

From knowledge production to monument protection: Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club

Nini Palavandishvili

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The Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club is an extraordinary building considering the original reason for its creation and its cultural, historical and social contexts.¹ [Fig.1]

In order to acknowledge and honour the outstanding achievements of local chess players, ›chess palaces‹ were built in three Soviet republics in the 1970s – Georgia, Armenia and Belarus. Moreover, these buildings testified that Soviet domination in chess was an important ideological argument for the superiority of the system.

The Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club building was dedicated to the first female grandmaster – Nona Gaprindashvili, who became world chess champion in 1962 at the age of 21 and went on to defend the title for 16 years. This is particularly interesting today, considering the popularity of the Netflix series *The Queen's Gambit*, in which Nona Gaprindashvili, herself a prodigy in her day, is mentioned. Chess or film lovers might also know that Nona Gaprindashvili sued Netflix in 2021 after a line in the series mentioned her by name, stating that she had ›never faced men‹. She had, in fact, faced male opponents on many occasions.

The Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club opened in 1973 in one of the parks at the centre of Tbilisi. The building is organically distributed on the slopes of the park landscape. My interest in artistic/curatorial projects very often derives from my everyday living environment, of which architecture is an inseparable part. One of the buildings that has attracted my attention and continued to fascinate me is this one. The building represents an example of both the archi-



[1] Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club, 1970s

tectural principles of Modernism and the socio-economic processes that have been taking place since the 1990s.

The building has been through a large number of transformations in its lifespan. In the 1970s and 1980s it found fame, gaining admirers and respect as hundreds of people filled its main hall to watch chess tournaments. Generations of chess players and mountaineers were raised here. In the 1990s, during the civil war, it became the ›headquarters‹ of a paramilitary group. This is when it started to be broken up into several parts fulfilling various functions – casino, burger bar, pharmacy, bank, gym. [Fig. 2]

Today we have the following situation – 85% of the building, which belongs to Tbilisi municipality, is leased to the Georgian Chess Federation, and 13% to the Mountaineers' Club. In order to ›maintain‹ itself and the building, the Chess Federation is obliged to sublet parts of the building. Space on the ground and second floors is rented out to a billiards club. A café, the International Chess Academy of Tbilisi and the president's office of the European Chess Union also operate from here.

The current and former tenants have continued to adapt the building according to their individual needs and tastes. They enlarge



[2] Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club, Interiors. From left to right clockwise: East side gallery, 1st floor, 2016. Main hall, 1970s. Main hall, 2019. South foyer, 1st floor, 1970s



[3] Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club. From left to right clockwise: North view, 2019. South view, 2019. North foyer after renovation, ground floor, 2019. Administrative wing after renovation, ground floor, 2019



[4] Exhibition *8×8, The Future that Never Happened*, 2016, Tbilisi, Georgia, curated by Nini Palavandishvili in collaboration with Lena Prents, exposition of archival material

inner spaces and create new spaces by using balconies and staircases, seal off windows or put in a door that is considered more ›beautiful‹ than the original one. Several decorative elements have been added to the entire building, using various paint colours. This results in a scenario that is in fundamental disharmony with the original material and concept of the building. The architects' initial challenge and aim – to create an architectural form that corresponds to its original concept and purpose – has been sacrificed to utilitarian function. [Fig. 3]

My first project based on the building was not intended to focus entirely on the unique architecture of the Chess Palace and Alpine Club. Nor was it only about chess and its history in Georgia. It was an attempt to observe one particular building and its surroundings, with the aim of comprehending the system mechanisms Georgia has been going through and the political, economic, social and other impact they have had on the country during and after the Soviet era. The same system mechanisms influence the existence of art. Thus the project also observed and analysed the environment in which contemporary art exists today, especially art which is socially and politically active and engaged, which reacts to the processes that surround it.

All of the above became the theme of the art project *8×8, The Future that Never Happened*, which I initiated in Tbilisi in summer 2016

in collaboration with Lena Prents. In order to avoid the project becoming too generalised and hypothetical, it was important to implement it in the building itself, opening it up for visitors and a wider audience.

Archive and historical material constituted the main part of the exhibition. It consisted of initial orders regarding the building, original drawings, a video of the opening, newspaper articles on the opening and the first tournaments held in the building. Explanatory texts provided visitors with information on the general theme and wider context of the development of chess. Alongside the texts, artefacts such as books, postcards, stamps, badges, films, banners etc. were on display. Materials were organised around four topics: the History of Chess in the Soviet Union, Chess and Women, Chess and Art and the History of Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club. [Fig. 4]

In addition, works specifically created by contemporary artists within the framework of our project (local artists as well as those invited to take part in an artist's residency) were shown in the entire building. The choreography of the display allowed the visitors to see the building both from the inside and outside, allowing them to enter parts of the building where access is usually restricted.

In order to make the whole process more interactive and educational, we also offered guided tours, public playing sessions, film screenings, etc. [Fig. 5]

On the occasion of the project, I wrote two letters to the agency of monument protection, asking them to list the building as an immovable cultural monument. The agency did not respond to either of them.

