Blank Zones in Collective Memory  
or The Transformation of Yerevan’s Urban Space in the 60s  

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Moscow Cinema Theater open air hall  
(part A)

The beginning of 2010 in Yerevan was marked by an unprecedented activist movement which began right after the Armenian Government made certain changes in the List of Historical and Cultural Monuments of the City of Yerevan. The changes concerned the open air hall of the Moscow Cinema Theater, a bright example of the late modernist architecture of the 60s, which was taken out of the list with a subsequent commission that it should be destroyed and the church of St. Poghos-Petros (St. Paul and Peter) that had been destroyed during Stalin’s antireligious campaign in the 30s should be constructed in its place.

The decision provoked an immediate and quite unexpected (in its scale) reaction. A Facebook group called “SAVE Cinema Moscow Open Air Hall” was formed and 6000 members joined the group in a short period of time. In addition, an activist initiative that organized various types of actions, public discussions, etc. was formed. One of the most effective actions was the signature campaign that was held for a week during which more than 26000 signatures were collected for preserving Moscow Cinema Theater open air hall. Different professional unions, NGOs and other public institutions also supported the initiative. The campaign started to gain wide public resonance, shifting the discourse to broader sociocultural and political levels, which was rather unexpected and unwanted for the government and for the church. After hot debates in the press, TV, radio and the internet, the church, as well as the government decided to pull back and suspend the implementation of their plans for a while. They announced that the question was being considered by different commissions, which could either mean real discussions or it can be the usual tactic employed to stagnate the problem by freezing public attention.

The problem regarding the Moscow Cinema Theater open air hall is actually more complex than it may seem at first sight. In a strange way, it ties up the epoch when it was built, with its tensions, emancipatory energies and paradoxes, to the neoconservative context of neoliberal sociopolitical and cultural actuality.

The open air hall was constructed between 1964 and 1966 by architects Spartak Knedgehtsyan and Telman Gevorgyan. It has been one of the best examples of the revived functionalist approaches in post-Stalin Soviet Armenian architecture that were developing parallel to the intensive urbanization of the city of Yerevan. Architects masterly transformed a constricted backyard between two buildings into a rationally used space where the combination of concrete forms with developed superfluous spaces mixed with integrated natural elements created a distinguished ensemble in the very heart of Yerevan.

An amphitheater with an extensive foyer underneath, it used to be one of the most popular and active cafés in the city. The wide terrace that united the amphitheater with the sidewalk broke the rigidity of the given topographical geometry by intervening with and obeying it at the same time and allowing the trees on the sidewalk to grow through the firmness of its concrete and in this way created many new perspectives for observing the surrounding reality as well as the very architecture. But one of the most important features of this architecture (as well as many other architectural forms created in the very same period in Yerevan and Armenia) that I would like to focus on is how it formed certain surplus spaces in the urban environment which could be regarded as kind of blank or so to say “extraterritories”; territories that shaped new perceptions...
of urban space, new urban cultures and politics, the formation of which was tightly intertwined with the appearance of the qualitatively and essentially new public spaces in the city terrain. However, since the middle 90s those specific spaces have been vanishing from the urban environment either by being destroyed or corrupted beyond recognition. It could seem that in a newly developing post-ideological society these constructions and spaces have remained as examples to or reminders of something else/ different that could hardly fit in the economy and politics of a new sociocultural paradigm. The tendentious demolition of these structures and spaces was evolving with the reconsiderations of historical narratives, and the occupation of these “extraterritories” of the city in a symbolic way was an erasure of certain zones from collective memory; a phenomenon that, in a paradoxical way, juxtaposes that certain trend in the period of the 60s to form blank spaces in the urban environment with the formation of blank spaces in collective memory. Thus, we are dealing with a forced or natural collective amnesia the symptoms of which could be traced back to the very 60s.

