
The Edifice Complex: Architecture and the Political Life of Surplus in the New Baku

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Just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed . . . they . . . conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries, and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.

—Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

Sovereignty is as imaginary as art; art is as political as sovereignty.

—Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*

Across the former USSR, one of the strongest visual indexes of all that has been wrought over the past twenty years—since socialism came to an end, and fifteen internal Soviet republics began new incarnations as independent states—has come in the dramatic transformation of urban landscapes. This is perhaps no more so than in capital cities, so regularly presented

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by governments and citizens alike as showcasing the face of a brave new world.¹ The promotional message everywhere seems to be “Think what you might of us before, but look at us now.”

Outside Moscow, the world of plenitude that many hope to find in the post-Soviet era is perhaps no more in evidence than in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. Long celebrated by local elites as a center of cosmopolitan life in the Caucasus region, the city has undergone a stunning amount of transformation in just the past few years, with more on the horizon. Flush with new wealth from one of the world’s largest oil and gas projects, the city has also experienced a sizable population influx from rural areas. While the first decade of independence saw a striking number of apartment blocks being folded into existing downtown courtyards and available lots, each almost identical to the next, the current building boom in Baku is projecting a very different kind of urban space.

Residents were offered some of the first signs of this new life in the city’s hosting of the Eurovision Song Contest in 2012, which showcased a substantial rebuilding of roadways; an enormous extension of a downtown seaside park; a state-of-the-art concert hall; the world’s tallest freestanding flagpole; and dozens of high-profile new towers.² In what was long a modest provincial city of low-rise buildings overlooking the Caspian Sea, these dozens of new structures of jutting glass and steel stood out for their boldness.

It soon became clear, however, that the changes startling many were only just the beginning. Plans are under way for a literal remaking of the capital itself, with huge swaths of densely populated urban neighborhoods slated for demolition, a series of gigantic building projects along the existing downtown Caspian waterfront, and the addition of several new business zones—several entirely new downtown areas, in fact—including the world’s tallest building. For many, the speed and sense of exuberance in the construction is part of what spurs repeated references to the city as a new Doha, Dubai, or Shanghai. These new projects have proven remarkably popular with an impressively wide segment of Azerbaijanis, many of whom have tired of regional war and daily economic struggles since

1. While Moscow and its soaring skyline continue to attract the most attention in this context, the non-Russian republics have very much followed suit. This is evidenced in ample studies of Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia (Manning 2009), and Yerevan, the capital of Armenia (Abrahamian 2012). Also amply tracked are other Russian cities such as St. Petersburg (Yurchak 2011), regional centers such as Derbent (Gould 2012), and entire new cities rising out of former provinces in Russia’s near abroad, such as Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan (Buchli 2007; Laszczkowski 2011; Meuser 2010).

2. Baku’s status as the holder of the world’s tallest flagpole, at 162 meters, was eclipsed nine months later when the same American design firm unveiled a pole only 3 meters higher in nearby Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

the end of the socialist period. Whether there is an actual place for them in these new structures or not, this new spate of building has had a profoundly inclusive effect. For others, it is as if an alien civilization has descended to dazzle and defeat.

Officially, the government is declaring its massive new urban shift as the anchor for tourism development in anticipation of its oil supply's eventual exhaustion. Amid regular claims to the tallest and the largest, the country's foreign minister remarked of Baku's remaking in advance of Eurovision: "It signals my country's re-emergence into the international community and enables us to showcase our achievements since independence" (Mammadyarov 2012). So, too, has the president regularly pointed to evidence of the city's transformation as proof of reform. Across Baku, where aphorisms from Lenin and Marx once encouraged the high-minded thinking of Soviet citizens, new marble pedestrian tunnels are carved with the president's words: "Our country is becoming stronger, newer, and more modern."³ This oft-pronounced commitment to urban planning has puzzled many observers given the formal absence of any general plan for urban development of the city, the last of which, launched in the Soviet era, expired in 2005. Also notable in this context is the earnestness of the country's politicians to distinguish themselves from their Soviet past, a past whose traditions of political rule haunt many of the architectural ambitions of its capital city today.⁴

Unofficially, so little is technically known about actual owners of enterprises in Azerbaijan—where a law was recently enacted to shield such information from



Figure 1 Digital rendering of the 189-floor Azerbaijan Tower, set on the Khazar Islands. Courtesy of Avesta Concern

3. See also Aliyev 2012.

4. At a recent press briefing, Ilham Aliyev stressed his country's transcendence of Cold War frames: "We have long left the name of a post-Soviet country. We are not a post-Soviet country. When sometimes in meetings with foreign partners, they say 'post-Soviet countries,' and I say, 'Wait. Azerbaijan is not a post-Soviet country. Perhaps some are post-Soviet countries, but we are not'" (News.Az 2013).

the public eye after the president's family was repeatedly implicated in state contracts—that conversation, speculation, fear, and adulation have come to envelop each of these projects. In this heady mix of optimism and malevolence, observers remind us, the construction industry remains one of the most effective ways to launder money in a post-Soviet world, where complex networks of both government and well-connected private figures have turned to real estate as a means of legitimizing less reputable financial gains. In this respect, the hundreds of new structures are simply the result of expected economic torsions, the aggressive if erratic business of the rapid redistribution of wealth. But to those long trained in the Soviet tradition of art in the service of state power, the government's embrace of these futuristic buildings says much about new forms of social exclusion. In a country where the average salary is just over \$500 a month, for professionals and small business owners alike, there are statistically very few who can afford to live in the gleaming new towers.⁵ This makes contemporary Baku, in the terms of an earlier study of the Caucasus and elsewhere in the former USSR, a decidedly political landscape (Smith 2003).