None of the events and activities that followed were pre-planned; one thing led on to another.

In 2017, again in collaboration with Lena Prents, I organised a second exhibition at ZK/U – Center for Art and Urbanistics in Berlin. This time, we expanded our focus to include materials from Armenia and Belarus. The participating artists portrayed different aspects of chess in their works, drawing attention to the ideological implications of the past and the present. Here also, alongside the exhibition, we organised chess tournaments in collaboration with the local chess club, a film screening with food night, etc. [Fig. 6]

Back in Tbilisi, I continued to work on raising public awareness of the building on a local and international level, making several TV appearances and writing articles for international publications. One of the major events was a public talk by the famous Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, which took place in the building. This was an exceptional moment, with a large audience completely filling the big hall.

As a result of these activities, the organisation »Blue Shield Georgia« contacted me in 2018 and suggested that we apply jointly for funding from the Getty Foundation's »Keeping it Modern« programme.



[5] Exhibition *8x8, The Future that Never Happened*, 2016, Tbilisi, Georgia, curated by Nini Palavandishvili in collaboration with Lena Prents; from left to right clockwise: works by Lado Lomitashvili and Atu Gelovani, Yip Kai Chun, David Bergé and Nadia Tsulukidze, Iza Tarasewicz.



[6] Exhibition *Pop-Up Chess Palace. On Architecture, Ideology and Chess*, 2017, ZK/U – Center for Art and Urbanistics, Berlin, Germany, curated by Nini Palavandishvili and Lena Prents; from left to right clockwise: exhibition view, works by Naili Vakhania, Tatia Skhirtladze, Nino Sekhniashvili

The aim of this grant is to support research and preparation for conservation plans and maintenance recommendations for 20th century architecture worldwide. Our application was successful.

In January 2019 we started with our numerous activities, and a long process of communication and negotiations with the ›owners‹ of the building began.

The aims of the project were:

- To develop the first ever conservation plan for a late Soviet Modernism building in Tbilisi, which would serve as a prototype for other period buildings of a similar kind;
- To facilitate the appropriate restoration, conservation and continued maintenance of a late Soviet Modernism style building in the future;
- To increase awareness of the value of late Soviet Modernism period architecture among city authorities and a wider Georgian public;
- To train young architects and heritage professionals in the documentation, conservation planning process etc. of buildings from the same period as the Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club.

In order to achieve these goals, numerous activities were carried out, for example:

- Heritage documentation training,
- The development of a concept for an interpretation centre for the Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club
- Events for the European Night of Museums
- Adaptive reuse workshop
- Public lectures on safeguarding late Soviet Modernist architecture [Fig. 7]

Most importantly, with the support of our international partners and due to the newly gained popularity of the building, the Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club was listed as an Immovable Cultural Heritage Monument on May 27, 2019. This is a huge achievement considering that only ten buildings from the late modernist period have monument status in the whole of Georgia, only three of which are in Tbilisi. The last time this status was granted was in 2008.

A huge amount of work was also invested in two publications. One is a manual entitled ›Why and How should Modernist Architecture be Protected‹, aimed at municipality workers as well as the tem-



[7] Activities in the framework of the ›Conservation of Modernist Architecture and its Sustainable Use in Georgia‹



[8] Manual *Why and How should Modernist Architecture be Protected / Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club. Conservation and Management Plan, 2020*

porary owners of such buildings. It is available only in Georgian. The second is a conservation and management plan in two languages. It is the first document of its kind to be created in Georgia for a late modernist building. The plan aims to protect the values that define the significance of the building, preserve its original function and increase its economic potential and sustainability by carefully adapting certain spaces for new compatible uses.

In addition to outlining conservation needs, goals and strategies, the document provides a thorough building maintenance plan with practical checklists for the building manager, adaptive reuse proposals for selected spaces in the building, management recommendations related to various aspects, and an action plan for the implementation of the CMP.

Now it is up to the Tbilisi municipality to take these recommendations into consideration and proceed with the appropriate adaptation plan.

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Note

- 1 Further reading M. Kalkhitashvili et al. (ed.), *Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club. Conservation Management Plan*, Tbilisi 2021, online <<https://chesspalaceandalpineclub.ge/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/%E1%83%99%E1%83%9B%E1%83%92-Eng-Online-spreads.pdf>>, 1.12.2021; »Tbilisi Chess Palace and Alpine Club«, in: Adolph Stiller (ed.), *Between Caucasus and the Black Sea. Architecture in Georgia*, Vienna 2018.

Photo credits

- [1] George Chubinashvili National Research Centre for Georgian Art History and Heritage Preservation.
 [2a], [2c],[3a]–[3d] Gogita Bukhaidze.
 [2b] David Gurgenzidze personal archive.
 [2d] Germane Ghudushauri family archive.
 [4a]–[4d] Gogita Bukhaidze and Tamara Gurgenzidzen.
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