Collective amnesia and/or blank spots of the 60s

Reflecting on the Soviet 60s nowadays, we are dealing with such an enormous amount of information, images, personages and narratives as well as their interpretations that (both during the Soviet and post-Soviet times) there have been only few subtle reconsiderations connected with changes in the political and cultural paradigm. The connection between these elements may seem quite contradictory and sometimes really forced as if you are trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle knowing about a certain image, but the pieces either do not fit or compose other/different fragmented pictures leaving extensive blank zones in between.

Despite the fact that the epoch of the 60s is firmly stamped in the collective memory of ex-Soviet societies as an extremely important part of their histories that conditioned, in many senses, the subsequent development of their cultural, social and political environments, it is also possible to follow how this memory is fixated on certain events and data which are associated only with the established local historical master narrative which is mainly being called up to rationalize the present state of those societies. Scarce publications about the period mainly focus on certain subjects and mostly deal with them in quite narrow and individuated contexts. But as soon as you try to step beyond the trite and general stories about the “thaw,” “khruschevka,” dissident culture and politics, revived national self consciousness, and just talk to people of the 60s about the 60s, quite often you may confront an interesting but at the same paradoxical situation where a very slight allusion to that period rouses an intensive flow of fragmented private memorie intertwined with scrappy but at the same time bright images and emotions which are generally interrupted by a deep impenetrable spotty memory effect. It might seem that the selective processing of private memory is constantly correlatin personal data with the junctures inscribed in the timeline of the historical narrative (believed to be a collective memory) as well as with the contemporary context which seems to be in total opposition to the paradigms of the “romantic rebellious epoch.” And whatever does not fit in the narrative is selfcensored, ignored or just deleted from memory.

Exploring the transformation of Yerevan city in the period of the 60s, I discovered a very interesting case of collective memory loss that concerned the change of the most visible symbols of the city.

In the beginning of the year 1962, the monument of Stalin that was “watching” the city from the heights of one of Yerevan hills, was displaced and the roof of the World War 2 Victory Museum’s building that used to serve as a
huge podium for the monument remained empty till 1967. After a 5 year break another monument, *Mother Armenia*, was put on display to substitute the “Father of the Nations.”

Though it might sound ironic, it took quite a long time and a lot of effort to figure out the exact date of the monument of Stalin in Yerevan was displaced. Despite the fact that it was one of the biggest and most well-known monuments in the Soviet Union made by Sergey Merkurov, its displacement hasn’t been covered well enough neither in books nor in documentaries.\(^1\)

For some people, the date the monument was taken down was associated with the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 where Khrushchev denounced Stalin’s crimes and the “cult of personality.” Or there was another fixation that the monument had been removed in 1967, right before *Mother Armenia* was installed in the same place. The only thing that got imprinted in collective memory was the case about the two workers who were killed during the removal process.

In the book about Jakov Zarobyan (the first secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Republic of Armenia in the period of 1960-1966) written by his son Nikita Zarobyan there is a very interesting detail that describes the whole political context of the period when Stalin’s monument was displaced in Yerevan. This was in fact one of the latest displacements of Stalin’s monuments in Soviet capitals, and the son of the former first secretary describes the reason for this delay as a form of hidden diplomacy between Armenia and Georgia. And this story is also connected with another veiled and/or forgotten episode from the Soviet past.

Spontaneous large-scale demonstrations took place in Tbilisi as well as other cities in Georgia (Gori, Sukhumi, Batumi) right after the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, where the offended demonstrators were trying to defend the outraged honor of their compatriot Josef Stalin. The Tbilisi revolt lasting five days (between 5 and 10 March) that was violently suppressed by military forces (the number of estimated casualties varies from several dozens to several hundreds) could be considered a breaking point and a symptomatic event in Soviet history. Aside form being a painful reaction of a society at the end of the Stalinist myth, it also became the starting point for the development of new nationalist contexts and separatist discourses in Soviet sociopolitical and cultural situations that were being shaped parallel to the evolving social disbelief in the feasibility of a new social order.\(^2\)