Part of the spirit of Baku's transformation is aptly captured in what Aihwa Ong has called "hyperbuilding," a term that illustrates the often stunning and ambitious pace of construction found in many Asian cities. It also emphasizes the powerful political imaginaries conjured by particular architectures toward sovereign ends. "The skyscraper megalomania of Asian cities," she writes, "is never only about attracting foreign investment, but fundamentally also about an intensive political desire for world recognition." "In conditions of uncertainty, the spaces of spectacle animate an anticipatory logic of valorization; that is, speculations that anticipate economic, aesthetic, and political gains through circulation and interconnection" (Ong 2011: 209). In other words, more than just wanting to recycle funds for long-term economic gain (or to recycle funds, pure and simple), the wide range of responses across the country to these dramatic changes suggests that Baku, like many other places, is wrestling with its own "edifice complex." It is a complex that, moreover, conjures earlier scenes of hyperbuilding from the spectacular age of state socialism, an age that seems all too present to many observers in the projection of new worlds to come.

For all the country's great wealth in recent years, Azerbaijanis have ample reason to seek solace in a skyline. The past two decades alone have included the collapse of the state of which they had been a part for over seventy years; a calam-

5. Figures as of January 2013, per the Azerbaijan State Committee on Statistics (cited in Rzayev 2013).

itous war with Armenia over the mountainous region of Nagorno-Karabakh, where Armenia continues to occupy over 15 percent of recognized Azeri territory; repeated economic crises; and, in what seemed to many a telling return of the repressed, a fraught political situation dominated by a narrow range of elites under the effective banner of single-party rule. This comes amid what the World Bank and others have identified as a dismaying absence of economic diversification in a country dependent on an oil supply now understood to be in decline. In this context, what we observe is decidedly familiar: a government's invocation of a certain material strategy to exorcise the past and to compete on a world stage. Indeed, this celebration of glass and steel conjures an image of the "technological sublime"—a world where the skyline carries the citizen's imagination above and ultimately away from the known life of the sidewalk (L. Marx 1964; Gell 1992). The technological sublime is an aesthetic that, in this case, expressly invites global comparison. Repeated reference to structures that are the biggest, tallest, or boldest are emulative—aimed at surpassing one's rivals—rather than merely imitative, in the sense of becoming "another Dubai." In this respect, the grandest of the new buildings stand out for their generic legibility to a global audience, working at an aesthetic register that is inherently competitive in both quantity and quality.

Yet while most Azerbaijanis take pride in the ways that the city's transformation signals a departure from Soviet-era limitations, a telling number also see the remaking of authoritarian rule through these elaborate and almost exclusively state-sponsored projects. Here is where we start to enter a very particular post-Soviet specificity. As other ethnographers of Soviet cities such as Victor Buchli (1999) and Caroline Humphrey (2005) have pointed out, long-taught Marxist doctrines of infrastructure and the built environment lent a powerful sense of ownership over public space in socialist settings, and architecture still matters a great deal today in the public imaginary. These doctrines also rely on decades of state control over public space and public spectacle, Soviet variations on an edifice complex that have been perhaps best studied in comparative terms by architecture critic Deyan Sudjic (2005), who urged us to look past a focus on design alone to understand how broader forces have long moved construction toward political and social ends.

In this essay, I argue how contemporary talk about these structures demonstrates how deeply haunted by socialist contexts these buildings are. Socialism was by most accounts a hypertextual tradition, a politics that was never far from the collected works of its leaders, a world that invited, even demanded, near constant explanation at an everyday level. In the post-Soviet age, in a world largely

turned upside down, most people are still talking. In Azerbaijan, where the government's role in daily life is erratic and sometimes violent, talking helps create a sense of normality at a time when such normality can be elusive. People talk because of the economic and physical risks inherent in these new developments. Proud of the country's new look, as most are, they appreciate how difficult it will be for so many hundreds of new towers to be filled.⁶

With a focus on urban architecture and visual spectacle, then, I explore how idioms of post-Soviet sovereignty are disclosed in everyday contexts, keeping in mind that neither the state nor sovereignty can be taken as analytical or empirical givens, that indeed all systems of authority are products of situated practices (Bartelson 1995; Hansen and Stepputat 2006). Working in this way, I contend, enables us to refine our approaches to changing traditions of authority and political rule in the formerly socialist world.

Below I place Baku's recent transformations alongside a series of interviews with architects, journalists, residents, and visitors in order to interrogate this particular moment in the remaking of post-Soviet states. Approximately half of those I interviewed were born and raised in Baku and had come to see themselves as members of a localized intelligentsia, the well-known caste of Soviet-era arbiters of the moral, persons who have long seen themselves as decision makers of a certain kind, in terms we might appropriate from broader works on sovereignty and moral leadership (Schmitt 1985).⁷ To be sure, whether they went through Russian- or Azerbaijani-language schools, and whether they maintained close ties to the rural districts from which their families had come, influenced their social circles and outlooks. But it was striking how prevalent this particular kind of talk was, as even many from rural backgrounds could also easily shift into this same arbiter mode.

Amid these scenes of plenitude, I suggest, Baku's often stunning, futuristic new landscapes offer us insight into classic approaches to domination-through-surplus. Here I am thinking of surplus in at least three ways. First there are the vast public funds, profits extracted from oil rents and leveraged to effectively

6. Two economists I consulted suggested that while residential towers might be sold off in the right market for second-, third-, and fourth-home buyers, they believed that little of the planned commercial space could be occupied in the near future. Interviews, Baku, September 2012.

