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Building the State, Branding the Nation: The role of iconic architecture in transforming post-Soviet Baku, Azerbaijan

Overview

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emerging fifteen nation states were faced with the monumental task of formulating individual national identities and producing a new sense of collective belonging within their state boundaries. Many of these countries approached the task by sponsoring dramatic construction campaigns with iconic architecture. The South Caucasus' state of Azerbaijan is a particularly strong example of this development. In the decades since independence in 1991, the country has increasingly used state oil revenues to transform the image of its capital, Baku, into one of an international hub. Baku's spectacular new architecture has been further accompanied by the government's hosting of large-scale international events, such as the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest, 2015 European Games, 2016 & 2017 Formula 1 motor races, and the 2017 Islamic Solidarity Games. These events lure wealthy foreigners in the hopes of filling the city's new hotel and apartment buildings. Between 01-22 June 2016, I travelled to Baku in order to critically examine how these processes of new development were taking place. During this time, I was able to conduct site visits throughout the metropolitan region, documenting many of the new architectural attractions and interviewing local architects and citizens. I gathered a sense of the changing image of the city, but also collected impressions of local residents who continue to struggle with the complete overhauling of many neighborhoods. The following grant report first provides a brief contextual framing of the post-Soviet nation building process, before moving on to describe these developments in Baku specifically. It concludes with suggestions for areas of future research in support of my PhD dissertation.

State Building and Nation Branding in the Former Soviet Sphere

Physical state building and ideological nation building have long been concomitant processes. Over the past few decades, the nations of Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Eastern Europe in particular have seen a remarkable amount of new urban development taking place in the name of post-independence progress. Prior to this, these same regions experienced multiple transitions in foreign-imposed rule, including from Imperial Russia, the Ottomans, and the Soviets. A number of post-Soviet countries, including Azerbaijan, further experienced brief periods of their own national independence in the early 1900s before again falling under foreign domination. These layers have complicated contemporary definitions of collective identity and nationhood, making the connections between physical state building and national ideological formation multi-layered.

The twenty-first century architectural response to synthesizing these historic layers has in-turn taken on a remarkably broad spectrum of ideological referents and political messages—from those foregrounding a dominant ethnicity or religion (such as in Georgia and Azerbaijan) to those conversely emphasizing multi-ethnic tolerance and secular statehood (such as in Kazakhstan). As the range of edited volumes on post-Socialist nationalism and state building since 2010 alone reflect (Andrusz, Harloe & Szelényi, 2011; Diener & Hagan, 2016; Isaacs & Polese, 2016), the ways through which new state identity narratives are being communicated are now vast and all-encompassing, representing everything from official language policies, to policies on education and health, the sponsoring of new public celebrations & events, and dramatic architecture and urban transformations. With regards to the latter, urban form is a particularly useful medium for communicating state ideals on account of its large scale, public visibility, international media attention, and physical palpability. Such new public-sector projects are often framed as ‘gifts to the people’ from the government, conjuring an image of a generous and benevolent—yet strong and all-mighty—sovereign authority.

The processes of ideological state building are also concomitant with those of historic erasure, with the demolition of existing city fabric taking place in order to clear space for the emergence of a new identity. Beyond this emphasis on the role of new branded architecture during nation building then, various scholars have begun analyzing the ways in which existing built fabric is being erased, renovated, altered, or otherwise transformed in the name of collective identity formation. Dwyer & Alderman (2008) and Chang & Huang (2005) argue that a crucial component of nation building is such efforts toward collective amnesia and the erasure of the past. Pre-existing and obsolete narratives must be attenuated if new state narratives are to effectively take hold. The demolition of urban fabric is a primary means of accomplishing this act.