The connection between the Tbilisi demonstrations and the late displacement of Stalin’s monument in Yerevan is explained in the memoirs about Jakob Zarobyan to be the very concrete and simple intention of the first secretary of the Armenian Communist Party of that period to keep good neighborly relations with Georgia.\(^3\) Although this description might seem really unsophisticated it also signified another important contextual shift: the peripheral republic decided to pursue its own autonomous politics by defining its strategic priorities connected with

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1. It was also impossible to find any archival photos with a missing monument, but taking family photos with the monument of Stalin and then Mother Armenia in the background was popular. I am still in the process of looking for such an image, but at the same time, it is clear why such images are missing: it did not occur to anybody to have a picture taken in front of an empty podium – a missing icon.

2. In his book titled *Unknown USSR – the Antagonism Between Society and the Power System* Vladimir Kozlov wrote about the development of the Tbilisi outbreak in 1956 among many other small scale and big scale outbreaks in the Soviet Union during the Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev periods and identified it as one of the most symtomatic outbreaks as its start had quite a symbiotic character where advocacy for Stalinism was intertwined with a nationalistic background, which at the end (on the 4th day of manifestations) turned into appeals concerning the separation of Georgia from the Soviet Union, unbelievable for that period of time. The author of the book thinks that even if those appeals had a fragmented and particular character, their effect on the subsequent development of the socio-cultural and political situation in Georgia as well as in other republics of the USSR and the Socialist Bloc was tremendous. Владимир Александрович Козлов НЕИЗВЕСТНЫЙ СССР. ПРОТИВОСТОЯНИЕ НАРОДА И ВЛАСТИ 1953-1985 Глава 7 «ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ ВОЛЯНИЯ В ГРУЗИИ ПОСЛЕ XX СЪЕЗДА КПСС» [http://krotov.info/lib_sec/11_k/05/fav_va4.htm](http://krotov.info/lib_sec/11_k/05/fav_va4.htm)

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the future development of the relations with its neighbors with a clear understanding that the regulation of national questions is no longer under the same authoritarian control of the center as it used to be during the Stalin period, which, at the same, time supposed the advance of the individualization process that started to develop in the sociopolitical, economical and political situations in every one of the 15 Soviet republics.

The Tbilisi riot, as well as many other insurrections that took place in the Soviet Union in the Khrushchev period (Murom 1961, Novocherkassk 1962, Sumgait 1963, etc.) had a very complex, multifarious and intertwined character (pro-Stalin, social, political, anarchistic) where there could be big discrepancies between the essential motivations and the final demands. Demonstrations in the early Brezhnev period were gaining a more specified character in the sense of raising concrete political demands (Yerevan 1965, Moscow 1965, etc.). But, anyhow, all those important historical episodes of public upsurges were strictly tabooed during the Soviet period. They remain only in the memories of the local participants in those rebellions, but fade away by being mythologized and losing contextual particularities.

It might sound paradoxical, but even after the fall of the Soviet Union only a minor portion of these historical episodes were just partly unveiled. The multifarious essence of these social rebellions that represented, in a certain way, the ambiguous character of the very epoch was perhaps the main reason why those narratives were retold to the public via selective and fragmented interpretations. The editing of history that started in post-Soviet societies with the revision of the narratives and images (demolition of monuments and symbols) of the communist past, to a certain extent, revitalized some of those episodes that were fitting to the political and cultural contexts of the liberalizing post-ideological society. As a rule, those interpretations obeyed the mythical narration, and what is most interesting, they were mainly deprived of the affirmation of imagery. And according to the same logic, just like there were no images of an empty podium from the interval between the displacement of Stalin’s monument and the erection of the new monument *Mother Armenia* in Yerevan, a lot of other images that might give some information and/or propose other contextual readings of the phenomenon had been either lost or taken out from public circulation and later on from collective memory.