7. While it is tempting to equate socialist- and postsocialist-era intelligentsias with educated middle classes and civil societies of market economies elsewhere, Paul Manning importantly demonstrates why the intelligentsia as a social formation specific to socialism was of quite a different order. They performed what Manning (2009: 72–75) describes as a certain “aristocratic mediation,” seeing as their responsibility the answering of the classic question, “What is to be done?” Property, technically, may not have been in their hands, but propriety was another matter.

remake a city center, along with the lives of hundreds of thousands of its residents. This instance suggests the classic understanding of surplus value studied long ago by Marx. Not all may share in such plenitude, but for many the hyperkinetically changing skyline of Baku is nonetheless a collective possession, a sign that surplus oil monies are going somewhere, being redirected at a dizzying pace.⁸

At a second, quite concrete level, Baku itself is multiplying, with the literal creation of several additional downtown areas and new urban centers. Most strikingly in comparison to other urban renovations in the postsocialist world, Baku's remaking has entailed unusually large-scale evictions from the downtown core; perhaps not since the wholesale restructuring of Paris in the nineteenth century by the notorious and celebrated urban planner Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann have we seen the same level of relocation (or dislocation) of urban residents.⁹ In this spirit of remaking, yet another kind of "surplus" comes into play, as thousands of older buildings along the better-known routes throughout the city have been elaborately illuminated, reclad in expensive carved limestone to recall the baroque look of the city's late nineteenth-century oil boom or, more unusually, entirely encased in glass sarcophagi.

Finally, at a third level, many in Baku see a kind of surplus in the widely circulating images, posted online and plastered on billboards and construction sites across the city, that claim that the future is now.¹⁰ This is in one sense a testament to the power of what is known as "paper architecture," chronicles of the built and unbuilt that circulate in ways separate from actually existing structures. In Soviet days, drawings of new worlds to come were widely admired and extensively cited for their staging of state power (Buck-Morss 2000; Papernyi 1996; Schlögel 2005). In Baku, the hold exerted over so many by these fantastic drawings and videos suggests that architecture—to refashion a line from Marx—has become another opiate of the masses. This is to say that if these buildings have begun to accrue their own "surplus value," it is not solely because of their prestige or their enactment of a certain technological sublime in a global competition. It is because they become haunted—often before and even without being built. The govern-

8. While the unreconstructed Marxism of Guy Debord (1995, thesis 17) does not easily lend itself to many real-life settings, his phrasing well captures the experience of many post-Soviet citizens when he writes of a cycle of being as becoming, being as having, and being as appearing to have.

9. For comparative purposes, Kostof 1994 is an excellent guide to urban demolitions across Western Europe in the nineteenth century.

10. See, for example, "Azerbaijan—Land of the Future" (2013), the government's press campaign presented at the 2013 Davos forum. Krebs 2011 outlines many of the limits in and responses to the government's various global branding efforts.

ment presumably hopes for all these new structures to be objects of admiration, but the circumstances of their production quickly exceeds all that.

By focusing on sovereignty and surplus in these ways, I do not ask whether this construction represents order or disorder, and even less whether the “real order” is seen or unseen, which would overestimate the givenness of state power and sovereignty in ways that do not reflect the continual production and morphing of these concepts in practice. I make my case instead based on the prodigious volume of discourse on space and governance generated by this dramatic remaking of urban space. For as one new building goes up and another comes down, the visions of rubble, the promises of new life, and the collisions between fact and rumor create entire spheres of their own. Architecture’s place in such rapidly changing political economies today invites us to better understand competing projects of social order and circuits and circulations of sovereign ambitions in different realms and offers a possibility to think of Caucasus futures otherwise.

The Long Remakings of Baku

“If you look at the city as if you are on the outside looking in, of course, everything has become more beautiful. We wanted the future and now we have it.” I sat with a friend in her kitchen in the autumn of 2012 in Baku. In her fifties, she worked as an art historian at a private university. She continued:

Visually, everything is very smart [Russian: *nariadno*], especially if you are out in the center of the city in the evening, everything is lit up and it’s really something. Buildings have been covered over in good stone and are illuminated at night. Yet it’s not hard to figure out that it’s a visual dimension that is aimed at the visitor, at someone new to the city, and not at the people who actually live here. Because it’s been years now that we have all been living on a construction site, and we have paid the price.

I avoided mentioning the fact that in the more than ten years I had known her, new apartment blocks had come to entirely obscure her once-prized view of the Caspian Sea, and instead I complimented her on the handsome new cladding that had been applied to her prestigious, Stalin-era building. Surely, this at least meant that her home was safe from demolition. Without blinking she replied:

I’m sorry, no. Not a single building in this city is off the table when it comes to the new urban plan. Not mine, not anyone’s. According to the general plan that currently exists—I mean, the ones online—sure, Baku in the future, it will be an amazing city, beautiful, and probably more

expensive. But what happens in the meantime? You think that some buildings are more protected simply because they are attractive or have historic value? Forget it. . . . The only real protection against demolition I can think of would be if a building is physically outside Baku, somewhere where no one will ever see it. Maybe that building has a chance to remain standing.

Later that morning, shortly after we left her home, I paused at a busy street corner to admire what appeared to be a new, nearly completed apartment block on one of the city's main east/west arteries. Beneath the scaffolding the building was entirely clad in an expensive, ornately carved limestone that recalled the townhouses of fin de siècle oil barons. It was another anachronism for a city whose new public faces alternately looked forward and back. "It's a little over the top," I conceded. "But it's not the worst, right, for a new building?" She looked at me and laughed: "Except that your new building isn't a new building at all. It's the same as that one, across the street, but it's been dressed up for the age of new oil. And it is hell inside for the people living there, just look."¹¹

On closer inspection, one could in fact see that the building had been part of a complex of 1920s apartments by well-regarded constructivist architects, apartment blocks that I had passed many times in years previous and often admired. The original structure was unrecognizable now. Life inside the newly clad building was indeed challenging, as we found when we visited a neighbor there a few days later. Architects had added an extra floor to make the building correspond to one across the street, and instead of simply recladding the original sea-blue exterior they erected a new limestone facade a full five feet away, creating a gallery that swallowed up much of the natural light. Nor did the new set of windows line up with the old.