Much mainstream focus on the urban transformations of post-Soviet cities has been with regards to the grandeur of the newly-constructed, spectacle-rich works of architecture used specifically for government institutions. Yet, it is equally important to consider projects in the private sector and the broader economic drivers of new construction in these emerging nations. Neoliberalism and globalization are increasingly driving the need for nations to brand their cities for economic competition and have lead governments to rely on large developers to undertake such initiatives. The push for global market competitiveness therefore adds greater complexity to our understandings of why ruling governments may choose to undertake dramatic nation building campaigns. In such instances, seemingly straightforward desires to communicate state power through architecture become over-complicated and muddled by concurrent issues of economic development, foreign investment attraction, and extra-national political alignment—particularly in relation to regional trade agreements and the influence of economic sectors such as tourism, which possess their own branding components. In this sense, the development challenges facing cities of the former Soviet Union can be seen as coinciding with those of other rapidly transforming cities the world-over, which are all driven to physical and ideological change as a means of surviving in an increasingly globalizing and neoliberal era.

Azerbaijan’s Building Boom and its Socio-Political Ramifications

The resource-rich nation of Azerbaijan emerged from the Soviet Union with great potential for economic growth as an independent country and regional hub of capitalist accumulation. As the world’s first centre for oil and natural gas extraction in the nineteenth century, Azerbaijan has had a long history of reflecting its economic prosperity through built form (O’Lear 2001, Grant 2010, Valiyev 2013, Koch and Valiyev 2015). When Azerbaijan gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, a capitalist class emerged

from within the country's governing elite, carried forward from Soviet times. It resulted in an urban growth coalition of state officials and entrepreneurs that continue to direct the nation's development primarily in the service of their own interests. Put succinctly by anthropologist Bruce Grant: "to speak in any critical way of the new construction in the city is therefore necessarily to criticize the government, a body politic with which most have their own clientelist relations" (Grant 2014, 514). Similarly, Koch & Valiyev (2015) build upon Logan & Molotch's (1976) concept of an 'urban growth machine' to describe the ways in which Azerbaijan's ruling elite have directly profited from spectacular post-independence urban development.

Since the early 2000s, Baku has seen a dramatic rise in new construction—particularly with regards to luxury commercial, residential and hotel facilities. Key recent projects include: Baku TV Tower (1996), The Flame Towers (2007), Baku Business Centre (2011), Crystal Hall (2012); The Carpet Museum (2014), White City (still under construction), the world's largest flagpole¹, the Winter Boulevard (2014), and the Aliyev Centre (2012). Many of these newly-built projects involved not only colossal state spending, but also mass demolitions and displacement (HRW, 2012). For example, the construction of the 37,000 m² Crystal Hall stadium as a waterfront venue for hosting the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest destroyed the neighborhood of Bayil in the south-west of the city. Similarly, large portions of the Old Jewish district were demolished in order to create the outdoor promenade park referred to as the Winter Boulevard. Across town, the dramatic white and curvilinear architecture of Zaha Hadid's Aliyev Centre likewise led to mass resident displacements and neighborhood destruction (HRW, 2012). The demolition of the Soviet-era neighborhood of Sovietski was still actively underway during my research visit to Baku in June 2016. The area is purportedly being razed in order to make room for an additional park, flanked by new high-end condominiums. In line with the notion of urban erasure being integral to new identity formation, these large-scale demolitions work not only to abolish the memories of Baku's Soviet past, but also effectively displace the lower class residents who were keeping this history alive. Instead, new construction ushers in a population of young upper middle-class residents and wealthy foreigners.

What has come to emerge as the dominating image of new Baku, therefore, are monumentally-scaled works of architecture that are directed primarily toward leisure consumption by Azeri elites and non-residents. These projects aim to communicate to an outside audience that Azerbaijan is capable of possessing the same prestigious landmarks and services found in other global cities. In terms of nation branding, such architecture specifically foregrounds the supremacy of the ruling Aliyev family as a marker of power and unity in the country. Heydar Aliyev was president of Azerbaijan between 1993 and 2003, after decades of serving in high-ranking Soviet positions. His son, Ilham Aliyev, succeeded him as President of Azerbaijan following his death in 2003 and remains in power today. Zaha Hadid's Aliyev Centre is a clear example of spectacular new architecture being used to instill pride in both Azerbaijan and the Aliyev family. When viewed from above, the building massing resembles Heydar's signature and the project was toponymically named in his honor. A key component of the interior curated content of the Centre is an exhibition with a chronological homage to the events of Heydar's life and service to his country.