But coming back to that particular period between 1962 and 1967, that specific temporal “void” that opened wide in the midst of an epochal shift marked by the change between two monumental symbols in Yerevan, which signified different epochs and different political and cultural hegemonies, it is possible to trace how same kind of voids were appearing in the different strata of the socio-cultural, political and even economical reality of that period. And those weren’t just the type of voids that could appear in a confused society that, after losing its leader also lost its belief in the ideas of a “bright future.” Those types of voids were very soon filled by the substitution of the “personality cult” with the “cult of the nation” as a new system of controlling a society stripped of ideological bias.

The process was much more complex and multilayered, as complex and multilayered as the society itself. Maybe it is appropriate to mention that aside from that big inter-ideological void there were many other voids of different scales and different characters that had appeared in or were generated by the same society either in order to extend the spatial and ideological (formal and informal, new and old) limitations, or to prolong the temporal void for autonomous reconsiderations of the past, the present and visions of the future.

Actively evolving urbanization of Yerevan and rural areas, intensive development of diversified industries in the whole republic with a gradual shift towards advanced technology products, establishment of scientific institutes, improvement of life standards, intensifying interrelations with the world (in the 60s there was the last big wave of repatriation of Armenians from the Diaspora), and many other progressive developments in the 60s had really influenced the reality by reviving Soviet utopias. Yerevan, as well as many other cities in the Republic, had gained a new

4 In the same period of time the monumental symbols of Motherlands were erected in almost every Soviet national republic (Mother Georgia, Motherland Kiev, Mother Belarus, etc.).
modernist appearance that was in contrast to Stalinist architecture. In parallel to the appearance of new environments in the urban space new urban cultures that were also shaping up new images of individuals were emerging. Reintegration (although partial and distanced) with worldwide sociopolitical and cultural processes and a clear vision of its own participation in the big Cold War period geopolitical setup on the one hand stimulated universalist perspectives though they were considered with a local focus, and on the other hand suggested reconsiderations of the known as well as forgotten narratives of its own history of modernization –like the formation of the first republic between 1918-1920, then the formation of the Soviet Socialist Republic in 1920. In the 60s, Sovietization started to be considered in various intellectual and political discourses as an imported and new form of colonization and this was propagated in society in direct and indirect ways despite the fact that since the beginning of the 20th century, the Caucasus used to be one of the important centers where communist and socialist revolutionary movements were developing.

The other important event in that period which determined the subsequent development of the whole sociopolitical and cultural paradigm was the demonstration of students and intelligentsia in Yerevan on 24 April 1965 (that overgrew into a large scale nation-wide demonstration) demanding the recognition of the Genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 –an issue that was strictly banned during the Stalin period. In two years, the Memorial for Genocide Victims was raised on Tsitsernakaberd Hill in Yerevan and it became a unifying symbol for Armenians scattered all over the world.

All those and many other processes and newly developing discourses concerning identity, history, perspectives about the future, etc. have opened new spaces in the collective consciousness and memory. Besides activating some forgotten segments and driving out others to the zone of oblivion, they have also opened up a space between perceptions about utopias and the doomed constancy of existence, between modernisms and antimodernisms. An open space for contemplation, tensions, confusions, drifting, flânerie... A space that appeared in Armenian literature, cinematography and architecture of the mid 60s.

Artavazd Peleshian, applying in his films his method of “distanced montage” based on a re-definition of the spatio-temporal structure and the relationship between image and sound was creating a certain kind of space between sequences, bringing them closer to or further from each other, and letting the spectator to enter that space and contemplate it, switching in between images of modernisms and antimodernisms. In his short films, Peleshian used his method for structuring the simultaneity of diverse episodes taking place in different temporal and situational contexts, and depicted vanity as the poetics of the modern epoch contrasted to the ontology of existence (presented with images of constant movement, migration, transitions and transmutations, catalyisms, etc.). Vanity was universalized and identified with the notion of eternity.5

