the former Soviet Union that became the subject of international debate.

The late-Soviet penchant for megastructures with highly expressive artistic language means that the period from **1970 to the end of the 1980s** was probably the most interesting in architectural terms, in spite of the stagnation that set in under Brezhnev. It is no coincidence that this era saw the birth of a dissident movement in Georgia, and its leaders went on to play an important role in politics after the Soviet Union collapsed. The late-Soviet taste for spectacular, large-scale constructions also left its mark on Tbilisi, in the shape of the widely publicised administrative offices of the Ministry of Highway and Bridge Construction, the new central railway station, and three large residential blocks by the former film studios on the banks of the Kura River, as well as the Hotel Adjara, the bus station, the rail authority building and the university. Most of these developments were completed in the 1970s, as was the third city planning programme, launched in **1971**.

Following the failure of glasnost and perestroika, and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia seceded from the USSR and declared itself an independent republic on 9 April **1991**.

## **Recent developments**

The latest and most significant phase of architectural renewal was initiated at the personal insistence of President Mikheil Saakashvili. Under the motto “Light Up the City”, several internationally renowned architects were invited to take part in an extensive renovation, redesign and enhancement programme. A number of spectacular constructions appeared at key high-visibility locations across the capital, such as the Bridge of Peace over the Kura and the newly designed Rike Park (known as the Peace Park), both by Milan-based architect Michele De Lucchi. Giga Batiaschwili was given the task of renovating and redesigning the former police barracks to create the Presidential Palace, which has a glass dome reminiscent of that at the Reichstag building in Berlin; the upgrade was completed by Michele De Lucchi following political intervention. Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas from Rome were the team behind the Public Service Hall, also known as the House of Justice.

But construction has come to something of a standstill following completion of these projects. Some eye-catching administrative and cultural buildings were developed in parallel with President Saakashvili’s initiative and completed shortly before the financial crisis. Attention has turned instead to renovating historic properties and implementing more modest projects, with the exception of developments currently under way that are backed by major local and foreign investors.

## **Georgian National Opera and Ballet Theatre**

*Giovanni Scudieri*

1851 – 1874

*photo: Georgian Union of Architects*

The National Opera and Ballet Theatre in Tbilisi is one of the oldest and biggest opera houses in the Caucasus region. On the initiative of the Russian Governor General in the Caucasus region, Prince Mikhail Vorontsov from 1847 – 1851 a theatre was built in the Renaissance style opposite the town council. A major fire which broke out on 11 October 1874 before a performance of “Norma” caused devastating damage.



At the end of the 19th century a new opera house was therefore planned. The work was carried out under the direction of Viktor Schröter, an architect of German origin from St. Petersburg. The construction manager was also a German architect, Paul Stern, who had come to Tbilisi as Schröter’s assistant. The construction of the new opera house with 1,200 seats took several years and was completed in 1896. The ground plan was supposedly inspired by Richard Wagner’s Bayreuth Festival Theatre plans.

The impressive building in a pseudo-Moorish style on Rustaveli Avenue is characterised primarily by its architectonic quality and is influenced by traces of the theatre’s history. In addition to renovation work carried out in 1973 after the building had once again been damaged by a fire, 2010 – 2016 the opera house underwent its first extensive overall refurbishment to make improvements such as modernising the stage equipment and restoring the stage curtain.

It was reopened on 30 January 2016 with the performance of the most famous Georgian opera “Abesalom and Eteri” by Zakaria Paliashvili.

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### **Reconstruction Marjanishvili Quarter**

*V. Kurtishvili, Z. Isakadze, Z. Pilishvili  
2009 – 2011*

*photo: Georgian Union of Architects*

At the place where **Marjanishvili Square** stands today, an Evangelical Lutheran church was built in 1894 with money donated by the German community in Tbilisi. After the Second World War (1946) the church was demolished. At the same location, prestigious residential buildings were constructed from 1947 – 1949 based on the plans of the architect Misha Melia. In line with the market economy interests of private investors, in the last few years Marjanishvili Square and Agmashenebeli Avenue have developed into a high-class residential district with luxury shops and have become a cultural and public centre.



Since it was first created, **Agmashenebeli Avenue** has changed its name and its appearance several times. First of all, the road built in 1850 by German settlers was called “Micheil Street” in honour of the Caucasian governor Prince Mikhail Romanov (period of office 1862 – 1882). From 1918 to 1988 the road was called “Plekhanov Prospekt” in honour of the first party leader of the Russian Social Democrats, Georgi Plekhanov. After Georgia had gained independence in 1991, the road was named “Agmashenebeli Avenue” after the Georgian King David IV the Builder.

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### **Tbilisi Concert Hall**

*Irakli Chkhenkeli*

*Structural analysis: Shalva Gazashvili*

*1967 – 1971*

*photo: Adolph Stiller*

The glass cylinder of the philharmonic orchestra building is a good example of the spirit of optimism among architects in Tbilisi at the end of the 1960s. The hall for 2,500 spectators is one of the best in the city, it is acoustically perfect, meticulous in architectural detail and has a confident modern design. Concerts were held here during the Soviet era, and after the fall of the Iron Curtain the building became a political stage. In terms of town planning, the philharmonic orchestra building is a syntactic masterpiece. The integration of the liberal arts in every building during the Soviet era can be seen by the bronze sculpture “Muse” by Merab Berdzenishvili in the forecourt.