This was not the first time that Baku had been dramatically remade. When Baku first appeared in the texts of Arab geographers, in the tenth century as the domain of the shahs of Shirvan, it was in the context of its local trade in oil—the commodity that has long defined and directed its existence (Fatullaev-Figarov 1998: 1).¹² Over the years, the city's fortunes rose and fell, but extant sources suggest that it would be some time before it would be celebrated by visitors. In 1843



Figure 2 City set in amphitheater overlooking the Caspian Sea. Baku in the 1890s

11. The building was part of the Shaumian Settlement, designed by Anatolii Samoilov and Aleksandr Ivanitskii, built between 1925 and 1928. A profile is featured in Paré 2007: 230–36.

12. Despite oil's early preeminence, the region was also well regarded for its trade in salt, saffron, silks, cotton, and, later, copper.

the German scientist August von Haxthausen (1854: 441) reported that the city's residents, numbering a little over seven thousand, "build very slightly." Local Persian- and Azeri-language writers rather more generously described it as "a typical eastern town" (Rumyansev 2008: 233). Prospects appeared to improve when the city's first oil rush began in the 1870s, briefly drawing foreign oil magnates such as the Nobels and Rothschilds, who came to make their fortunes and stayed long enough to create elaborate townhouses and apartment blocks in the style of Stockholm and Paris. Even then, it might be conceded, the city itself did little to impress most foreign travelers. A decade or two later, with Baku's population exploding, reports of city life were quite a bit kinder, as by then local magnates had constructed a downtown core of hotels, government offices, and residential areas that fed on the newfound wealth. At the close of the nineteenth century, Baku was responsible for a staggering 50 percent of global oil production (Hasanov 1997). By the eve of World War I, its population, by then a quarter million, had leapt in size over thirty times in only fifty years. The era created the foundations for a romance with the life and times of the city's homegrown oil barons, who remain much lionized today, and signaled the start of a very particular public and government-endorsed celebration of private oil wealth (Huseynova 2012: 86).

In the 1920s, Baku consolidated its role as a center of Soviet oil production, even if the Russian Soviet Republic would soon eclipse the southern republics in overall output. Oil might have remained the city's lead Soviet-era brand, but as Sergey Rumyansev (2008) has perhaps best expressed it, the city's symbolic tug-of-war between "oil and rams" was never far from view. While the city was celebrated for its thriving economy, its diverse makeup, and its place in the history of Soviet jazz, Rumyansev reminds us that it never entirely lost its pastoral roots. The "age of rams" seemed to return in the early years of the post-Soviet period, when the city of some 2 million confronted a flow of refugees caused by the war with Armenia, the departure of hundreds of thousands for points abroad, and an influx of shepherds and traders from the countryside, startling many with their pasturing of sheep in green spaces throughout the downtown core.¹³

For all the privations of the 1990s, the age of rams was not long-lived. By the end of the decade, the city was battling the throngs of petty traders who had

13. While the immediate post-Soviet era is almost always associated with a new wave of *korenizatsiia* (R.: a return to ethnic roots in public life) and a mass arrival of Azeri nationals into Baku from the countryside, Rumyansev (2008: 243) points out that such a demographic shift was equally if not more prominent in the 1970s, when the government was faced with a considerable industrial labor shortage and accordingly started handing out the much-sought-after Baku residence permits with greater speed.



taken to its broad boulevards to make a living. In response came the government's pledge to remake the face of the capital. Residents, too, fed off the promise of oil development, which brought, for the second time since the late nineteenth century, a surge of foreign investors. But as urban demographics shifted, few were prepared for what became, by the end of the first decade of the new century, a wave of high-profile, wholesale changes.¹⁴

Baku's recent prosperity is clear to most, especially relative to other south Caucasus capitals such as Tbilisi, Yerevan, or Tabriz (Baku's Iranian-Azeri counterpart). Azerbaijan's economy expanded from \$6 billion in 2001 to \$63 billion in 2011, logging the world's fourth-highest annual average growth rate over the same period, at 12.7 percent (Robertson 2012). Even while average personal incomes have remained low, oil funds have given the country an official per capita gross domestic product figure of over \$10,000, far outstripping its post-Soviet neighbors

14. Despite seemingly dramatic shifts in the population of Baku's composition in terms of class and ethnic background, the officially reported overall population of the city remained reasonably steady from 1989 through 2011, at approximately 2 million. Most newspaper reports, factoring in the large swaths of undocumented residents, commonly put the figure at 3 million.

Figure 3 Billboards pledging new worlds ahead, in architecture, late 2000s. Photograph by author

Public Culture

(Index Mundi 2013). With oil profits now peaking, these considerable changes appear to have been only the beginning. Seen on fencing or scaffolding panels around the city and on YouTube, fervently discussed around kitchen tables and in chat forums, Baku construction projects under way or on the horizon include the complete renovation and extension of the downtown seaside boardwalk with new hotels, museums, and entertainment complexes such as the Crystal Hall, purpose-built for the 2012 Eurovision song competition and seating twenty-three thousand; the new Carpet Museum, its roof unfurling in the shape of the objects it holds (Chenciner 2012; Darieva 2011); a new airport; a futuristic, blob-like cultural center measuring fifty thousand square meters, named after the president's late father, Heydar Aliyev, and designed by Zaha Hadid; and three gigantic "Flame Towers" on the site of the city's former Moscow Hotel, clad entirely in LEDs that produce kinetic walls of fire to recall the city's early ties to oil and Zoro-

astrianism. Startled, as many are, by the towers' appearing to burst into flame against the night sky, the Associated Press recently called Baku's skyline "a glaring, electric testament to profligacy and confidence" (Leonard 2012).