In Frunze Dovlatyan’s film Hi, its me! (“Здравствуй, это я!” Armenfilm, 1965) young scientist Artem6 endlessly strolls in and between Yerevan and Moscow, in his own memory space, having a dialogue with his alter ego; he drifts between the past and future, contemplating all the way. His flânerie in a certain way becomes the main process and meaning of the whole film that at

5 Earth of People ВГИК (all-USSR State Institute of Cinematography) produced in 1966, Beginning ВГИК (all-USSR State Institute of Cinematography) produced in 1967, WE (Yerevan Studio of Documentary Films) produced in 1969.
6 The protagonist was based on a real character, physicist Artem Alikhanian, one of the founders of nuclear physics in the Soviet Union, the founder of the Yerevan Physics Institute and the cosmic ray station on Aragats mountain at 3250 m., and one of the creators of the Yerevan synchrotron. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artem_Alikhanian.
the end is unexpectedly interrupted, when all of a sudden, the protagonist wraps up his analysis of the past, perceives (as a kind of epiphany) his identity and destiny and leaves the boundless space of idle drifting, going away towards the mountainous landscape in the final scene.\(^7\)

The physical materialization of those blank-open-free spaces could be better observed in the transformations in urban spaces and in Soviet Armenian architecture of the mid 60s, particularly considering the case of Yerevan.

**Extraterritories of transforming Yerevan in the 60s**

Yerevan, in comparison to other cities in Armenia, has experienced the most intensive and radical transformations in the 60s that affected the whole character of the city. One of the most important reasons for such an active development of the city was the intensive growth of the city population that was highly exceeding the population growth stipulated by the 3rd master plan of Yerevan city developed in 1951. In 1961, work began on the 4th Master Plan that supposed not only new scales and new strategies regarding the city’s development but was also based on a new philosophy related somehow with Soviet utopias (like Khrushchev’s famous declaration that the Soviet society would attain communism as early as the 80s), but which at the same time was dealing with a social and cultural structuring that was different from the radical visions of early Soviet utopias.

The modernist trends in early Soviet architecture and urban planning that were interrupted in the 30s experienced a revival in the 60s. That was also a period when some of the important architects (like Michael Mazmanian and Gevorg Kotchar) that belonged to the avant-garde constructivist groupings of the 20s and 30s returned to Armenia from exile and were actively integrated into the architecture and urban development projects for Yerevan, other cities and rural areas of Armenia. In 1956, a group of architects led by Michael Mazmanian developed a residential area plan for the Achapnyak district in Yerevan composed of only prefab houses (so called “khrouschevkas”), and in 1971 Mazmanian led another group that developed the master plan scheme of Yerevan according to which the city gained an emphasized modern character and its future modus of development was laid out.

Gevorg Kotchar realized several interesting architectural projects. In the 60s he had the chance to continue and complete some of the complexes and ensembles that he started to design and build in the late 20s. The best example to these is the summer resort for the Union of Writers in Sevan.

Besides those architects that belonged to the early constructivist groupings there were many other architects from the younger generation who had managed to travel abroad, sometimes even for short-term studies or researches. In the 60s, architectural communities throughout the Soviet Union started to organize specialized professional trips and exchanges inside and outside the Union parallel to the activated reciprocal professional visits of architects from Europe, the United States and Japan. That was also a period when some European professional architectural magazines were circulated regularly and the library of the Union of Architects was enriched day after day with professional literature that was coming to Armenia through different ways (professional exchanges, connections with the Diaspora, etc.).

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\(^7\) See [http://youtu.be/7k3le2E-wnU](http://youtu.be/7k3le2E-wnU).
At the time, the Union of Architects used to be one of the important public institutions that, along with the state architectural firms, municipalities and the government, participated in decision-making processes and provided a venue for active discussions on architectural and urban development projects. Those discussions tackled different subjects among which, one of the most domineering ones was the question concerning form-building principles regarded from the perspectives of functionality of architecture and its relation to the specificity of the local context which involved considering not only the relation of architecture to the natural but also the cultural environment. That was, in fact, the continuation of a quite tense discourse that developed since the 20s and was interrupted in the mid 30s between two major architectural groups/schools (the national school and constructivists) and was revived in the new ideological context of the Khrushchev period that put strict limitations on construction norms, correlating it with restricted financial means.

