

# A View of the Pandemic from the City of Balconies

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*The City of Balconies*, a mid-twentieth century novel by Nikoloz Gabaoni (republished in 2017), is a beautiful homage to nineteenth-century Tbilisi. In it Gabaoni provides a vivid description of the city's eclectic atmosphere, as experienced by residents from their various courtyards and balconies. What the book makes clear is that apart from having unique architectural features, the courtyards and balconies of Old Tbilisi are important catalysts for social life in the city. They are the venues in which deep rooted place meanings are formed while people go about their daily routines. Today, few would argue with this notion; the vernacular image of old Tbilisi continues to be positively presented in literature, urban scholarship, and tourism marketing, shown as embodying the rich communal life of a bustling European city (Manning 2009; Герсамя 1984).

By contrast, the hundreds of large housing estates that mushroomed in the peripheries of Georgian cities in the second half of the twentieth century have been depicted as largely devoid of social life, oppressively grey, and lacking strong senses of public activity. Critics of these sort of quintessential prefabricated modernist neighborhoods the world over have described them as far too physically separated and divided by vast public realms to promote social interactions. While there are indeed shortcomings of this form of 'tower in the park' urbanism, a growing body of ethnographic literature shows that they are rarely devoid of social life (for example: Humphrey 2005; Urban 2013; Attwood 2013). Rather, across the world's mass-produced housing estates one can easily find a rich sense of community and social engagement. This is the case irrespective of the seeming monotony and lack of maintenance of the architecture itself. Tapping into this reality simply requires moving away from aesthetic critiques toward deeper understandings of personal experiences.

## **Studying Social Activity in Georgia's Prefabricated Modernist Neighborhoods**

In line with this, in May 2020, I worked with ninety-four undergraduate students from the Cultural Geography program of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University to better understand these lived realities. Over several weeks, students living in Georgia's prefabricated modernist neighborhoods were tasked with conducting firsthand observations of their social environments. The initiative had students participate from cities across Georgia, including Batumi, Kutaisi, Rustavi, and Tbilisi. Students carefully watched, listened, and recorded all that unfolded around them in their neighborhoods. They then completed a thirty-five-question survey to reflect on their observations and prepared an essay summarizing their findings. While the work was not of a duration to qualify as ethnography or of the same empirical rigor as professional academic studies, it provides a unique window into the lives of these communities. As an assignment appropriate for undergraduates, it enabled students to begin assessing their surrounding built environment and examining its capacity for social activity more critically.

The assignment had an additional layer of novelty since it was assigned amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, daily life in Georgia was significantly transformed as the government introduced new restrictive measures aimed at stymying the virus's spread. All public transportation was suspended, employees were told to work remotely, universities switched to online learning, and a nationwide public curfew prohibited residents from leaving their homes between the hours of 21:00 and 6:00. My students documented not only the social contexts of their neighborhoods as they had been prior to the pandemic, but also how neighborhoods changed as a result of national mobility restrictions,

curfews, and area lockdowns. Beyond learning about the social life of Georgia's prefabricated modernist neighborhoods, therefore, the assignment presented a unique opportunity to reflect on innovative approaches to pedagogy through distance education. As a result, the work has important takeaways both for what the students observed in their changing neighborhoods and for what can be learned about their research approach as an alternative means of knowledge creation via embeddedness with local communities.

