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Disclaiming and Reclaiming the Public



ապեր էս նկարում ես, որ տեղեկիզորով ցույց տաս 2005թ.

Within these last 5-6 years, it has been possible to perceive an increasing wave of public activism, in the capitals of former Soviet republics, supporting the protection of urban buildings and spaces which had public functions during the Soviet period.

The process of privatization started right after the collapse of the Soviet Union and has been quite intensive and, in some cases, quite violent. However, only comparatively recently have the societies of these countries started to reflect deeply on these cases of appropriation of public property, these architectural and spatial reorganizations of the urban body. Previously, when important architectural monuments from various epochs in various republics were demolished, it happened sometimes that resistance came from the public outside of narrow professional circles; but this resistance mainly emphasized the cultural and historical aspects of the buildings, detaching them from their social, political, ideological contexts.

The recent activism is connected with the appearance and hyper-intensive growth of social networks, which, furthermore, diversified the discourse, producing new articulations of the problem. The struggle did not become easier. There were some victories when society succeeded in forcing the

state or the developers to give up or postpone their demolition plans. But there were more defeats. New developers, in collaboration with state systems of control, sometimes used brute force to suppress the social protests, and also borrowed from the protesters the inverted tactics and rhetoric of "disagreement." The diametrically opposed intentions of two sides in the midst of severe discussions concerning the rightness of their arguments often led to dramatic and quite carnivalesque confrontations in which the topic of the conflict gradually dissolved in between the pathetic and cynical attitudes of the confronting parties.

The combination of those two attitudes embedded in the core of a struggle for a space could seem, on one hand, paradoxical, and, on the other hand, quite simple if not banal; one party is trying to privatize and capitalize property that once used to belong to everyone, and the other is trying to restore justice in regards to the preservation of the common wealth. The paradoxical aspect is that both sides speak in the name of the public, and propose their versions regarding the reuse and redistribution of former Socialist property while juggling old concepts and constructs, but at the same time either keeping silent about the social and economic origin of those buildings and spaces or openly blasting the Soviet past and its heritage. While maneuvering in between those different, contradictory, uncertain, and quite abstract notions, both sides are thoroughly testing each other, and at the same time speculating about new horizons for societal organization through architectural transmutations.

In a 2005 photo installation called "Hey bro, are you shooting in order to show it on TV afterwards?" Mher Azatyan depicted simple, out-of-use objects - a broken refrigerator, a gas oven, a rusty bucket, empty vegetable oil cans - placed in the middle of pavement. The placement looks very random, but it has intervened quite aggressively into the public territory, and in doing so, creating a zone which could merge public and private functions - an anonymous, self-organized territory formed by anonymous citizens for an anonymous public. While quite concrete, the display is rather ephemeral. It functions in the pedestrian zone as a certain point of interruption, a territory of "idleness" (the display implies a place where people could come together, having a sit, rest, talk, or play cards) which proposes itself as an organically-developed opposition to the systematized pedestrian path. Interestingly, apparently-random architectural structures were a common phenomenon in the post-1960s Soviet urban reality. Against the backdrop of evolving state capitalism, it became quite common for Soviet citizens to improve the conditions of their living space by transforming their *khrushchevka* balconies into glass porches, or by subtly occupying a territory from the public space in the common yard through step by step tactics - planting a tree, building an improvised fence (out of a piece of broken iron pipe, for example) and an improvised bench (like a box or a metal can), which, since the moment of installation, constantly but unnoticeably starts moving, day by day, expanding and securing the territory for the anonymous owner who pretends to create a space for public use. Many of those spaces over the years transformed into

garages, some of into kiosks, small shops or even houses by the silent agreement of the society, which, during the Soviet period, unconsciously supported the appropriation of its collective property, wordlessly sympathizing with the invisible manifestations of anarchic individualism as a form of disagreement with the existing political, economic and social setup where commonality was the basic determining ideological concept. General disappointment and, since the late 1960s, increasing disbelief in socialist and communist projects generated in the collective consciousness of late Soviet society a quite paradoxical world outlook, where the public wealth was considered as something given, while the fair distribution of it seemed absolutely impossible. The gap created within the dichotomy of that logic became a perfect space for different kind of speculations, varying from theoretical assumptions to prosaic manipulations leading to the accumulation of capital. And, interestingly, those speculative tactics within the last decades of the Soviet empire did not have the logic of vertical confrontation between the power system and society. There were many cases (sometimes even really anecdotal) of how architects in collaboration with the local political elites found ways to bypass the system and general regulations in order to construct something that did not fit the assigned economic quotas or ideological frameworks. A good example is a story from the early 1970s. A delegation from Moscow GOSPLAN (State Economic Planning Commission), accompanied by Armenian political authorities in a car on the newly-constructed 70 kilometer highway from Yerevan to Sevan suddenly discovered that the highway they were taking should have not existed, as it was not planned and was not subsidized by their Central State Economic Commission. So the highway, metaphorically speaking, appeared out of thin air. There were, of course, explanations about savings and the management of the regional budget; but in the end, the highway was needed, even though it was not on GOSPLAN's list of planned and subsidized constructions. The highway was built because of public need, which, in fact, was the major argument used in any disagreement with the Soviet system. The occupations of residential yards were motivated by similar sentiments: that the "randomly" developed spaces (though everybody knew that they were not randomly developed) fulfilled a public need.