Dealing mainly with a dull, standardized architecture in the second half of the 50s where it was only possible to make innovations in the field of urban development, in the beginning of the 60s architects as well as local authorities started to find some ways out from the monotonous construction and budget dictates, creating low-budget but extremely interesting architectural forms that imparted new energy and new images to the city character of the 60s.

Coming back to the aforementioned tendencies in the 60s regarding the formation of blank spaces, Armenian architecture that started to develop in that period of time presented perfect examples of such extraterritories, or extra volumes despite the fact that the ideological doctrine of the period was waging a war against excesses in architecture.

There was a story about Khrushchev’s visit to Armenia in 1961 when the leader of the Soviet Communist Party got furious (and that anger turned into a big scandal well propagated by the Soviet press of that time) when he saw a small architectural volume resembling the form of seagull displayed as a roadside sign for the northern exit of Yerevan city. That architectural volume made of concrete (actually a really low budget construction) became an object of Khrushchev’s hard criticism. His phrase, “That is how you are squandering national money!” became a warning to other republics to keep away from that kind of dissipations.

Though Khrushchev identified that small architectural volume as a squandering, there was an intensive development of new spaces and volumes in urban environments that could be associated with a waste of means, territory and purpose. Without going over budget limits, architects together with local authorities, employed new tactics as well as a new philosophy regarding the organization of urban space. The construction of new streets and avenues (like Sayat Nova avenue that was inaugurated in 1963), the reconstruction of some of the old streets in the city, the improvement of city parks and the development of new recreation areas were imparting to the city a new horizontal character forming spacious zones for pedestrians.

Water surfaces of different scales, and geometrical shapes appeared in the parks and even on the pavements of some reconstructed streets. Next to those basins, quite often there appeared pergola type structures that were either used as open air cafés (new and important public spaces in Yerevan developed in that period) or marked by their presence functionless or
multifunctional territories on the pavements. Open air cafés that appeared in Yerevan in the 60s weren’t just a new type of public space that formed a new city culture but they were also bright examples of new horizontal architecture where it was possible to see the direct influences of organic architecture as well as some echoes of the concept of emptiness coming from modern Japanese architecture.

The liberation and democratization of urban space in Yerevan paralleled the revival of modernist trends in architecture and the historicist principles of the national style (that since the mid 30s was integrated into the Stalinist style) retreated, opening up a short and temporal gap for free experiments that were more universalist in their essence. Experimentations that were in contrast to existing national and Stalinist styles in architecture succeeded to shape not only the new character of Yerevan but also a new social, cultural and psychological situation in urban life. That short lasted transformation of the city, which occurred in the time between the replacement of one hegemonic symbol by another, succeeded in giving rise to a new society and to new individuals who had the chance to choose their positions when strolling around the extra spaces of the new city and the new architecture that was free from the aesthetics of the past and did not have direct ambitions concerning the structuring of the future. The functional essence of that architecture that was based on the principles of rational distribution and usage of space also brought forward a discourse concerning other possible functionalities of space that could stimulate a sense of commonality outlined by the simple compositions of concrete forms and structures as well as a sense of individuality conveyed by individual aesthetic and conceptual solutions.

Yet the most important change suggested by these architectural forms was a new correlation between subject and architecture where the extra space provided foremost required the presence of the subject who would modify, articulate and substantiate that architecture. In return, this new feature formed a new but at the same time ambiguous interrelation between subject and commonality, between the particular and the universal. On the one hand, there was great excitement about the self-potency granted by the universalist world outlook which offered an opportunity to shape reality, but on the other hand, it generated tensions related to a fear of being absorbed or lost in the no one’s extraterritories of commonality.