These now or near completed projects are in turn dwarfed by the fresh work under way to transform Baku's long notorious "Black City," a soot-filled industrial area adjacent to the central rail station, into a gleaming "White City"; the wholesale remaking of one of the city's largest traf-

fic arteries, Heydar Aliyev Avenue (formerly Moscow Prospect), into a four-tier, kilometers-long set of business, entertainment, residential, and cultural districts, anchored by a signature spiraling tower in the shape of a tall glass spike; and a new, \$100 billion Khazar Islands project slated for rapid completion in 2022, to be built following the example of Dubai on a series of forty-one reclaimed land jetties protruding out into the sea, connected by 150 bridges, and featuring



Figure 4 The Heydar Aliyev Cultural Center. Photograph by Iwan Baan

numerous museums, parks, shopping centers, residential complexes, university campuses, a Formula One racetrack, its own airport, and, here again, an anchoring signature building, the \$2 billion Azerbaijan Tower, planned as the world's tallest, at over one thousand meters.¹⁵ Public art installations by Jeff Koons and Anish Kapoor, as well as still more new structures designed by Norman Foster, Frank Gehry, and Hadid, all figure prominently. "Over one million people will live [there]," proclaimed the head of the concern supervising the project. "It will be Venice, [a] new Venice" (quoted in Evgrashina and Antidze 2013).¹⁶

Visions of Excess

The leviathan-like scale of new development in Baku has not gone unnoticed, especially as it contrasts with the modest economic growth characteristic of the region. It has attracted significant attention, both locally and internationally, because of the evictions required to undertake such substantial rebuilding of the existing downtown core. In 2011 the Institute for Peace and Democracy, a small independent human rights organization in Baku, estimated that anywhere from sixty thousand to eighty thousand residents had been removed from their homes since 2008.¹⁷ Many residents recounted to me how, when the relocations began, city officials would conduct limited bargaining with them over the rate of compensation. That policy soon gave way to the application of a standard amount that was routinely well below and often less than half of current market estimates in the same neighborhood. Later, an increasing number of residents were extended no monetary compensation, instead being handed keys to comparably sized apartments in newly built housing blocks in more distant parts of the city.

The institute launched a number of legal challenges to the forced relocations, including one on behalf of its own privately held two-story townhouse, which served as its head office. One August evening in 2011, at eight-thirty, just one day after the institute had directed especially prominent international media attention to the evictions, and while the office was fully occupied by staff, its headquarters was beset by city trucks and bulldozers and leveled to the ground in under a single hour (see Erickson 2011). The townhouse was in a densely populated his-

15. The White City project is online (Baku White City 2012) and is featured in multiple online video forums (e.g., "Baku White City Project" 2010). See also "Heydar Aliyev Avenue" 2010.

16. A profile of the Khazar Islands project and its charismatic overseer, Ibrahim Ibrahimov, can be found in Savodnik 2013.

17. For a small sampling of the coverage of the demolitions and evictions, see Asadzade, Ismayilova, and Rifkin 2012; Rinnert 2012; and Sultanova 2012.



toric district two blocks deep and six blocks long that was slated for demolition to make way for the Winter Park. Few doubted the appeal of more green space in a sprawling semi-industrial city that has long been beset with air quality problems, but many challenged the wisdom of the violence used to provide for it.¹⁸

Figure 5 Architectural drawing of the seaside Carpet Museum. Courtesy of Wolfgang Beyer Images. © beyer.co.at

Press coverage of events such as this in the year leading up to the high-profile Eurovision Song Contest was widely seen as a blow to the government, with international journalists widely remarking on the country's endemic corruption and human rights abuses. Since 1994, Azerbaijan's government has essentially been led by a single party, directed by a small set of elites under the banner of single-family, hereditary rule.¹⁹ As in many oil-rich states that depend primarily on the commodification of natural resources for their revenues (rather than the commodification of labor), the traditional path to wealth in Baku has been through the maximization of rents, with access to them controlled by a variety of political means. To this scenario, familiar in countries around the world, one need also factor in the considerably less well-known dimensions of post-Soviet inheritance. As was the case in many former Soviet republics, the government officials of newly independent Azerbaijan were left in single-handed stewardship of virtually the entire country's physical plant, leading—as elsewhere across the former socialist world—to gigantic profits and powerful careers to be made in short order through the redistribution of former state holdings. To speak in any critical way of the new construction in the city was therefore necessarily to criticize the government, a body politic with which most have their own clientelist relations.

18. As of December 2012, the elaborate Winter Garden designs were dropped in favor of a regular park with extensive underground parking, according to Abbas Elesgerov, chair of the city's urban planning and architecture committee (Olaylar 2012).

19. Guliyev 2012 offers a succinct overview of the often fragile competing political networks in the country today.

Visions of excess came not only in terms of pure wealth. Excess could also characterize the government's eagerness to cover over so many existing buildings without undertaking any significant renovations of their internal structure. In the context of this uneasy abundance of fresh but skin-deep beauty, dark humor abounded, as did plays on words to capture the surreal quality of living where entire buildings came and went with such rapid speed or became unrecognizable, even to longtime residents.

One evening I went to visit a senior architect who, having written a number of books on architectural history, could, I thought, offer a professional opinion of the myriad new structures around town. He waved his hand and gave me a stern look. "Your questions do not interest me," he said proudly. Living only a few blocks from the then planned Winter Park, witness to the violent demolitions that had taken place the year previous to make way for it, he seemed sure he would have nothing of it. But he did address the question of buildings and their facades. "Today, you can tell this is a historic moment," he began. "I say this because no one really knows what is going on today—nothing makes sense the way you thought it would. You realize that you have to stop and look around and really think about it." He offered this anecdote:

My wife was on the 153 bus the other day; she was going to Genclik [metro station]. Or it was the 33. In any case, the driver was the kind who liked to talk to passengers. He was always joking or telling stories to whomever was sitting near him, all day long. She had talked to him before, and he remembered her. They were crossing the square by the metro, which then, like now, is one big construction site, being completely rebuilt, with new buildings, and new facades, new roads and bridges, everything. It's a mess right now, still. At that point they had just covered over some of the older buildings at the far end with new facades. He had a big smile on his face when he turned to her and said: "Ay Xanım, siz bu ikiüzlü evləri görmüşsüz? İkiüzlü evlərə fikir verməyin. Bunlar, sosializmdə ki kimi, elə deyilmi? Bu gün, hər şeyin iki dənə üzü yenə də var" [Azerbaijani: "Ay, madam, have you seen these two-faced buildings? Don't give these two-faced houses any thought. They are just like during socialism, aren't they? Today, everything has two faces again"].