In other projects, the grandeur of Azerbaijan itself is more strongly foregrounded, such as with the HOK-designed Flame Towers, the tallest buildings in the country, which were designed to symbolize the flare stacks of the nation's oil rigs. The LED façade panels display images of the Azeri flag when illuminated at

¹ As of 2011, Dushanbe, Tajikistan has bypassed Baku in claiming the world's tallest flagpole

night. Likewise, the under-construction Crescent Development Project closer to the city's waterfront alludes to the Islamic crescent, a symbol also found on Azerbaijan's flag.

Field Work Reflections and Future Research

Throughout the course of my 2016 trip to Azerbaijan, it became apparent that there was strong disconnect between visual representations of Baku as a successfully emerging global city and the actual experience of daily life for many local residents. While much of the city's architectural propaganda propounded a sense of vibrancy and equality, many new buildings sat vacant or devoid of public activity. There further appeared to be disjuncture between the government's stated success of new architecture and such projects' actual physical neighborhood integration since the new projects rarely connected with adjacent impoverished districts and provided little to no amenities for their residents. Framed as post-card perfect settings, the new projects relied more upon the circulation of their imagery abroad than on local experience.

Moving forward as a doctoral candidate at MIT, I aim to expand my initial research on Baku to further include locations across the broader South Caucasus region (including in Georgia and Armenia) and in other former socialist destinations, such as Yugoslavia and Central Asia. In addition to considering a greater geographic region, I aim to expand the thematic scope of my research to include un-realized early design proposals that also circulate as forms of nation branding propaganda. Bolstering the image of the country abroad, these un-built visions are part of a growing trend in nation branding that has taken particular hold in globally-emerging nations—and one that blurs the line between image and reality by presenting finished and unfinished projects alongside one another. Through my early field research in Baku, it became very apparent that the agency of these types of unrealized and partially-realized architectural design proposals is a large force driving real estate speculation. More than early illustrations of design proposals, such un-built projects work as a form of hype that bolsters economic activity by over-creating the impression of market prosperity in Azerbaijan. In turn, these proposals provide the Azeri government and members of Baku's growth machine with political support.

Specifically in Baku, I am interested in examining more closely two case studies of proposed yet unrealized island mega-projects: the 2009 Zira Island Master Plan and the 2010 Khazar Islands Plan. Overwhelming in scale, these proposals have been branded with environmental sustainability narratives and aim to position Azerbaijan as a regional leader in green urban design. Still, after almost a decade of media campaigns and press announcements, nothing has come of these projects. The Zira Island proposal has been completely frozen in its design stage and the Khazar Islands Plan has only partially begun groundwork. Such projects are indicative of the trend toward ostentatious project proposals in Azerbaijan. While much new urban construction has already taken place, there remains even more development in early design proposal phases. Collectively, these realized, partially-realized, and unrealized projects are producing a new international image of Azerbaijan as a (real and imagined) nation.

As cities around the world compete with one another to lure capital and to boost their global status, branded architecture is becoming increasingly expensive, ostentatious and technologically sophisticated. The high-risk financial nature of grand architectural proposals and their frequent associations with displacement or environmental destruction suggests that the mega-project model is flawed. At the same time, there remain key advantages for governments to proposing designs that are more spectacular than they are feasible. Through my continued research, I aim to critically assess the various benefits and detriments of such an

approach to architectural commodification in the former Soviet sphere, particularly foregrounding the role of collectively identity formation in this process.

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