**Aquatic Sports Centre “Leninsky-Komsomol”**

(Today “Laguna Vere”)

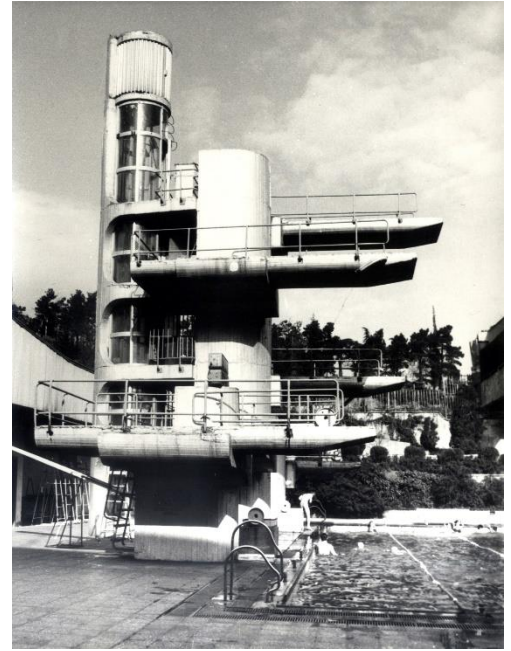
Shota Kavlashvili, Ramaz Kiknadze, Gia Abuladze

Mosaic frieze: Koka Ignatov

1978

photo: Archiv der Architekten

“Laguna Vere” is the biggest swimming bath in Tbilisi and a unique example of modernistic architecture in the city. The complex, built in 1978, corresponded with the international standards at the time for holding water sports competitions. The stands for 5,000 spectators gave a good view of the swimming pools with three water depths: 6, 2.50 and 1-metre depths and the 10 m dive tower.



**Bank of Georgia, headquarters**

Former Georgian Motorway Directorate

George Chakhava, Zurab Jalaghania

1974

Renovation in 2010

photo: Georgian Union of Architects

The best-known, widely publicised, bizarre and fantastic building in Tbilisi was designed in 1974 for the Georgian road ministry. The architect George Chakhava was himself the minister and was therefore able to implement the project. The building with its reduced foundations is inspired by the most beautiful suprematist utopias. As part of the reconstruction for the Bank of Georgia, a glass cube as an entrance and also parts of the interior fittings and wall coverings were redesigned.



### **Ortachala Central Bus Station/“Autowagsal”**

Shota Kavlashvili, Vladimir Kurtishvili,  
Ramaz Kiknadze

Structural engineer: R. Shiolashvili

Mosaic: Zurab Tsereteli

1969 – 1973

Opened in 1974

photo: Vladimir Kurtishvili



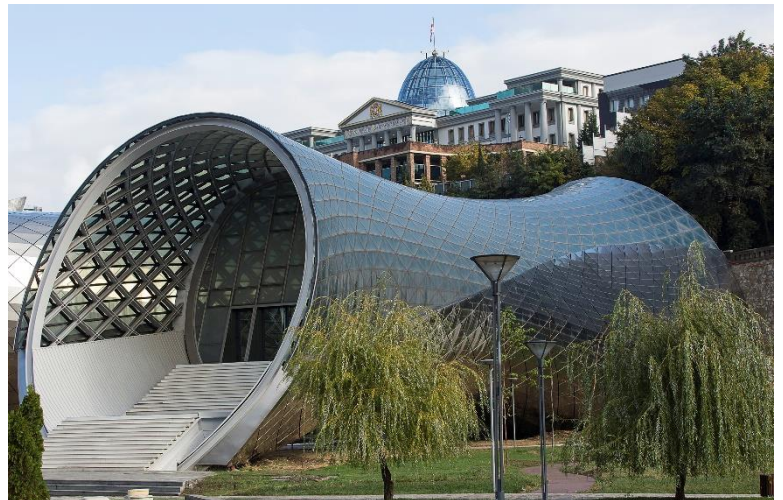
The extremely functional, simplified building has a very reserved effect on the street and appears as a concrete construction with a transparent façade made of glass and narrow aluminium profiles. People entering the plain, cube-shaped building find themselves in the middle of a tall room flooded with light with a classily decorated ceiling supported by elegant, marble-clad pillars which divide the room. The bus station – also known by the name “Autowagsal” in the city – is the most important bus station in the eastern part of Tbilisi.

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### **Rike Park Music-Theater and Exhibition Hall**

Massimiliano & Doriana Fuksas, Rom  
2011

photo: Adolph Stiller



The building site is within the green area called Rike Park. The building consists of two different, smooth elements which blend into one structure on the rear wall. Each form has its own function: the northern part is allocated to the musical theatre, while the large entrance of the exhibition hall opens with an outside staircase and brings in the public directly from the street level. In contrast, the musical theatre is on an elevated level and, in this way, gives visitors standing in the foyer a view of the river and the city’s skyline. It is a periscope of the city and looks towards the river by framing the historic heart of the old town.

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### **Catalogue**

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Adolph Stiller (ed.); approx. 240 pages, with contributions from Irina Kurtishvili, David Abuladse and Rostyslaw Bortnyk

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