In Tbilisi, Georgia, a shiny new architectural skyline has become a political issue as much as an aesthetic one—is it slapdash commercialism ruining the culture’s authentic history or a step toward a more progressive society?

R E Z O G A B R I A D Z E’S PUPPET THEATER stands in the heart of Tbilisi’s Old Town—which is very old indeed. Around the corner are the sulfur baths, where, according to legend, Georgian King Vakhtang I decided to build the city in the fifth century. Up the street is the great Sioni Cathedral from the seventh century.

Gabriadze himself is a Georgian national treasure. I saw his marionette version of the Battle of Stalingrad when I first came to Tbilisi 10 years ago and fell in love with the city. I was ushered into a dank, run-down basement, where I watched, enthralled, as Gabriadze’s tiny puppet tanks advanced to the rousing strains of Shostakovich. It was unforgettable.

The theater was a dump, but then, so was the rest of the city. The old buildings were missing many of the elegant narrow bricks first introduced there by the Byzantines. The covered balconies with their delicate latticework, a gift of the Ottomans, were listing and rotting. There was litter everywhere. An apartment’s garbage disposal was often its front window.

None of this made the city any less romantic or delightful. Houses still clung to the cliffs above the Kura river as they did centuries ago, looking as though they might suddenly lose their grip. A faint smell of sulfur hung over the shallow domes of the old baths, where Pushkin once ogled Georgian women bathing. From high up on the cliff, the stones of the ruined Narikala fortress gazed over the town from the fourth century, and the eighth, and the 13th, and the 17th. History has played rough with Tbilisi for a very long time.

Persians, Byzantines, Ottomans, Russians and Soviets have all had their way with her. Each has left a little of its best self there. The
result is a city that Boris Pasternak called a chimera—a fanciful beast with a Western head and an Eastern body. Tbilisi has gotten even more fanciful recently. Italian architects have been busy with glass and steel, adding the sleek vernacular of modern capitalism to the city’s babel of building styles.

The new buildings are striking, and some are beautiful. Do they belong here among the ruins of dead empires? It turns out that question is as much political as aesthetic. Georgia’s new buildings have become pawns in a power struggle over its place in the world. Does it belong in the cosmopolitan sphere of the European architects who built them? Or should it remain somewhere lost in time, “a city as if not of this world,” as Pasternak puts it?

It is impossible not to be struck by how much the city has changed since I had last seen it, maybe four years ago. Gabriadze has a renovated theater, which opened in 2010. He designed it with the same cockeyed whimsy he puts into the puppets he makes. A crooked clock tower, encrusted with Gabriadze’s handmade tiles, sprouts a pomegranate tree from its roof. A gold-winged angel strikes the hours.

The changes go well beyond the theater. The whole surrounding neighborhood, what the history books used to call Old Tiflis, looks freshly minted. The houses wear bright new paint, and their sagging balconies have somehow pulled themselves up straight. The streets are clean, or at least much cleaner, and there are scores of new cafes and restaurants.

This was the first time I’d had a chance to see the Peace Bridge over the Kura river—it opened in 2010. The Italian architect Michele De Lucchi gave the bridge a wavy glass roof lit by more than 1,200 LEDs for maximum twinkle.

Just down from Freedom Square at the city’s heart stands a boxy block of glass shaded by huge droopy white petals on tubular stems. It’s the new Tbilisi Public Service Hall by two other Italians, Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas, and if it seems overscaled, it’s meant to. Inside the cavernous hall, Georgians are getting married, buying new houses, paying their taxes and conducting all manner of official business with an absence of humiliation and indignity that is quite fresh here. The grandiose architecture is meant to amplify the virtues of Georgia’s kinder, gentler bureaucracy. “I’m done in five minutes, which is almost a shame because it’s so pleasant here I don’t want to leave,” one of my Georgian friends tells me.

Do not expect rousing applause for any of this, however. For all their charm, Georgians can be maddeningly querulous. Tbilisi’s face-lift has gotten many of them particularly riled up. The complaints come in a variety of voices, some shrill and some shriller. The preservationists accuse the government of handing out inducements to private developers, who favored slapdash commercialism over historical authenticity in restoring Old Tbilisi. The local artist Gio Sumbadze calls it “facadism.”

Sumbadze does have a point. There is indeed a Ye Olde quality to some of the jazzed-up facades. But in fairness, the government needed to make some concessions to induce private developers; it could never have afforded to restore Old Tbilisi on its own. Meanwhile, the Soviets had crammed four or five families into
It’s no longer used. Saakashvili moved parliament to a utopian complex he had constructed in Kauais, three hours away, by the Spanish architect Alberto Domingos. The new parliament is a big glass egg that looks intended to support humanity in an inevitable planet. "Whichever, in a sense, it’s all these new buildings were part of a package. We were trying to change the mentality of the whole apparatus," Bobekas says. "In post-Soviet times, the government had an ego and just found ways to inflame you. That’s what we were trying to leave behind. The core of the debate was always, What kind of country should Georgia be?"

Later, that debate has grown sharper teeth. Last May, gay rights demonstrators were badly beaten during a rally that had been condemned beforehand by the Georgian Orthodox Church. Ivanishvili denounced the violence, but the antimodern sentiment isn’t just aimed at buildings anymore. "That was the most shameful day in my life," Bobekas says. "They’re trying to make us un-Georgian." "I believe there’s a tipping point for everything," Kancheli says. "Sakashvili finally reached it, and now he’s gone. I think Ivanishvili’s government will ultimately reach a point on the other extreme, and then they’ll be gone too. Hopefully, one day Georgians will learn how to live in the middle." Whichever way Georgian swings, a building somewhere in Tbilisi will commemorate it.

MODERN SOCIETY
Clockwise from top left: a view of the roof of City Hall. Revolutionaries, on the former Rose mayoral residence, Gigi with soaring steel municipal building just above it; inside Ivanishvili’s $50 million compound. Minister Bidzina of Tbilisi, with the Tbilisi Public Clockwise from top left: a view of Mayor Bidzina’s residence in Tbilisi. The palace of the Tsars was at the site of a controversial music theater and exhibition hall, also designed by the Fukasawa. It was to be housed in a pair of massive, glass egg that looks intended to support human life on an inevitable planet. It’s no longer used. Saakashvili moved parliament to a utopian complex he had constructed in Kauais, three hours away, by the Spanish architect Alberto Domingos. The new parliament is a big glass egg that looks intended to support humanity in an inevitable planet. What kind of country should Georgia be?"

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