"The great thing about this," he continued, "is that it can be understood in such different ways. In some respects it's not insulting at all because if you are covering over a building with one big wall of stone or a glass carcass, then it's true that the building has *iki üzlər*, two faces, two surfaces. So it can be a neutral term. But the fact that the phrasing also signals hypocrisy means that it all depends on how

you say it.” The friend who sat with us laughed when I asked her what she thought of the (to me, attractive) new facade on the building across from hers. “Oh, come on, these are all candy wrappers [R.: *fantiki*]!” she smiled. “It’s just a cover.”

For some people, of course, it’s not so bad. They increase the size of your apartment if they give you a whole new exterior. They sometimes provide compensation if you lose the natural light because of the new windows outside your old ones. In some cases, people are perfectly happy. But you yourself have seen when you walk a few meters through the archway how the buildings look from behind; it’s the same life as before. And was that life really so terrible? What are we hiding?

Indeed, there were many ways to describe the new facades. “Gecəgündüz binələr yuyurlar,” went the frequent refrain in Azeri. “They are washing buildings day and night.” New stone might have a cleansing effect, but the phrasing made clear that sins and money, too, could be laundered on the same construction sites. Others suggested that these acts of purification might not be what they seemed, a not unreasonable supposition in a political context where nationalist notions of purity and pollution, purity and danger—in effect, inclusion and exclusion—were so earnestly expressed. “Ay Bakı, orada binələr təzəkləyirlər” (Az.: “Right, Baku is where they are covering over all the buildings with manure”), a grandmotherly figure in the countryside said to me one day with cheerful irony, recalling how farmers in her village would still mix manure and straw to cover over the walls of a barn. Her choice of words reflected a long tradition of practiced wit in Azeri life, exemplified in the art of traveling bards (Az.: *aşıqlar*) whose ability to speak in Aesopian terms (Az.: *kinayə ilə danışmaq*) earned them the plaudits of their listeners. It was a manner of speech that was often found during the Soviet period, and that was making a significant comeback in this post-Soviet age.

To properly reflect on these comments requires that we take a step back and consider some of the historical uses of lavish spectacle in the service of political power. Most scholarly accounts suggest that the sheer abundance of spectacle in public space invites awe and submission with a view toward defining social centrality (Adams 2010; Debord 1995; Geertz 1977; Mukerji 1997). As for the modern European state, perhaps Henri Lefebvre (1991) made this point best. But striking the right balance is crucial. In the work of anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, observing a very different part of the world, Haiti under the Duvaliers, we find the principles of excess and restraint in regular tension. He writes: “Vulgarity is inherent in power—unless power denies itself. . . . Thus the line is always fine between grandeur and ridicule, between sumptuousness and vulgarity

(Trouillot 1992: 78). “That is the inherent risk in putting up all these buildings,” a friend said to me one day, smiling. “They [the government] need *hormət* [Az.: colloquially, “bribes paid in the style of tribute”], but they also need *hormət* [Az.: literally “respect”].” Whether the leading political networks are illegally making money or not, he was saying, the government still seeks the respect of its people.

For Marx, surplus value (and the surplus status of commodities that went to market) became the bedrock of capitalist logic; in formal economic terms, then, the utility of excess is clear. But a far wider range of notions of surplus as a means of domination moves through everyday life. Commenting on how deeply idioms of surplus underlie contemporary Western thought, French theorist Jean-Joseph Goux (1990: 61) neatly demonstrated how widely notions of surfeit and supplement circulate in political and economic theory through what he calls “the surplus that subjugates.” Remarking that he never quite understood why scholars would be so challenged by the works of G. W. F. Hegel, Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Derrida, Goux suggested that, for all their differences, they were all talking about much the same thing. What they had in common was a study of domination-through-excess. Thus, in Hegel, one finds a surfeit of Reason and State; in Marx, a surfeit of gold and value; in Freud, a surfeit of libido and Rule by the Father; and in Derrida, a surfeit of logos and meaning (Goux 1990, chap. 1; see esp. 54). Surplus, surfeit, and supplement, in Goux’s eyes, effectively underwrite modern social orders.

In gesturing to Goux and his work, I am not trying to suggest that Azerbaijan and France be understood in the same light. One could dwell, for example, on the Azeri specificity of a certain discursive excess through satire and on the very practiced traditions of taking down local princes, powers, and potentates (Məmmədov 1975). However, I believe that insights such as Goux’s bear restatement in post-Soviet settings where questions of surplus occupied a very particular place in public logics. The magic of communism, promised by Marx, Friedrich Engels, and their many successors, is that any surpluses were intended to be reinjected into society for the greater good: no delays, deferrals, or trickling down. Georges Bataille, in a sense the bard of exuberant expenditure, famously lionized the Soviet Union long ago for this very reason, for the means by which it refused the extraction of surplus value by private enterprise and placed it squarely, instead, in the hands of the people’s commissars. Moving away from more classically Marxist-Leninist discourses of infrastructural determinism, Bataille (1995: 12) contended, “It is not necessity but its contrary, ‘luxury,’ that presents . . . mankind with their fundamental problems.” As many Soviets once discovered,

however, and as Azerbaijanis are experiencing again today, the question behind such recirculation of wealth back into society on a mass scale is, of course, where does the money go?