For anyone who has spent time in one of Georgia's prefabricated modernist neighborhoods, it will come as no surprise that students found these areas to be full of social activity. Summarizing their experiences while peering out of windows or lounging on balconies, students described neighborhoods supporting a broad range of public interactions; plazas between buildings were used as communal spaces for people of all ages and social gatherings of all sizes. For example, groups of teenagers could often be observed chatting outside building entranceways. Common plazas frequently served as the venues for multi-generational gatherings for things like birthdays and public holidays. Some residents interacted only briefly. Others, like pensioners and children, tended to occupy the public realm for entire portions of the day. Across the student observations, playgrounds were described as full of activity, packed with happy children getting in their daily dose of exercise while their parents chatted with one another at the periphery. Local shops were similarly portrayed as the sites of a constant ebb and flow of residents. Visitors, such as taxi drivers, also frequently entered the scene, picking up any number of small shop items, from cigarettes to soft drinks. Georgia's characteristic *birzhas*, or men's informal social gatherings, were similarly often captured. In them, neighbors would gather and talk for hours, resting on curbs, front steps, or park benches. In the evenings, car owners sometimes parked their vehicles on side streets in order to convert their garages into spaces for communal neighborhood feasts. In other words, contrary to the popular view of large-scale, prefabricated modernist neighborhoods as drab and devoid of social life, the students found that virtually everywhere they looked there was a flurry of public activity.

### **A View of the Pandemic from the City of Balconies**

With the heavy onset of pandemic-related mobility restrictions in March 2020, many of my students feared the dying out of these sorts of social life in their communities. They had strong premonitions that there would be lasting impacts on the ties between neighbors and that neighborhoods would struggle to eventually return to their former levels of public activity. Continuing to peer out from their windows and balconies, they observed as outdoor gatherings shrunk in size and diminished in duration. Residents increasingly stood farther apart from one another, avoiding hugging or kissing, holding off chatting for too long—all in the name of public safety. Rather than the erosion of social ties, however, many students felt that such measures were actually the result of mutual respect amongst neighbors. Overwhelmingly, residents wanted those in their community to be safe and were willing to abide by temporary social distancing measures to ensure that this would happen. Importantly, some students even noticed the emergence of increased solidarity amongst neighbors. Elderly and poorer residents were often helped by their younger, wealthier, and more able-bodied neighbors who provided things like food, personal protection equipment, and medicine.

Residents also compensated for diminished face-to-face interactions by transitioning to the digital realm. For example, during the peak of the pandemic's mobility restrictions, several neighborhoods continued their social ties by setting up online forums like Facebook groups. Resident-to-resident telephone calls also increased, as did distanced balcony conversations. Through these alternative channels, neighbors would update one another on their health status, coordinate shopping for vulnerable community members, and discuss many other topics relevant to their district. These measures were highly effective at retaining a level of social activity in neighborhoods amidst increased restrictions on mobility. They provided a sense of community resiliency and, once government restrictions were finally eased, they meant that residents were able to successfully revert back to their earlier levels of

connectivity. Overall, the students found that residents worked hard to foster community solidarity and to promote a sense of kindness towards others.

### **Remote Education Through Embeddedness with Local Communities**

In reflecting back upon this assignment, there are also important lessons for remote education and digital pedagogy. The necessity of distance learning due to the closure of universities in Georgia presented significant challenges as an instructor. Beyond navigating computer logistics, many students found it hard to concentrate on their studies and felt worried about their future academic paths. Added to these concerns were more pragmatic challenges of converting domestic spheres into temporary classroom environments; bedrooms became libraries, kitchen tables became lecture rooms. By allowing students to incorporate their changing surroundings into their class assignment, they were provided with an outlet for these concerns. They could discuss how they saw the pandemic changing society and what that meant for the physical spaces of their community. Through their firsthand observations, they came to understand how different spaces can support different activities, and in doing so they bridged the collapsing domestic and academic spheres of learning from home. Importantly, the assignment made students feel less isolated during online learning. Overall, through their long periods of close observation from windows and balconies, students were able to feel engaged in the life of their neighborhoods.

As restrictions gradually eased, students gained insights into social resiliency, learning about the ability of their neighborhood activities to revert back to what they had been previously. These findings underscore the power of personal observation as a pedagogical and research tool in situations where universities are closed and only remote learning is possible. Thinking back to Gabaoni's *The City of Balconies*, my Cultural Geography students have produced similarly captivating accounts of the social lives of Georgia's hundreds of prefabricated modernist buildings. Perhaps into the future, these locations, too, will come to hold an important place in the country's rich urban history.

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