In Mher Azatyan's photo installation, we confront a formally recognizable, typical post-Soviet situation, which is emphasized with a decontextualized extract from a street conversation. By superposing that text with the image, the artist creates a new poetic context that discloses the hidden significance, the final goal, and the whole prehistory of that "random" display.

"Hey bro, are you shooting in order to show it on TV afterwards?" is a question that ironically rewinds and inverts the logic of that display to its hidden motivation, where, in the name of the public, the private anonymous is asking the artist/photographer/anxious citizen if he is making a video to show back to the public.

That apparently naïve question contains curiosity, anxiety, and a certain portion of warning or threat.

After the fall of the Soviet system, the privatization of former socialist property took place in a comparatively short period of time. But it was still difficult to uproot from the collective memory the perception that those buildings, sites and spaces had been associated with a different form of property. Of course the destruction and transformation of those buildings and spaces involved many different premises and motivations (mainly related to economic factors and the qualitative incompatibilities of those buildings in a new epoch), but the economic, social, political and cultural inconsistency of those buildings always remained in the background, in the unconscious, popping out in the most critical moments of the public confrontations that took place in recent years related to the protection of several buildings in Yerevan - the Youth Palace, the Moscow Open Air Hall Cinema, Mashtots Park, Zvartnots Airport, and the Covered Market).



The case of the reconstruction (a better term would be "fundamental corruption") of the Covered Market in Yerevan is a significant example of conceptual reassignment. It was privatized in the first years of the post-Soviet Armenian reality, but it continued to be perceived by the citizens as one of the most important traditional public spaces architecture, the market was also categorized as a historical-cultural monument. The building needed a major renovation, as for at least two decades it had had no proper maintenance. No-one expected that the new owner of the building would want to completely reconstruct the historical monument, and it was absolutely beyond imagination that neither the Ministry of Culture nor the governmental authorities of the city of Yerevan would be unable to prevent the obvious act of vandalism. The developer masterfully maneuvered through the gaps in the legislative system, leaving all the responsible institutions paralyzed. He delicately developed a step-by-step tactic of carrying out the construction work, breaking it into phases, starting with unnoticeable changes, in order to give the public a false sense of security. Then on New Year's Eve, when people were busy with their families and holidays, he started the massive destruction of the rear arches of the building. He was actually applying the same tactic described in the beginning of this text, where an anonymous

individual occupies communal space. He perfectly understood the collective psychology and the perceptual gaps in the collective thinking of people who still bear the trauma and undifferentiated perceptions inherited from their past, and he succeeded in dealing with the public rage that came up as a result of his vandalism by confronting it with another rage from another public living in the vicinity of the market - people whom he had promised to return to the market after its reconstruction, where they would find themselves in clean, cozy, warm, new conditions. The developer formed a new social group that argued for the improvement of its economic and social conditions, and he set it against the other group of activists who appealed to notions like "collective memory," "cultural heritage," and "urban history." This confrontation brought up all the actors and all the polarized mentalities that were involved in the communal property occupation process during the late Soviet period, but in an inverted form, where the *lumpen* (who in the former occupation process used to have invisible and active role) now took the role of an active revolutionary class, accusing the other party (the one that during the Soviet period used to silently sympathize with the appropriation of common as a protest to the system) of having a bourgeois attitude, of being detached from the local socioeconomic reality.

The confrontation lasted for a few months in front of the market. The culmination of it was the formation of another new group of demonstrators. This group (among whom it was possible to recognize the same people that were appearing in the other rallies initiated by the owner of the building) proactively claimed to be socialists at the moment when the discourse started to shift from cultural complaints to the social and economic aspects of the problem. Ironically, that staged confrontation of so-called socialists with the civic activists protecting the market building from destruction revealed the fake socialists' major fear: when the social component was reinstated in the collective consciousness, they comprehended their own complicity in the collective economic and social set-up (even if it is embodied in architecture), a complicity that they had denied.



The civic activists were defeated. The Covered Market kept its front façade, but the whole body of the building was changed, and the market was converted into a shopping mall. The fake socialists fighting for the reconstruction of the building got a few counters to sell some vegetables and fruits in a tiny sector in front of the building to create the impression that it was still a marketplace and to show the social significance of the new space. A few months later, all those people were thrown out from the mall, as they were corroding the logic and aesthetics of the modernized shopping center and continued trading greens and lemons on the pavement in the vicinity of mall. The new shopping mall is working and creating its own public, despite the fact that the building lost its former significance, was crossed off by the citizens from the list of popular urban sites, and continues to be boycotted by a great number of Yerevan dwellers. It is difficult to judge if it was a smart investment by the owner, but one thing is obvious: the reconstruction of the market did not arise from a pragmatic business approach, but more as a manifestation of symbolic and political gestures.

The case of the Covered Market is one of many similar cases that took place in various post-Soviet urban situations. Societies try and fail to defend some historical building, then end up in a deadlock. These deadlocks are more complex than they seem at first sight, and people try to explain the reasons for them. But it is becoming obvious that the way beyond them can come from asking the right questions. What exactly are the societies trying to defend? What vital concepts and important constructs are embedded in the forms and functions of those buildings and spaces, making them so significant? What constructs are embedded in the collective thinking of the society? What are the conceptual inconsistencies of those constructs? And what are the gaps between opposing positions which might serve for speculation on new forms of common space for different social groups, classes and individualities?