When Paper Architecture Goes Digital

Thus far I have talked about surplus emanating from the shared rapture of oil wealth, knowledge and rumor circulating around the much-lionized new public and private monies since the collapse of the USSR, and the profusion of newly built structures promising a new Baku. We can also find surplus operating in another venue: online, in the form of widely circulating promotional videos for new architecture. Some of these are lifted from government sites, but most are remixed and reloaded with elaborate slogans and new soundtracks. In some respects, nothing could be more twenty-first century than an online second life for an entire city. But I would also make the case that in these constantly proliferating and ardently discussed images, we can see an example of what Susan Buck-Morss (2000: 64), in her extensive work on early Soviet public dreamworlds, calls “the utopian supplement.”²⁰ The Soviet 1920s and 1930s were a period when “paper architecture” flourished, with the entire country awash in plans for its remaking under the socialist ideal. While relatively few of these revolutionary images came to life in steel and stone, many more continued to circulate long after their realization was abandoned.

Whether or not such projects were ever built, Buck-Morss noted, they possessed a clear cognitive power: “These [unrealized] ‘products’ of the avant-garde adhered to a different logic than machine efficiency or industrial engineering. They were dream images, expressing the wish for a transformed relationship between human beings and their environment” (ibid.). As most products of revolutionary futurisms do, such images also transplanted the viewer in time, Buck-Morss reasons, as well as in space. Back in the Caucasus, anthropologist Mathijs Pelkmans recently found much the same dynamic at work in the Ajaria region of Georgia, where a charismatic breakaway leader, Aslan Abashidze, ruled the day. Surrounded by construction sites, with scores of gleaming new structures finished but strangely empty, Pelkmans (2006: 199) found that, for many among those he spoke to, “construction seemed more important than the actual use of the buildings.” While some reasoned that brand-new buildings standing unused were evidence of poor government planning, others found that the emptiness afforded

20. Buck-Morss borrows the term from art historian and philosopher Hubertus Gassner.

them a paradoxical plenitude. As Pelkmans writes: “The new buildings were early signs of that turn for the better, of a future of fulfilled dreams. That the buildings were empty was perhaps even a *precondition* for the maintenance of that dream, because as long as they were empty they belonged to the realm of the future and therefore remained potentially accessible to everyone. Empty buildings—emptiness itself—would leave the unevenness of ‘progress’ unseen” (ibid.: 207). Some ten years later in the newly built capital of Kazakhstan, Astana, Mateusz Laszczkowski found similar expressions of welcome diversion from the roughness of everyday life. There the notion of construction as the epitome of positive change is an effect “largely based on the circulation of images and a kind of collective wishful thinking . . . [with] real social consequences” (Laszczkowski 2011: 78).²¹

Tellingly, therefore, when I sought friends, colleagues, and specialists to talk about the social life of architecture in the city, the first impulse most of them had was to leave the kitchen and head to a computer, deferring to the new Baku’s ample online presence. Even when they had not seen the images themselves, almost all proposed to start there, or to send me to someone who had. In the online videos and the cascade of commentary they generate, it is not hard to identify the ways in which the collective sense of national ownership and sovereign rule quickly fuse. While the titles and voice-overs promise brave new worlds ahead, most online commenters present these worlds as ones where Armenian foes from the war over Karabakh will rue the day they dared to occupy Azeri land and where Baku will be admired around the world and considered an example for others. The Armenian question—rarely a simple one for most Azerbaijanis in the Caucasus—preoccupies easily two-thirds of all comments on architectural drawings that invite no special ethnic or military association. The voluminous exchanges appear in Russian, Azerbaijani, and English, between self-identified Armenian and Azerbaijani writers, with much of



Figure 6 The Flame Towers, seen by night from the walled inner city. Photograph by author

21. Futurism and time travel are the themes of an excellent essay on the architectural transformations of Shanghai, in Lagerkvist 2007.

the language unprintable. Equally telling are the simple expressions of admiration from around the world that in turn elicit nationalist notes of acknowledgment from Azeri respondents who cast themselves in the position of owner or host (“Thank you, you are welcome, come visit us”).

Online, the voices of dissent are few, and they are aggressively policed. “Why should we be thanking the president for all of this?” one commenter asked as part of a discussion of the Baku White City project. “Is he putting his own money into this and carrying the stones himself? This is being built on oil money, our money, and it’s our money that’s being eaten up by all of this.”²² Soon followed a series of responses in support of the government: “Our nation is a nightmare—instead of asking about the president, why not just take pride that Baku will be like this? You are finding fault when you shouldn’t.”²³ To which many others added, “I agree.” When some pointed out that the levels of poverty across the country might invite very different kinds of human investment, the most popular reply expressed the belief that new buildings will lead them out of it.

Indeed, the towering verticality of the Baku plans is a significant departure for a city whose Soviet-era construction codes strictly regulated building heights, not only due to Baku’s seismically active location but also in deference to its hillside setting, where urban planning had allowed for generously unobstructed views down to the sea and the channeling up of cool marine winds. It is the Star Trek–like designs of many of the new structures, or the elaborately gilded government residences, that have led others to question the spirit of feast in a time of continuing privation. All politics may rely on spectacle, but at what historical and social junctures do some decide that even spectacle can become “too much”?

I returned one day to my art historian friend whose view of the Caspian had recently been obscured in the frenzy of new construction. We reflected on a city of new skylines and new surfaces. She shrugged her shoulders and said: “I think I know why they are washing all those buildings. They are washing out our visual memory. It’s a psychological thing. It’s not just money laundering, it’s something more. They’re doing good for people in some ways because they are doing everything they can to erase a world where Azerbaijanis were never better than second-class. They are erasing the scenes that remind people of a Soviet system that never favored us.”