The trend changed in just a few years (or let’s even say it was developing as a parallel process) and particularity turned into a main principle regulating local social, political and cultural processes. By the end of the 60s new models of “local modernities” began to appear. They were either big scale representatives of supranational architecture (although it might sound contradictory Armenian late modernist architecture of the 70s and 80s had also been considered in the Soviet Union as a certain national particularity), or examples of a new national style in architecture that had conceptualized and contextualized structures and forms of traditional architecture inside a modernist modus operandi.

The short-lasting stratum of urban culture with its structures and landscapes was overshadowed by the particularity of big scale representational architecture that continued to develop “excessive” spaces for other functions which were already different from the “extraterritories” of the 60s.
The fate of extraterritories and
Moscow Cinema Theater open air hall
(part B)

Today, the architecture of the 60s in Yerevan is almost completely swept away or has been distorted beyond recognition. The effects of neoliberal economics and urban policy were first felt in public spaces, recreation areas, historical centers of the city, etc. Of course, in this process of the violent reshaping of the city buildings and districts that belong to different periods of time were destroyed and each of these destructions had its own history and problems. As a matter of fact, certain projects concerning the radical modernization of the city center (like the construction of the Northern Avenue) were being developed since the very early master plans of Yerevan were made.

And of course, when the city was losing districts developed at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, when symbolic buildings of constructivist and Stalinist styles, and late modernist architecture were partly or completely destroyed or terribly corrupted (Sports Committee Building, Sevan Hotel, former Russia Movie Theater, Youth Palace, etc.), when the continuous green zones and recreation areas of the city were fragmented and were hidden behind the facades of the newly erected buildings, when the problem of the loss of public spaces in the city which is a social problem and a matter of town planning became a burning political issue, questions concerning such “ephemeral” spaces that were developed in the period of the 60s can sound really naive and romantic.

However, the case of the Moscow Cinema Theater open air hall that led to the explosion of such an incredible self-organized public reaction that turned into a serious social movement struggling with the political power and the church in order to protect an architecture that bore, in its structure and form, something that was neglected, covered and forgotten, was really symptomatic considering the complexity of current social, political and cultural processes in Armenia.

One of the keys to understanding the complexity of the situation that developed around the cinema theater can be found in the text titled “The End of the State (or a New Form of Societal Organization)” published in 2008 by Tigran Sargsyan, the current Prime Minister of Armenia. Analyzing the evolution of States in the context of postindustrial societies, Tigran Sargsyan concludes that “the state as we perceive it today is nearing an end. New forms of networked structures of public organization are coming to replace it.”

To summarize his point:

In a postindustrial world, in accord with the new philosophy and ontology, we should first conceptualize our competitive advantages in networked forms of self-organization. We have an opportunity to pull through the periphery of history and create a new networked civilization – the Armenian World. From the perspective of the above described methodology and hypothesis, we can conceptualize Armenians as a network. History testifies that after the loss of statehood, the Armenian people demonstrated an alternative form of self-organization that helped this nation to survive. The church came in to take on that function of self-regulation. As such, the methods and the form of organization the church used were complying with the network logic.

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This fragment from the Prime Minister’s text could, in fact, serve as a key puzzle piece that will bring together the whole picture. And it deals with the same space/void/tension between modernist visions of universalism and phobias regarding loss of particularity i.e. control over societal self-organization processes.

For the Armenian context and many others, the end of the 60s suggested a simple superposition of these two visions as a result of which particularity had been universalized, revitalizing and universalizing good old institutes of power like the nation and the church.

The struggle for the Moscow Cinema Theater open air hall was in fact the continuation of that old conflict where the architecture of the theater (as well as other rare examples of modernist architecture from that period that are preserved) has, in a certain way, turned into an evidence and bearer of other models of universalisms which, till today, were able to encourage a sense of unity and self-organization in post-Soviet fragmented societies.