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CULTURE, POLITICS AND EVERYDAY LIFE

LEARNING FROM TBILISI
A STUDY OF ARCHITECTURES OF EVERYDAY LIFE**Introduction**

During my one year exchange in the metropolis of São Paulo I found myself more attuned to my everyday surroundings. Likewise did the experience broaden my understanding of the social meaning of architecture as material reality. From the novelty of kitchen stoves and fruit selections, to the sharp contrasts between building typologies, the experience in the city sparked my interest in the topic of *everyday life*.

At first glance the everyday and architecture appeared unproblematically intertwined, as both could be considered backdrops for human experiences. However, I would come to realize that to question their relation involves a critical examination of both terms. The everyday is often understood as the seemingly unimportant, the ordinary or the generally overlooked. Architecture, on the other hand, suggests two contrasting definitions: architecture as cultural landscape (as encompassing the entire material world), and architecture as the visionary building (as high design).¹

Theorists on everyday life have recognized the homogenization and commodification of life and landscape following the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism. Henri Lefebvre saw everyday

life as "both a colonized setting of oppression, banality, routine, passivity, and unconsciousness and the locus of an ultimate reality and a source of potential liberation".² Could everyday theories then both be used to reflect critically upon contemporary objectives and practices of professional architecture, and on the other hand indicate ways to go about for the practicing architect?

Furthermore, what can studying cultural landscapes teach me about the agency of my own profession? Can it help me to better understand my role as a soon-to-be professional practitioner?

Intention

The project is an exploration of the concept of 'everyday life', by looking at architectures that are generally overlooked within professional discourses. It is a reflexive and tactical search for a method, as well as a personal search for a critical stance.

Tbilisi and the protagonist

Inspired by Henri Lefebvre's and Michel de Certeau's theories on space and everyday life as critical political constructs, the project takes form as a practice-based research of Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. There the project started as a fieldwork, based on the hypothesis that everyday nuances

are more easily recognized in a foreign context. The city's liminal position in the global east-west dichotomy makes it an interesting case in the study of everyday practices within changing planning regimes. To navigate I chose to follow the balcony (and typologically related building extensions) as an architectural protagonist.

The study of Tbilisi has been two-sided. On the one hand I studied the city horizontally. By navigating categories of balconies I aimed to get an overview of historical planning regimes to better understand recent and current cultural narratives. On the other hand I decided on certain architectures to study vertically. This was done through a set of qualitative studies of interior spaces: the protagonist as seen from the inside.

As balconies are situated on thresholds between territorial spheres, they are carrying testimonies of the human territorial nature. Political instability, social injustice, as well as influence by rural culture have led to a rise in informal practices in Tbilisi. This includes appropriation of space and spatial organization beyond formal boundaries. The territorial tensions of the Tbilisian liminal architectures illustrate the meaning of space as socially contested.

Towards a method

During the second part of my project I started working in parallel in a physical space at Bergen School of Architecture, with the aim to embody my research, acknowledging that architecture starts with the body and that the everyday exists in the scale of 1:1. The goal of the laboratory was to practically reflect on knowledge from the previous phase and eventually formulate a set of methodological principles. Among them most importantly stands to practice tactical thinking and to nurture *use value*: to cultivate the usability of space.

Henri Lefebvre encouraged "a style of thinking turned toward the possible in all areas".³ To recognize architecture as culture means to see that space is culturally produced. This suggests to challenge cultural conventions as a method towards positive change.

References

- [1] Upton, Dell (1968) *Architecture in Everyday Life* New Literary History, Volume 33, Number 4, Autumn 2002, pp. 707
- [2] *Ibid.* pp.712
- [3] Lefebvre, Henri (2009). *State, space, world: Selected essays* (N. Brenner & S. Elden, Eds; G. Moore, N. Brenner, & S. Elden, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp.288

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