22. YouTube user SkAzOcNiK66 commenting in November 2011 on the three-minute video “Baku White City Project” (2010).

23. In the reply from Esmirache95: “Bizim millet dehwetdiye,..prezidente tewekkur etmekden ..fexr etmekden ki Baki bele olacaq,..her seye miz qoyursuz” (*sic*).

The question of whether one could speak of an Azerbaijani people in new favor with a government trained in the Soviet era still hung in the air. “Right,” she replied.

Once again we are in the throes of ideology, someone else’s power games. But this time it’s not the radiant future of socialism, it’s just a radiant future. Before, the future was going to bring something positive for everyone. Now the future is going to bring tourists. The future itself, somehow, is supposed to explain everything. Where have we heard all this before? You’ve seen what is happening with the evictions. Once again, people are not personalities, they are a resource, a resource to be administered for better and for worse. . . . Because what we have right now is a literate demagoguery, where for all intents and purposes, there are very few objectors. Most are in favor, fine. But the problem is a society where the government has no real mechanism in place to allow for people to disagree. It’s one thing, sure, not to agree, but it’s another to feel that your position at work is challenged because you chat in the cafeteria about why you don’t like the Flame Towers. So once again we are back in the kitchen. You might talk about these things with friends in your own home, but certainly not at work, and probably not in public in general.

Her remarks sent me back to the dynamics of surplus once again, to Marx in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, where he charts early capitalism’s evolving relation to its constituents. Surpluses are there to be deployed, sometimes for gains that are public and sometimes for gains that are private. But their deployment is not open to all.²⁴ Too many people and too much talk can be a problem. In a new capitalist age, in short, people need to mind their limits.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have cited from several years of talk, of impassioned conversations about the remaking of Baku with both Azeri visitors to the city and residents who long saw themselves at its center. I should stress that there was not a single person among them who did not take something positive from the city’s dramatic new looks. Many have embraced these buildings as signs of shared lives ahead, while even many older inhabitants expressed belief that the country was ready for such a high modern style. Some offered their professional expertise as architects or

24. “Needlessness as the principle of political economy is most brilliantly shown in its theory of population,” Marx wrote. “There are too many people. Even the existence of men is a pure luxury; and if the worker is ‘ethical,’ he will be sparing in procreation” (K. Marx 1964 [1932]: 152).

journalists; most others asserted their authority as longtime residents or observers of the city, from a perch at home, in their kitchens over pots of tea. What they shared was a well-developed sense of government and its projects as hieroglyphs of a most prominent type, as things to be closely read, and read into. Even most critics could only marvel at how such advances in social exclusion could make so many feel included.

As I noted at the outset, talk very much matters in the work of the new capital city. Rumor and elaborate imaginations feed the online discussions and street corner gossip about new demolitions planned and fantastic works of art rising skyward this year, next year, or the year to follow. This abundant talk also informs the changing estimations of sovereign rule in a country where so many citizens, from city and countryside alike, have learned to adopt the stance of the intelligentsia, if only momentarily, as arbiters of social propriety.

Those far from Baku and from seats of power—including those who held forth to me at length about why they voted for the ruling party—also rarely missed the chance to reflect on how they, too, had much to say on the subject of facades.

The idea that in our recent age—not least in the rapidly nationalizing states of the former Soviet Union—people might collectively identify, for better and for worse, with their built landscapes comes as no surprise. Pyramids and palaces have long made for scenes of wonder before which subjects were to grasp their relative standing. In the material logics of nationhood, capital cities, especially, have long been objects of shared belonging. It is likely that no government, in fact, has ever missed this point. Scholars of post-Soviet space have argued this notion even further, observing that authoritarian leaders look to exert their control over public space more earnestly than others, seeking a legitimacy that they cannot easily claim through the electoral process (Forest and Johnson 2011: 280). By this reading, new city skylines are explained as essential to the exercising of a certain style of hegemony—architecture appearing yet again as an opiate of the masses—delivered to populations who find relief in shining new horizons.

These kinds of assumptions about hegemonic strategies on the part of the Azerbaijani or any other government, however, may be unnecessary. We know that physical force and coercion can equally go a long way toward engineering tacit forms of consent, something that this government has, at times, frantically tried to impress upon demonstrators and satirists of a range of political leanings in Baku over recent years. Try as one might to guess at what the government's

master plan for the city may be—if such a plan exists—the very haphazard nature of the city’s transformations would seem to indicate little unified state oversight. Talk nonetheless continues unabated, suggesting that the state still looms large, even growing in size, in the public imagination (Gupta 1995). Nor have all government efforts at dressing-to-impress proved successful: in 2013 Mexican authorities removed a monument to former president Heydar Aliyev, erected by the government of Azerbaijan in Mexico City as part of a \$5 million donation toward the renovation of a downtown park, after various critics and human rights observers awoke to the presence in their midst of someone they considered an authoritarian figure, on the same avenue as Mahatma Gandhi and the greats of Mexican independence (Al-Jazeera 2013).

Knowing that many in Baku are buoyed by these scenes of prosperity, we may assume that time is on the builders’ side. How many visitors to Paris today, so many years after Haussmann’s violent remaking of its urban center, recall the less grand neighborhoods that came before it? Haussmann, to be sure, did not have an international mass media or an Internet to document his every move. But one suspects that in twenty, thirty, or especially fifty years, admirers of Baku’s broad new parks and an extended sea boulevard stretching across the downtown core, of a “Black City” turned “White,” and of a former Moscow Prospect turned Heydar Aliyev Avenue, will be equally unlikely to remember the tens of thousands who found themselves in the future’s rough path. Many residents appear to sense this too, lending greater urgency to daily conversation about the hauntings of another brave new world on its way.

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